

Persona in foreign language learning: A qualitative review of online video games as a tool for developing an L2 motivational self system

Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso Bacharelado em Letras-Inglês

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Florianópolis, Maio de 2021

## DECLARAÇÃO DE AUTORIA DE TRABALHO DE CONCLUSÃO DE CURSO (TCC)

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Título do TCC: Persona in foreign language education: A systematic review of online video games as a tool for developing an L2 motivational self system

Data da Defesa: 20/05/2021

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Assinatura do/a aluno/a

24/04/2021

Data

## **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost, I'd like to thank my parents for allowing me to freely choose my path and professional career, giving me an opportunity to do something that was yet not accomplished by our family which was to enroll in a public university. I'd also like to thank them for the way they dealt with the inclusion of video games in my life. My father Luciano dos Santos was eager to introduce me to video games and gave me countless outlets to experience it, from old consoles to my own personal computers. My mother Claudia Sinara de Souza was, on the other hand, always supportive of my hobbies and passions which allowed me to learn a second language and shape my aspirations to become an English undergraduate.

I'd also like to thank my advisor, Prof. Dr. Hanna Kivistö-de Souza for taking on this daring field of research which I had zero expectations that anyone would agree on letting me proceed. I've been very warmly welcomed by her, and the commitment she presented to this undertaking was genuinely outstanding. The sheer level of competence, organization, quickness and punctuality she provided was crucial for the development of this TCC that was made under such chaotic times. I will be forever thankful for the opportunity that she created by embracing my idea and allowing me to professionalize in a field so dear to my own life experience.

I'd also like to thank Vitor Marques, my dear friend and classmate, for being the most honest, reliable and relatable individual during my undergraduate years. There have been people who claimed we wouldn't hang around by the end of our academic career, but I hope we still have plenty to write about in the future.

Lastly, I'd like to thank Malu Mattos. Just remember that you will always motivate me to win.

## **RESUMO**

Video games como meio de aprendizagem de línguas já foram propostos sob diferentes escopos (Anderson et al, 2008; Galvis, 2015; Yang et al, 2010) e sempre suscitaram um debate relevante sobre os benefícios de seu uso em salas de aula. No entanto, não há muitos estudos que enfatizem as relações entre video games, identidade e motivação para a aprendizagem de uma L2. Esse estudo procura analisar a literatura tanto no campo da motivação em L2 quanto em estudos neurológicos e linguísticos na área de video games para determinar o potencial dos video games on-line como ferramentas para desenvolver um possível usuário ideal de L2 pela construção de uma persona on-line. Esta dissertação visa a compreender os elementos nos video games on-line que podem desencadear respostas motivacionais e os meios de correlacionar essas respostas ao aprendizado de L2. Os dados coletados serão usados para compreender a funcionalidade dos video games on-line para o aprendizado de línguas com o objetivo de fazer uma ponte entre conceptualizações paralelas de motivação e identidade em ambos os campos.

**Palavras-chave:** Video games, Ideal L2 self, Identidade, Motivação

**Número de páginas:** 43

**Número de palavras:** 11615

## **ABSTRACT**

Video games as a medium for language learning have been proposed under different scopes (Anderson et al, 2008; Galvis, 2015; Yang et al, 2010) and have always sparked relevant debate on the benefits of their use in classroom settings. However, not many studies emphasize the relations among video games, identity, and motivation for L2 learning. This study seeks to analyze the literature both in the field of L2 motivation and video-game studies to determine the potential of online video games as tools to develop an Ideal L2 self through the construction of one's online persona. This essay aims to understand the elements in online video games that can trigger motivational responses and the means of correlating these responses to L2 learning. The data gathered is used to understand the functionality of online video games for language learning with the objective of bridging parallel conceptualizations of motivation and identity in both fields.

**Keywords:** Video games, Ideal L2 Self, Identity, Motivation

**Number of pages:**43

**Number of words:**11615

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## 1 - Introduction

Video games are electronic interactive experiences between a player and a virtual interface, guided by a variety of display screens (such as TVs or touchscreens) and input devices, such as game controllers or mice and keyboards. Gaming as an activity continues to boom yearly, totaling an estimate of around 2.7 billion global gamers engaging with some sort of video-game as of 2020 (Statista, 2020). The field of video games has grown beyond entertainment and it has been observed under different academic lenses ranging from literature and art (ie. ludology) to cognitive and neurological studies on motor coordination or video-game addiction (Kühn, Gleich, Lorenz, Lindenberger 2014; Sioni, Burleson, Berkerian, 2017). The medium has also seen its inclusion in various facets of education and learning (Galvis, 2015; Gee, 2003; ), on anxiety and addiction, as well as on identity (Gee, 2003; Milik, 2017; Sioni et al. 2017).

As we will observe in this bachelor's thesis, the use of a second language (L2), often either English or Japanese, will be a central part of any video-game's playing experience. This is also an occurrence seen consistently amongst the affinity groups of gamers of any genre, where many non-native speakers of the language are present, which means that knowing these languages may prove to be a large obstacle when navigating the game in question. In my personal experience, my first interaction with a second language came from the contact I had with video-game consoles in my childhood. Despite being in the boom of video-game technology, the practice of gaming still was not nearly as widespread as seen today, when gaming culture is no longer a niche activity for select countries and communities. Surely, Brazil did have

a growing connection with video-game culture, but the games were never produced with the Brazilian player in mind. Games were rarely adapted and sold to our region, and aspects such as the inclusion of Portuguese interfaces and translated manuals and box arts<sup>1</sup> were never included. It was only through game magazines that had to be translated and appropriated to the Brazilian population that we often had any opportunity to directly interact with the video games in question in our language, and considering the availability, cost and compatibility, most players had to “figure it out” when it came to exploring the digital medias they had just acquired. In my case, despite not knowing anything at first, the sheer immersive and entertaining nature of video games pushed me to keep playing. By fifth grade, I was speaking English. This anecdote was what defined my career later on and motivated me to enroll as an English undergraduate, and now -- to return the favor to the media that taught me my second language -- to conduct research on how video-game experiences can motivate and function as a tool for L2 learning.

When it comes to the topic of video games, learning and literacy, Gee (2003) mentions a number of features supporting the idea that video games provide for good, active, and critical learning. He claims that video games possess specific design grammar spaces. These are the elements that make up a game’s internal components. Design grammar spaces also construct social identities, which players must acknowledge and understand in order to interact with the video games in question. The design grammar spaces can be divided into two: internal and external. Gee (2003) elaborates that *internal design grammar spaces* are composed of all the combining features that define the genre and the type of game at hand. In other words, a player must understand the combination of acceptable and unacceptable elements provided by the context (the video-game) to determine what meaning should be given to them within the game.

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<sup>1</sup> Box arts are what the video-game community calls the covers of the video-game packages, whether it is for a cartridge, a cd, dvd, or blu-ray.



As for the *external design grammar* spaces, those, Gee (2003) claims, are defined by the socio-cultural values and identities formed by players and communities of a certain game or genre (or on some occasions, game platforms). A way to look at both design grammar spaces is to think of the game's rules and limitations as internal, while forums, videos, communities and identities pertaining to that game as external. Gee (2003) elaborates that understanding how a player of a certain type of game behaves is essential for the construction of identities that interact within the affinity groups that belong to that semiotic domain, which Gee (2003) theorizes is how video-games provide for contextualized, just-in-time meanings for words and other semiotic elements through embodied experiences. As a consequence, he classifies video games as good when they propose active learning possibilities that require the player to reassess their approach to a new section or challenge while applying newly acquired knowledge. Critical learning happens when the player engages in metalevel thinking<sup>2</sup> over the *design grammars* in play to adapt and reflect on the core system or to critically reflect upon and understand the video-game being played, or the genre it pertains to, as well as what it means to be a player of certain video game (Gee, 2003).

Online video games are solely categorized by the requirement of internet connectivity for one or many components of a game's system. Online functionality becomes part of a video-game's *design grammar* (both internally and externally) due to the fundamentally transformative impact it has on its ecosystem. These transformative design grammar elements can utilize online tools to reconstruct video-game genres and styles. Additionally, they allow for social experiences that demand the understanding of different design grammar elements, such as player-to-player interaction, cooperation, competition, and, in many cases, language and

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<sup>2</sup> Gee (2003, p. 42) defines metalevel thinking as "thinking about the game as a system and a designed space, and not just playing within the game moment by moment".

communication. Online video-game genres that rely on language as a crucial aspect of their design grammar are typically competitive and cooperative games, such as first-person shooters (FPS) and multiplayer online battle arenas (MOBAs), or massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs).

Social interaction is a requirement to operate under the affinity group linked to those semiotic domains pertained to online video games, and these genres allow for the development of unique language varieties of one or many pre-existing spoken languages. Theoretically, many of these video games may allow players to engage with the game non-socially or even provide spaces for exclusive L1 interaction. However, engaging with these games' design grammar spaces often requires engaging with the affinity groups related to them, which directly correlates with engaging in an L2 for a multitude of personal and collaborative reasons. This is also important since online video games push players towards completing objectives together within a global culture that may utilize World English varieties as their main language for communication, considering how these games allow for international relations with people across the world. These cultural varieties of English, either as an institutionalized language part of one's national curriculum or as common practice as a primary foreign language (Kachru, 1992), come together in the global online video-game contexts to solve problems through dialogic interactions and cooperative acts.

## **2 - Problem setting and method**

Considering the factors mentioned above, this study aims to analyze the relationship between online video games and L2 motivation through the concept of Dörnyei's (2009) "Ideal

L2 Self” and the components of his theorized L2 motivational self-system. Its objective is to observe the relation between online video-game persona and Ideal L2 self, who perceives an L2 as a desirable trait of their identity. This objective is met through a thematic discussion on studies made on L2 motivation, as well as video games and learning. The study also discusses the practice of using online video games for L2 learning by reviewing previous theoretical and exploratory articles to suggest their implementation in future educational institutions. It is important to address that despite the articles being analyzed here being often based on L2 learning of English or Japanese, this study aims to observe the aspects of any second language learning and online video games as a whole. Consequently, this present piece of research seeks to argue the following:

1. Online video games may be useful in developing an L2 motivational self system through online personas
2. Online video games and the development of an online persona may be beneficial for L2 learning

This objective was met by surveying, examining and analyzing the previous literature in the areas of video game studies and L2 motivation. The methodology that supported this theoretical discussion was a qualitative literature review conducted on both fields. Due to the shifting nature of both gaming culture and technology, but also studies on L2 and video-game motivation, this study analyzes relevant works made in the past three decades, from 1990 to 2020. These were done on each individual scientific field mentioned above in order to establish a link between both.

### **Procedures for Data collection**

To achieve data necessary to analyze the effects of online video games on L2 motivation and teaching, this study relies on two databases that contains research done on the topics at hand. The databases that were used were *Portal de Periódicos CAPES* (Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior) and *Google Scholar*.

A combination of the keywords “video games”, “ideal L2 self”, “identity”, “motivation” and “learning” were chosen to select the articles for this study. The results yielded well over a thousand search queries, despite many not targeting the fields of either video games and learning or L2 motivation. Due to this, many articles were discarded for not presenting relevant information to the study at hand, and the studies included had to explicitly be tied to motivation or aspects related to motivation (identity, immersion, visualization, etc.). A total of 37 articles were read and selected for this paper, as well as two books linked to the theoretical framework of this current research. Moreover, a few studies on L2 Willingness to Communicate (L2 WTC) (Macintyre et al. 1998) and video-game and psychosocial effects were also included to corroborate the possible link between video games and L2 motivation analyzed here.

Lastly, data analysis was done with the use of these articles and books with the intention of investigating the theoretical relationships between online video-game motivation and L2 motivation that will be established in this paper, as well as supporting the notion that online video games may facilitate FL learning.

In the following sections, the results of the research are presented. Two main issues will be discussed, the first being concerned if video-games can develop an L2 motivational self-system through the formation of an online persona, and the second emphasizing the use of video games in L2 learning. Those sections will then bring relevant discussion over the aspects

aforementioned in order to establish a relationship between L2 motivation and online video-game play.

### **3 - The relation between persona in video games and SLA**

This section is concerned with the potential of online video games in developing an Ideal L2 self through the formation of online video-game players' social identity, which we will further elaborate as the persona. To understand how online video games may promote motivational SLA features, this research draws on four main distinct theories; Gee's (2003) concept of virtual, real and projective identities; Dörnyei's (2005; 2009) "L2 Motivational Self System"; Milik's (2017) theory of Persona in MMO (Massively Multiplayer Online) games, and MacIntyre's (1998) L2 Willingness to Communicate.

- **Video-game identities and the online persona**

One of the main aspects of the present study relies on how players can develop three different types of identities when engaging with a video-game: *a virtual, a real, and a projective identity* (Gee, 2003). The virtual identity (Gee, 2003) is characterized by the virtual characteristics of the avatar in play since, in most games, you interact inside the game space with the use of an avatar. All of the progression made in the game (leveling up, interacting with non-playable characters, traveling to new locations, etc.) of this virtual identity is guided by the real identity, which Gee (2003) defines as the personal actions, goals, and aspirations executed and obtained by the player, such as defeating tough challenges or getting stronger equipment.

Finally, the projective identity (Gee, 2003) forms from the interaction between the player and all their identities (ie: race, class, occupation, ethics, etc.) and the avatar. This happens through the projection of an idealized representation of a player upon a virtual identity (who in turn impacts the player). For example, in the popular action role-playing game *Skyrim*, a player could choose to be a female of the Orc race. However, the kind of Orc this avatar will become, what choices, values, interactions, and needs she will have will be filtered by the player's choices and preferences and projected onto this virtual identity.

The relevance of projective identity for this study is related to how idealization and achievement occur when players are motivated. Video games are often fairly efficient in motivating their players (Amory et al, 1999; Bryant, 2006; Denis & Jouvelot, 2005; Dickey, 2006; Dondlinger, 2007; Gee, 2003;; Klimmt & Hartmann, 2006; Peterson, 2010; Thompson & Gillern, 2020) and frequently enticing to their audience in involving their real-world identities with their virtual ones. Gee (2003) exemplifies this phenomenon by arguing how students should feel capable of seeing themselves *as* their own idealized versions of scientists they wish to become, which in turn bridges the distance between the identities and allows certain students to project themselves with their own perspectives. Nonetheless, the notion of idealized identities that are motivating on their own is also present in studies done by Dörnyei (2005; 2009) on his proposed “L2 motivational self-system” theory, which will be discussed in the following section.

Together with the previous discussion on identity, this study also relies on Milik's (2017) conceptualization of persona for the contextualization of online video games as powerful L2 motivators as well as understanding social presence and anonymity in these global communities. The persona in online MMOs, according to Milik (2017) is the social permanence and representation of any specific player that may include multifaceted real and virtual elements that

compose their presence in online social contexts. These may include their avatar (or multiple avatars), alias/es, real-life identities (gender, race, etc.), and physical factors (voice, images, physical presence, etc.). Milik (2017, p. 72), when defining the persona as the Meta-stage, states:

(it) incorporates both the character and the player, but also impacts the core identities and social meanings of both. While the player has a central role in defining the aspects and traits of the character, the character can also greatly influence how the player is perceived by others.

It is common for players of online MMOs to represent themselves as an entity who encapsulates many aliases and avatars, and that representation may seep into real-life situations, such as gaming conventions and communities (Milik, 2017) Furthermore, the author argues that just like the avatar, a player is also a social construct who “projects certain identity features through language and behaviour” (Milik, 2017, p. 73), which may facilitate social interaction and create specific communication opportunities that have a degree of anonymity and malleability present. Milik (2017) emphasizes the permanence of the persona, which goes beyond the identity set forth by one or another avatar and will remain there even if a certain player chooses to delete that avatar from the game. This concept allows us understand how non-avatar focused video games, such as first-person shooters (FPS), allow for the formation of concrete identities that also represent a virtual, a real, and a projective self. If a persona transcends a visual and virtual representation and is more firmly in line with a player’s online permanence and social presence, then a one-dimensional avatar such as a non-malleable *terrorist* (a simple visual, allegorical device whose only purpose is to put the player in the game), in popular FPS *Counter-Strike*, could take on malleable projected desires and needs, and can, in turn, construct an acting persona

in that community space. This may be relevant due to the highly social and communicative aspect of competitive games, which often adopt global English elements as part of their design grammar spaces, thus expanding the scope of this present study. This concept which the author claims to be the “persona as meta-stage” (Milik, 2017, p.74) may also contribute to bridging online video games to L2 Willingness to Communicate elements that will be discussed below, alongside Dörnyei’s L2 Motivational Self-system theory.

- **Motivation in L2, Ideal L2 Self and L2 Willingness to Communicate**

As mentioned in the discussion of Gee’s (2003) concept of identity, the focus of this study relies on works that analyze the motivating aspects of idealized selves. The L2 motivational self-system elaborated by Dörnyei in 2005 is made up of three components that are related to a learner’s mental representation of themselves as idealized speakers of an L2. Those components were characterized by Dörnyei (2005; 2009) as the *Ideal L2 Self*, *Ought-to L2 Self*, and the *L2 Learning Experience*. *The Ideal L2 Self* and the *Ought-to L2 Self*, according to Dörnyei (2005; 2009) are contrasting motivating forces where the former promotes intrinsic motivation through the desire to approximate an idealized self who speaks an L2 and their actual self, which in turn promotes a self-motivating force for L2 learning. *The Ought-to L2* self exists to build extrinsic motivational factors based on aspects and features one would like to possess to avoid negative outcomes. Furthermore, the *L2 Learning Experience* deals with situated, external motives related to the experience of learning and the elements surrounding the space where this learning occurs (Dörnyei, 2005; 2009). The focus of this study was given to the component of



the *Ideal L2 Self*, but future research should observe how the other components interact within online video-game environments as well.

Another relevant aspect is that of mental imagery and imagination as explained by Dörnyei (2009). The author discusses previous research to defend the claim that imagination is a powerful motivator for those who wish to achieve a specific goal, and the mental imagery is efficient on facilitating the materialization of that imaging into actions (Markus & Ruvolo, 1989 as cited by Dörnyei, 2009). This, combined with the understanding that mental imagery and visual perception trigger similar brain responses (Kosslyn et al, 2002 as cited by Dörnyei, 2009, p. 16), could suggest that inherently imaginative environments such as video games (and here in specific online games) are capable of activating simultaneously a mental and visual imaging response in a player who understands that games' *design grammar*, that is, that both the video-game's visual representation of one's avatar and their own mental imagery of an projected self could trigger motivating responses. This is related to a study carried out by Magid and Chan (2011) on how intervention programs that relied on guided imagery and assisted imagination improved students' Ideal L2 self-perception and resulted in higher L2 confidence and motivational levels. The authors investigated the relation between guided imagery, Ideal L2 Self and L2 motivation and confidence by analyzing intervention programmes that focused on creating and reinforcing students' ideal L2 selves through the adaptation of previous intervention programmes by Oyserman (2003, as cited by Magid & Chen, 2011) and Hock (Hock et al, 2006 as cited by Magid & Chen, 2011). Afterwards, 111 L1 Chinese students of English from both intervention programmes were asked to respond to a questionnaire and were interviewed. The authors concluded that aspects such as visualization and scripted and guided imagery improved the participants' Ideal L2 Self, as well as improving their L2 motivation and confidence.

Since video games are greatly visual in nature (Amory et al, 1999) and promote identification with virtual avatars as well as providing for spaces where players can create representations closer to their ideal selves (Bessière et al, 2007; Klimmt et al, 2009), it is believed that online video games could provide for intrinsic motivation based on personal goals related to achievement, social interaction, and growth (Gee, 2003). Furthermore, similarly to how sports athletes use imaging as an effective performance-enhancing technique (Gregg & Hall, 2006 as cited by Dörnyei, 2009, p. 17), players of online video games can feel motivated to use imagining to view themselves as more successful. Considering the social aspect of online video games, learning an L2 may become part of an imagined idealized self who interacts using the L2 in these online social environments, which often adapt World English as a means to sustain communication and construct identities.

Lastly, while not strictly central to this study, international posture and imagined international communities may have relevance within online video-game practices for L2 motivation. International posture is consisted of “interest in foreign or international affairs, willingness to go overseas to stay or work, readiness to interact with intercultural partners, and, one hopes (sic), openness or a non-ethnocentric attitude toward different cultures, among others” (Yashima et al, 2002, p. 57) and may facilitate the development of an “English using self” of a player who is engaged in a highly social online video-game. Moreover, imagined international communities (Yashima, 2009) where World English as an international language is spoken may present parallels with online video-game external design grammar spaces and the affinity groups of players of a specific game or genre where the proximity to other L2 users may further motivate learning (Murphy & Arao, 2001 as cited by Yashima, 2009, p. 153).

If we are to observe language learning motivational factors in online video games, it is also important to understand how L2 willingness to communicate (L2 WTC) can fluctuate between learners of an L2. L2 willingness to communicate is defined as the “readiness to enter into the discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2” (MacIntyre et al, 1998, p. 547). MacIntyre et al. proposed (1998) a pyramid model that accounts for state and trait factors that impact a speaker’s L2 WTC. Among these, *state-communicative self-confidence*, *interpersonal/intergroup*, and *social situation* could become focal points of analysis under the use of online video games as a tool for L2 motivation. Let us discuss these three in detail.

*State communicative self-confidence* is a factor containing two facets which the authors categorize as state anxiety and state perceived competence (MacIntyre et al., 1994, p. 549). According to Spielberger (1983 as cited by MacIntyre et al, 1998, p. 549) state anxiety is “the transient emotional reaction defined by feelings of tension and apprehension, accompanied by autonomic nervous system arousal”, and is an always varying element that affects one’s WTC depending on its intensity at any given moment. State perceived competence is in turn momentary perception of one’s capabilities of communicating at any given communicative opportunity (MacIntyre et al; 1998, p. 549).

The link between anxiety, social phobia and video games has been analyzed by a multitude of authors in the field of neurosciences and psychology (Ohannesian, 2018; Scholten et al, 2016; Sioni et al, 2017). The different approaches (ie: gender, avatar identification, anxiety prevention, etc.) allow for the consideration of the qualities and dangers of the implementation of video games for L2 learning and motivation. Studies on internet use and online interactions also provide insight into how these social foundations can enable individuals with social anxiety to engage in social communication (Caplan, 2007; Erwin et al, 2004; Lee & Stapinsky; 2012).

These studies build a solid case for online video games as a less threatening form of social interaction that can be appealing (and in some cases, addictive) to those who struggle with trait or state-like anxiety, since the findings are conclusive in linking a positive relation between anxiety or social phobia and problematic internet use and avatar identification.

It is important to address the potential negative aspects of video games that can be observed in some of the studies mentioned, such as: the relation between gender and anxiety in gaming environments, the reliance on internet use for sociability and the various links to addiction. Online video games were found to positively correlate with the highest levels of anxiety in women (Ohannesian, 2018) which the author claims to be due to the elements of violence and competition found in said games. However, it could also be argued that there is a connection to the inherent discriminatory nature of some online gaming communities towards women throughout the decades, since there is a plausible link between women and negative identities inside certain online groups. Fortunately, this has seen a great shift in the last few years as online video games are played more and more each year by female players, as for example, in 2020, 41% of total gamers were women (Statista, 2020).

Furthermore, the enforcement of fairness has been a priority to most of the front-running game developers and publishers, allowing for inclusivity by the means of punishing perpetrators of many forms of hate speech and cyberbullying. For example, Riot Games (developer of two massively popular online competitive games, League of Legends and VALORANT) has gone to varying degrees to combat unethical behavior in their online environments (Jones, 2020), implementing non-lenient infractions to those who do not follow their code of conduct and future plans on combating sexist behavior in game (Down, 2021).

The second factor presented by MacIntyre et al. (1998) as impacting the role of online video games in L2 motivation is interpersonal and intergroup motivations, which are characterized under two different categories, *affiliation* and *control*. *Affiliation* motivated communication relies on factors of interest and desire to interact and approach another interlocutor or group. *Control* motivated communication may occur to limit “cognitive, affective and behavioural freedom of the communicators” (Macintyre et al., 1998) and is often used to maintain social roles and positions between personal and group environments. *Control oriented motivation* will not be discussed thoroughly in this study, since it deals with communication in hierarchical situations (Macintyre et al, 1998), while control oriented interpersonal and intergroup motivation may appear in online video games, such as in situations where opposing and dominant factions, guilds and alliances exist, or in parties where a leader communicates to establish roles and duties, this study will focus instead on the aspects of affiliation. It is important, however, to denote how certain control motivated interactions such as asking for guidance or assistance in online MMOs may develop ought-to L2 selves inside online video-game environments with the notion that one should learn/speak global English in order to be successful within said affinity group. Moreover, this form of extrinsic motivation also relies on a player’s desire to avoid negative outcomes, whether that is being a “noob” (a beginner) or a “troll” (an intentionally harmful player to the community), for example. Coincidentally, online video games often share a negative identity tied to unresponsive, uncommunicative<sup>3</sup> players, since most online video-game communities deem lack of communication as not contributing to a group’s success.

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<https://www.sportskeeda.com/esports/valorant-riot-needs-rethink-player-punishment-comm-bans-make-innocent-suffer>

Macintyre et al. (1998) second group of motivation, namely, *Affiliation* motivated communication may be widely present within online video-game design grammar spaces, due to the many structural elements these game genres provide for direct global social communication with multifaceted interests and in various contexts (friends, guilds, alliances, teams, etc.). Players and their online personas repeatedly interact with other attractive and/or similar personas that may be part of different groups which they may wish to integrate. Online MMOs are social games in nature, and while playing alone is plausible, it is often not encouraged. Furthermore, idealized selves that players might wish to affiliate to may trigger similar motivational responses, which the online video-game design grammar space also creates (ie: skilled, friendly, L2 speaker, etc.). It is believed that both affiliation in social contexts and affiliation to idealized possible selves within these affinity groups may exist, and that these acting personas may adopt an L2 as part of their ideal self due to their interpersonal and intergroup motivation to communicate for varying needs.

*Social Situation* is defined by Macintyre et al. and other authors (Biber 1994; Brown & Fraser 1979; Hymes, 1972a; as cited by Macintyre et al. 1998, p. 553) as the variable of L2 WTC affected by a number of factors (the participants, the setting, the purpose, the topic and the channel of communication) that constitute a social encounter. Here, most of these factors take on a highly mutable and flexible state inside an online gaming environment, permitting them to be positively malleable for L2 WTC. Considering that online video games permit their participants to build their own online persona by only presenting social features they wish to expose, it is possible for players to become comfortable with certain interactions by altering them into conversations they would want to engage in by omitting certain parts of their identity. Due to this factor being controllable by the participant, the topic and channel of communication also become

player-controlled, as they will only engage in topics and forms of communication (writing or talking being the two domains) they feel comfortable with at the time. Moreover, it is possible that anonymity allows the participants to feel more confident in topics they would usually not be, or engage on channels of communication they would typically avoid.

Another aspect of online video games that provide for players to construct their online persona are the various purposes of L2 writing/speaking depending on the requirements of the goal they want to achieve. The authors classified certain social situations in four categories: persuade, transfer information, entertain, and reveal self (Biber, 1994 as cited by Macintyre et al. 1998, p. 553-554). Whether the goal is to socialize, organize a team (or *parties* in MMORPGs), lead players towards a certain objective (ie: defeating *dungeons*), acquire or share information, or any of the multiple forms of communicative purposes inside an online game, there are plenty of outlets to flexibly communicate one's intentions, which depending on the external design grammar of the online game in question, can extend beyond the in-game setting and develop into community websites and gatherings, which can constitute the many settings of certain online game's social situation.

To end this section, I present links to Dörnyei's L2 motivational self-system theory and international posture, as well as how MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) may positively impact L2 WTC. Previous research indicates that the presence of an Ideal L2 Self is a predictor for L2 willingness to communicate (Bursali & Öz, 2017; Munezane, 2013) and that international posture may provide for significant links to L2 WTC by influencing motivation which subsequently improved self-confidence in L2 communication (Yashima, 2002). These findings allow for further consideration of the impacts online video games may have in building an Ideal L2 self. Reinders and Wattana (2011) conducted an experimental study on the

effects of gaming on L2 Willingness to Communicate with L1 Thai players of MMORPG “Ragnarok Online”. The results evidenced a positive correlation on how this genre of video games improved the learners’ L2 willingness to communicate. If online video games positively reinforce L2 WTC, as well as provide for deep, multifaceted and malleable online personas, it may indicate that, as long as an L2 is inherent to the design grammar space of said genres, an Ideal L2 Self might plausibly exist for players who participate in that affinity group.

#### **4 - The use of video games in L2 learning**

In the previous section we reviewed literature that led to the conclusion that online video games are likely to be beneficial for the development of an Ideal L2 Self, which in turn may benefit L2 acquisition. The purpose of the present section is to address how video games and persona may be beneficial for L2 learning. This paper is concerned with the benefits of video games for the general linguistic skills such as reading, listening, speaking and writing (deHaan, 2005; Galvis, 2015; Peterson, 2010; Thompson & Gillern, 2020), and we will additionally look into aspects such as literacy (Galvis, 2015; Gee, 2003; Squire, 2010), sociolinguistic competence (Bryant, 2006; Dondlinger, 2007; Peterson, 2012), and communicative interaction and L2 WTC and motivation (Peterson, 2006; Reinders & Wattana, 2011).

- **General linguistic skills (reading, listening, speaking, writing)**

As for general linguistic competence, deHaan (2005) conducted a case study on a Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) student with the use of a Japanese baseball game for the



intentions of observing the potentials of language acquisition through game-play. Four primary research questions were presented, which emphasized matters such as balance between playing and learning, effect on listening and reading comprehension through play, and how the player utilizes the video-game in question to learn language (deHaan, 2005). The primary findings by the author indicate that it may be possible to facilitate L2 listening and receptive skills through continuous play (consisting of multiple sessions with the game) of said specific Japanese baseball game. DeHaan (2005) claims that through repetition, contextual clues, controllability and aural and textual language present in the game, the student was able to improve his JFL acquisition over time. The author also emphasized how “the subject was able to learn most of the language he did from context” (deHaan, 2005, p. 281) which correlates with Gee’s (2003) observation on how video games’ design grammar spaces present complex systems that promote contextualized, situated meanings. Equal to a study by Peterson (2012) presented later in this review, both studies confirm that there may be a learning curve for players to adapt and improve over time so they can equally balance their navigation through the design grammar spaces and the linguistic and communicative aspects of the video games in question. deHaan (2005) does claim, however, that despite the difficulties in balancing both play and learning, that the player did improve over the sessions. Lastly, it is important to consider that this paper by deHaan was a case study, so further research still needs to validate these outcomes with larger sample sizes, especially in online settings considering the video-game in question did not include any online connectivity or opportunities for social interaction.

Moving onto studies that attempt to validate the effects of online video games and L2 learning on larger scales, Peterson (2010) and Thompson and Gillern (2020) both have published works which analyze the direct interaction between video games and FL learning. Thompson &

Gillern (2020) aimed to analyze the effects of digital games for vocabulary acquisition for English language learners through a systematic review of literature. They screened 1126 articles until finding 19 that met the quotas set for analysis according to the research questions proposed in regards to EFL vocabulary acquisition. The study utilized bayesian meta-analysis to “quantitatively synthesize a collection of studies on the same topic or that address the same or similar research questions” (Thompson & Gillern, 2020) and concluded that overall digital games contribute to vocabulary production for English language instruction. The authors also suggested that digital games could be utilized as effective tools for TESOL by teachers and educators (Thompson & Gillern, 2020, p. 19) despite the need to understand the best practices of adaptation for digital games as educational practices. Thompson and Gillern (2020) also reinforce the notion in this study that digital games may be more fruitful for specific groups of learners, which in this work was analyzed to be college-level students, performing better than younger learners present in other studies reviewed. Lastly, the authors also confirm that digital games on all platforms (console, mobile and PC) netted positive results, and suggests that commercial-off-the-shelf games should be considered for TESOL instruction due to providing greater vocabulary learning outcomes than serious games, which are designed for specific purposes such as education or training and not related to entertainment (Thompson & Gillern, 2020, p. 21). This finding is beneficial for the scope of this present study, considering the focus of online video games is designed primarily for entertainment purposes, and most, if not all, qualify as commercial digital games.

Another study done on the subject was the one by Peterson (2010). The author made an analysis of three exploratory studies on video games and learner behavior for language learning which began by observing crucial aspects connected to video games, such as how they foster

immersive, interactive environments that promote contextualized literacies, risk-taking, and the formation of Zones of Proximal Development (ZPDs)<sup>4</sup> through interaction occurring in network-based games (Thorne, 2008 as cited by Peterson, 2010). The author reviews three exploratory studies done on MMORPGs and SLA, where he recontextualizes the findings of previous studies that indicate varying positive effects of online video games as a tool for FL teaching.

Of these effects, Peterson highlights how studies showed “beneficial effects of participation in network-based gaming in terms of enhanced production of TL output and extensive practice in the four skills” (Rankin et al, 2006b; Thorne, 2008 as cited by Peterson, 2010, p. 436). He also confirmed that MMORPGs support enhanced vocabulary learning through interaction within that video-game genre. Furthermore, interpersonal relationships, communication and collaboration in MMORPGs were all present in the data analyzed (Thorne, 2008 as cited by Peterson, 2010). Lastly, the paper also provides evidence that beginner level FL learners may struggle with the design grammar spaces provided by MMORPGs, and that these video games are better suited for intermediate and advanced level proficiencies (Rankin et al, 2006b as cited by Peterson, 2010)

Overall, these results seem to indicate video games, especially online MMORPGs, as effective tools in providing for L2 general skills, with emphasis on aspects such as vocabulary acquisition, as well as additionally reinforcing positive aspects found in the data such as the practice of L2 communication. In the next section, this paper will present a theoretical research conducted by Galvis (2015) on how video-game based language instruction can further emphasize the role of video games as an effective tool for language learning, as well as how

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<sup>4</sup> The ZPD refers to one’s possible range of abilities (in this case, linguistic) they possess while being mentored (read: *scaffolded*) by an expert (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86)

video games may promote extensive vocabulary acquisition due to how video-game spaces handle literacies and how they can contextualize (situate) meanings to specific contexts on a moment-to-moment basis (Gee, 2003; Squire, 2010).

- **The impact of video-games on literacy and on L2 learning**

When learning a second language, learners do not only practice the four skills, they are also faced with literacies that can differ from their L1. The concepts of multimodal literacies, semiotic domains and situated meanings are discussed by Gee (2003). The author elaborates on how print literacy is an insufficient practice still predominant in school systems, and how learners need to be literate in many social semiotic domains that present multimodal literacies that include visual, auditory, verbal, and textual signs. Gee (2003, p. 18) emphasizes that semiotic domains are “any set of practices that recruits one or more modalities (...) to communicate distinctive types of meanings”. He continues by reinforcing how semiotic domains classify the representation of certain signs in specific social practices, and how meaning is dependent on the social context it is being presented.

Gee’s focus on semiotic domains and literacy are essential for the study of video games and learning due to how the semiotic domains of video games present situation and domain-specific meanings. This concept Gee (2003, p.24) classifies as *situated meanings*, the act of situating the “meaning of (a) that word, symbol, image, or artifact within embodied experiences of action, interaction, or dialogue in or about the domain”. He further claims that video games are effective in providing for embodied experiences that allow for players to efficiently situate meanings that are specific to the situation present just-in-time (Gee, 2003, p.

26). Video games promote literacy that relies on embodied experiences that do not adopt decontextualized meanings in order to understand texts that require reading beyond the print and grasping the social situation and domain specific meanings being formed.

Squire (2010) also approaches the topic of digital video-game literacies and how its interactive and social nature transforms the process of meaning-making and mastery. The author claims that video-game based literacies are inherently oppositional to print-focused classroom literacy (Squire, 2010, p. 667):

Game-based literacies include a constellation of literacy practices that are quite different: texts are spaces to inhabit, learning as a productive, performative act, knowledge is legitimized through its ability to function in the world, participation requires producing as well as consuming media, expertise means leveraging digital spaces to further one's goals, and social systems have permeable boundaries with overlapping trajectories of participation.

Squire (2010) emphasizes the sociocultural aspects of video games and how they present opportunities for players to open "spaces" through their own interactions and experiences (Jenkins & Squire, 2002 as cited by Squire, 2010, p.646). The way players can "probe" the environment (Gee, 2003) in turn allows for active, contextualized meaning-making which motivates the players to learn through their own mistakes, since video-games motivate players to solve problems through critical thinking in order to solve novel problems that are presented by the design grammar of the game in question. Furthermore, Squire's (2010) descriptions of video-game structure often resemble linguistic elements, such as how video games are constituted of small units that can be combined to "create increasingly complex situations that coalesce to become a holistic experience for the player-as-game-character" (Squire, 2010, p. 649)

or how video games systems are a combination of closed and open systems that “are ultimately hard coded and knowable, but their emergent properties are so complex that they are for all practical purposes open-ended problems” (Steinkuehler, 2005 as cited by Squire, 2010, p. 652).

The question of multiliteracies and foreign language instruction can be seen applied to the media of video games through the theoretical research conducted by Galvis (2015). This study analyzes potential key concepts that create dialogical connections to language learning and video games so as to suggest their implementation in classrooms and other educational settings. Rooted in the works of Gee, this study emphasizes theories aforementioned in this paper (situated meanings, critical learning, identities, language motivation) as positive indicators of video games as tools or mediators for L2 instruction. Galvis (2015) also suggests that other ideas, such as *incidental language learning* (Squire et al, 2005; Galvis, 2011b as cited by Galvis, 2015), and *Flow* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997 as cited by Galvis, 2015) are both present inside design grammar spaces of video games and that they might benefit L2 vocabulary acquisition and motivation/enjoyment.

The study by Galvis also reinforces positively the type of multiliteracy found in video game design grammar spaces as opposed to print literacy found in classrooms, and how it provides for “critical experiences” similar to those in ESL abroad programs (Block, 2007 as cited by Galvis, 2015). The author also raises a few concerns such as the role of *Flow* for education, avatar attachment (ie: not being able to separate real and virtual realities) and violence, types of testing and assessment, and structural limitations, such as accessibility to computers and video games for educational institutions. Finally, the paper also reinforces other aspects which will be mentioned in the following sections of this study, such as the prioritization of the social context

in language education with suggestions that VGBLI should approach learning through a “Focus on forms” communicative approach (Galvis, 2015).

As was seen in the results provided by the authors above, the impact of video games on literacy may be fruitful for L2 learning, considering video-game design grammar spaces abandon decontextualized approaches to the learning of tools, mechanics and language. Everything the player is in contact with provides for rich, embodied experiences that require the player to learn through play, always providing meaning to the words and situations encountered as the symbols are likely to represent different things according to the context within the specific semiotic domain in question.

- **Sociolinguistic competence in online video games’ design grammar spaces**

In their daily interactions, language learners need sociolinguistic competence to interact with other language users, which Alptekin (2002, p. 58) defines as “the social rules of language use, which involve an understanding of the social context in which language is used”. The social aspect of video games may be beneficial for the development of this aspect, thus creating an application for the online persona as a crucial factor for L2 learning within online video games and their design grammar spaces. Bryant (2006) examined the use of task-based activities through playing *World of Warcraft* and other MMORPGs. The results suggest that MMORPGs may provide for effective SLA through sociocultural interactivity and context. The author implies that the ability to simulate immersive scenarios where learners can conduct linguistic tasks through interaction with peers and acquire contextual, domain and situation specific meaning may be beneficial for learners of a second language (Bryant, 2006). Bryant (2006) also

emphasizes how this genre of online video games is specifically beneficial for these simulations due to how they provide for global and “international imagined communities” (Yashima, 2009), and how MMORPGs are specifically highly motivating, stating that the average player may spend an average of 23 hours a week playing (Yee, 2006 as cited by Bryant, 2006, p. 3). Bryant (2006) discusses a case where he conducted a *World of Warcraft* task-based activity with a second semester German student in which he elaborates the procedures taken during a 30-minute lesson, stating qualities and hurdles that may occur due to the sociolinguistic nature of the class. The lessons were one-on-one as the author took on a mediating role (“guide”) and followed the student as a companion inside the game world, where they spent time together completing objectives in the game while engaging in L2 communication (German). Bryant (2006) would then extend the experience by recalling elements of the gaming session to allow for feedback and corrective actions based on the mistakes committed during the activity. The author concludes by believing MMORPGs such as “World of Warcraft” can be flexible enough to accommodate tasks for beginner-to-intermediate L2 students.

Dondlinger (2007) carried out a literature review on video games for motivation and education purposes and emphasizes how video games may facilitate learning. The author expands the research from subjects such as motivation and goals and rules, down to social aspects such as constructivist elements and gender. Some remarking comments made that may defend the sociolinguistic aspects of video games are cited by the author, such as the presentation of Gee’s (2003) “Regime of Competence” principle, which presents similarities to the Vygotskian’s concept of ZPD, stating that the player is often challenged at the edge, but never outside of their abilities and resources, having to rethink their previous experience (Gee, 2003, p. 70). Another statement was also cited by the author as the literature review presented a studied



by Zagal, Nussbaum, and Rosas (2000 as cited by Dondlinger, 2007) on how interactivity in multiplayer video games may propose cooperative and/or competitive social interactions that may require synchronicity or coordination.

Furthermore, Dondlinger (2007) analyzes a number of articles and books that conclude the inherent constructivist nature of video games. If learning in video games adopt constructivist principles, it is further possible to think of online video games as genres that may engage with social constructivist and sociolinguistic principles, which is presented in the study of Peterson (2012). The author conducted an exploratory study focusing on sociocultural and linguistic aspects inside an MMORPG titled *Wonderland*. Through a qualitative analysis, Peterson (2012) observed the social and linguistic interactions of four Japanese learners of EFL and what features were predominant in their sociolinguistic behavior. Furthermore, the author also quizzed the participants (who were all beginners on this genre of video games) in their behavior towards playing MMORPGs to assess overall feedback on this type of practice. The most salient results were in regards to how participants were able to engage in L2 production and interaction through the use of distinct strategies and practices that contribute towards sociolinguistic competence, such as “the extensive and appropriate use of positive politeness in the form of greetings, leave-takings, informal language, small talk, and humor, as a means to build rapport” (Peterson, 2012, p. 337). Reinforcing the social aspects of the interaction, Peterson (2012) also cites how collaborative work aided the participants and maintained the state of intersubjectivity during the dialogues, as well as how assistance provided by other players benefitted the participants’ production of “coherent and appropriate TL” (Peterson, 2012) through scaffolding. Lastly, the study also concludes that participants’ attitudes towards MMORPGs were positive, and that

online environments such as these benefitted from “reduced anxiety and enhanced opportunities for risk-taking” (Peterson, 2012, p.377) as well as motivational and instructional factors.

As indicated by the studies above, this paper suggests that there may be a beneficial link between the practice of online video-games and the development of an L2 learner’s sociolinguistic competence, considering the application of language in use under contextualized scenarios where players have to adapt their linguistic interactions according to the situation and the individuals who are participating. This will be further reinforced by the following subsection which emphasizes on communicative interaction regarding avatar usage and L2 willingness to communicate through online game-play.

- **Communicative interaction and L2 WTC**

As for studies on how video games transform and provide tools for L2 communication and L2 WTC, two articles will be presented. The exploratory research done by Peterson (2006) on a famous avatar hub *Active Worlds* studied the communicative factors implemented by intermediate level EFL learners during play. It also aimed to observe factors such as the impact of avatar-specific communicative features, the relation between avatars and heightened sense of telepresence and copresence on participants, which Schroeder characterizes as the sense of “being there” and “being together” in a virtual environment (Schroeder, 2002 as cited by Peterson, 2006), and the frequency of negotiation of meaning that occurred when students encountered misunderstandings during interaction in-game. The author used a task-based approach using Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) through virtual reality game *Active Worlds* alongside a set of goal-oriented tasks that aimed to facilitate second language

development through communication (Peterson, 2006). The types of tasks implemented were jigsaw, decision making, and opinion-exchange, which were then discussed through the game's interface. Data was collected by the means of the participants' exchanged text messages through the game's integrated chat-box through the span of 3 sessions of 60 minutes. The results highlighted the participants' operation of a number of transactional and interactional strategies that facilitated TL interaction, and overall reflected face-saving practices<sup>5</sup> seen in face-to-face interactions. The author categorized the transactional strategies as feedback markers, addressivity and time saving devices, while also emphasizing the high number of interactional positive and negative politeness implementations employed by the EFL learners in this study (Peterson, 2006). The study also reported positive correlation between avatar-focused CMC and heightened sense of telepresence and copresence, as well as indicating mixed results on how often participants made use of their avatar communicative features, despite showing promising data that may indicate positive factors for matters such as turn tracking. Lastly, negotiation of meaning did occur through confirmation and comprehension checks in certain interactions where miscommunication was present, but its indicated infrequency may suggest that the subjects opted to use avoidance strategies or simply preferred to ignore certain misunderstandings to follow the scrolling conversation text (Peterson, 2006). These findings reinforce the hypothesis that digital games can be beneficial for L2 communication, suggesting that task-based and sociocultural approaches may prove effective with the use of online video games.

Another study also exemplifies how online video games have direct positive effects on L2 production and L2 WTC (Reinders & Wattana, 2011). The authors modified a version of

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<sup>5</sup> Face-saving practices utilized here were both practices of negative and positive politeness such as greetings, leave-takings, formal or colloquial language, humor, apologies and small talk. To "save face" would be to maintain theirs and others' "status" and integrity during the interactions, which in turn facilitates the flow of communication (Brown et al, 1987)

popular MMORPG *Ragnarok Online* to include three goal-oriented quests that required L2 social interaction and communication for completion. The digital game was played with a fully English interface and presented to 16 Thai EFL students, where they either were selected to communicate orally (via a third-party program) or textually, through the game's chat box. Just like the study Peterson on CMC tools, Reinders and Wattana (2011) also emphasized computer assisted language learning (CALL) as part of the corpus of their course, and implemented 40 minute game sessions alongside 15 minute briefings on the necessary materials for the activities and ground rules and etiquettes for partaking on the quests. The results of the study indicated that participants had a considerably high number of communicative interactions that gradually progressed between the three sessions of the experiment. The authors emphasize that the subjects selected for the chat box category communicated more frequently and employed higher levels of lexical accuracy and more complex discourse (Reinders & Wattana, 2011). Furthermore, the research did not sufficiently indicate higher levels of L2 production quality, pointing at frequent textual inaccuracy which the authors claim to be correlated to the cognitive stress of the activities which lead to an inability "to pay attention to both form and meaning" (Reinders & Wattana, 2011). Lastly, participants' L2 WTC were considerably high, indicating that the environment created by the modified version of *Ragnarok Online* resulted in highly motivating worlds where L2 learners were encouraged to interact with lowered anxiety, among other beneficial factors such as natural contextualized use of language.

#### **4 - Conclusions**

At the beginning of this paper two statements were made to discuss the relations between video games and L2 motivation and learning. Throughout the articles reviewed in the prior sections it is possible to observe links and parallels between the subjects at hand, which concern aspects such as how video-game's inherently motivating nature and one's Ideal L2 Self may schematically present themselves in a similar manner. They may also dialogue with each-other whenever the video-game's design grammar spaces include a FL as a part of its core features, which is often the case with online video games due to their use of global English as a means of communication for the practice of various in-game tasks. Much of the research on video games and identity (Gee, 2003; Bessièrè et al, 2007, Milik, 2017) appears to parallel notions of how Dörnyei's L2 motivational self-system theory operates within the space of L2 motivation, and some studies done on L2 Willingness to Communicate and both video games and the Ideal L2 Self (Bursali & Öz, 2017; Reinders & Wattana, 2011, Munezane, 2013) seem to indicate that online video games may motivate their players to integrate an Ideal L2 Self to their online persona. Most exploratory studies that observed L2 production within online video-game spaces have observed a positive increase in L2 participation (Peterson, 2010, 2012; Reinders & Wattana, 2011,) and studies on anxiety and video games may configure these design grammar spaces as more accessible to individuals with social phobia and/or anxiety (Ohannessian, 2018; Scholten et al, 2016; Sioni et al, 2017), which is a positive element for L2 Willingness to Communicate.

Furthermore, to understand the role of the online persona in the achievement of L2, this paper also gathered studies done on video games for L2 learning and teaching. Many of the articles reviewed in the latter subsection did their own gathering of data from other experiments

previously done on video games and learning, L2 competence, literacy and L2 communication. One of the most evident features of video games may seem to be their capability of promoting vocabulary acquisition (deHaan, 2005; Thorne, 2008 as cited by Peterson, 2010; Galvis, 2015; Thompson & Gillern, 2020) and their construction of social environments that promote L2 communication and L2 Willingness to Communicate, (Bryant, 2006; Peterson, 2006, 2010, 2012; Reinders & Wattana, 2011), and contextualized, situated language learning (Gee, 2003; Squire, 2010). This appears to indicate that online video games may be designed to provide for vast, embodied experiences that can be applied as tools for L2 learning and its many linguistic competences, which is further defended by the theoretical work of Galvis (2015) in his conceptualization of a framework for the consideration of video-games for L2 instruction.

This study, however, brings some limitations to light. Firstly, since there were no exploratory applications to assess the direct relation between the Ideal L2 Self, online video games, and the online persona, the concluding remarks of this paper can only expose and amplify the links that may be present between the concepts aforementioned. This fact calls for the conduction of experimental studies that observe the links above in practice in carefully crafted environments for L2 learners to engage with language through online video games. Second, some of the studies reviewed either presented a low number of subjects, or dealt with single-player video games, as for example the study conducted by deHaan (2005), which was a case study and utilized a single-player baseball game. While the studies on online MMOs seem to be in continuous growth throughout the last decade, this paper suggests for the conduction of more exploratory studies that analyze the use of online video games as tools for L2 learning (writing, reading, speaking, listening) and L2 Willingness to Communicate. In relation to the last aspect, the third limitation appears to be in the open-endedness of the design grammars present

within video games as a whole. Some studies mentioned the difficulty of working with video games that are not as linear and focused as classroom settings (ie: Bryant, 2006). Further research should consider how to prepare teachers for this new type of electronic media that adapt a completely different form of literacy that does not conform to print literacy found in schools and textbooks.

It is clear that the topic requires further analysis, since this paper evidenced parallels between the intrinsic motivating nature of (online) video games, the role of language in these situated domains, and the formation of an online persona with a possibly defined Ideal L2 Self. If we are to contextualize L2 learning to our current times, the inclusion of commercial video games as part of the curriculum appears to be positive and beneficial due to their ability to contextualize language in joyful, motivating experiences that can be shared socially. This bachelor's thesis hopes to extend the dialogue over the role of video games in education.

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