Digital Culture & Education (DCE)

Publication details, including instructions for authors
http://www.digitalcultureandeducation.com/

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Online Publication Date: 15 April, 2011

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Abstract

Playing digital games is undeniably a popular leisure activity, and digital gaming is also gaining academic attention and recognition for enhancing digital literacies and learning motivation. One tricky issue when exploring digital gaming in Asian contexts is the popularity of English and Japanese games. Though Chinese and Korean online games are readily available, many of the more popular commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) digital games are in English and Japanese. Students in Hong Kong are required to take English as a foreign language, which resulted in a huge range of proficiency, but Japanese is not offered at public schools. So, most Hong Kong gamers are playing foreign language games. Yet language barriers do not diminish the market demand for foreign language digital games. This paper explores the phenomenon of digital gaming in foreign languages. Based on findings from an on-going research project with ten undergraduate video gamers (F=4, M=6), this paper argues that gamers exercise learner autonomy by managing their gaming both as leisure and learning experiences.

Keywords: *digital gameplay, foreign language learning learner autonomy*

Young people participate in and consume arrays of digital games with "entirely out-of-school noninstitutional realms of freely chosen digital engagement" (Thorne, Black & Sykes, 2009, p. 802). Digital gaming is truly thriving with the burgeoning sales of commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) games, online massively multiplayer role-play games (MMORPGs), online casual games, and numbers of discussion forums on gaming strategies and walkthroughs. Gamers are interacting with game texts and other gamers online in their first language, and also increasingly, in English on globalized gaming platforms (Thorne, 2008). As Thorne et al. (2009), and other reports suggest, these gamers are also playing in their leisure time, and away from the classrooms (Byron, 2008; Ito et al., 2010). Yet there is very limited knowledge of what gamers actually do in out-of-class contexts in relation to their language learning and use, particularly in gaming-related activities. Benson (2011, pp. 76-77) conceptualizes self-management of learning as a continuum with self-instruction and naturalistic learning as the opposite endpoints, indicating the learner's entire or lack of focus on language learning. Naturalistic self-directed learning, on the contrary, indicates a mid-point at which the learner sets up a naturalistic learning activity with the intention of learning language, but once they are immersed in the situation the focus shifts from learning to the participation of the activity itself. This exercise of autonomy in out-of-class language learning context is a relatively under-explored area, especially in activities that have no direct linkage with schooling (Benson, 2011). Digital gaming and engagement in gaming-related activities are such examples.

In the early 1990s, digital games were already called the "integral part of modern language teaching methodology" (Hubbard, 1991, p. 220). Twenty years later, the global popularity of digital games certainly demonstrated that they are integral to many people's leisure consumption, but their roles in language teaching methodology are still questionable (Ito et al., 2010). The earlier suggestions highlighted the needs for educational games designs (Hubbard, 1991) and scrutinized commercial games for educational purposes (Baltra, 1990). The call for appropriating leisure digital

technologies as learning tools is reiterated by Swenson et al. (2005). The burden, then, is on the teachers to select, integrate, monitor, and evaluate digital games for application in the classrooms (Lacasa, Méndez & Martínez, 2008). The inclusion of digital literaciesliteracy in language teacher education has been advocated, but the expansion is not strongly evidenced (Coutinho, 2008; Doering & Beach, 2007; Simpson, 2005; Young & Bush, 2004). Studies show that teachers were more familiar with "passive" receptive popular cultural activities carried out in "private" domains (e.g. reading watching films and listening to songs). As a popular culture activity, digital games have not been listed as tools for foreign language learning. Teachers who are already familiar with digital gaming appear to have better imagination in envisioning its pedagogical potentials (Chik, 2011; Hyland, 2004; Santo et al., 2009; Schrader, Zheng & Young, 2006).

Yet, digital gaming as a learning tool beyond the classroom has received considerable academic attention. Using "affinity spaces" (Gee, 2004) in reference to informal learning cultures Jenkins, Puroshotma, Clinton, Weigel and Robison (2005, p. 9) argue that "the informal learning within popular culture is often experimental." Language learning with and through video games is not a new concept as educational language learning games have been developed in the last 20 years (Squire, 2003), as digital games reconfigure the ways learners place themselves in naturalistic learning contexts (Benson, 2011; Gee, 2003; 2007). While Gee (2005, p. 37) argues that digital games are complex systems of learning, which are "action-and-goal-directed preparations for, and simulations of, embodied experience." Digital games involve reading and writing at different levels from semiotic to still and split framing, learners are also using digital gaming for language learning (Lamb, 2007; Purushotma, 2005). The in-game chats between an American and Ukraine gamers in Thorne's (2008) study show the use of Russian, Latin and English (in both standard and text language) is driven first by the shared interest in gaming, and then expanded to mutual interests in music and life goals. The overlapping interactions of virtual and physical worlds show that perhaps there is a need to address the ways that video gamers bring gaming into their social worlds, and vice versa. Ito (2008) also suggests that learning about games and with games should be understood as happening simultaneously, which links gaming to gaming-related activities from an ecological perspective. This was demonstrated clearly in Thomas's (2007) work on teenagers' engagement with the online fan fiction writer communities. The engagement was an extension to the participants' gaming practices. While Thomas's work explores the link between gaming and gaming-related activities in the participants' first language (English), the study by Benson and Chik (2010) extend the investigation to the second language learners. By examining the language learning history of a Chinese-speaking Hong Kong gamer, it is shown that engagement in gaming and gaming-related activities (both online and offline) is instrumental to satisfactory self-directed foreign language learning. The current body of work on digital gaming and learning shows that there is a growing awareness of the learning potentials through digital gaming practices, in particular the potential for foreign language learning and use. This potential was discussed in Thorne's (2008) work on Russian learning, and in passing, Chinese learning among English-speaking American gamers. When gaming is becoming a globalized industry dominated by English and Japanese games, there is also a need to investigate the impact on foreign language learning. The present study investigates digital gaming as foreign language (English and Japanese) learning and use among Chinese-speaking Hong Kong gamers, focusing on such practices in relation to learner autonomy.

Research design

This paper discusses the qualitative findings from the initial phase of an ongoing research project on the impact of digital gaming on foreign language learning. I adopted Gee's (2007) definition of digital gaming, which included commercial games played on computers and on game consoles, online or offline. Digital gaming in Hong Kong is a particularly interesting area for language learning and use investigation. Hong Kong households are technologically rich with 75.8% computer ownership and 73.3% Internet access. Among the surveyed population, 30.1% played online digital games in the last twelve months, a drastic increase from 24.9% in 2008. In fact, 37.8% of all households had at least one game console, with students comprising the biggest group of digital game players, with 82% game console ownership (Friends of the Earth, 2009), and averaging 8.7 game hours per week (Census and Statistics Department, 2009). Though there was no estimate of actual sales figures for digital games, the latent demand or potential industry earnings provided interesting reading into the sales of digital games and consoles in Hong Kong (Parker, 2005). The Parker report estimates that the Asian and Oceanic regions accounted for about 33.1% of global sales of digital games and consoles, with Hong Kong resting at USD 170.45 millions in 2006, ranked 26 globally, and projected to be reaching USD 226.19 millions in 2010. For a city with a population of around seven million, the consumption of digital games is on par with all major international cities, including Tokyo. While the figures suggest that many Hong Kong young people are playing digital games, the tricky question in understanding digital gameplay in Hong Kong is the dominance of foreign language, namely Japanese and English, game sales. Though many of the recent game releases are available in bilingual version (English and Chinese), the most popular commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) games are either in monolingual English or Japanese.[1] Cantonese, a Chinese dialect, is spoken by 95% of the population as their usual languages. So even though all Hong Kong students are required to take English as a foreign language, the range of proficiency in English is huge. Japanese is not officially offered in public schools, but there are plenty private language schools offering the language. In this sociolinguistic situation, it is plausible to argue that when Hong Kong gamers play digital games in English or Japanese, they are playing games in a foreign language in their leisure time. The issue worth exploring is the relationship between digital gaming and foreign language learning and use.

The present study investigates the gaming practices of young people in Hong Kong, focusing on the impacts of gaming in foreign languages. The initial phase (Table 1) of the research project was designed to recruit and screen potential gamer-participants, who would act as co-investigators to explore their own learner autonomy development and interview other gamers (Cameron, 1992). From the initial project call for participants, fifty-eight undergraduates (23 females and 35 males) responded. These applicants submitted short text-based language learning histories that focused on their out-of-class foreign language learning, and joined in short group discussions on gaming practices and attitudes. The applicants also discussed various aspects of their gaming practices including their game consoles, game genres, gaming hours and gaming-related activities. The group discussion sessions, conducted in English, were transcribed and all data related to individual applicants were woven into their language learning histories. At this stage, I adopted a narrative approach in analyzing the language learning history data obtained. I extracted themes from the language learning histories by using content analysis (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998), and then the themes were used to categorize the initial group of applicants.

Table 1: Research design.

	Participants	Data collection
Initial call	58 undergraduates (F=23, M = 35)	Short written language learning histories; Group discussion
Project	10 undergraduates (F=4, M=6)	Long written language learning histories; Video-taped gaming sessions; Blog entries of gaming practices; Group discussion sessions; Stimulated recall sessions on gaming videos; Interviews with video gamers.

After an initial round of selection, ten participant-investigators (4 females and 6 males, Table 2) were recruited. The participants came from different academic disciplines: liberal arts (4), social science (3), business (1), and engineering (2). Though the gamers were gaming for research purposes, the whole design was set up to capitalize on their existing gaming practices. In short, the participants were playing games that they were already playing. The recruited gamer-participants investigated gaming and language learning patterns by video-recording their game play and interviewing other gamers. All participants have five or more years of gaming experiences, with four participants started gaming since lower primary (which would have accounted for more than ten years of gaming). All ten participants speak Chinese (9 Cantonese and 1 Putonghua) as their first language, and learned English as a second or foreign language. The gamers were invited to focus group discussion sessions at the beginning of the study to introduce their gaming habits and open up the personal habits for group discussions. The data collected were content-coded and analyzed in the narrative inquiry tradition, treating data as narrative units which give better sight into the overall longitudinal development of the gaming and language learning process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Chase, 2005; Lieblich et al., 1998). In addition to group discussions, each participant video-taped eight digital gaming sessions over a month, created and responded to blog entries, and interviewed five additional gamers on gaming habits and language learning. To conclude this phase of the project, the gamers were invited to stimulated recall sessions in which they viewed their recordings and blog entries to discuss what happened in the videos (Gass & Mackey, 2000). During the stimulated recall sessions, participants also commented on strategies used by other gamers as recorded in blog entries, and on their interviews with other gamers.

In the following two sections the findings from the gamers' language learning histories and focus group discussion will first be discussed to foreground digital gaming within foreign language learning contexts. The relationship between gaming and learner autonomy will be further illuminated by two case studies (Jana and Edmond).

Table 2: Background information of the ten participants.

Gamer	Discipline	Gaming preferences/consoles*
Tracy	English	English online role-playing games / PC and PS2
Jana	English	Japanese games / NDS
Mabel	English	English role-playing games / NDS, PS3, PSP
Michael	English	English real-time strategy / PC
Sam	Surveying	English sports games / PC
Edmond	Electronic Engineering	English sports games and real-time strategy games / PC
Carrie	Computer Science	Japanese action-adventure and role-playing games / PC and arcade centres
Kenneth	Psychology	English action-adventure games / NDS

Raymond	Business	English first-person shooter games / PC
Tom	Creative Media	English first-person shooter and action-adventure games / PC
*Gaming consoles: Personal Computer (PC), PlayStation®2 (PS2), PlayStation®3 (PS3), PlayStation®Portable (PSP), and Nintendo DS (NDS).		

Digital gaming for language learning: Surveying the landscape

A geneal survey among the project applicants showed gamers' attitudes towards gaming and language learning was first, and foremost, related to their initial choice of gaming language. During the group discussion, gaming language choice was a highly contested topic. Almost all gamers had been gaming for more than five years, since the late 1980s or early 1990s:

> Japanese games were the norm then, except for online games, it was really difficult to get hold of the English versions. I simply didn't know enough Japanese to enjoy playing. So I thought being able to play in English was a godsend (Michael).

Michael believed that his English at that time was relatively limited, but he could still understand English-language games better than Japanese-language games. From that time on, Michael kept his English-language gaming habit. However, other gamers were more open to playing in Japanese for practical reasons:

> I only had hand-me-down games from my elder brother and cousins. At that time Japanese games were cheaper, so I grew up playing mostly Japanese video games (Carrie).

Carrie also strongly supported the idea that foreign language could be learned effectively through gaming. All participants had played games in Japanese as well, but they might not consider gaming in Japanese as optimal, particularly when they had to overcome the language barrier. The only solution to this barrier was 'reading the Chinese walkthroughs downloaded from forums' (Raymond). However, the dominance of Japanese-language games has changed over the years when the American (English) versions are now widely available:

> I am really excited about *Final Fantasy XIII*, it is coming out next month, and I have been waiting for its release for so long. But I think I'm going to wait for the US version. I don't think I'll enjoy the Japanese version (Mabel).

The general preference for playing the games in English also led to a negative attitude towards gaming in Chinese, or 'sinicized' English and Japanese video games. Sinicized games are unofficial Chinese versions created by voluntary gamers, and were frequently circulated on bulletin board systems and discussion forums for free.

> Home-brew Chinese subtitles and plots add-ons, made by the Mainland Chinese or Taiwanese players, are available for download. I don't know whether the people who made the add-ons had very bad English, or they simply used electronic dictionary to do the translation, the subtitles were usually ridiculous (Carrie).

Other than questionable translations, many of the Chinese-language game add-ons from that period frequently came with software bugs and viruses, which further fueled the

mistrust among Hong Kong gamers. Even though most of the more recently released games are officially available in Chinese, all gamers still believed that the Japanese and English versions are of superior qualities than that of the Chinese editions, even better than the official Chinese version.

The initial choice of gaming language might influence individual game language preferences, but language learning through gaming did not happen spontaneously. The collection of language learning histories showed that digital gaming provided two dimensions for language learning and use: in-game texts and online gaming platforms. First, the need for game level advancement made gamers more aware of the English in-game texts. Second, gaming platforms provided authentic opportunities for interactions with other gamers in English. These two different types of motivation then fueled individual language learning paths through gaming. All applicants had played non-educational digital games in English, but they did not necessarily view such type of gaming as supplementary language learning and use tools. Gamers generally agreed that in-game texts were language rich. They were aware that it was feasible to use game texts as learning texts, but their responses also indicated that the feasibility depended highly on the gamers' initiatives. Applicants' responses ranged from overwhelmingly positive, "I learned so many words from *Pokémon*" (F36), to negative, "I never read the English instructions" (M06). Gamers who contemplated learning were usually motivated by game level advancement, as one gamer 'complained' that he 'really had to learn the English terms to play the game' (M04). However, being aware of the in-game texts was only the first step in the language learning process:

> You have to be prepared to put in the work to find out the meaning, either by using the dictionary or by asking other gamers (M02).

To the gamers, this motivation was translated into 'willingness' to use the dictionary:

> The dialogues and texts in games like *Biohazard* [also know as *Resident Evil*], *Devil May Cry* and *GTA* provide abundant reading and listening materials. I use the dictionary when I find new vocabulary in the games (M09).

The repetition of language items was also frequently cited as the major cause for language learning:

> Some Japanese phrases appeared frequently in games, I worked out the meaning only by trials and errors, and that was how I learned them. I find it too difficult to try to use the bilingual dictionary (F10).

One gamer compared in-game texts as popular English-language TV series or films, "If you only read the Chinese subtitles, you are oblivious to the English in the games. You have to open your minds to see these texts as reading and listening opportunities, just like American TV and films" (M19). This showed that learning through gaming is a deliberate rather than naturally happening event.

Learning from the in-game texts was only part of the picture. Other gamers utilized massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) as platforms for authentic English interactions:

> …I met hundreds of American, Mexican, Canadian and, even South African *Ultima Online* gamers! (M09).

Game websites were probably the first globalized platforms where Hong Kong gamers realized that they could use English for authentic social interactions beyond their language classrooms:

> I have to use English to play online games. Although the English I used was not good, but it was an opportunity to chat with foreigners in English (M19).

The gamers generally agreed that the communication was not about 'chatting in perfect English, it was getting the meaning across that counted' (Michael). When they had more communicative opportunities, many of them suggested that gamers, regardless of cultural backgrounds, were all united by games:

> Thousands of people from all over the world play *Age of Empires II* together. It was amazing, I talk to the Americans and Europeans in English, and we are like one big family. Of course, we use vulgar language all the time (M01).

Chatting with other gamers was not the only English learning and use opportunity, but they also had to learn slang quickly and "be tough enough to ignore stupid insults" (Michael). Yet in some cases, gaming provided the bridges to connect with teachers:

> I remember rushing to Internet cafes after school to play *Counter-Strike* with my classmates, but we had problems playing the game. The radio commands were in English, and filled with jargons. We ended up asking our English teacher and learned phrases like "cover me", "fire in the hole", and "sniper". We also improved our gaming skills after learning the English. The amount of English I learned in the game was much more than what I learned in class in a term (Gamer, M11)

This was an unusual example of connecting learning from school teacher through digital gaming as most examples only supported peers interactions and language advising. While some gamers agreed that the repeated appearance of certain words and phrases might facilitate learning, gaming does not necessarily facilitate English learning automatically. Language learning through gaming was a deliberate act of learning. The gamers not only made the choice, but were also inadvertently forced to learn foreign language if they were to continue gaming. The language learning strategies they adopted included both the learning and usage of the foreign language (Cohen, 1998). Using online dictionaries appeared to top the learning strategies. In their gaming logs, some gamers had pieces of paper ready by the computer when they were playing, or had their laptops ready when they were playing on consoles.

Gamers appeared to be pragmatic in their appropriations of games as language learning tools and were well aware of the limitations of games as resources. One limitation was genre-specificity,

> It depends on what games you play, say, if you play soccer games, you'll learn about soccer-related terms, but not much else (Raymond).

Raymond enjoyed mostly first-person shooter games, and he felt that he was proficient in language items related to radio commands and modern weaponry, but would be lost with commentaries in sports games. Michael enjoyed historic real-time strategy games, so he mostly learned about military terminologies from different historical periods. However, the participants did not appear to be bothered by this limitation. They

claimed their expertise in genre-specific vocabulary acquisition as Michael said, "I know more about military terminologies than you do, doctor".

Learning also depended highly on the medium of delivery: some games provided more reading and listening texts than others. With most games, there were usually more opportunities for reading and listening than speaking or writing. Tracy strongly argued that role-playing games (RPGs) were more engaging because of the story plot, which in turn, provided better reasons for being attentive to the in-game language. Almost everyone denounced online causal games as "literally clicking my life away" (Mabel). In many ways, these gamers engaged in receptive learning, however, they felt that the true value of using games was the opportunities "to learn while having funs" (Kenneth). When language learning through gaming was viewed as "an unexpected positive side-effect" (Kenneth), the motivation to keep using games as the only learning tool was overshadowed by impracticality. First, as university students, these participants did not have "the luxury of time like teenagers do to binge gaming" (Michael), and thus the natural exposure to language was reduced. Second, the demand to acquire discipline-specific academic language could not be fulfilled through gaming. However, participants continued to view video gaming as a viable and sustainable tool for language learning for leisure and other social purposes. This concept of sustainability will be illuminated by the following case studies: Jana and Edmond.

Tales of two gamers: Jana and Edmond

The gamers' LLHs and group discussion indicated that they were generally aware of the language learning potential in and around gaming. However, the activities in and around gaming could be highly self-contained. The gamers mediated their language learning and use through the texts (game texts and walkthroughs) and interactions (online game interactions and forum discussion, and offline social interactions). Yet, digital gaming was not an activity that could be separated from other aspects of language learning. In this section, I will discuss the gaming and social worlds of Jana and Edmond to illuminate the relationship between gaming and language learning and use. Born in Hong Kong, Jana majored in English and had a passion for Japanese culture. Jana took one year of Japanese language course at university, but she regularly used video games as supplementary learning resources. Born in the Mainland China, Edmond majored in Electronic Engineering, and he wanted to improve his listening and speaking skills in English. When playing games, Edmond favoured real-time strategy (RTS) and sports games, which he believed could help him improve his English.

Jana: Bridging formal classroom learning and personal interest

Jana became interested in Japanese pop culture when she was in secondary school, but she did not have the financial resources to take Japanese class at the time. In pursuit of her own interest, she created a personal leisure environment filled with Japanese popular cultural texts: pop music, TV drama series and digital games. After taking one year of Japanese at university, Jana categorized herself as a lower-intermediate learner. In the formal learning context, she was weary of the stress on "structured acquisition of vocabulary and grammatical rules" that had "limited daily application". She was frustrated that her regular language classes could not help her better understand popular cultural texts. When watching Japanese TV drama series, she found it very difficult to follow the dialogues, and she was only able to understand a few words. As an alternative, Jana turned to digital games, with which she had greater success. Like some other gamers, she did not set out to learn Japanese intentionally, but she was driven to

"get through the Japanese content to win or advance to the next level". Jana admitted that she would only learn the in-game vocabulary or phrases if they appeared on the screen regularly. The diversion from grammatical rules also made her believe that she was "learning naturally".

Jana chose to buy a handheld game console because she could 'source' games more easily. This was also why she could sample more than ten games during her month long participation. The games she played ranged from educational ones targeting foreign language learners to recreational ones designed for native Japanese speakers. When playing educational games, she benefited from voice recording and pronunciation checking, and the drilling exercises. Though she was enthusiastic at first, she gave up on educational games fairly quickly because "the games were simply repetitive and boring". She then turned to recreational games, including rhythm matching, cooking, platform and time management games. After sampling a variety of games, she soon developed a tactical approach in using games for Japanese learning: platform games for reading short and simple written instructions, rhythm matching games for listening to instructions, and cooking and time management games for vocabulary learning. Jana was particularly satisfied with using the in-game spoken dialogues in *Osu! Tatakae! Ōendan* for practicing pronunciation (published in English as *Elite Beat Agents*). Towards the end of the project, she resorted to rhythm and dance games because she was attracted by the music tracks. She also found out more about the singers and groups on *Osu! Tatakae! Ōendan* 1 and 2, which featured popular J-pop stars like Ken Hirai, HYDE, SMAP and L'Arc-en-Ciel. Jana was particularly satisfied with using the in-game spoken dialogues in *Osu! Tatakae! Ōendan* for pronunciation practices. In *Osu! Tatakae! Ōendan*, when the cheerleader shouts out cheering commands in audio tracks, it was accompanied by written texts. This game feature allowed Jana to practice spoken Japanese.

Summing up her month long experience, she reflected that she probably had not learned Japanese in a very systematic way but she was able to 'mix and match' according to her gaming preferences. The myriad range of games also sustained game playing in Japanese, as she 'switched whenever I am frustrated'. In the end, her gaming preferences also matched her personal interest in Japanese pop music, which in turn sustained her digital game play.

Edmond: Connecting with the social world

Edmond started learning English in Mainland China. The examination practice drillings made him realized that English learning in China was about "knowledge transmission, not communication". At home, he used English-language film ("not the ridiculous Chinese-dubbed ones") to improve listening. When Edmond came to Hong Kong to study in an English-medium university, he needed to quickly improve his proficiency in listening and speaking "otherwise I could not understand my professors". He attended self-access learning sessions at the language centre, but found the learning materials uninteresting and difficult. Living in the student hall meant that Edmond had plenty of opportunities to join basketball games and midnight video gaming parties with his hall mates.

Edmond played sports and real-time strategy games on his PC during his month long participation. As an enthusiastic basketball player, Edmond encountered difficulties when playing with other international students because he did not fully understand their basketball terminology in English. With only limited access to live English basketball TV programs in the student hall, his friends suggested playing basketball digital games. He enjoyed the in-game audio commentaries and jokes from the sports games, and read all the instructions dutifully when he acted as manager of his fantasy team. He used an

electronic dictionary and kept a vocabulary book. Even though the commentaries and texts were repetitive, Edmond had to work hard to memorize the terminology. He later found the in-game sports terminologies helpful when playing basketball with other international students.

While Edmond used sports games as a study tool on his own, he had his friends to help him with the RTS games. Together they compiled a long vocabulary list with all the necessary terms and phrases to be learned before they could advance to the next game level. Edmond gave the example of working out the meaning of "staff" as a branch or walking stick, not as personnel, as team work which allowed them to acquire the necessarily game item. Though Edmond has never enjoyed reading literary texts, he found the in-game texts from one particular game so poetic that he felt his 'speech and writing seemed pale' in comparison. But the in-game reading texts also frustrated him when he felt that he knew almost every word, but not the meaning of the sentences.

Reflecting on his gaming experience, Edmond considered the social interactions, both online and offline, to be the major motivation for language learning. Knowing that he needed the correct terminology for playing and watching basketball games, he chose relevant sports games. He chose the digital games that would maximize his communicative use of English for socializing with friends in daily activities. Gaming, and the resulted language learning, was sustained by the need to use English in his daily social interaction.

Discussion

This is a small-scale on-going project exploring the foreign language learning aspects of digital gaming, particularly with the learning of two different foreign languages, Japanese and English. Though there are realistic and financial constraints on game selections, for instances the types of game consoles owned and prices of games, gamers still had a certain degree of freedom in formulating their personal gaming preferences. One of the more intriguing features of digital gaming is gamers' choices of games and attitudes towards gaming as learning resources beyond the classroom. The findings suggested that gamers, in general, were aware that gaming and related activities could be utilized as learning resources (Figure 1).

Figure 1 represents a striped-down model of the relationship between digital gaming and foreign language learning deduced from the collection of language learning histories written by gamers and group discussion. There are primarily three areas for gamers to actualize language learning potentials through gaming: in-game texts, online discussion forum (on strategies and walkthrough), and online gaming platforms. First, in-game texts were treated as the primary sources of language inputs. Depending on game genres, the inputs varied widely between short reading and listening materials and longer story plots with interactive reading and speaking dialogues. Second, online interactions with gamers on globalized platforms also provided authentic reasons and opportunities for foreign language use. The online globalized platforms might be particularly instrumental for active English learning and use (Thorne, 2008). Third, gamers' activities on discussion forums to learn more about the games could also be viewed as the ecology of language learning (Ito, 2007). Carrie and Raymond used Chinese walkthroughs to get through Japanese games and also learn Japanese phrases. Other gamers recommended reading English walkthroughs to learn more about the games, and more English. It appeared that accessing forums for walkthroughs also formed part of the learning ecology.

Figure 1: Digital gaming and foreign language learning.
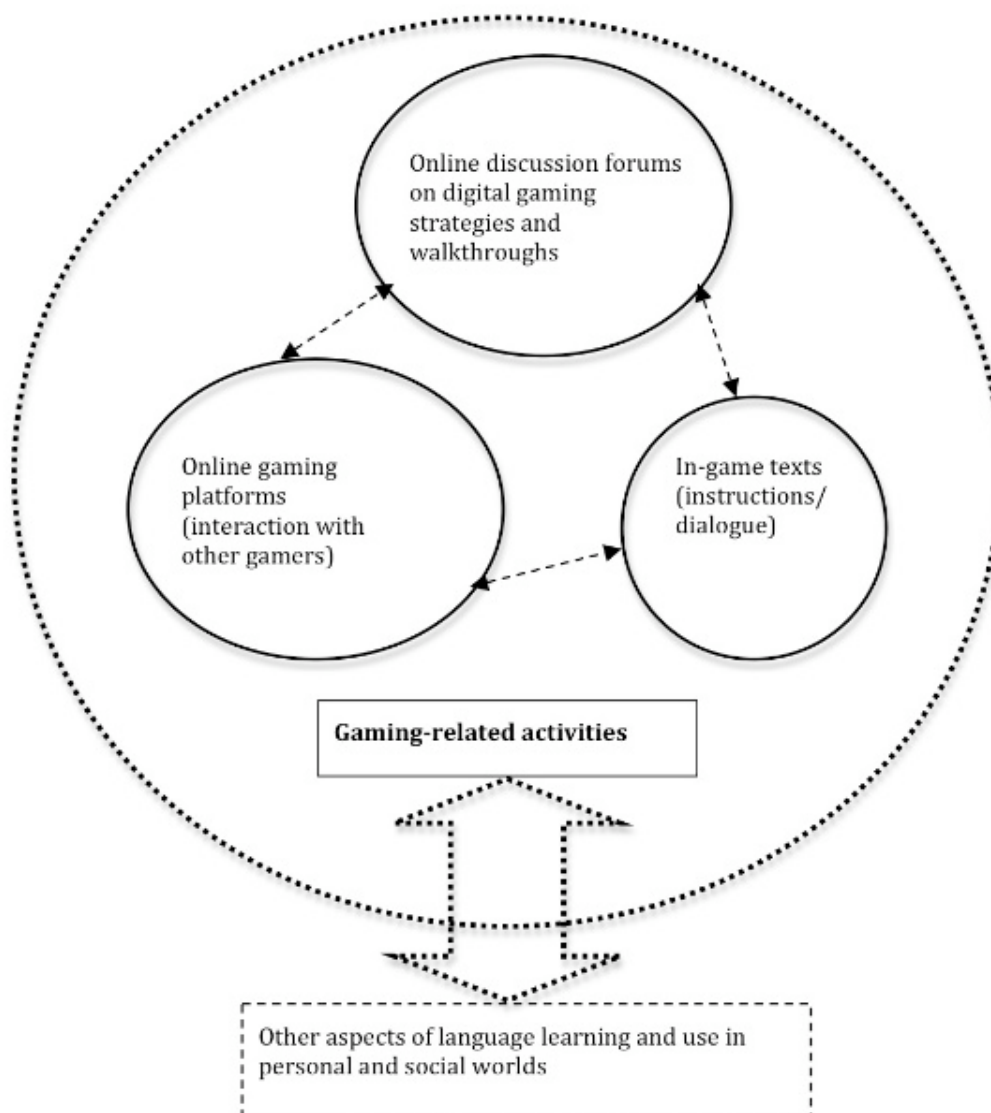
Depending on gamers' attitude and strategies for using games for learning, it is possible to view gaming as a learning activity beyond the classrooms (Benson, 2011). Video gaming could be viewed as a mode of naturalistic self-directed learning on the continuum of self-managed language learning. This view of naturalistic self-directed learning also hinged on the degree of control language learners could exercise. Most gamers agreed that they exercised high degree of autonomy in game choosing, even though peer influence is significant. Yet, the decision to use game texts for language learning was frequently personal. As one gamer pointed out that one had to be prepared to put in the hard work, meaning the use of dictionary or other learning strategies to learn the language items. In discussion of using COTS games as learning texts, all gamers stressed the aspects of personal enjoyment, 'the little pleasure in life' (Michael). And advancement in game level or wining is frequently the stated priority, and language learning and use is secondary. In this sense, it is more plausible to see gaming as being placed at the further end of the continuum when gamers did not intentionally set out to learn language, but nevertheless acquired some foreign language through gaming.

In the age that gaming strategies and walkthroughs flourish on various online discussion forums, gamers also had to make the decision to extend gaming beyond the self-contained game texts. Not all the gamers on the project liked visiting discussion forums for gaming strategies or walkthroughs, therefore, the links between linking game texts and other gaming-related activities are not all solid (Figure 1). For many gamers, the decision to play MMORPGs could mean opening up new opportunities for authentic English communicative events, which also meant that gamers had to take risk to game in real time in a foreign language.

However, the present study shows that language learning might be instrumental in aiding the gamers to achieve their stated priority of game level advancement. It was also worth noting that the gamers (Jana and Carrie) did not have a high level of proficiency of Japanese, but it did not stop them from playing and also learning through Japanese COTS games. Though both Jana and Carrie admitted that the ways of using such texts were not the most systemic or efficient method to learn Japanese, the gaming playing interest sustained their formal Japanese learning. The same applied to English learning. Though most of these gamers have been learning from kindergarten, learning has not always been fun. The opportunities to use English for personal purposes were limited, so being able to understand English to make personal meaning from games was an important aspect of gaming in English. The gamers also developed very different gaming preferences which constituted their autonomous choices in language learning texts. This was particularly transparent in Edmond's case when he manipulated game play to augment his social interaction in English with his hall mates. Looking from a different angle, it was Edmond's sporting activities that prompted him to engage more in sports video games. In viewing gaming and gaming-related activities collectively as a learning system, it is porous because it is connected to gamers' other aspects of personal and social worlds (Figure 1). The connectedness between gaming and other aspects of personal and social worlds sustained the language learning process.

Conclusion

The present study shows that Hong Kong Chinese-speaking gamers have long been gaming in English and Japanese. Though all gamers learn English in formal education, Japanese remains a foreign language. Still, gaming in a second or foreign language did not deter enthusiasm. Instead, these gamers had all exercised certain degree of learner autonomy to overcome linguistic barriers for gaming purposes. Gamers learned through in-game texts, learned about games on discussion forums, and through online gaming interactions. It is important to state that the participants who joined the project were all self-selected enthusiastic video gamers. Their game play hours were probably much higher than other young people. At the same time, these participants also had keen interests in utilizing video games for pleasurable out-of-class language learning. Their motivation partially explained their preferences for English and Japanese digital games. It is not to say that Chinese-language video games are not popular, there is a strong online market in Hong Kong, and gamers are purchasing 'point cards' at convenience stores on a regular basis. Yet, it is impossible to deny that Japanese and English COTS games are readily available and hugely successful in Hong Kong. Given the popularity of digital gaming in Hong Kong and other regions, it is also possible to speculate that there are more young gamers purposefully using game play to enhance their foreign language learning and use. The issues for further exploration then rest on understanding the different contexts and circumstances that these gamers exercise autonomy to fulfill both the gaming and language learning demands. The present study shows that gamers have been exceptionally persistent in playing foreign language digital games. At present, we

are beginning to understand video gaming as possible learning spaces (Gee, 2003). The phenomenon of gamers playing and learning in foreign languages, both online and offline, also requires further examination as a natural extension to language learning beyond the classrooms.

Notes

[1] One prime example of English- and Japanese-language game dominance is the sales of Nintendo's Wii game console and software in Hong Kong. Though the console is sold with Traditional Chinese language interface, only four Chinese-language Wii games are officially available. Hong Kong Wii console owners are advised to buy and play the console-compatible Japanese-language version on the Hong Kong Nintendo official website. Other popular console games are either in English or Japanese, with a Chinese instructional manual. However, most in-game texts and dialogues are only in English or Japanese.

Acknowledgements

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Biographical Statement

Alice Chik's main research areas include language learning histories, English for young learners and popular culture in language education. With her background in TESOL, she is particularly interested in the roles of popular culture in foreign language learning and use. Her recent research project on game-based learning focuses on viewing video gaming as an avenue for language learner development, and as a potential area for foreign language learning and teaching. She is currently working as an Assistant Professor at the Department of English, City University of Hong Kong.

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