

Online English in gamers chat

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“A force of unimaginable power – a Leviathan...- is loose in our world and we are as yet barely aware of it. It is already changing the way we communicate, work, trade, entertain and learn; soon it will even change the way we think.” (Naughton, 1999).

And this Leviathan speaks English.

Introduction

A lot has been said about online communication in social and literal terms and hardly anyone agrees. Because the Internet is such a broad medium and influences life in so many ways every field of science has taken an interest and their own approach. One of the things they differ in is how we call this online communication. Social scientists define it as Computer Mediated Communication or CMC, which focuses on the medium itself and communication as a process. Linguists would define it as netlish, netspeak or cyberspeak, which focuses more on the language itself used in the process of communication. (Crystal, 2001).

The Internet, and computer use in general, seems to favour English and prompt the English language as a global language. Discussion is alive as to the truth of these observations. One may also wonder if this online English is, and will remain, English indeed. With so many other native speakers using this one common language can it not but change? Is online English still English?

We will be looking into a specific use of online English by looking at a transcript of the HelpChat of the Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) EVE-Online.

Thesis Statement

How does online English differ from 'normal' English?

Specifically between gamers in a realtime online chat.

Chatting

When describing language use in chatting it is important to realise how this type of communication differs from other (online) forms. "Chat groups, by contrast, typically involve several people, with message-exchanges often anonymous, continuing indefinitely and dealing with a wide and unpredictable range of issues... In a synchronous group, electronic interactions are taking place in real time" (Crystal, 2001).

The transcript described below is one from a synchronous group, the responses have not been carefully constructed or pondered upon. They are instant responses. The participants are not entirely anonymous as they are known by their avatars; the name of the character they play with. Of course this avatar does not have to relate to their actual identity but as it will exist beyond this interaction there is some need to preserve face. The chat room is entitled 'Help' so the range of issues should be limited to player versus player questions and assistance.

Transcript

Unfortunately there is no way to tell whether the author in the chat room is a native English speaker or not. However, the overall use of the English language indicates a good grasp of the English lexis and syntax. A number of interesting uses of language can be seen repeatedly throughout the transcript:

Acronyms: abbreviations that are also used in other forms of online communications and in text messaging. For example:

Line 38 ‘ok, ty’ meaning Thank You.

Line 208 ‘omg’ meaning Oh My God.

Advertisement: For example:

Line 104-109, 133-135

Emoticons: combinations of symbols that resemble facial expressions. For example:

Line 49 ‘: p’ a face sticking out it’s tongue (in jest).

Line 210 ‘: D’ an open-mouthed smile.

Hyperlinking: questions are sometimes answered in the form of a link to more information. For example:

Line 116 ‘<http://www.battleclinic.com/forum/index.php/topic,8560.0.html>’ this is the link to a salvage guide.

Line 237 ‘<http://eve-survival.org/missions/>’

Jargon: as with any community there are certain words that have no or a different meaning outside this community. For example:

Line 238/239 ‘*voice* is getting fully integrated with *fleet controls* in *trinity*’

Line 398 ‘is there a *GM* in here...’

Line 410 ‘like the *MOTD* says...’

Punctuation: it is often lacking but this does not seem to be a problem judging by the responses. For example:

Most sentences do not end in a fullstop.

Line 217 a question without a question mark, receives an answer.

Line 372 a question without a question mark, receives an answer.

Short and commanding: sentences are short and seem to have a commanding tone.

For example:

Line 111 'train your salvage skill' instead of 'You should/Maybe you want to/You could train your salvage skill'.

Start of the sentence: the first word of a sentence is not being typed. This is often the case when the first word should be 'I' or 'The'. For example:

Line 31/32 'never used it for mining though.. cargohold is a bit small...' instead of 'I never used it for mining though. The cargo hold is a bit small...'

Line 333 'anyone know how to...' instead of 'Does anyone know how to...'

Line 343 'drug factories are connected' instead of 'The drug factories are connected...'

Line 422 'just got a newc computer...' instead of 'I just got a new computer...'

Stepwise answers: answers are given in short statements as if guiding the person through it step-by-step (much like a 'For Dummies...'). For example:

Line 187/189 'go to attributes' 'in the character screen'.

Line 364 'tai - go to market – browse – implants and boosters – implants – attribute enhancers'.

Verbing: making a pronoun into a verb. For example:

Line 20 'I spreadsheeted' instead of 'I used a spreadsheet'.

Line 199 'because if you suicide it..' instead of 'because if you commit suicide'.

As we can see above the participants in the chatroom minimize communication effort by shortening words (acronyms), forgoing punctuation and politeness (short and commanding) and/or skipping the first part of a grammatically correct sentence. Seeing the range of English being used, I am not inclined to attribute these grammatical errors to lack of knowledge but rather to choice or custom.

The participants also go beyond 'normal' written communication by using emoticons and hyperlinks. The first adding facial expressions to communicating with someone that is unseen by making creative use of all the symbols on a keyboard. The second adding informational value to a 'sentence' by making creative use of the capabilities of the medium.

The use of jargon confirms the social cohesion of the participants, they all know what they are talking about but an outsider would not understand. The verbing seems to be part of this jargon as not every pronoun is converted to a verb but just certain pronouns are.

The stepwise answers relate to the computer environment in which the interaction takes place. It is similar to the way guidebooks of software work which is similar to the pathways on a computer (C:\\My documents\\fileZ\\documentX). Everyone in this interaction shares the usage of a computer and thus should be able to understand this style of communication.

The advertisement in this interaction seems to be typical for a gamers chat. No one responds to it which indicates all the participants are used to this type of advertising. An advertisement in the middle of a 'normal' written or face-to-face interaction would be considered very strange and would certainly prompt a response.

Conclusion

There is a different use of the English language between gamers in an online chatroom. It can not be found so much in the bending or re-writing of words and it can not be called a pidgin or derivitory in a literal sence. It still is English with a few grammatical mistakes. The difference can be found on another level. The way the language is used and the things that are being done with it which are only possible in a digital environment, this is what makes it different.

That these are not just any online communicators but gamers indicates a group cohesion, which is shown in the use of jargon, and a type of computer user. Most online gamers are very adapt at communicating online and hereby using all the options provided by the medium. They are experienced online communicators. And what they do is 'short and sweet'. Minimal communicative effort with maximal communicative power. The possibilities of the environment are intertwined in the use of the language. CMC and Cyberspeak combined.

References

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Naughton, J. *A brief history of the future: the origins of the Internet*, (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1999) ISBN 0185520030