Title of Project:
Adolescent English language learners' second
language literacy engagement in *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*)

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Research Summary:

As noted by researchers (Funk, Hagen, & Schimming, 1999; Squire, 2006; Williams, 2003), many youth today spend more time playing in digital worlds than reading, or watching TV or films. Though many people, parents and teachers, still take video games as mere entertainment, "gaming culture" (Sanford & Madill, 2007) and "game literacy" (Gee, 2007) have been proposed to view gaming as a positive and potential tool in literacy development. With the notion of literacy as reading and writing skills being expanded to multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996) and multimodal literacy (Kress, 2003), studies on gaming in the field of education have been increasing in recent years(e.g.,Compton-Lilly, 2007; Dubbels, 2009; Ferdig, 2007; Squire, 2005; Zhao & Lai, 2009). However, most of the studies are conducted with native English speakers and deal with the features in games that could facilitate learning. What remains to be explored is what adolescent English language learners' (ELLs') online gaming experience is like. To fill this gap, this qualitative study sought to understand how adolescent ELLs were engaged in second language (L2) literacy practices through a popular massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG), *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*). This study triangulated multiple data sources, including interviews, observations, and artifacts. The participants were four Chinese adolescents who had lived in the U.S. for between four to nine years. Through an ethnographic multiple case study approach, this study presents a "rich, 'thick' description" (Merriam, 1998, p. 29) of what L2 literacy practices occur in online games.

Pivotal to the findings is the need to stress the definition of "literacy" in the study, which suggests effective functioning in situated social practices through meaning making across various modalities (texts, images, symbols, numerals, sound, movement and so forth). This study differentiates among gaming activities, literacy activities, and literacy practices. "Gaming activities" are the activities directly observed in the participants' game play process. "Literacy activities" suggest "observable units of behavior" (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 7) where literacy plays a role. "Literacy practices" refer to an abstract way of "utilising literacy" (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 8).

Inspired by Guthrie and his colleagues' engagement model of reading development (Guthrie, 2001), I draw a visual representation below to demonstrate the participants' literacy engagement in *WoW* as a dynamic system. The diagram on the left of the figure shows the

relationship among literacy practices, literacy activities, and gaming activities. All literacy practices are embedded in literacy activities, which are derived from gaming activities. In other words, gaming activities as the most observable activities in gaming provide opportunities where the literacy is utilized. To follow the arrow around literacy practices, the four aspects of literacy practices including socializing, information seeking, strategizing, and problem solving are depicted on the right. Sense of engagement occupies a central location with the four literacy practices around it. This means the four literacy practices that occur concomitantly foster the participants' sense of engagement, which involves the issues of reward, immersion, and immediacy. The sense of engagement reflects the participants' "enthusiasm, liking and enjoyment" (Guthrie, 2004) in game play. It is noted that Guthrie's framework for understanding literacy engagement derives from research in the classroom context and using print literacy. In this study, the participants were involved in multimodal meaning-making processes. Moreover, all the participants were immersed in a scaffolded, interactive, and collaborative learning environment, where English is the second language. Thus, the multimodal environment is prominent in the GLE model generated in my study.

The participants were engaged in a complex process which involved all the four literacy practices not any single literacy practice in the game process. Only in this way, could their sense of engagement be stimulated through being completely immersed in the gaming environment, being rewarded upon accomplishments, and being caught by immediacy in gaming.

While playing *WoW*, the English language, as a second language, was necessary for the participants to complete the task-based activities. In terms of language use, reading and writing were the main language practices in which the participants were involved. Furthermore, reading in the game is not confined to reading words. Reading is multimodal and intertwined with words, symbols, images, numbers, colors, and
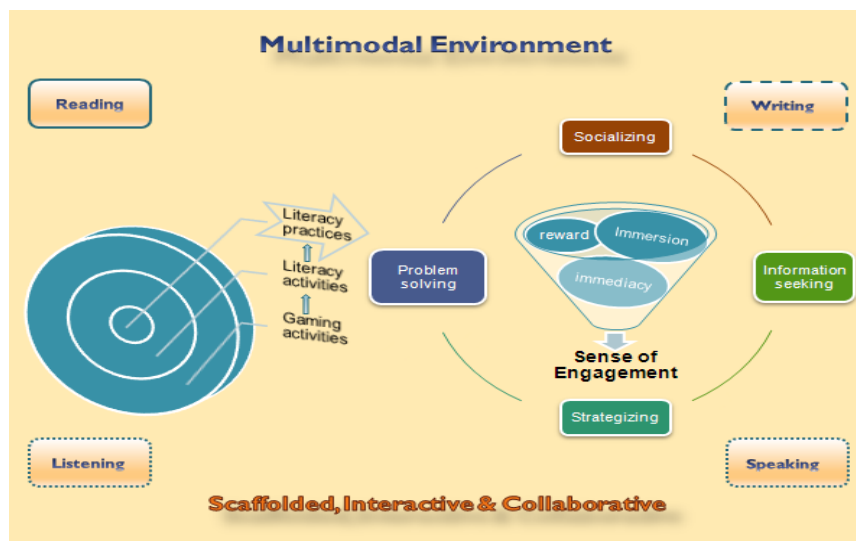

Figure 1. Literacy engagement in *WoW*.
> Note: The variety of the frame lines (from solid lines to dashed lines) of the four components (reading, listening, writing, and speaking) indicates the varied degrees of occurrence of the four language practices. Reading was most often observed language practice in the gaming process. Writing occurred less than reading but more than listening and speaking.

occasionally sounds, all of which shaped a rhetorical context for the participants. Though writing was not as indispensable as reading in their *WoW* play, informal writing did occur in all the participants' game play process, though the frequency varied. The experienced player was most active in using informal and specialized game language to chat with other friends. Listening and speaking were optional literacy practices, which happened infrequently. Some simple instructions could be heard as long as the participants turned the volume on when they played the game. Of the four participants, only once did Mark use voice chat with other players once, through which he talked with others in an interactive way. The multimodal environment in *WoW* offered the participants a variety of literacy options that they could choose to effectively function in the game world.

To summarize, exploring the literacy practices that the participants were engaged in reveals the nature of the literacy engagement. A bottom-up perspective on gaming activities, literacy activities, and literacy practices provides the lens through which the nature of the literacy engagement can be viewed in a dynamic way. In *WoW*, literacy engagement occurs when a player's excitement and enthusiasm are aroused by the joint functioning of reward, immersion, and immediacy in a multimodal gaming environment replete with scaffolding, interaction and collaboration. The player is involved in a dynamic process of socializing, information seeking, strategizing, and problem solving simultaneously within and around the game. To the participants and others who learn English as their second language, the exposure to the English language is increased owing to the fact that reading and writing are incorporated into the gaming process while listening and speaking tend to be optional practices.

Given that ESL students' engagement in video games outside of school has received scant research attention, this study attempts to inform teachers, parents, and curriculum designers of the digital discontinuity of the students' literacies in and outside of school. First, this study adds to the knowledge of ELLs' out-of-school literacy. Since the study attempts to understand how adolescent ELLs are engaged in online gaming, it expands our knowledge about ELLs' out-of-school literacy practices, especially their new literacies. Second, this study contributes to the existing literature about students' gaming experience. The existing analysis on the potential of video games in learning, undoubtedly, serves as the theoretical foundation for the study, and in turn, the study results about ELLs' L2 literacy engagement in online gaming widen our view of how video games can be applied to productive learning. Furthermore, this study has significant implications for parents, teachers, curriculum developers, and game designers. By examining ELLs' "alternative literacies" (Sanford & Madill, 2007), this study offers hope to parents and teachers, who may want to reach adolescents to teach them.

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