

# Social Interaction in Game Communities and Second Language Learning

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**This paper examines models of social interaction in computer game communities that could be harnessed to support learning and especially the learning of a second language. We demonstrate that learning is not only embedded in the game, but also in the in-game and out-of-game community that emerges from the game.**

*Computer games, game community, social interaction, second language learning*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Computer games are becoming a popular culture and medium and an increasing number of educators are investigating their educational potential. However, the result of these game-to-teach or game-to-learn tools is not very encouraging as more often than not the educational game is neither entertaining nor educating [1]. With the advance of communication tools, particularly Internet technologies, game playing is no longer an individual experience even when the game is meant to be played by a single player. Instead, social communities form around the game. We argue that computer games should be studied as a social phenomenon that spills beyond a confined game, by demonstrating three kinds of game community and suggest their use for a specific learning domain i.e. language learning.

## 2. COMPUTER GAMES AND SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

The use of language is pervasive in contemporary computer games. Textual and aural languages in games function as instructions, commands and user interfaces which must be learned in order to play the game effectively. The emergence of these language-heavy computer games signifies the need for adequate linguistic competences in successful game play. Some research has also been conducted to study the explicit use of computer games to facilitate language learning. Basically, this research focuses on the interaction between players and games; computer games are treated as virtual environments that support language learning on their own.

“Kana no senshi”, for example, is a computer game which harnesses the player-game interaction for Japanese language learning [2]. This game places its emphasis on designing a motivational user interface based on a popular first person shooter game. Other games, such as Zip & Terry, attempt to incorporate an automated speech recognition system into the language learning tool in order to allow the practice of spoken language [3]. Perhaps one of the most ambitious challenges is the implementation of AI to create intelligent agents in the game that could hopefully communicate with the learners in a realistic way [4]. Although most of these projects claim that there is a significant improvement in learners’ linguistic skills, they do not take into consideration the sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects of language learning.

## 3. GAME COMMUNITIES

Game-based language learning has focused mainly on how the game itself can be used to teach a second language but we claim that the educational opportunity in computer games stretches beyond the learning activities in the game per se. Indeed, if you observe most people playing games, you will likely see them downloading guidelines from the Internet and participating in online forums to talk about the game and share strategies. In actuality, almost all game playing could be described as a social experience, and it is rare for a player to play a game alone in any meaningful sense [5]. This observation is even more evident in Massively Multiplayer Online

Games (MMOGs). The participation in a MMOG is constituted through language practice within the in-game community (e.g. in-game chatting and joint task) and out-of-game community (e.g. the creation of written game-related narratives and fan-sites). The learning is thus not embedded in the game, but it is in the community practice of those who inhabit it. Therefore, we would like to expand the study on computer games to include the entire game community which can be categorised into three classes which we have identified (figure 1).

**Single Game-play Community:** This refers to a game community formed around a single player game. Although players of a single player game like *The Sims 2* and *Final Fantasy VII* play the game individually, they are associated with an out-of-game community which discusses the game either virtually or physically.

**Social Game-play Community:** This refers to multiplayer games which are played together in the same physical location. It creates game communities at two levels: in-game and out-of-game. Occasionally, these two levels might overlap. The out-of-game interaction might be affected by issues beyond the specific game system; for example, the community starts exchanging information about another game.

**Distributed Game-play Community:** This is an extension of social game-play community, but it emphasises the online multiplayer game in which multiple sessions of game are established in different geographical locations.

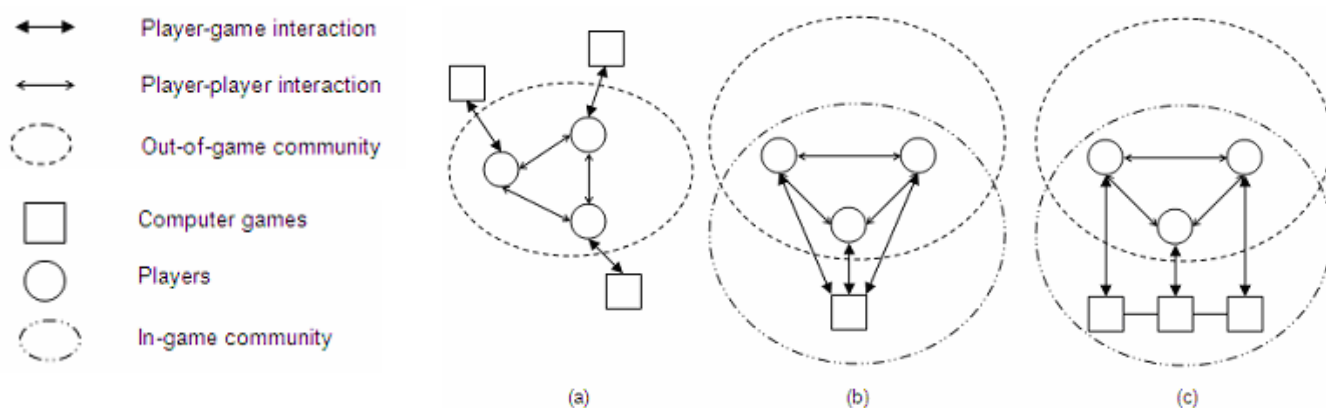


FIGURE 1: (a) Single Game-play Community, (b) Social Game-play Community, (c) Distributed Game-play Community

#### 4. DISCUSSION & SUMMARY

The study of game communities, especially out-of-game communities, from the perspective of language education is still very much unexplored. We believe the potential of games in education is not limited to what is going on in the game. Educators could benefit by studying games as a social community because games are now becoming a culture that permeates the life of everyone, especially the younger generation. Black [6] has investigated the interactions among participants in a virtual community of Japanese comic fans which involve a lot of reading and writing throughout the site. She examines how the community of fans helps each other with English language writing skills and with cross-cultural understanding. In this paper we have pointed out that game communities can emerge from both single-player and multiplayer games. We believe that by further studying the social interaction in the game community, we will be able to utilise games in language learning in a more fruitful way as the activity in the community involves a great deal of language practice. We are planning to apply and evaluate these models of game communities to specific scenarios in language learning.

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