

**Aiming at the English Language Proficiency Objectives of the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education through Video Games**

Markus Lukkarinen  
Pro Gradu Thesis  
University of Oulu  
Faculty of Humanities  
English Philology  
Spring 2013

## Table of Contents

1. Introduction .....	1
2. Theoretical background.....	3
2.1. Video games.....	3
2.2. Video game genres.....	5
2.3. Video games and Learning.....	8
2.3.1. Experience and Learning.....	9
2.3.2. Social Identity and Learning .....	11
2.3.3. Collaborative Game-play and Language Learning .....	12
2.4. Second Language Acquisition.....	13
2.5. Extramural English and language learning .....	15
2.5.1. Language Learning in Everyday Contexts.....	15
2.5.2. Previous research on extramural English and language learning.....	16
3. English language learning and assessment in a Finnish and European context.....	20
3.1. National core curriculum for basic education and foreign languages.....	20
3.2. English language proficiency objectives of the National core curriculum .....	21
3.3. Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.....	23
3.4. Criticising the CEFR language proficiency model .....	26
4. Data and methodology .....	29
5. Analysis.....	31
5.1. Adventure – The Secret of Monkey Island: Special Edition .....	32
5.2. Action shooter – Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 .....	36
5.3. Action adventure – Uncharted: Drake’s Fortune .....	40
5.4. Role-playing – The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim .....	43
5.5. Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing – World of Warcraft.....	46
5.6. Strategy – Tropico 4.....	51
5.7. Sports – NHL 12 .....	54
5.8. Life simulation – The Sims 3 .....	56
5.9. Puzzle – Scribblenauts Unlimited .....	59
6. Conclusion .....	62
REFERENCES.....	64

## List of figures and images

Figure 1. Competence requirements for developing basic language proficiency level (A2.2) according to the CEFR	24
Figure 2. Competence requirements for functional basic language proficiency level (B1.1) according to the CEFR	25
Figure 3. Time spent on playing the video games for this thesis	30
Image 1. The user interface of The Secret of Monkey Island: Special Edition	34
Image 2. The user interface of Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3	37
Image 3. A screenshot from Uncharted: Drake's Fortune	41
Image 4. The user interface of The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim	44
Image 5. The user interface of World of Warcraft	49
Image 6. The user interface of Tropico 4	51
Image 7. The user interface of NHL 12	55
Image 8. The user interface of The Sims 3	57
Image 9. The user interface of Scribblenauts Unlimited	60

## **1. Introduction**

The video game industry is growing by leaps and bounds. A major part of modern popular culture, video games are now being played more than ever by different age groups. New video game genres, such as life simulators and fitness games, have captured the interest of casual gamers, and the number of active players is on the rise.

The importance of video games has led to an increased awareness of the potential of video games for learning. Thus, it should come as no surprise that the relation between playing a video game and learning has been studied on numerous occasions in the recent decades. This paper aims to do the same.

More specifically, the objective of this paper is to study the Finnish National core curriculum for basic education and its English language proficiency objectives and analyse how video games can help ninth graders to aim at these objectives and improve their English language skills. Additionally, this thesis examines if the genre of a video game played has an impact on the English language learning experience, i.e., whether playing, for instance, a role-playing game benefits the student more in terms of English language learning than playing a sports game.

Nine video games of varying genres were played extensively for the purposes of this study. The author of this thesis took notes and used the think-aloud strategy to gather data during the game-play.

The reasons for this research are several. First, it has been claimed that playing video games is beneficial for English language learning purposes (Thorne 2008a; Sundqvist 2009) and that the more students play video games, the better English grades they receive (Uuskoski 2011), but I was more interested in seeing how the

genre of a video game played can affect a student's English language learning and his or her English language skills. To this end, I used the National core curriculum for basic education as a reference point. Second, playing video games has benefited my own English language skills significantly over the years, starting from early teenage. This gaming hobby of mine actually turned into a part-time job four years ago when I joined the ranks of the Finnish gaming magazine *Pelit* as a contributor. Third, I studied a small Finnish group of 12-year-olds three years ago (Lukkarinen 2010) to examine how their gaming habits can benefit or constrain their learning of English as a second language. The analysis showed that the quantity of video game playing was not the key in achieving good English skills or grades. Although the boys in the study recorded nearly four times the gaming hours the girls did, the girls had the better English grades. The quality of the time spent on playing seemed to be more important than the quantity. Moreover, the study showed that some video game genres might be more suitable to English language learning than others; it appeared that role-playing games, action-adventures, first person shooters, life simulators and puzzle games were the most beneficial genres in terms of English language learning. After examining sixth graders, it felt like a logical step to examine students aged 13-15 and the language proficiency objectives of A-level English in grades 7 through 9 next.

This thesis is organised in the following manner: the second section of the paper discusses the basic theoretical background information concerning video games and their genres, video games and learning, second language acquisition, and extramural English and language learning in everyday contexts. The third section examines English language learning and assessment in a European and Finnish context, while the fourth section of the paper introduces the data and methodology of the study. The analysis of the data is presented in the fifth section. Finally, the sixth and final section of the paper concludes the thesis by discussing the results of the study and by considering the reliability and applicability of the findings.

## **2. Theoretical background**

This section will provide background information on video games, their genres, video games and learning, second language acquisition, and extramural English and language learning in everyday contexts. Providing information about these subjects and defining the key terms related to them is vital when the discussion moves on to the data and analysis sections.

### **2.1. Video games**

In this paper, the term video game will cover both computer and console games. Seppänen defines (2008: 5) video games as electronic games that take place on a screen and are designed to be played on a computer or other such electronic equipment. Video games involve interaction with a user interface to generate visual feedback on a video device. The systems used to play video games are known as platforms: examples of these are personal computers (PC) and different game consoles, such as the Microsoft Xbox 360, the Sony PlayStation 3 and the handheld Nintendo DS.

Most video games are presented in English, only the most significant titles are localised. The games are typically multimodal in nature, providing interaction and information to the player. Audio is universal and of great importance: sound reproduction devices, such as speakers and headphones, increase immersion for the players. Other feedback can come via haptic peripherals, such as vibration (e.g., console game controllers).

Another important characteristic of a video game, as Seppänen (2008: 5) points out, is that while most traditional games are abstract, most video games have fictional

worlds. Particularly adventure and role-playing games, such as *Tales of Monkey Island* (Telltale Games, 2009) and *Mass Effect 2* (BioWare, 2010), often employ a fictional world. Seppänen (2008) also explains that all (video) games are rule-based. The rules are typically programmed to the software to prevent the player from breaking them, such as killing a character in the game that is needed in advancing the plot. Salen and Zimmerman (2004: 80), on the other hand, simply define video games as systems in which “players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules that result in a quantifiable outcome”.

The game industry has experienced significant transformations over the past few decades, in no small part due to technological innovations. Malliet and de Meyer (2005) point out that the video game medium dates back as early as 1958 and state that almost all genres that are known today already existed in a 'prototypical form' in the early 1980s. The genres ranged from language-centric and contemplative adventures games to action-oriented games that were more fast-paced. In addition, Thorne (2008b) explains that the rise of online PC games in the 1990s and the more recent development of massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) have remarkably expanded the possibilities for players to communicate and interact with foreign languages.

Technological innovations and development aside, the medium of video games has matured quickly with its growing popularity and diversification of its user base. A survey commissioned in 2010 (Gamevision 2010) showed that 25.4% of Europeans aged above sixteen were gamers – in other words, they had played games in the preceding six months. The survey confirmed that young male gamers play more often than other demographics, but it also showed that almost 30% of 30-49-year-olds play games, and that the gap between males (one in three are gamers) and females (one in five are gamers) is still substantial but narrowing. Furthermore, the survey also accentuates the significance of gaming as a family activity, with as many as 58% of gaming parents revealing that they play with their children. Finally, the

prevalence of online gaming was notable in the survey: 71% of gamers had played online games in the preceding three months. Although these numbers show that Europeans are active gamers, playing video games is even more popular and more demographically equalized in the United States (ESA 2011).

## 2.2. Video game genres

The game industry today is massive in size and variety. As Seppänen (2008: 10) points out, a vast amount of different games are available, which can be divided into various different genres and sub-genres. However, these genres are merely suggestive, as more and more games today are hybrids that contain elements from different game types. Thus, at times it is almost impossible to draw clear limits between different video game genres.

**Adventure games** are story-based games that usually rely on puzzle-solving (Seppänen 2008: 10). They can be text-based, as the early adventure games usually were, or graphical. Adventure games usually employ a first person (the game is depicted through the eyes of the protagonist) or third person (the game is depicted from a fixed distance behind and slightly above the protagonist) perspective. They do not generally run in real-time: the player can take as much time as he or she wants, as nothing will happen in the game world until a certain action is performed. Seppänen (2008: 10) mentions that originally adventure games were parser-based, accepting simple sentence commands from the keyboard, but modern adventures are called point-and-click games, where the player uses the mouse to enter commands. Adventure games are generally expected to have large, complex worlds for the player to explore, and to contain colourful characters and a gripping story. One of the most well-known adventure games is *The Secret of Monkey Island* that was published by LucasArts in 1990.

**Action games**, on the other hand, are real-time games, in which the player has to react quickly to what is happening on the screen. According to Seppänen (2008: 11), it is perhaps the most basic of gaming genres, and certainly one of the broadest. Action games tend to have game-play with emphasis on combat. First person shooters (FPS), such as *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (Treyarch, 2010), dominate the genre as they are sold the most. An action-adventure hybrid is often a third-person game, where one can see the protagonist as he or she is moving through the environment. A well-known action-adventure game is *Tomb Raider* (Core Design, 1996). Seppänen (2008: 11) claims that action games are generally considered less cerebral than adventure, role-playing, strategy or puzzle games, and that they rather call for fast judgements and quick reflexes than rationality. Opponents in an action game are either computer-controlled artificial intelligences (AIs) or other human players connected over a network.

Elliott, Golub, Ream & Dunlap (2012) describe **Role-playing games** (RPGs) as games rich in narrative, usually played offline in the single player mode. Typically the player has to complete a series of quests and his or her success depends on developing and managing characters. The player's avatar can work alone or lead a group of heroes. The game-play revolves around improving the skills and strength of the heroes. Combat is usually an important element for gaining strength, experience and money to gain new equipment. Like adventure games, RPGs are quite heavy on dialogue and feature large worlds with a gradually unfolding story that often involves moral choices. The aforementioned *Mass Effect 2* is a good example of a role-playing game. Elliott *et al.* (2012) also introduce an important sub-genre of RPGs: **Massively multiplayer online role-playing games**, abbreviated as MMORPGs. The most well-known example of this genre is the hugely successful *World of Warcraft*, developed and released by Blizzard Entertainment in 2004. In games such as these, the players are tasked with developing a character and interacting collaboratively and competitively with other humans in a shared online world (Elliott *et al.* 2012).

In **Strategy games**, as Seppänen (2008: 12) explains it, the player has to manage a limited set of resources to achieve a predetermined goal. Often the player needs to decide which kinds of units to create and when to put them into action. Many strategy games are turn-based, where the player can take his or her time making a decision. **Real-time strategy** (RTS) games set the computer AI in motion against the player whether he or she is ready or not. Multiplayer versions of RTS played online substitute human opponents for the computer AIs. Classic examples of strategy games are *Civilization* (MicroProse, 1991), where the player builds an empire, and the multiplayer-oriented *Starcraft* (Blizzard, 1998). Many strategy games, such as *Civilization* (Microprose, 1991), are turn-based where the players, or the artificial intelligence, have a certain amount of turns or time to make their moves and implement their strategy (Elliott *et al.* 2012).

Various other genres are prevalent as well. **Simulations** seek to emulate the real-world and **sports games** let the players participate in their favourite sports. **Casual games** are adaptations of traditional games such as chess, bridge or solitaire. **Driving games** are primarily racing games, whereas **platformer games** require precise movement and jumping. **Educational games** aim to both teach and entertain. Seppänen (2008: 12) clarifies that they are often aimed at a younger audience than most commercial products, and their designers work closely with the experts on the subject matter. **Puzzle games**, such as *Tetris* (Alexey Pajitnov, 1984), exist purely for the intellectual challenge of problem solving. Elliott *et al.* (2012) explain that puzzle games involve matching, logic, deductive reasoning and solving problems or puzzles.

**Music games** challenge the player to follow sequences of movement or develop specific rhythms. These games have made the gaming experience more sociable, since they are often played with friends. Recently, music games such as *Sing Star* (London Studio, 2004) series and *Guitar Hero* (Harmonix, 2005) series have achieved remarkable popularity among casual gamers.

### **2.3. Video games and Learning**

Evidence of the relevance of video games to second language learning and acquisition is apparent in mainstream media, language teaching circles, academic publishing venues, journal articles and book chapters (Cornillie *et al.* 2012). Furthermore, as Piirainen-Marsh and Tainio (2009a: 169) state, games and play are recognized as central to processes of learning and development. They note that numerous empirical studies on computer games and game-playing have studied the affective, social, and cognitive factors that improve the development of skills required in game-play and similar complex activities. It has been found, as Piirainen-Marsh and Tainio (2009a: 169) clarify, that extended experience of playing video games shapes attention processes and develops the skills required by different games. These include the ability to selectively direct attention to relevant information, and the ability to switch rapidly between response options.

On the other hand, studies that have focused on the social aspects of game-playing have begun to show how players use games and create meanings in the process of playing. Piirainen-Marsh and Tainio (2009a: 170) tell us that players adopt different roles in a game. Experts guide and support the novices in managing the game. It seems that collaborative game-play creates opportunities for enjoying the game and learning at the same time.

Video games provide varied opportunities for involvement and immersion in the game worlds. According to Gee (2003), this type of involvement lies at the heart of the learning potential of video games: they combine action and learning, and learning and identity, thus offering the player opportunities to experiment with new identities at the intersection of the real world and the virtual world.

Numerous studies have addressed the use of technologies, particularly Internet communication technologies in second language education, but the study of gaming as a site for learning foreign languages is only beginning to emerge. Thorne (2008a) is one of the pioneers: he has studied multiplayer online video games as an environment for a temporary immersion into a new cultural, linguistic and task-based setting, and thus as an environment for learning foreign languages. Online games, in Thorne's view, may turn out to be powerful sites for language learning in the future. Uuskoski (2011) goes even further when he states that playing video games online or offline has a direct effect on one's English language learning and grades. Gee (2008), Thorne (2008a), Piirainen-Marsh & Tainio (2009a; 2009b), on the other hand, stress the importance of participation in language learning. According to them, video games create affordances, or opportunities, for language learning, but it is up to the player to make use of these affordances.

### **2.3.1. Experience and Learning**

Gee (2008) argues that good video games recruit good learning and that a game's design is inherently connected to designing good learning for players. According to Gee, good game design has a lot to teach about good learning, and contemporary learning theory can teach how to design even better and deeper games. He also states that when today's learning scientists talk about the mind, it can sometimes seem as if they are talking about video games. Earlier learning theories, as Gee (2008) reiterates, argued that a human's mind operates like a calculating device or a digital computer. According to these views, humans think and learn by manipulating abstract symbols via logic-like rules.

More recent learning theories, however, claim that people primarily think and learn through experiences they have had, not through abstract calculations and generalizations (Gee 2008). People store these experiences in memory and use them to run simulations in their minds to prepare for future problem solving in new

situations. This simulation helps them to form hypotheses about how to proceed in the new situation, using their past experiences as guidelines. However, as Gee (2008: 21) points out, there are conditions that experiences need to meet in order to be truly useful for learning.

Gee (2008) introduces five points. First, experiences are most useful for future problem solving if the experience is structured by a specific goal. According to him, humans store their experiences best in terms of goals, and how the goals did or did not work out. Second, for experiences to be useful for future problem solving, they need to be interpreted. In this case interpreting experience means simply thinking – both in action and after the action – about how our goals relate to our reasoning in the situation.

Third, people learn best from their experiences when they get immediate feedback during the experiences. In this manner they can recognize and assess their errors and realize where their actions or expectations have failed. They should also be encouraged to verbalize their errors and explain why their expectations failed, along with what they could have done differently. Fourth, learners need ample opportunities to apply their previous experiences to similar new situations, so they can, as Gee (2008: 21) formulates it, “debug” and improve their interpretations of these experiences, gradually generalizing them beyond specific contexts. Finally, learners need to gain knowledge from the interpreted experiences and explanations of other people, including both peers and experts. Gee (2008) emphasises that social interaction, discussion, and sharing with peers, as well as mentoring from others who are more advanced, are important aspects of learning. Additionally, debriefing after an experience is useful for learning.

Gee (2008: 22) explains that when these conditions are met, people’s experiences are organized in memory in such a manner that they are able to draw on those

experiences as from a data bank, people can build simulations in their minds that allow them to prepare for future action. Their experiences enable them to test out things in their minds before they act, and adjusting their predictions after they have acted and received feedback. Gee (2008) accentuates that they can play various roles in their own simulations, seeing how various goals might be accomplished. This is very similar to what a gamer does in a video game. These simulations are composites of our interpreted experiences built to prepare us to predict, act, and assess.

### **2.3.2. Social Identity and Learning**

Modern learning theories stress the social and cultural aspects in learning. This, as Gee (2008: 22) points out, results from the fact that the elements of good learning experiences – namely the aforementioned goals, interpretations, practice, explanations, debriefing, and feedback — have to come from somewhere. In fact, they usually flow from belonging to a certain social group. For instance, a photographer's experiences have been greatly shaped by other people and institutions devoted to photographing.

Social identity is crucial for learning. Gee (2008) gives the example of learning to become a member of a SWAT team. SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) unit is a special law enforcement unit in the United States, which uses military-style light weapons and tactics in high-risk operations that normal police forces are not equipped to deal with (Goranson 2003). As Gee (2008) points out, the member of a SWAT team needs to consider the goals of the team, the ways in which experiences in different situations should be interpreted and assessed, the sorts of feedback that is received and reacted to, and the ways in which specific tools and technologies are used. All of the aforementioned flow from the values, knowledge, established practices and skills of experienced SWAT team members.

Gee (2008: 23) claims that what is true of being a SWAT team member is equally true of being a photographer, teacher, school student, scientist, community activist, football player, gang member, or anything else. He also states that different social groups exist to induct rookies into distinctive experiences, and ways of interpreting and using those experiences, for achieving goals and solving problems. What is remarkable in today's society, as Gee (2008) emphasises, is that social groups can engage in interactions at a distance via the Internet and other technological devices. The result from this is that the role of face-to-face interaction is changing, and new forms of social organization around identity are emerging. However, good learning still requires participation, as vicarious it may be, in some social group that helps learners understand and make sense of their experiences. It helps them understand the nature and purpose of the goals, interpretations, practices, explanations, debriefing, and feedback that are integral to learning.

### **2.3.3. Collaborative Game-play and Language Learning**

Piirainen-Marsh and Tainio (2009a) examined a Finnish group of gamers in their study and argue based on their results that game-playing creates a range of interactional opportunities for using English. Players can make use of the written information, for instance by voicing the instructions available in a game. This form of participation enables the players to attend to and index choices in game-play, and to negotiate them in the course of play. Similarly, voicing written texts can serve to show appreciation of significant actions in game-play. Piirainen-Marsh and Tainio (2009a: 179) also show that players orient to the bilingual activity by adopting English elements as part of their game-related communication. The language used by the players is awash in frequent borrowing of game vocabulary and mixed language forms that alternate between Finnish and English. Piirainen-Marsh and Tainio (2009a) state that the elements drawn from the game language are a central resource that the players employ to make sense of the game and advance in it. Also, with increased experience of the game, the vocabulary needed in the game is adopted as part of the players' shared repertoire, which may also be extended to the

communicative practices of the broader communities formed around the game or gaming in general.

According to Piirainen-Marsh and Tainio (2009a: 180), informal interviews with gamers and studies on the learning potential of games show that game-playing is an informal learning environment that enhances the development of certain skills. As mentioned before, game-playing shapes attention processes and develops certain skills required in complex activities. Moreover, as Piirainen-Marsh and Tainio (2009a) state, research done on social aspects of learning suggests that collaborative gaming produces additional benefits, as players' abilities can develop through distributed expertise and shared practices.

It could be stated that gaming, with its multiple participation frameworks and multimodal interface, creates affordances for additional language learning. The analysis conducted by Piirainen-Marsh and Tainio (2009a) shows that players pay detailed attention to the textual and vocal resources of a game, adopt gaming vocabulary as part of their interactional repertoire, memorize parts of game dialogue, and are able to reproduce or adapt these resources in appropriate contexts. While their analysis does not provide clear evidence of longitudinal changes or development of language expertise, it does demonstrate some of the ways in which participants in a collaborative gaming activity orient to the language of the game.

#### **2.4. Second Language Acquisition**

Gass and Selinker (2008: 1) describe the field of second language acquisition (SLA) as “the study of how second languages are learned”. They draw the line between the terms **foreign language** and **second language** by explaining that second language learning is connected to the learning of a non-native language in an environment in which the language is spoken, whereas foreign language learning refers to the

learning of a non-native language in an environment of one's native language (Gass & Selinker 2008: 7). This distinction has been questioned by many scholars (Mitchell & Myles 2004) and the terms second and foreign language are often used interchangeably. Sundqvist (2009: 10) points out that this distinction is outdated in today's world where English is present and accessible to everybody.

Furthermore, differentiating between the terms second language learning and second language acquisition is problematic. Gass & Selinker (2008) discuss second language acquisition, yet they are explaining how languages are learned. It seems that they use the terms acquisition and learning interchangeably. This is not the case with Krashen (1981) who proposed that there are two ways of learning a second language. According to him, a person either acquires a language unconsciously like a child acquires his or her first language, or by learning a language consciously through memorizing rules and correcting mistakes. In addition to this learning/acquisition hypothesis, Krashen (1982) also formulated the input hypothesis. The hypothesis claims that in order for one to acquire a language, the learner needs only to be exposed to target language input that contains structures that are barely beyond the learner's level of competence. Another hypothesis by Krashen (1982), the affective filter hypothesis, states that successful acquisition requires that learners are motivated, confident and free of anxiety. Krashen (1982) used these hypotheses to argue that an effective language teacher has to provide input and make it comprehensible in a low stress situation.

Schmidt (1995) has studied the role of awareness and consciousness in language learning extensively. He discusses the importance of intention, attention, noticing and understanding in language learning (Schmidt 1995: 5). Playing a video game or reading a novel can result in language learning or acquisition even if there is no intention to learn originally. Schmidt (1990: 149) points out that incidental learning is possible when a task demands the actor to focus his or her attention on the relevant features of the input. According to Smith (1990, 1995) incidental learning is possible

if the input is meaningful and if a motivated learner is aware and focused on the input. However, it should be noted that Krashen's and Schmidt's views of language learning differ substantially from those of more recent researchers such as Gee (2008) and Thorne (2008a) who accentuate the importance of sociocultural language learning and affordances for language learning, not simply the input.

## **2.5. Extramural English and language learning**

Extramural English refers to the English that learners encounter outside the school context. Coined by Sundqvist (2009), the term is derived from concepts used by other researchers in the case of out-of-class learning. Extramural English includes all the activities related to the English language that are performed outside the classroom, be it reading a novel, playing a video game, watching a film or conversing in English.

### **2.5.1. Language Learning in Everyday Contexts**

It is not unheard of that learners bring resources to the classroom from life outside school. New technologies and the computer-mediated networks, as Kuure (2011) exemplifies, enable collaboration between people regardless of their location. A great deal of language learning takes place elsewhere than the classroom. The Internet, for example, affords the emergence of collaboration and multifunctional teams for gaming, but also for other purposes. As Kuure (2011) points out, participants may be moving across different networks and places when engaged in intertwined practices of community building and maintenance, apprenticeship and problem-solving.

Relatively few researchers have been interested in everyday learning, apparently for practical reasons, as most studies situate themselves in the context of formal schooling. However, Saarenkunnas (2006: 200) argues that a look at everyday

learning, particularly in connection with the English language is essential. The role and presence of English is increasing in the everyday lives of Finns. The language, as Kuure (2011) points out, has gained a particularly prominent role in Finnish home through various media technologies. Films and television programmes are not usually dubbed; Internet resources are abundant and available, as are net games, console games, computer games and music. Additionally, as many as nine out of ten Finnish eleven-year-olds are reported to be regular Internet users, while every second child uses the Internet daily (Kuure 2011).

### **2.5.2. Previous research on extramural English and language learning**

Fortunately, some studies exist that examine extramural English and language learning in everyday contexts. Pickard (1996) examined the extramural English activities and learning strategies of 20 German students who were proficient users of English through interviews and a questionnaire. Pickard found that the most popular extramural English activity among the students was listening to the radio, followed by reading newspapers, novels and magazines. On the basis of this, Pickard (1996: 157) argued that the students chose the activities based on their own needs and the “intrinsic interest value of the particular materials”. However, the landscape and opportunities for extramural English learning have changed considerably since Pickard’s study. As Uuskoski (2011: 16) points out, the spread of the Internet and the growing influence of the global community have strongly shaped the landscape of language learning since the 1990s.

A more recent longitudinal study, conducted by Pearson (2004), also explored the theme of out-of-class language learning. He examined the impact of language proficiency on out-of-class learning strategies and activities, and also investigated how different learners take advantage of out-of-class learning opportunities. Pearson’s test group consisted of 106 students that were taking a course on English for academic purposes. His aim was to learn how experience and contact with

English influenced the students' extramural English activities during the course. In several cases the students reported that out-of-class activities helped them concentrate on their personal language needs throughout the course, while others reported that they actually learned more English outside the classroom and enjoyed their extramural English activities more than formal teaching (Pearson 2004: 4). Like Pickard (1996), Pearson (2004) also stresses the importance of motivation and learner autonomy.

Sylvén (2004) studied the importance of extramural English activities by using three extensive vocabulary tests that were administered to two groups one year apart and comparing the improvements of the groups. The first group consisted of Swedish CLIL students who study all or most of their subjects in English while the second group consisted of students who studied in their native language of Swedish. In addition to the vocabulary tests, Sylvén also used a questionnaire that included questions about extramural English activities and about motivation and attitudes towards English in general. Interestingly, the results showed that the most remarkable factor for vocabulary improvement was being involved with various extramural English activities, such as watching television, playing video games and using the Internet, not whether the student was in the CLIL programme or studying in a traditional class (Sylvén, 2004: 218). According to Sylvén (2004: 219), this shows that it is not the amount of English input students receive at school that is the decisive factor in their English language learning but rather the total amount of English input.

While useful, Sylvén's (2004) study focuses mainly only on the vocabulary aspect of language acquisition. Sundqvist (2009), on the other hand, scrutinises the effects of extramural English in a more diverse manner. She used several vocabulary and oral proficiency tests to assess the English language skills of 74 students aged 15-16 in a 10-month time span and compared their scores. Based on the results of her study, Sundqvist argues that there is statistically a significant correlation with extramural

English activities for both the size and diversity of the students' vocabulary and oral proficiency scores. Furthermore, Sundqvist (2009: 204) claims that even a minor increase in time spent on extramural English activities can make a difference regarding the students' level of oral proficiency and range of their vocabulary. Sundqvist (2009: 197-198) points out that video games are a particularly powerful medium in this sense:

“Learners who play video games have to rely heavily on their language skills in the target language. Furthermore, [...] they need to produce target language output, often both orally and in writing. Moreover, since lexical and prosodic repetitions are integral features of video games [...] players are simultaneously involved in activities which are hypothesized to benefit L2 acquisition. In other words, video games provide opportunities for implicit learning; thus, players become learners, even though they might not be aware of it themselves.”

Nevertheless, Sundqvist (2009: 193) admits that it cannot be said with a certainty that a causal relationship exists between being exposed to extramural English and achieving good scores in English tests, as there are such a large number of variables connected to language learning. Moreover, Sundqvist states that having a high language proficiency most likely leads to engaging in more extramural English activities and thus to an even greater proficiency level, whereas students with lower English proficiency are not as likely to engage in such activities.

Olsson (2011) is another Swede who has studied the phenomena of extramural English and language learning. She focused on how exposure to extramural English affected the English writing skills of 16-year-old students and also examined the correlation between this exposure and English grades. Olsson (2011: 124–126) learned that great differences existed between students in the amount of exposure to extramural English and that extramural English exposure and good grades have a strong positive correlation. She found that three activities are particularly beneficial to writing skills: reading, writing and watching television and films. Employing corpus analyses of texts written by the students, Olsson (2011: 127–130) argued that students with more extramural English contacts used longer words and a greater

variety of expressions and possessed a more varied informal vocabulary and greater register awareness than students with less extramural English contacts.

Whereas all five of the aforementioned studies were qualitative in nature, Uuskoski (2011) examined the effects of extramural English activities to English language learning via a quantitative research. He used a questionnaire to examine how Finnish upper secondary school students' gaming habits are related to their English grades. Uuskoski's sample included 495 upper secondary school students. His findings reaffirms the notion that extramural English activities, in this case video games, have a strong effect on the students' English language skills: on average, students who played video games regularly had statistically significantly higher English grades than the students who played less (Uuskoski 2011: 56). Furthermore, playing certain types of games was also connected to higher grades. The students also felt that playing video games had improved their English skills (Uuskoski 2011: 56): of gamers who played more than 15 hours a week, as many as 89% felt that gaming had improved their English skills remarkably. Even of the students who played only up to 5 hours a week, 78% thought that gaming had improved their English skills at least to some extent.

### **3. English language learning and assessment in a Finnish and European context**

This section is divided into four parts. First, it examines the foreign language section of the Finnish National core curriculum for basic education on a general level. Second, it focuses on the language proficiency objectives of A-level English in grades 7 through 9. This framework will be employed in the later analysis section when video games of different genres are examined and their potential for English language learning is evaluated. The framework will also be used to determine how well the different aspects of games played for the purposes of this thesis can support students who are endeavouring to reach the English language proficiency objectives of the national curriculum. The third part scrutinises the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and how it is used in the National core curriculum. Finally, the fourth part questions and criticises some parts of the National core curriculum and the CEFR in relation to language learning and assessment.

#### **3.1. National core curriculum for basic education and foreign languages**

The fundamental purpose of foreign language teaching in Finland is to improve a pupil's language skills to the point where the pupil can communicate efficiently in different social situations, including hobbies, services and public life (Opetushallitus 2004). In grades 7 through 9 the importance of written language increases and the pupils are expected to cope with the demands of foreign cultures. The pupils are also expected to acquire new strategies for the purposes of language learning.

The national core curriculum for basic education was accepted by the Finnish National Board of Education on 16<sup>th</sup> January 2004 (Opetushallitus 2004). The revamped curriculum was first taken into use on 1<sup>st</sup> August 2004 and every school had to use them by 1<sup>st</sup> August 2006. Some additions were made to the curriculum on

29<sup>th</sup> October 2010, but these additions did not affect the English language proficiency objectives of the curriculum.

The Finnish National Board of Education is in the middle of preparing a new National core curriculum that is expected to be finished by the end of 2014 and taken into use by 1<sup>st</sup> August 2016 (Opetushallitus 2013). The new curriculum will be used both in early childhood education and basic education. Adjustments will be made to parts that concern language teaching and special needs education, among others.

### **3.2. English language proficiency objectives of the National core curriculum**

The National core curriculum for basic education clearly outlines various foreign language proficiency objectives in grades 7 through 9. In A-level English the objectives are already fairly demanding. The pupils should be able to understand the main ideas and key details in clearly organised texts, be they spoken or written, even if the text requires broad general knowledge from the pupils (Opetushallitus 2004). The pupils should also learn to communicate successfully in social situations and be able to describe everyday actions in some detail both verbally and in writing. Additionally, the pupils should be able to recognise some of the key differences between the different variants of English (Opetushallitus 2004).

Learning cultural skills and getting acquainted with new learning strategies are similarly important in grades 7 through 9. The pupils should familiarise themselves with different cultures where English is used as a native language and reflect on these cultures from their own cultural point of view (Opetushallitus 2004). Furthermore, the pupils should learn to communicate and act in everyday situations in an appropriate way if they interact with these cultures. The pupils can also employ different learning strategies in language learning (Opetushallitus 2004): they can use strategies they have already learned in their other studies, such as mother tongue classes, and utilise information and communication technologies in their learning, communication and information acquisition. In addition, the pupils should be able to

evaluate their own working methods and language skills in relation to the language proficiency objectives, and to change their working methods if needed.

The key areas of English language proficiency objectives are focused on different social situations that are presented in a context that is closely related to the target culture or country (Opetushallitus 2004). The themes include spending leisure time and hobbies, travel, public services, study, work and business life, sustainable development, health and welfare and the media. The pupils are also required to study the structures of English (Opetushallitus 2004). They should learn the basic conjugations of verbs and the most important tenses, the use of nouns, adjectives and the most common pronouns and prepositions, and the main principles of syntax and conjunctive structures. Finally, the pupils should be able to successfully employ different communication strategies. These include linguistic reasoning and reasoning based on situational hints, reacting to feedback in a communicational situation and using the feedback, compensating for inadequate language skills by approximate expression, observing one's own language use, and reacting appropriately in various social situations, such as taking and maintaining a turn to speak, giving feedback and ending a discussion (Opetushallitus 2004).

The English language proficiency objectives also define the final assessment criteria for a grade of 8 (Opetushallitus 2004). In order for a pupil to receive a grade of 8 or better in the ninth grade, the pupil must reach a certain level in listening comprehension, speech, text comprehension and writing. The Council of Europe has created a guideline, The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), to describe achievements of learners of foreign languages across Europe. The National core curriculum for basic education utilises this framework and uses its language proficiency scale to assess how far pupils have progressed in their English skills. To accomplish a grade of 8 in the ninth grade, a pupil needs to reach a functional basic language proficiency (level B1.1 in CEFR) in listening comprehension and text comprehension, and a developing basic language proficiency

(level A2.2) in speech and writing. These vague terms and levels do not tell much by themselves, thus the CEFR and its contents will be examined more closely in the next section of the paper.

### **3.3. Common European Framework of Reference for Languages**

The Common European Framework of Reference for Language plays a key role in language and education policy in Europe. It provides “a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe” (CEF 2001: 1). The CEFR describes what language learners need to achieve in order to communicate effectively and what knowledge and skills they need to develop. The framework is growing in influence, language testers and examination boards use it across Europe to help define language proficiency levels and interpret language qualifications (CEF 2001). The CEFR describes language skills on a scale of levels from A1 (beginner) up to C2 (master). This clear-cut scaling makes it relatively simple for anyone involved in language teaching and testing to see the level of these qualifications. The Finnish National core curriculum for basic education is based on the CEFR scale, but the contents of the levels have been somewhat modified to meet the needs and standards of the Finnish schooling system (Opetushallitus 2004). The following figures illustrate the competence requirements for the A2.2 and B1.1 levels of the National core curriculum for basic education. The figures give a good conception of what is expected from a Finnish ninth grader who studies A-level English and aims for a grade of 8 or better. The requirements for a Finnish ninth grader are in boldface text.

Figure 1. *Competence requirements for developing basic language proficiency level (A2.2) according to the CEFR (Adapted from Opetushallitus 2004)*

Level A2.2. Developing basic language proficiency.	
Listening comprehension	Understands enough language to be able to meet concrete needs in everyday life. Can understand straightforward factual information about common everyday topics to some extent.
	Can usually recognise the topic in discussions. Understands high frequency vocabulary and a limited number of idioms related to familiar themes or general topics.
	Can follow speech which is very slow and carefully articulated, with long pauses to assimilate meaning.
Speech	<b>Can give a simple description of people and their daily routines. Can participate in discussions that are related to familiar topics. Might need support in discussions and evade some topics.</b>
	<b>Speech is reasonably fluent at times, but breaks and disfluencies occur regularly.</b>
	<b>Pronunciation is understandable, although a foreign accent is apparent and pronunciation errors are common.</b>
	<b>Possesses a relatively good vocabulary and knows some idioms. Knows many simple structures and some structures that are more demanding.</b>
	<b>Struggles with tenses and other structures when has to maintain a long conversation. These errors sometimes interfere with the clarity of the message.</b>
Text comprehension	Understands the main points and some details of everyday texts (advertisements, letters, etc.) and factual texts (manuals, news).
	Can easily obtain new information concerning familiar topics if the text is only a few paragraphs long. Can infer the meaning of unfamiliar words from their wording and context.
	Often needs to read the text again to understand it, might also need additional tools or utilities to understand it.
Writing	<b>Can write well enough to manage everyday situations.</b>
	<b>Can write a short, simple description of events, past actions, personal experiences and immediate surroundings (short letters, notes, applications, voice messages).</b>
	<b>Knows everyday life vocabulary, structures and the most frequent connectors.</b>
	<b>Can write simple words and structures correctly, but makes mistakes in rarer structures and forms. Often produces somewhat clumsy expressions.</b>

Figure 2. *Competence requirements for functional basic language proficiency level (B1.1) according to the CEFR (Adapted from Opetushallitus 2004)*

Level B1.1. Functional basic language proficiency.	
<b>Listening comprehension</b>	<b>Understands the main points and details of speech on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school or leisure, including short narratives. Understands the main points of radio programs, films, TV series and clear voice messages.</b>
	<b>Can follow speech that is related to past experiences or concerns general knowledge. Understands everyday life vocabulary and some idioms.</b>
	<b>In order to understand longer messages, they have to be carefully and slowly articulated. Some repetition might be needed at times.</b>
Speech	Can discuss familiar topics and tell some details of them even in more demanding social situations. Manages everyday situations and informal conversations with native language speakers. Long presentations or abstract themes cause visible problems.
	Speech is understandable, although pauses and hesitation occur in longer conversations.
	Pronunciation is clearly understandable, although foreign accent is apparent at times and some pronunciation errors occur.
	Uses a rather broad everyday life vocabulary and some common phrases and idioms. Uses various different structures.
	Some grammar mistakes (e.g., missing articles and declensions) in longer conversations, but they seldom prevent the message from getting across.
<b>Text comprehension</b>	<b>Can read texts with different themes that are 2-3 pages in length and have a familiar subject. Understands the main points, the key words and the most important details of the text.</b>
	<b>Can have some problems understanding texts that deal with unfamiliar topics. Might not also understand all the details of such texts.</b>
Writing	Can write understandable, somewhat detailed texts about familiar topics, be they fact or fiction.
	Can write straightforward connected texts by linking a series of shorter discrete elements into a linear sequence (letters, descriptions, stories). Can convey ideas on familiar topics clearly.
	Possesses sufficient vocabulary and structures to be able to write texts for different everyday life purposes, although some interference and circumlocution can be seen in the texts.
	Produces texts that are grammatically mostly correct and devoid of spelling errors, but some structures and phrases cause problems.

Dividing language proficiencies into four simple dimensions has been heavily criticised in the past 15 years. The next section of this paper addresses the problems of such a simple categorisation.

### **3.4. Criticising the CEFR language proficiency model**

Huhta and Takala (1999: 183) point out that dividing language skills into four categories is somewhat questionable, although it makes it easier to describe one's language skills and development in them. Huhta and Takala (1999) claim that various research has shown that language proficiency cannot be simply divided or categorised, instead it should be treated as one coherent entity. Particularly oral and literary skills differ distinctly. One person can learn a language by interacting with others in social situations while another person can learn the language by reading textbooks and using the Internet. Using different language proficiency scales, such as the CEFR model, is problematic because they cannot sufficiently describe or measure a person's real language skills (Huhta & Takala 1999).

It could be said that language is the dominant mode of communication in the Western world, but Kress (2000a: 153–154; 2000b: 182–184) argues that a change is occurring. The role of writing as a superior mode of communication is shifting alongside with the change in society, culture, economy and technology. Sounds and visual images are becoming increasingly important in today's world of meaning. Additionally, as Kress (2000b: 182) notes, the senses of touch and smell play a key role in the formation and communication of mental images and sensations. Kress (2000a) suggests that language and other modes of communication should be seen as a flexible set of resources, not as an unchangeable set of standards carved in stone. Instead, this set should be shaped and remade in social interaction by individuals who have different needs and interests. This kind of change is natural and occurs constantly in all the different communicational modes. Furthermore, as Kress

(2000a) accentuates, individuals make conscious and unconscious choices about which communicational modes to use in different situations based on their prior experiences.

Kress (2000a: 157–158; 2000b: 183) also highlights the possibilities and importance of multimodal communication in educational purposes. In his mind, favouring written language over other modes of communication limits the self-expression of students and might even hinder their cognitive and affectional development. Kress points out that focusing on the written and spoken language places students in an unequal position: some people might be verbally oriented, but the visual and kinaesthetic modes should also be taken into account in teaching. Furthermore, as Kress (2000b) points out, all communication is multimodal in nature. Written language is not merely composed of symbols on paper, but is in fact a complex system that involves a lexicon, a certain word order and syntax. Kress (2000b: 186–187) stresses that this multimodal nature of communication should be recognised and employed in language teaching to improve the learning of a language as an intricate communicative system.

Heikkinen (2009: 11), on the other hand, argues that the CEFR does not adequately take into account the sociocultural and ecological perspectives of language learning. According to Heikkinen, the CEFR's "traditional view nearly ignores the role of motivation, attitudes, beliefs and identities of the learner". She claims that learning occurs in social interaction, not because of it, and cooperation among the learners is of great importance to language learning. As a matter of fact, some researchers have examined sociolinguistic learning as early as in the 1970s. Huhta and Takala (1999: 184) note that various sociolinguistic viewpoints have influenced the assessment of language skills in a profound manner. These viewpoints stressed the importance of communicative language skills and communicative language teaching, putting the emphasis on authenticity, real communication or its simulation, and taking into account the social context of the learning.

Canale and Swain (1980) were the first to define communicative competence. They introduced a theoretical framework for communicative competence in 1980 that incorporated elements from previous theories and studies. Canale (1983) refined the model three years later, adding discourse competence to the model. The end result is a model that consists of four key competences: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. Grammatical competence is concerned with mastery of the linguistic code (e.g., vocabulary, syntactic, semantic and phonetic rules), whereas sociolinguistic competence includes knowledge of rules and conventions underlying social situations (Canale & Swain 1980). Discourse competence, on the other hand, is concerned with the ability to combine forms and meanings to achieve unity of spoken or written texts (Canale 1983). Finally, strategic competence is associated with knowledge of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that are used to circumvent communicational problems caused by insufficient language skills. Canale and Swain's (1980) framework has laid the foundation for many later models and theories. As a matter of fact, echoes of it can be seen in the CEFR as well.

The next section of this paper gives a brief overview of the data collection and methodology of the study before moving on to the analysis section.

#### 4. Data and methodology

Nine video games of different genres were played for the purposes of this thesis. The method of collecting data was self-observation: the author of this paper took notes and used the think-aloud strategy and a voice recorder to gather data during the game-play. Additionally, a large number of screenshots were taken from the games during the game-play. Some of these screenshots are reproduced in the analysis section of this paper to help visualise the user interface and the contents of the games. Although some of the video games had the option to choose between different languages, all the games were naturally played in English – i.e., both the audio and the subtitles of the games were in English.

The amount of time played varied significantly between different games and genres (see Figure 3 below). *World of Warcraft* and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, both role-playing games, logged the most hours (182 and 78, respectively), followed by the ice hockey themed *NHL 12* (62 hours) and the action shooter *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (37 hours). At the other end of the figure were *The Secret of Monkey Island: Special Edition* (7 hours) and *Scribblenauts Unlimited* (9 hours). A number of factors explain this sharp contrast. Many of the games played had multiplayer components, the prime examples being *World of Warcraft*, *NHL 12* and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*, whereas others (e.g., *The Secret of Monkey Island: Special Edition*, *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*, *Tropico 4*, *The Sims 3*) only had the single player component. Generally video games that invest heavily on the multiplayer component are played more than the single player games where it is not possible to play online with other people (Uuskoski 2011). Still, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* placed second in the game time comparison, although it is purely a single player game. Naturally, the gaming habits of players also differ considerably and are dependent on their personal preferences. Finally, games were played on various different platforms (PC, Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3) to establish a broader perspective on the subject matter.

Figure 3. *Time spent on playing the video games for this thesis*

Game	Platform	Genre	Time played
World of Warcraft	PC	Massively multiplayer online role-playing	182 hours
The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim	Xbox 360	Role-playing	78 hours
NHL 12	Xbox 360	Sports	62 hours
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3	PC	Action shooter	37 hours
The Sims 3	PC	Life simulation	29 hours
Tropico 4	PC	Strategy	24 hours
Uncharted: Drake's Fortune	PlayStation 3	Action Adventure	12 hours
Scribblenauts Unlimited	PC	Puzzle	9 hours
The Secret of Monkey Island: Special Edition	Xbox 360	Adventure	7 hours

Using qualitative research methods was practical and justifiable in this study, because they provide a deep and holistic perspective on the topic. Although qualitative methods are highly subjective and descriptive, they enable the researcher to look beyond the 'objective' numbers of quantitative analysis (Eskola & Suoranta 1998: 65; Yin 2003). To be more exact: this particular study is a descriptive case study that describes a phenomenon (English language learning) in a real-life context (ninth graders aiming at the English language proficiency objectives of National core curriculum). However, as always, the validity and reliability of the study are important aspects to consider when conducting qualitative research. According to Huberman and Miles (1994: 262), a qualitative analysis can be "evocative, illuminating, masterful – and wrong". Of course, qualitative research is dependent on the researcher and his or her interpretations, but this is a typical feature for all qualitative studies (Eskola & Suoranta 1998: 211). Finally, it should be stated that no research or analysis can be completely objective as they are never completely free of human interpretation.

## 5. Analysis

Benefits of authenticity in foreign language learning are apparent (Gilmore 2007): authentic and meaningful input facilitates language learning. In the case of 12-year-olds, the parents have a key role in making this input comprehensible, but 15-year-old ninth graders are more likely to understand input from the context or by using a dictionary. This is reflected in the English language learning requirements for ninth graders. Using authentic textbooks is also a vital part of the current National curriculum for basic education (Opetushallitus 2004). This authenticity is also related to video games: younger players often struggle with the demands of video games and their language. The players are forced to cope with the situation by improving their English language skills.

This section of the paper analyses nine video games of varying genres. The games were hand-picked by the author of this study: they are prime examples of their genre and of high quality when considering their design, game-play and user interface (user interface is used to interact with the game). Furthermore, the games chosen for this study were released on different platforms: World of Warcraft is a PC (personal computer) game, Uncharted: Drake's Fortune was published exclusively on the Sony PlayStation 3 console, whereas NHL 12 was published on different consoles such as the Microsoft Xbox 360 and the PlayStation 3. The heterogeneity of the sample makes it easier to assess the relationship between video games, English language learning and the English language proficiency objectives of the National core curriculum. All of the games chosen for this study have sold well or very well in the Finnish market (FIGMA 2013); these are the games that Finnish teens are likely to play. Additionally, many earlier iterations of the games examined in this study – such as Call of Duty: Modern Warfare, NHL 10 and the Sims 2 – were named as favourite games by the 12-year-olds that I interviewed for my pro seminar work (Lukkarinen 2010).

It should be noted that some of the games chosen for this study have been localised for the Finnish market. NHL 12, Uncharted: Drake's Fortune and The Sims 3 have the option to change the game's language to Finnish. However, not all of their content is localised: the commentary in NHL 12 is not available in Finnish, nor is the dialogue in Uncharted: Drake's Fortune. Localising games for the Finnish market is still quite rare because of the expenses related to it – only games that are expected to sell well get localised.

Analysing the nine video games required great effort, but examining such a large number of games was essential. The games differ significantly in terms of their language learning potential and content: some games emphasise the social elements of gaming, others concentrate on the single player experience. The games were analysed using the framework of the English language proficiency objectives of the National core curriculum for basic education: listening comprehension, speech, reading comprehension and writing. Each game is analysed in terms of its language learning potential.

### **5.1. Adventure – The Secret of Monkey Island: Special Edition**

The Secret of Monkey Island: Special Edition is a remake of a 1990 classic point-and-click adventure game The Secret of Monkey Island. The updated Special Edition of the adventure was released in 2009 for iPhone, PC, Mac, Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. The protagonist of the game is Guybrush Threepwood, a youngster who travels to the fictional Mêlée Island in hopes of becoming a pirate. He meets up with the pirate leaders of the island who task him with three trials in order to become a pirate: Guybrush needs to win a sword duel against Carla, the island's master swordsman, find the buried treasure of the island, and steal an idol from the governor's mansion. These tasks take him through the island and finally to the mysterious Monkey Island.

The user interface of the game is fairly simple: the cursor that allows the player to interact with the environment is moved with the mouse. Clicking the left mouse button moves Guybrush to the desired location on screen, while the right button allows the player to use a default action on an object. What this action will be is shown in the bottom right corner of the screen. Furthermore, pushing the Ctrl key brings up the verb menu, which can be used to interact with environment in various ways. Guybrush can give items to other characters, open or close objects, pick up items, look at points of interest, talk to characters; and use, push or pull items (see Image 1 below). Not all of the actions can be performed on every character, item or point of interest in the game; it is up to the player to figure out what actions can be performed. The structure of the adventure is linear: in order for the player to advance in the game, he or she needs to perform a certain number of actions in a certain order. For instance, finding the treasure of Mêle Island requires Guybrush to find a treasure map and a shovel. When Guybrush locates a shovel in an ironmonger's shop, he needs cash to purchase it. Unfortunately Guybrush has no gold coins and has to look for someone who is willing to hire him. When he finally finds a potential employer, the 'Fantastic Flying Fettucini Brothers', Guybrush learns that he needs a protective helmet. And the circle goes on. It would not be exaggerated to say that the *The Secret of Monkey Island: Special Edition* consists of a series of puzzles that the player needs to figure out in order to complete the game.

Image 1. *The user interface of The Secret of Monkey Island: Special Edition*



All the main characters of the game are voiced. These include Guybrush and his love interest, Governor Elaine Marley, LeChuck the ghost pirate, the Voodoo Lady and Stan the salesman. The accents of the characters vary somewhat: Guybrush has a standard North American English accent, whereas Elaine speaks with a standard British accent (Received Pronunciation, ‘RP’) and The Voodoo Lady has a Jamaican accent. The dialogue is clearly articulated and rich with humour. Ninth graders should be able to recognise some of the key differences between the different variants of English in the game and understand the main points of the dialogue, although it contains many idioms. Expressions such as “fall for someone” (feel love for), “in a big way” (intensely) and “drop dead” (die) are frequently used, at times slang idioms such as “rip off” (steal from) are also used. Below are excerpts from the game’s dialogue that contain these particular idioms:

- (1) LeChuck fell for her in a big way, but she told him to drop dead. So he did. Then things really got ugly.
- (2) I can’t help but feel I’ve been ripped off.

As discussed above, *The Secret of Monkey Island: Special Edition* includes many elements that contribute to one’s English listening comprehension skills and can help

students aim at the English language proficiency objectives of the National core curriculum, but the same cannot be said about their English speaking skills. The Secret of Monkey Island is a single player game, thus interaction with other players is not required. Of course, it is possible for players to upload game-play videos to YouTube and verbally comment on the game, but this is extremely rare for non-native speakers of English.

The Secret of Monkey Island has a great deal to offer in terms of improving one's English reading comprehension skills. All of the dialogue in the game is subtitled and it is easy for the player to follow the action on screen and see the spelling of different words. Unlike many other games of its genre, the Secret of Monkey Island does not have a quest log to recount earlier events, nor has it a guiding arrow on the screen to assist the player reach the next objective of the game. It is imperative that the player understands the dialogue and the events of the game; otherwise he or she is unable to solve the puzzles and advance in the game. A good example of this is the sword fighting part of the game: Guybrush needs to beat Carla, the sword master of the island, in a duel of insults to be accepted as a pirate, but before challenging the master, Guybrush must learn various insults from the lesser pirates that roam the island. There are in total 15 insults and counter insults that can be learned. For instance, if a pirate attacks Guybrush by saying "You fight like a dairy farmer", the correct counter insult would be "How appropriate, you fight like a cow". The player has to understand the context of the insult attack to be able to counter-attack effectively with an appropriate insult of their own. Of course, a resilient player can memorise the correct insults and counter insults, but memorising them will not help against Carla the sword master, who has unique insults. Instead of uttering "You fight like a dairy farmer", she attacks with the phrase "I will milk every drop of blood from your body". Again, the player has to understand the context of the insult and respond by saying "How appropriate, you fight like a cow". These examples illustrate the fact that it is nearly impossible to advance in the plot without understanding the events and their context. If a player lacks the necessary English

language skills or vocabulary to figure out a certain puzzle, he or she simply needs to improve these skills.

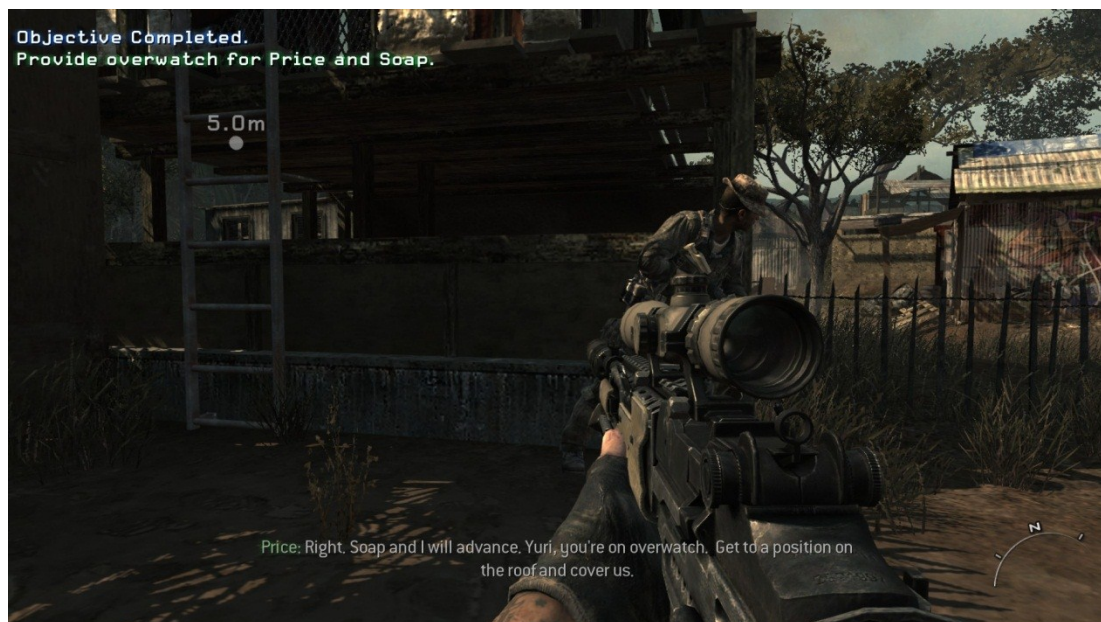
It was not unheard of that players were required to enter written commands in the adventure games of the 1980s and the early 1990s. In *Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards*, the player had to input commands such as ‘change channel’ and ‘look around’ to interact with the environment in the game. The Secret of Monkey Island: Special Edition does not require the player to write such commands, but in order to guide Guybrush through his quest, the player must use the nine different actions (see the verb list in Image 1) provided by the user interface at appropriate times. Doors can be opened and closed, objects can be pushed or pulled and non-player-characters (NPCs) can be talked to. It is up to the player to perform the correct action at the right time. Additionally, The Secret of Monkey Island has a diverse vocabulary that is related to everyday themes and actions. Learning this vocabulary and the various structures and idioms seen in the game are likely to improve a pupil’s English writing skills, particularly his or her spelling and ability to produce idiomatic expressions.

## **5.2. Action shooter – Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3**

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 is a first-person shooter game developed by Infinity Ward and published by Activision in 2011. The game was released on PC, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3 and the Nintendo Wii. The single player campaign of Modern Warfare 3 takes the player in the middle of World War III: Russia has declared war against the United States and also attacks some of the largest countries in Europe – France, Germany and the Great Britain. The characters of the campaign, most of them soldiers, are caught in this war. Each mission in the game features a series of objectives that are displayed on the user interface, which also shows the direction and distance between the objectives and the player. The missions vary somewhat – sometimes the player is asked to plant explosive charges on enemy installations or

hold a certain position against enemy troops – but mostly the missions consist of running from point A to point B and eliminating all the enemies on the way. The player is equipped with various weapons, such as assault rifles, sub-machine guns, pistols and grenades, to achieve these objectives. The multiplayer portion of Modern Warfare 3 consists of different game modes that pit they players against each other either in teams or individually.

Image 2. *The user interface of Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*



The single player campaign mode of Modern Warfare 3 is rather short, but the plot contains many twists and turns. Every mission begins with a voiced briefing and a video that explains the situation and the player's objectives. All of the videos are subtitled, as is the dialogue during the missions. The game is filled with different characters and accents: Captain MacMillan has a strong Scottish accent, sergeant 'Grinch' speaks standard North American English, the terrorist Waraabe has a Somalian accent, and the Russian antagonists speak English with a thick Russian accent. However, Modern Warfare 3 is scarce on dialogue, and it is extremely difficult to listen to the radio messages during the fast-paced missions. The player

needs to concentrate fully on surviving the enemies' attacks and achieving the set objectives. However, this changes radically when the player moves on to the multiplayer portion of the game. When working in teams, players are required to communicate with each other quickly. This is best done by voice communication software, such as Mumble or Ventrilo. These programs allow the users to communicate with each other instantly by pressing a button. The teams or 'clans' formed in Modern Warfare 3 are often multinational with members coming from across Europe, and English is typically used for communication. In some special cases the team members can be from different continents, but usually the latency (the amount of time it takes data to travel from source to destination) between different continents is too great for gaming. Playing in Modern Warfare 3 clans can benefit a pupil's English skills a great deal: the players learn the terminology associated to the game and have to get their messages across fast in intense firefights. Improving one's English listening comprehension skills is vital in all this.

The single player component of Modern Warfare 3 does not offer much in terms of improving one's English speaking skills. The game does not recognise voice commands or require any interaction between human players. Of course, a Finnish player can emulate the various characters heard throughout the campaign and discuss the game's contents with a friend in English, but this is usually done in Finnish. The multiplayer component, on the other hand, provides various opportunities to improve one's English speaking skills. If the player belongs to a multinational Modern Warfare 3 team, he or she needs to be able to communicate in English. The team leader assigns different tasks to team members, such as defending a certain location, assisting other players or attacking the rear of the opponent. Of course, the English used by young non-native speakers of English most likely will not always be grammatically correct, but in this instance the clarity of the message is more important than the form. It is also interesting to note that Modern Warfare 3 players, as discussed by Piirainen-Marsh and Tainio (2009a), adopt English elements as part of their game related communication. The players frequently borrow game vocabulary and use language that alternates between Finnish and English. With

increased experience of Modern Warfare 3, the vocabulary used in the game is adopted as part of the players' shared repertoire that may affect the communicative practices of the communities formed around the game.

The dialogue in the single player campaign of Modern Warfare 3 is limited. Fortunately, the briefings and all the in-game-dialogue are subtitled, but it is not imperative for the player to follow these discussions. The user interface always shows what and where the next objective is, all the player has to do is to get there and eliminate all the enemies on the way. Sometimes the protagonist is sent on a mission with another soldier who gives the player instructions. These short instructions include commands such as "follow me Yuri", "flank the Russians" or "provide overwatch for Price and Soap" (see Image 2 above). However, even if the player does not understand anything of the dialogue or the plot, it is possible to complete the campaign by following the indicators on the user interface. The player has little time to concentrate on the dialogue or the plot – he or she must concentrate on eliminating the opposition and on moving quickly from one objective to the next. Judging by all this, it could be stated that the benefits Modern Warfare 3 provides to one's English reading comprehension skills are somewhat questionable.

The single player portion of Modern Warfare 3 does not provide many opportunities for improving one's English writing skills, apart from expanding one's vocabulary and improving one's spelling, but the multiplayer portion actually allows the player to write chat messages in multiplayer games. Unfortunately, many players use this feature to insult others or criticise their team mates. When playing the multiplayer portion of Modern Warfare 3, players often produce sentences such as "lol, u suck" (laughs out loud, you suck) or "nobody knows how to play on this server". This was witnessed on many occasions when gathering data for this study. Furthermore, the language used in the chat was filled with grammatical and spelling errors. For instance, one player of Modern Warfare stated "ill take left side at building" to his team during a multiplayer match, neglecting to use the capital 'I', the apostrophe between 'I' and 'll', definite 'the' articles before 'left' and 'building', and also uses

the preposition ‘at’ instead of ‘of’, which would have been correct in this particular case. Using acronyms related to the game, such as ‘gtg’ (got to go) or ‘glhf’ (good luck and have fun), can sometimes be very efficient for communication purposes, but they do not necessarily improve one’s English writing skills very much in the context of the National core curriculum and its English language proficiency objectives. In this sense, it could be said that the learning results are highly dependent on other Modern Warfare 3 players.

### **5.3. Action adventure – Uncharted: Drake’s Fortune**

Uncharted: Drake’s Fortune is an action adventure game developed by Naughty Dog and published by Sony Computer Entertainment America in 2007. The game was released exclusively on the Sony PlayStation 3. The action of the game is presented from a third person perspective and the game-play is a combination of action, adventure and platforming elements. The protagonist, Nathan Drake, can jump, swim, climb, swing from rope, and perform other acrobatic actions in addition to shooting enemies, taking cover and interacting with the environment. Drake is a modern day treasure hunter who is on a quest to find the fabled lost city of El Dorado. The other characters of the game include Victor Sullivan, a longtime friend and a mentor of Drake, and a female reporter named Elena Fisher.

Although Uncharted is already over five years old, it is easy to see that the developers of the game had a substantial budget for their work. The visuals of the game are still of high quality, the animation of the characters is fluid, but most importantly of all, even all the minor characters in the game are fully voiced. The main characters of Uncharted, Drake, Fisher and Sullivan, are all American and have a standard North American English accent. The main antagonist, Gabriel Roman, on the other hand, is a Brit whose accent could be described as Estuary English, or “standard English spoken with the accent of the southeast of England” (Parsons 1998: 37). It is stated in the National core curriculum for basic education that pupils

should be able to distinguish between different accents of English to some extent; Uncharted can be of help to pupils in this instance. Additionally, all the dialogue in Uncharted is subtitled, which makes it easier for players to follow the plot and understand the various accents in the game. Uncharted clearly has potential for improving one's English listening comprehension skills.

Image 3. A screenshot from *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*



Like many other strictly single player games, Uncharted does not have many elements that actively improve one's English speaking skills. Listening to the dialogue of the game characters can be beneficial to one's English pronunciation skills, but this kind of passive learning is not as effective as actually using the language in interaction. Furthermore, if the player is not able to distinguish between colloquial and formal English, the dialogue of Uncharted might actually confuse a learner of English. Colloquialisms such as 'shoulda', 'coulda' and 'sonuvabitch' are often seen in the dialogue. A good example of this is when Elena Fisher asks Nathan Drake if he really *wants to* disturb his ancestor's remains:

(3) Are you sure you wanna be defiling your ancestor's remains like that?

The plot plays an important role in Uncharted. Drake's quest for the lost treasure of El Dorado is filled with dangers and unexpected events, and the developing relationship between Drake and Fisher is central in the story. The structure of the adventure is rather linear and the area Drake is able to explore is limited. At times it feels like the player is advancing in a tunnel that cannot be traversed in any other direction than forward. Consequently, it is possible for the player to advance in Uncharted even if he or she does not understand the dialogue in the game. It should be noted, however, that the dialogue and the events on the screen support one another and make it easier for the player to follow the story. The subtitles of the game further support this. As a matter of fact, Uncharted could be compared to a film that has both English audio and subtitles. All in all, Uncharted can significantly improve one's English comprehension skills, if the player is attentive enough.

Although Uncharted does not allow the player to actually write commands, it can help improve one's English writing skills. The dialogue in Uncharted contains everyday life vocabulary, connectors and various structures that can help the player to write about everyday situations and get the spelling of the words right. Furthermore, the characters in Uncharted use many idiomatic expressions. For instance, when Nathan Drake is shot in chapter 7 of the game, he and Elena Drake have the following conversation:

- (4) Elena Drake: Oh my God, you're bleeding!
- (5) Nathan Drake: Yeah, it comes with the territory.

When Drake exclaims "You're bleeding", Drake calmly responds by saying "It comes with the territory", meaning that it is to be expected to bleed when one is shot. Another example of the characters using idiomatic expressions occurs in chapter 1 when Victor Sullivan berates Drake by saying:

- (6) Nate, let's just pretend that I don't really care about any of that and cut to the chase will ya?

Sullivan is not interested in Drake's private life, but wants him to cut to the chase – he wants Drake to deal with the important parts of the subject and not waste time on things that are not important. Learning idioms such as these can improve one's English writing skills remarkably. Uncharted has undeniable potential for English language learning purposes.

#### **5.4. Role-playing – The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim**

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim is a role-playing game developed and published by Bethesda Game Studios in 2011. Skyrim was released for PC, Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. The game takes place in the fictional province of Skyrim, which the player can explore at will. The story revolves around the player character's effort to defeat the mystical dragons and their powerful leader Alduin. Additionally, the player character also plays a key role in determining the next ruler of the land. It is up to the player to choose in which order he or she completes the quests in the game. As a matter of fact, it is not even required to complete the main quest story line of the game – the player is free to do what he or she chooses. A perpetual objective of Skyrim is to improve the skills of the player character. These skills can be divided into four schools: combat, magic, stealth and hand craftsmanship. Once the player character has improved enough in these skills, the character will level up.

The world of Skyrim is massive in size: the province has hundreds of locations the player character can visit, such as major cities, mines, shacks, caves, houses and inns, and is inhabited by thousands of non-player characters that offer work for the player. Despite the tremendous amount of NPCs, all the characters of Skyrim are voiced. There are ten different races in Skyrim: the Altmer, the Argonians, the Bosmer, the Bretons, the Dunmer, the Imperials, the Khajiit, the Nords, the Orcs and the Redguard. The races differ significantly in appearance, behaviour and accents. Although many of these accents have been artificially manufactured by the

developers of the game, most of the accents are rooted in the real world. The Altmer speak with a British English accent that ranges from Scottish to Estuary English, whereas the Nords have a ‘Nordic English’ accent. The Khajiit, on the other hand, speak English that is clearly influenced by Arabic and Indian English. Understanding some of the accents in Skyrim can be challenging for the player, but this resembles real life communication that involves a person who does not speak English as a first language. Understanding unfamiliar English accents can be extremely difficult for non-native speakers of English. Skyrim clearly has potential for developing one’s English listening comprehension skills and understanding different variants of English, even if the accents in the game are artificial.

Image 4. *The user interface of the Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim.*



The numerous customisation options of Skyrim have encouraged players to form a strong virtual community around the game. Although Skyrim is strictly a single player game, this kind of community building creates interaction between the players. Perhaps the most visible evidence of this can be seen in the large amount of user generated Skyrim videos uploaded to video hosting sites such as YouTube. These ‘fan’ videos gather millions of views and encourage conversation among the

gamers. Although the game itself offers few opportunities to actively improve one's English speaking skills, creating Skyrim videos and discussing videos published by other gamers can significantly improve the player's English speaking skills. Taking part in this kind of collaborative gaming activity orients the players to the language of the game (Piirainen-Marsh & Tainio 2009a).

Skyrim can be a powerful tool in improving one's English reading comprehension skills. In order for the player to complete any of the quests in Skyrim, he or she must understand the instructions given by the non-player characters. The user interface of Skyrim offers some visual cues (see Image 4 above) for the player, and the map function is useful for locating the next quest objective, but these aids have to be activated from the quest log. If the player understands little or hardly any English, he or she will not be able to do anything else but wander around Skyrim, enjoy the visuals of the game, and perhaps attack the wildlife. Skyrim demands a lot in terms of English skills: the game literally has hundreds of narrated quests that have a background story. Furthermore, if the player wishes to effectively use the skills of the player character, he or she has to understand what 'smithing' (creating objects from the materials gathered from the world) or 'enchanting' (improving items via enchantments) entails and what 'archery' (training in bows and crossbows) perks to pick for the character. Furthermore, Skyrim is filled with hundreds of books, notes and codex for the player to find. In one of these letters, a character named Anise asks Helgi to come live with her in the forest to form a coven:

(7) Helgi, dear, why do you hesitate? You can feel the power coursing in your blood! You have only to reach out and grasp it! Renounce that boy of yours and come, come live with me in the forest. My sister will be here soon. Together, we can form a proper coven, and your training will truly begin.

Understanding the details of the letter can be fairly demanding to ninth graders. Expressions such as "feel the power coursing in your blood" and "you have only to reach out and grasp it" require a good deal of English reading comprehension skills.

The dialogue, quest descriptions and books of Skyrim can greatly improve one's English reading comprehension skills.

The sheer amount of written text available in Skyrim is staggering. Considering the multitude of texts in the game, they are written surprisingly well. Below is an excerpt from a Skyrim book called 'Beggar':

(8) Eslaf discovered that among the ways of getting food, asking for it was the most troublesome. Far easier was finding it in the wilderness, or taking it from unguarded market stalls. The only thing worse than begging to get food was begging for the opportunity to work for the money to buy it. That seemed needlessly complicated. No, as far as Eslaf was concerned, he was best off being a scavenger, a beggar, and a thief.

The grammar, the style and the word choices in the book are commendable. Learning idioms such as "he was best off being a scavenger" can greatly benefit one's English writing skills. Furthermore, reading well-written texts can improve the player's ability to use the correct prepositions (e.g., for, from) and place commas correctly. It is fair to say that Skyrim provides many opportunities for improving one's English writing skills.

### **5.5. Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing – World of Warcraft**

World of Warcraft is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game developed and published by Blizzard Entertainment in 2004. It concentrates on the conflict between the Horde and the Alliance forces that fight over the control of Azeroth. The land of Azeroth consists of five continents: Kalimdor, The Eastern Kingdoms, the Outland, Northrend and Pandaria. As the player gains levels, his or her character becomes more powerful, gains more skills and receives better 'loot' (more powerful items for the character to wear). The objective of the game is to reach the maximum level of experience and access the 'end game' content. Instead of advancing in levels,

the player then aims to improve the ‘gear’ (items) of his or her character(s), complete ‘dungeons’ (underground adventuring areas that reward the player with high quality gear) in groups with other players and fight against other players in ‘player versus player’ (PvP) battle arenas. All of these activities are easier to perform in a ‘guild’, an in-game association of player characters that makes grouping easier and creates opportunities to socialise with other players. Most of these guilds use English as their language of communication.

World of Warcraft has expanded considerably since it was first launched in 2004. The game has received four expansion packs that have added more quests, items, dungeons and factions. The various continents of Azeroth are populated by thousands of non-player characters that give the player quests. However, only the most important NPCs, such as King Varyan Wrynn of Stormwind and the Earth-Warder Thrall, are voiced. Voice acting is seldom heard in the actual game-play of World of Warcraft, but the game contains numerous cut scenes that are fully voiced. One of these cut scenes is seen when the players defeat the final ‘boss’ enemy, Deathwing the Destroyer, in the Cataclysm expansion. Alexstrasza the Life-Binder, a red dragon and the guardian of all life in Azeroth, says the following in the cut scene:

(9) The champions who fought at our side assured the survival of our world. We dragon aspects have fulfilled our great purpose, and our ancient power is expended. But although our day draws to an end, life endures and new generations will be born.

Verbs such as ‘assure’, ‘expend’ and ‘endure’ do not belong in the active vocabulary of many ninth graders, but their meaning can be derived from the surrounding words. Alexstrasza articulates very clearly and slowly, which undoubtedly makes it easier for players to understand her words. The cut scenes and in-game dialogue can improve the player’s English listening comprehension skills considerably.

World of Warcraft has 9.6 million active subscribers (Stickney 2013) and can only be played online. Completing the quests individually is possible, but players are

encouraged to form groups and aid one another. Many of the stronger creatures in the game cannot be defeated alone and completing the various dungeons in the game requires a full group of five players that fulfill different roles. One of the players has to act as the ‘tank’ and redirect enemy attacks or attention toward himself or herself in order to protect the other players in the group. If the tank and other group members hope to survive the enemy attacks, the group also needs a ‘healer’ who uses spells to heal the wounds of others. The remaining three players are usually damage dealers who use various skills to quickly dispatch enemies. In fact, the most challenging ‘raid’ dungeons in World of Warcraft are designed for 25 players. These encounters demand a great deal from the players: they must use the right character skills at the right time, evade enemy attacks and observe their surroundings. This is why raiding is usually done in guild groups – it is far easier to communicate with a familiar group of people than with strangers who might not have the skills or gear to tackle the challenges of a certain dungeon.

Some guilds actually interview new players that want to join the guild to be sure of their skills and attitude. Once a player is accepted into a guild, he or she might receive additional training in regard to his or her character class and role in the dungeon battles. This kind of training can be useful to the player: as seen in the image below (Image 5), the user interface of World of Warcraft is filled with different information regarding the other group members (green bars on the left side of the screen), the player character (upper left corner) and her skills (toolbars on the right side and at the bottom of the screen), and the enemy (in the middle of the screen). It is no surprise that controlling the player character, helping others and picking up the essential information in the midst of battle can be somewhat vexing for the player.

Image 5. The user interface of World of Warcraft



Effective communication is vital in World of Warcraft. Most of the guilds use voice communication software in order to adapt to different situations in the dungeons. Voice communication is particularly important in player versus player battles, because predicting human behaviour is far more difficult than vanquishing the artificial intelligence controlled monsters. Of course, not all of the players want to raid dungeons or desire to combat against other players in battle arenas, but World of Warcraft provides ample opportunities for improving one's English speaking skills and listening comprehension skills in real interaction with other players.

World of Warcraft has thousands of quests. When the player accepts a quest from a non-player character, the quest and its description appear in the player's quest log. Anchorite Ceyla, an NPC located in Shadowmoon Valley, gives the player the following quest:

(10) According to Akama's letter, four fragments of the medallion were unearthed and given to the Ashtongue Corruptors. These dreaded

Broken were once powerful shaman who now defile the very elements they revered. Haalum, Corruptor of Air, can be found at Netherwing Pass. Eykenen and Yularu, Corruptors of Earth and Fire, were last seen at the Fel Pits near the Hand of Gul'dan. Lakaan, Corruptor of Water, is rumored to be near Coilskar Point. Find them and obtain the medallion fragments.

The player has to find the four shaman and defeat them in order to obtain the medallion fragments. The quest description provides the player with all the information he or she needs to locate the shaman, but their location is also marked in the player's map, rendering the quest description somewhat useless. This was not the case in the early days of the game – the player could not use the map to find the quest objectives but had to read the quest descriptions to locate them. Today most of the players do not bother reading through the descriptions; instead they just open their map and move to the quest location. Despite this, World of Warcraft has great potential in terms of improving one's reading comprehension skills.

Writing and chatting with other players has an important role in World of Warcraft. The player characters can learn up to two professions, such as skinning, leatherworking, herbalism and alchemy, and can trade the materials or items they have crafted with other players. When the player visits a large city, the general chat of the game is filled with trade proposals and general discussion about the game. It is imperative that the player knows how to bargain and understands how the economy of the game works. Improving one's English writing and reading comprehension skills is essential in this. Additionally, if a number of players form a party in order to complete quests or attack other players, being able to express one's thoughts is important.

## 5.6. Strategy – Tropicó 4

Tropicó 4 is a single player strategy game developed by Haemimont Games and published by Kalypso Media in 2011. It was released solely on PC. The game focuses around city building simulation and managing the needs of Tropicó's citizens. The player takes control of 'El Presidente', a dictator who rules over the Caribbean island of Tropicó as he or she sees fit. However, ruling over the banana republic is no simple matter: every citizen of Tropicó has his or her needs, skills and political ideology. The citizens also demand things that elevate their standard of living, such as food, healthcare and leisure, from their leader. Fortunately, these needs can be fulfilled by constructing specific buildings. For instance, if the citizens demand leisure, El Presidente can build pubs, restaurants or movie theaters. Furthermore, various factions, such as capitalists, communists and intellectuals, operate in Tropicó. If the player fails to appease these factions, he or she risks a rebellion against the government.

Image 6. *The user interface of Tropicó 4*



Tropico 4 has a story mode consisting of 20 missions, but the game does not emphasise the story very much. The player's avatar, El Presidente, is trying to improve Tropico's international stature and living conditions, and also hopes to gain more personal power and wealth. Every mission is preceded by a brief introduction that shows El Presidente's journal and the objectives for the mission. The briefings are partially voiced. In the first mission, 'Rise to Power', for instance, El Presidente says:

(11) What a hellhole! But at least it's my hellhole. St. Clara is the typical Caribbean island – beautiful on the outside, poverty stricken on the inside. People live in shacks and have hardly anything to eat. Healthcare and education are nonexistent and unemployment is through the roof.

All the characters in Tropico 4, including El Presidente and his or her closest advisors, have an accent that could be best described as 'Cuban English'. The game draws heavily from the setting of 1950s Cuba: every mission in Tropico starts from the year 1950, the country tries to balance between the USSR and the United States, and the player can even appoint Fidel Castro as the president of Tropico. The Latin American influence is apparent in the voice acting of Tropico 4 – the game can actually help the player to better comprehend speakers of English from countries such as Cuba, Spain, Colombia and Mexico.

Tropico 4 lacks the multiplayer component, which limits the game's possibilities when it comes to improving one's English listening comprehension and speaking skills. It is not possible to communicate with other players while playing Tropico 4, but the voice acting of Tropico 4, albeit pronounced in a foreign accent, gives the player an idea of how to pronounce certain words and idioms. Expressions such as "poverty stricken" and "through the roof", as seen in example 11 above, are most likely fairly demanding to Finnish ninth graders. First seeing and then hearing the expressions can benefit one's English speaking skills. This kind of learning strategy employs both the visual and auditory dimensions.

The vocabulary of Tropicó 4 concentrates on housing, welfare, economy, politics, business, education, industry, infrastructure, tourism and resources. El Presidente has to take care of Tropicó's economy, keep the citizens happy, and improve the infrastructure of Tropicó's cities. If the player hopes to succeed in managing Tropicó, he or she must be able to interpret the game and understand the instructions given by the advisors and the game tutorial. The player needs to understand the terminology related to housing (what is the difference between a shanty and a tenement), welfare and economy (is a clinic needed more than a bank), and food and resources (how does a salt mine operate). Furthermore, El Presidente needs to create a functional infrastructure, invest in the education of Tropicó, and raise the wages of Tropicó's workers if they are unhappy. Accomplishing this is no simple task for a ninth grader. Although the English language proficiency objectives of the National core curriculum mention the importance of learning vocabulary related to public services, study, work, business life and health and welfare, many of these are still fairly uncharted territory for ninth graders. Tropicó 4 gives the students an opportunity to learn about these topics first hand.

As a matter of fact, El Presidente can also accept objectives from the different factions of Tropicó. In one of the missions El Presidente is approached by Antonio Lopez, a lobbyist on behalf of the Capitalist faction:

(12) Feeding the people is great and all that, Presidente, but corn doesn't go for much on the international market. On the other hand, Tobacco exports are quite lucrative. I'm sure that if we produce and export some Tobacco we'll attract more investors to St. Clara.

Learning expressions such as "on the other hand" are extremely useful for English language learners when writing essays or texts that contrast or compare something. Moreover, adjectives such as 'lucrative' can be helpful if the writer wants to discuss matters related to economy or business. Tropicó 4 provides the player an excellent opportunity to expand his or her vocabulary.

### 5.7. Sports – NHL 12

NHL 12 is an ice hockey game developed and published by EA Sports in 2011 for Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. NHL 12 has several different game modes that can be played both offline and online. The single player game modes include the ‘Be a Pro’ mode where the player can create his or her own ice hockey player and experience an NHL career from a single player perspective, the ‘Be a GM’ mode where the player takes control of an NHL team and all its operations, and the ‘Season’ mode where the player controls one or more NHL teams for a single season. Most of these modes can also be played online with other players, but the most notable multiplayer gaming mode is the ‘EA Sports Hockey League’ mode that allows players to team up and compete against other human controlled teams in an 82 game season. It should be noted, however, that NHL 12 cannot be fully completed in the traditional gaming sense. A season or a career in NHL 12 can be completed, but not the whole game.

NHL 12 is often played with friends, either locally or over the Internet. It is customary for many players to gather around at a friend’s house and play NHL among friends. NHL 12 is notably susceptible to latency issues; this is why EA Sports Hockey League team members are usually from the same country. Quite different from many other multiplayer games, NHL 12 is often played online with fellow countrymen and thus English is not very often used to communicate with other players. However, the play-by-play commentary in NHL 12 is in English. The commentary is given in a standard North American English accent. The announcers provide some background information about the players and comment on the game events, but these comments get repetitive fairly quickly. Every match begins with the phrase “Hi everybody, I’m Gary Thorne along with Bill Clement for this one” and expressions such as “What a save!” and “He loves to bang bodies!” are constantly used. All in all, it appears that NHL 12 has limited potential to improve one’s English listening comprehension skills.

Although playing NHL 12 is a social gathering event for many players, the multiplayer component of NHL 12 offers ample opportunities to improve one's English speaking skills. Disregarding the latency issues, players can join multinational EA Sports Hockey League teams that use English as their language of communication. Teams need to coordinate their attack and defense and the team members have to reach an understanding about the tactics. Both Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 have integrated voice communication software which can easily be used to discuss team tactics before, during and after the game.

Image 7. *The user interface of NHL 12*



The actual game-play of NHL 12 contains only little written English (see Image 7 above). The score of the game is visible in the upper left corner of the screen, the player names can be seen under the player models when they have the puck or when a line change occurs, and the screen shows some player statistics when he reaches a milestone or scores a goal, but these are few and far between. However, some of the game modes, such as the Be a GM mode contain more written text. For instance, if the player takes command of the Toronto Maple Leafs, he or she has to keep the players and fans happy, draft and trade players, stick to the team budget and also take

care of the coaching and plays of the team. Substantial amount of information regarding the team is available in this game mode, but if the player does not have the necessary English language skills, leading the team will be extremely difficult. In the case of the Toronto Maple Leafs, one of the team's best forwards, Nazem Kadri, might approach the player by saying: "Hey coach, I think I can be more effective on the first power play unit". If the player ignores or does not understand this statement and keeps Kadri in the second power play unit that does not receive as much ice time as the first unit, Kadri might decide to leave the team.

As stated before, some of the game modes in NHL 12, particularly the Be a GM mode, can be beneficial in improving one's English skills. However, if the player wishes to play exhibition matches or start the Season game mode with some friends, only minimal English skills are needed. All in all, the amount of written English in NHL 12 is rather limited compared to many other games in this study and thus has less potential to improve one's English writing skills.

### **5.8. Life simulation – The Sims 3**

The Sims 3 is a strategic life simulation game developed by The Sims Studio and published by Electronic Arts in 2009. It has been released for PC, Nintendo DS, Nintendo 3DS, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Nintendo Wii and the mobile platforms. The game-play of Sims 3 revolves around creating 'Sim' characters and controlling their lives. Sims have their own needs, activities and relationships in a manner similar to real life. They go to work, form friendships and decorate their homes. The game-play of The Sims 3 is open-ended and indefinite: Sims are born and die, but the game continues.

The Sims 3 offers little in terms of improving one's English listening comprehension and speaking skills. The Sims Studio have created their own fictional language,

Simlish, for the game. As a result, the player does not hear any English in the game, not even during the cutscenes.

The vocabulary of the Sims 3 emphasises the themes of home, work, study, business and leisure time. The Sims perform everyday chores, such as cooking, washing dishes or repairing home appliances, go to work, meet their friends and renovate their homes. Decorating and renovating one's home is of utmost importance in the Sims 3. Sleeping in a comfortable bed replenishes the Sims' energy, flat screen television entertains the Sims, and a high quality stove does not break down as easily as cheaper stoves. The player can learn a large amount of home related vocabulary when purchasing new items for the kitchen, the bathroom, the bedroom, the living room, the dining room, the study or the kid's room. These items include lights, small appliances, dishwashers, cabinets, stoves, sinks, counters, refrigerators, toilets, accents, mirrors, curtains and blinds, tubs, showers, end tables, beds, wall decorations, dressers, plants, televisions, sofas, coffee tables, rugs, dining tables, chairs, bars, bookshelves, computers, desks and toys.

Image 8. *The user interface of Sims 3*



In addition to learning home related vocabulary, the Sims are presented with various work related opportunities. In order for a Sim to get promoted at work, the player must improve its skills, such as logic, charisma or athletic ability. For example, a Sim who works in politics needs to be charismatic and logical. When the Sim is skillful and hardworking enough, the game will notify the player of a promotion in the following manner:

(13) Congratulations! Your impressive performance has earned you a promotion to Vice President, as well as a bonus of §2,076! Second in command may not be the end goal, but riding the ticket long enough just might earn you the coveted top spot.

The promoted Sim is now the second most powerful politician in the party (“second in command”), but if the Sim stays on the party’s list of candidates and in the running long enough (“rides the ticket long enough”), the Sim might one day become the most powerful politician in the party, a position that is desired by many (“earn the coveted top spot”). This kind of idiomatic language is evident in The Sims 3 on numerous occasions.

Furthermore, when the Sims interact with one another, many actions can be performed. The Sims can tell jokes, hug each other, flirt, ask about the other Sims’ hobbies or work, sing, dance or play chess. When actions are chosen, the Sims perform them on the screen. Even if the player does not know the meaning of the verb, he or she can deduce it by following the actions on the screen. The written dialogue and vocabulary of the Sims 3 can greatly improve one’s English reading comprehension and writing skills.

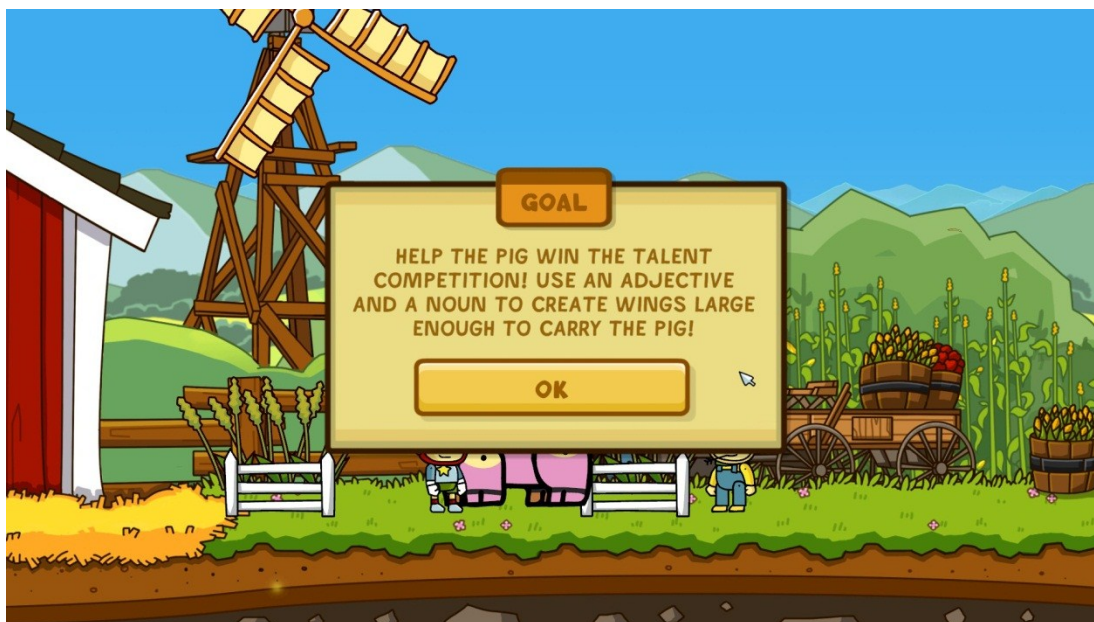
### **5.9. Puzzle – Scribblenauts Unlimited**

Scribblenauts Unlimited is a puzzle game developed by 5th Cell and published by Warner Bros for the handheld Nintendo 3DS, Nintendo Wii U and PC. Scribblenauts is vastly different from the other games examined in this thesis: the main purpose of the game is to create items by typing their names in the user interface and then use these items to assist the game characters in their problems. Helping the non-player characters requires logical deduction skills, creativity, puzzle solving skills and a rather extensive vocabulary from the player. Scribblenauts Unlimited has a backstory, which reveals that the protagonist, Maxwell, is collecting Starites (stars rewarded for helping the NPCs) to free his sister from a curse, but the story does not play a significant role in the game.

Similar to the Sims 3, Scribblenauts Unlimited does not have many elements that can help the player to improve his or her English listening comprehension or speaking skills. The game has a short animated and voiced opening cut scene, narrated by a female who speaks with a standard North American English accent, but the game is otherwise devoid of spoken English.

The whole game-play of Scribblenauts centers around words. All the puzzles in the game are solved by coming up with the appropriate words to help the game characters. For example, in the first mission of the game Maxwell is asked to clean a farmer's pig. In order to accomplish this, the player has to create a cleaning brush by typing the word 'brush' in the user interface. Next, the farmer requests Maxwell to increase the size of the pig. This is done by typing an appropriate adjective such as 'humongous'. Finally, the farmer asks Maxwell to make the pig fly, which is done by typing an adjective and a noun such as 'huge wings' (see Image 9 below).

Image 9. *The user interface of Scribblenauts Unlimited*



Written instructions, such as the one seen above (Image 9), only appear in the beginning of the game. The further the player advances in Scribblenauts, the more demanding the puzzles become. It could be said that possessing adequate English comprehension skills is important in the beginning of Scribblenauts, but in the final stages of the game it is far more important to possess adequate English writing skills and some creativity. In one of the missions, a witch asks the player to help her stop two children from eating her house. Typing 'rotten' and clicking on the house makes it putrid and the children run away in disgust. Some moments later, an arsonist appeals to Maxwell to help him with his habit of destroying the environment around him. This situation can be solved by typing and thus creating a 'therapist' who counsels the arsonist. In one of the more memorable missions, a giant human heart is attacking a group of people, but throwing some 'aspirin' at the heart calms the situation. The challenges in Scribblenauts can be solved in a myriad of ways, as the game recognises over 4000 nouns and adjectives. Scribblenauts is an excellent tool for expanding one's vocabulary.

The next and final section of this paper discusses the results of the study and considers the reliability and applicability of the findings.

## 6. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to study the Finnish National core curriculum for basic education and its English language proficiency objectives and analyse how video games can help ninth graders to aim at these objectives and improve their English language skills. Additionally, this thesis examined if the genre of a video game played has an impact on the English language learning experience.

The analysis shows that all nine video games examined in this thesis can have a positive influence on a student's English language learning. When considering the four dimensions of National core curriculum's English language proficiency objectives (listening comprehension, speech, reading comprehension and writing), it would appear that particularly role-playing games, massively multiplayer online role-playing games and adventure games can help a ninth grader to aim at the language proficiency objectives set by the CEFR and the National core curriculum. Of the games played in this study, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, *World of Warcraft* and *The Secret of Monkey Island: Special Edition* proved to aid a language learner the most in aiming at these objectives.

Dividing language skills into four rough categories has been heavily criticised by many researchers and teachers in recent years. They have hoped for greater emphasis on communicative skills and multimodal language learning in the next National core curriculum for basic education, which will be taken into use in 2016. Three of the games examined in this study clearly stood out in regard to their potential for improving one's communicative skills: *World of Warcraft*, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* and *NHL 12*. All of these are multiplayer games and provide ample opportunities for interaction with other human players. It should also be noted that these games placed first, third and fourth in the playing time comparison (Figure 3). Naturally, the amount of English language learning achieved through video games is

highly dependent on the player: how much one plays, does one play offline or online and what game modes one plays (see the example of NHL 12 in section 5.7.).

The results of this study support the findings of previous researchers who have studied extramural English and language learning. Extramural English activities, in this case video games, can greatly improve one's English language skills and provide affordances for language learning (Gee 2008; Thorne 2008a; Piirainen-Marsh & Tainio 2009a; 2009b; Uuskoski 2011). Examining nine video games of different genres was necessary for the purposes of this study, but a similar research could be implemented with a lesser number of research subjects. Some of the games scrutinised in this study could have been examined even more thoroughly, particularly *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and *World of Warcraft* have great potential for future research. Not surprisingly, *World of Warcraft* is already one of the most studied video games in history.

The reliability of qualitative research has been questioned on many occasions, but if the results of a study can be reproduced under a similar methodology, the research instrument should be considered reliable (Golafshani 2003). It is this author's understanding that if a research similar to this thesis was done with a similar methodology, the results would be convergent.

## REFERENCES

- Canale, M., & M., Swain, M. 1980. 'Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing'. *Applied Linguistics*, 1, 1, 1–47.
- Canale, M. 1983. 'From communicative competence to communicative language pedagogy'. In Richards, J. C., & R. W., Schmidt. (Eds.), *Language and Communication*, 2–27. London: Longman.
- CEF. 2001. *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*. Council of Europe. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cornillie, F., Thorne, S. L. & P. Desmet. 2012. 'Digital games for language learning: challenges and opportunities'. *ReCALL Journal*, 24, 3, 243–256.
- ESA. 2011. *2011 Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry*. Washington: Entertainment Software Association. Online. 11 April 2013. <[http://www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/ESA\\_EF\\_2011.pdf](http://www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/ESA_EF_2011.pdf)>
- Elliott, L., Golub, A., Ream, G. & E. Dunlap. 2012. 'Video Game Genre as a Predictor of Problem Use'. *Cyberpsychology, behavior, and social networking*, 15, 3, 155–161.
- Eskola, J. & J., Suoranta. 1998. *Johdatus laadulliseen tutkimukseen*. Tampere: Vastapaino.
- FIGMA. 2013. *Platina- ja kultapelit Suomessa 2004-2012*. Online. 18 April 2013. <<http://www.figma.fi/index.php/platina-ja-kultapelit>>
- Gamevision. 2010. *Video Gamers in Europe 2010*. Brussels: Interactive Software Federation of Europe. Online. 12 April 2013. <[http://www.isfe.eu/sites/isfe.eu/files/video\\_gamers\\_in\\_europe\\_2010.pdf](http://www.isfe.eu/sites/isfe.eu/files/video_gamers_in_europe_2010.pdf)>
- Gass, S. & L. Selinker. 2008. *Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gee, P. 2003. *What Video Games Have to Teach us about Learning and Literacy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gee, P. 2008. 'Learning and Games.' *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning*. Edited by K. Salen, The John D. & C. T. MacArthur. Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. 2008, 21–40.
- Gilmore, A. 2007. 'Authentic materials and authenticity in foreign language learning'. *Language Teaching*, 40, 2, 97–118.

Golafshani, N. 2003. 'Understanding Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research'. *The Qualitative Report*, 8, 4, 597–607.

Goranson, C. D. 2003. *Police Swat Teams: Life on High Alert*. New York: The Rosen Publishing Group.

Heikkinen, H-M. 2009. *Language Learning and Oral Skills Practice via Social Media: Young beginner learners of English as competent social actors in the Life in Cyber City project and the Mystery Animal chat*. Oulu: Oulu University Press.

Huhta, A. & S. Takala. 1999. 'Kielitaidon arviointi'. In Sajavaara, K. & A. Piirainen-Marsh (eds.), *Kielenoppimisen kysymyksiä*. Jyväskylä: Jyväskylä University Press. 1999, 178–228.

Krashen, S. 1981. *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon.

Krashen, S. 1982. *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon.

Kress, G. 2000a. 'Design and transformation. New theories of meaning'. In Cope, B. & M. Kalantzis. *Multiliteracies. Literacy learning and the design of social futures*, 153–161. London: Routledge.

Kress, G. 2000b. 'Multimodality'. In Cope, B. & M. Kalantzis. *Multiliteracies. Literacy learning and the design of social futures*, 182–202. London: Routledge.

Kuure, L. 2011. 'Places for Learning: Technology-Mediated Language Learning Practices Beyond the Classroom'. In Benson, P. & Reinders, H. (eds.), *Beyond the Language Classroom*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lukkarinen, M. 2010. *The affordances and constraints of video game playing in English language learning: a case study of fourteen Finnish sixth graders*. Unpublished seminar paper.

Malliet, S. & G. de Meyer. 2005. 'The history of the video game'. In Raessens, J. & Goldstein, J. (eds.). *Handbook of computer game studies*, 23–45. London: MIT Press.

Mitchell, R. & F. Myles. 2004. *Second Language Learning Theories*. London: Arnold.

Olsson, E. 2011. "Everything I read on the Internet is in English" – On the impact of extramural English on Swedish 16-year-old pupils' writing proficiency. Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg.

Opetushallitus. 2004. *Perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet*. Online. 10 April 2013. <[http://www.oph.fi/download/139848\\_pops\\_web.pdf](http://www.oph.fi/download/139848_pops_web.pdf)>

Opetushallitus. 2013. *OPS 2016 - Esi- ja perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteiden uudistaminen*. Online. 16 April 2013. <<http://www.oph.fi/ops2016>>

Parsons, G. 1998. *From "RP" to "Estuary English": The concept 'received' and the debate about British pronunciation standards*. Hamburg: University of Hamburg.

Pearson, N. 2004. *The idiosyncrasies of out-of-class language learning: A study of mainland Chinese students studying English at tertiary level in New Zealand*. Melbourne: The Independent Learning Association. Online. 14 April 2013. <[http://www.independentlearning.org/uploads/100836/ila03\\_pearson.pdf](http://www.independentlearning.org/uploads/100836/ila03_pearson.pdf)>

Pickard, N. 1996. 'Out-of-class language learning strategies'. *ELT Journal*, 50, 2, 150–159.

Piirainen-Marsh, A. & L. Tainio. 2009a. 'Other-Repetition as a Resource for Participation in the Activity of Playing a Video Game', *The Modern Language Journal*, 93, 153–169.

Piirainen-Marsh, A. & L. Tainio. 2009b. 'Collaborative Game-play as a Site for Participation and Situated Learning of a Second Language'. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 53, 2, 167–183.

Saarenkunnas, M. 2006. 'Language Learning through Networked Computer Games – The Case of an Efficient Novice', in P. Pietilä, Lintunen, P. & Järvinen, H.-M. (eds.), *Kielenoppija tänään – Language Learners Today*. AFinLA Yearbook 64, pp. 199–220.

Salen, K. & E. Zimmerman. 2004. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Schmidt, R. 1990. 'The role of consciousness in second language learning'. *Applied Linguistics*, 11, 2, 129–158.

Schmidt, R. 1995. 'Consciousness and foreign language learning: A tutorial on the role of attention and awareness in learning'. In Richard Schmidt (ed.), *Attention and Awareness in Foreign Language Learning*, 1–63. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i.

Seppänen, T. 2008. *Stories of our virtual lives: a study on narrative in video games*. Unpublished Master's Thesis in English Philology, University of Oulu.

Stickney, A. 2013. *World of Warcraft down to 9.6 million subscribers*. Online. 25 April 2013. < <http://wow.joystiq.com/2013/02/07/world-of-warcraft-down-to-9-6-million-subscribers/>>

Sundqvist, P. 2009. *Extramural English Matters: Out-of-school English and Its Impact on Swedish Ninth Graders' Oral Proficiency and Vocabulary*. Karlstad: Karlstad University Press.

Sylvén, L. 2004. *Teaching in English or English Teaching? On the Effects of Content and Language Integrated Learning on Swedish Learners' Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition*. Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg.

Thorne, S. L. 2008a. 'Mediating technologies and second language learning'. In D. Leu, J. Coiro, C. Lankshear & M. Knobel (Eds.), *Handbook of research on new literacies*, 417–449. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Thorne, S. L. 2008b. 'Transcultural Communication in Open Internet Environments and Massively Multiplayer Online Games'. In: Magnan, S. S. (ed.), *Mediating Discourse Online*, 305–327. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Uuskoski, O. 2011. *Playing video games: A waste of time... or not? – Exploring the connection between playing video games and English grades*. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press.

Yin, R. K. 2003. *Case study research: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.