CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Educational Problem

With increasing globalization, a need arises to travel to other countries and interact with people from other countries (American Council on Education, 1998). Likewise, as corporations and individual states become more involved with various countries of the world, company employees and state representatives will need international skills and competencies (American Council on Education, 1998). However, most people undertaking international work are not trained in international affairs (Mestenhauser, class discussion, 2001). With the increased number of people interacting cross-culturally and the lack of international training amongst those individuals, the need for intercultural training is even more critical.

Most intercultural training programs require participants to attend seminars and classes, interact with people from other cultures, and participate in role-plays and simulations. While intercultural training in a face-to-face setting can be effective, participants also spend a significant amount of time and money. Currently, there are no cost-effective intercultural training programs accessible to a large number of people.

Technology has opened the door for people to attain education and training on their own time. Pioneering universities and corporations have been educating and training students by utilizing technological innovations for the past 30 years. These institutions allow participants to remain in their homes and at their jobs while pursuing the education or training they need to improve their skills. Unlike these innovative institutions, most intercultural training organizations do not provide the opportunity to increase intercultural competence on one's own time in a convenient location.

Research Problem

Technology can be used to deliver education and training at a lower cost and on a larger scale, allowing more people to access and benefit from educational and training opportunities. This premise has been tested with the advent of online colleges and universities; however, it is not known whether technology can be used to deliver intercultural training beyond the presentation of facts and objective cultural information.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to address the educational problem of current intercultural training methods being location based, expensive, and relatively inaccessible. To address the problem, this study aims to explore the possibility of utilizing massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) to deliver intercultural training. MMOGs are a promising technology that may be able to simulate intercultural training programs at a low cost and on a large scale. They would allow more people to access intercultural training in order to prepare themselves for interacting with people of differing cultures and backgrounds.

Conceptual Framework

Subjective culture and two theories will be used to examine MMOGs and their potential ability to deliver intercultural training in a virtual setting. Subjective culture has been defined by Cushner & Brislin (1992) and Triandis (2002). The first theory is experiential learning, as defined by Brislin, Landis, & Brandt (1983) and Kolb (1984). The second theory is communities of practice, as defined by Wenger (2002).

Subjective Culture

To begin to better understand the phenomenon, researchers have divided culture into objective and subjective culture. Objective culture can be defined as those visible, or tangible, aspects of a group of people such as food, dress, buildings, and tools (Cushner & Brislin, 1992; Triandis, 2002). Subjective culture refers to "invisible, less tangible aspects of a group of people, such as their values, norms of behavior, attitudes, and worldview – the things people generally carry around in their mind" (Cushner & Brislin, 1992, p. 43). In addition, subjective culture may include skills, roles, formal and non-formal communication, symbols, and ethics (Triandis, 2002).

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning focuses on the process, rather than the outcomes, of learning. According to Kolb (1984), "Ideas are not fixed and immutable elements of thought but are formed and re-formed through experience" (p. 26). Essentially, learners have a concrete experience, reflect, draw hypotheses, and by testing those hypotheses, have more concrete experiences (Kolb, 1984).

In intercultural training, trainees typically learn about subjective culture and how to communicate with one another taking this culture into consideration. Trainees learn these skills through actual experiences (emotionally, physically, and intellectually), such as role-plays, simulations, and group discussions (Brislin, Landis, & Brandt, 1983; Ferdman & Brody, 1996). Experiential training allows trainees to use communication and analytical skills as they interact with other training participants (Weaver, 1986).

Communities of Practice

The purpose of a community of practice is to "create, expand, and exchange knowledge, and to develop individual capabilities" (Wenger, 2002, p. 42). Furthermore, communities of practice are held together by passion, commitment, and group identification, but will stay together only as long as the community remains relevant for its members (Wenger, 2002).

People within a community learn through interactions with other members, experimentation, observation, and critical thinking (Leemkuil, Jong, de Hoog, & Christoph, 2003; Lunenburg, 1998). New members to the community often learn through interactions with experts within the community. These experts guide the new members as they slowly adapt to the new community culture (Kimble, Hildreth, & Wright, 2001).

When newcomers join the community of practice, they are untrained and confront the new environment from a different perspective. However, as a person spends more time within a culture and has the opportunity to practice being a member of that culture, they become more adept and more able to interact (Grove & Torbiorn, 1986).

Rationale for the Study

This study is important because there is a dearth of research regarding MMOGs and culture in video games. While there is a large amount of separate research on culture, experiential learning, communities of practice, and in some cases, video games, research about the educational benefits of MMOGs is only now gaining interest.

Recognizing a lack of research linking video games with culture, experiential learning, and communities of practice, Squire (2002) suggested that future studies could focus on "shared practices, language, resources, understandings, and roles that emerge

through game play" (p. 4). In addition, he hopes that academics and the video game industry will work together to develop games designed for "edutainment" (p. 6). However, Squire also realizes that commercial games cost millions of dollars to produce and the video game industry will be hesitant to invest in "edutainment" games without further research (Foreman, 2004; Squire & Barab, 2004b). Therefore, Squire & Barab (2004) suggested examining existing games for desired educational and learning characteristics (p. 505).

This study answers a call for more research on video games and focuses on the less studied MMOG genre. By doing so, this study fills a gap in the research and provides direction for future research and game development.

Research Questions

Using culture and theories of experiential learning and communities of practice as a guide, this study focused on four primary research questions:

1. How do virtual environments such as those that exist within Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) manifest components of subjective culture?
    a. What components of subjective culture are found in an MMOG virtual environment?
    b. In what contexts are subjective culture components found?
2. How do players of Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) learn inside the virtual environment?"
    a. How does experiential learning occur in the MMOG environment?
    b. How are communities of practice utilized to help participants learn and build skill?

3. Where do participants learn?

4. How do experiential learning and communities of practice help players learn subjective cultural components?

Research Implications

There are two research implications as result of this study. First, since subjective culture, experiential learning, and communities of practice exist in this MMOG virtual environment, it is possible that intercultural training could occur in a MMOG virtual environment. As such, educators, interculturalists, and game designers should work together to build an intercultural training experience in a virtual environment. Within this environment, trainees could interact, experiment, and practice language and cultural roles. At the same time, researchers could monitor this environment to determine whether learning is occurring.

Assumption and Biases

Several assumptions and biases underlie this study. The first assumption is that technology can be used to assist in the education of children and adults. The second assumption is that educational video games have benefits for learning. In some cases, video games can help students learn more effectively, but in most cases, they merely supplant most traditional learning methods. Third, I assume that intercultural training in a face-to-face setting effectively prepares participants for interaction with people from another culture. Finally, I assume that people need intercultural training prior to interacting with people from another culture.

In addition to the above assumptions, it is important to state a few biases going into this study. First, I am currently involved in online education and believe strongly in

technology's ability to supplement people's learning as they prepare for their careers and lives. Second, I have been playing video games for the past 25 years and believe that video games have the potential to bolster learning, especially for those people who grew up playing them. Finally, all observations, interpretations, and analyses are made through the researchers' cultural perspectives.

Outline of the Paper

Chapter 2 outlines the relevant literature and research available. Chapter 3 highlights the available research methods available and why particular methods were chosen. The fourth chapter presents results of the observations, document analysis, and interviews. Chapter 5 utilizes the themes described in chapter four to answer each of the four research questions, as well as provide directions for future research.