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Towards a 'COOPING' Model for the Investigation of Gamers' Online Conversations in English

Abstract

This paper proposes a cognitive-functional investigation of gamers' uses of English in online communication, in order to enquire into the possibility of introducing a model that could be called COOPING ('COOperation Principles between INternet Gamers'). COOPING was devised at the University of Salento, and it was conceived as a further development of both Grice's maxims and Guido's principles describing English lingua-franca uses in intercultural exchanges. The main research hypothesis is that the interactants' awareness of the need to cooperate to reach shared targets prompts them to select a common linguistic means, which is usually a variation of English, when different linguacultural backgrounds come into contact. This paper will detail the four phases of COOPING—Evaluation, Acknowledgment, Negotiation, and Manner—which are expected to reflect the steps that players follow when they intend to cooperate in these virtual communities. Through an analysis of the selected corpus of conversations, this study will illustrate that gamers: (phases 1 and 2 of the Model) examine and evaluate the interlocutors' behavior in order to assess their cooperative attitude; (phase 3) decide to select English when community members come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds; and (phase 4) generate conversation turns that are characterized by specific features, from authentication, to meaning negotiation, to creative and critical modifications to the standard norms, trying to pursue reciprocal understanding and communication.

Keywords: *English as a Lingua Franca, online communication, virtual transient international groups, computer-mediated communication, conversation analysis*

1. Introduction and rationale

Video games are conventionally objects of studies that address their technological (Juul 2005; Chandler and Deming 2011) or translational dimensions (Mangiron 2018), whereas some scholars acknowledge that they can also help people increase their education, by means of the "gamification" of foreign-language learning (Perry 2015) and other disciplines (Gulinna and Lee 2020; Legaki et al. 2020; Sari et al. 2020). Furthermore, others enquire into the extent to which video games assist players to acquire social skills (Ducheneaut et al. 2006), as happens

in multiplayer games, whose users are involved in online interactions where the "ludic" (Drachen 2011) and "recreational" (Chang et al. 2006) properties of multimedia are merged. Players' exchanges can both reflect the social activities that are performed in non-virtual spaces (MacCallum-Stewart 2011) or have a specific, functional nature. In this regard, through language, contestants devise plans to fight an enemy or to acquire items and skills that are essential to progressing in the game and achieving their gameplay objectives. In other words, people end up creating and maintaining transient international groups (TIGs; Pitzl 2019) that are dependent on sharing one or more achievements from the ludic perspective. In addition, players' awareness of such commonality justifies their commitment to communicating and performing a linguistic actualization of cooperation by re-shaping and authoring English. In fact, since the increasing availability of Internet connections has torn down the physical and geographical distances of the offline world, the choice of a common language is paramount to capitalizing on such meetings. Despite this, the virtual dialogues between gamers are not thoroughly explored in the literature.

For these reasons, this paper will adopt an etic approach to the cognitive-functional investigation of the phases that seem to characterize the gamers' uses of English in online communication, so as to present a model that could be called COOPING ('COOperation Principles between INternet Gamers'). It is intended that its creation will contribute towards the evolution of linguistic research concerning the virtual "social and cultural activities" (Pennycook 2010) between players. COOPING aims to demonstrate that gamers' perception of belonging to a virtual community informs their vow to generate symmetric exchanges. The main research hypothesis is that the realization of the need to cooperate prior to reaching shared targets (Mäyrä 2008) prompts interactants to select a common linguistic means, in the form of English variations, when different linguacultural backgrounds come into contact. English hence functions as a lingua franca also in these scenarios, being subject to cases of authentication (Widdowson 2003), meaning negotiation (Mauranen 2007), and creative as well as critical modifications to the standard norms (García and Li 2014) in order to improve communication (Lewis et al. 2012) and pursue reciprocal understanding.

After illustrating the grounds of COOPING (sections 2 and 3), this paper will cover the four phases of the Model (section 4)—Evaluation, Acknowledgment, Negotiation, and Manner— which are expected to reflect the steps that players seem to follow when they intend to attain "the fullest communication possible" (Seidlhofer 2011) and enjoy the beneficial consequences of cooperation in these virtual floors.

2. Virtual transient international groups of online gamers and their communicative competence

Online gaming takes place in highly-interactive multi-user domains where people construct identities, relationships and whole worlds (Curtis 1997). These domains have a hybrid nature (Iaia 2016), for they are not completely detached from each individual gamer's linguacultural background. Proofs are the reflection of conventional stereotypes in the construction of Internet-based text types such as memes (Laineste and Voolaid 2016), or the virtual transposition of forms of activism such as awareness and consciousness raising (Rentschler and Thrift 2015). Another, more context-specific, proof is gamer attitude. When people want to access online groups, they tend to observe the rules that are established by existing members (Postmes et al. 1998, 85), so as to adhere to the etiquette that is followed. After being welcomed, players are willing to become useful resources by adjusting their gameplay style according to the roles that are needed to increase the chances of victory. Such actions define the hierarchical organization of these parties, seeing at the top the "central group" (MacCallum-Stewart 2011, 47) with managerial tasks. The selection of leaders is normally the outcome of 'natural selections' ensuing from discussion or elections among players, who prefer the ones with higher levels of experience with each video game, or those who build and deploy the strongest characters in virtual arenas. Outside the central group, others have (self-)appointed specific roles, trying to create balanced teams. One person therefore acts like a 'tank,' or the character who sustains the highest amount of damage to preserve the other colleagues, whereas others become 'healers' who cure teammates. This exemplifies that the activation and preservation of virtual groups of people playing the same video game is based on a "perceived similarity" (Trenholm and Jensen 2000), according to which gamers expect to find expertise and interests in common between interlocutors.

Similarity has prevalently a functional nature, which is associated with the need to cooperate for the team's sake. Players perceive similarity in the event of being 'experts' of specific genres, of mastering the (basic, at least) mechanics of specific video-game series, of realizing that everyone in the group is concurring towards the same goal. The above are seen here as the premises of the discussed form of intercultural communication online, which is a cardinal requirement to govern all the actions and steps to follow when playing together. Players take advantage of engaging in successful exchanges, which serve the purpose of getting what is best for them and their teams, to guarantee that their squads survive and flourish. From the technological and multimodal perspectives, depending on the requisites of the single games or the characteristics and limitation of dedicated hardware, messages can take the form of written,

oral or multimodal texts, which one can find enclosed in chat windows that are positioned at the bottom or top corners of the visual frame. In other cases, gamers can directly talk through microphones. In general, the awareness of the international connotation of online multiplayer games leads interactants to anticipate that their native languages can be replaced. For all these reasons, it seems appropriate to propose the definition of virtual transient international groups of online gamers for these aggregations that are governed by the cognitive-functional premises that have been illustrated so far. The definition reflects the "transient and ad hoc" nature of the gatherings under discussion (Pitzl 2019), where people accept to meet and cooperate "for a limited period of time around a shared activity" (Mortensen and Hazel 2017, 256), in order to pursue specific achievements. In fact, players may be in the same virtual areas by chance, and their perception of striving for the same goal is what motivates them to communicate by means of shared linguistic and extralinguistic modes.

Inevitably, virtual multi-user domains are not impervious to racial, social, geographical discrimination. In online gaming, this is usually reflected by players that are resistant to accepting foreign colleagues: they mark their opposition by keeping on using their native languages despite the interlocutors' requests for a lingua franca (Iaia 2016). It follows that cooperation is linguistically actualized when gamers activate a clear cognitive stance, thinking about virtual areas as spaces where world citizens can be found, and where mediation and negotiation are mandatory to prevail in the game. At that point, players go online presuming the access of foreign gamers, and such expectation prepares them for the potential dynamic uses of the common means for communication (Lewis et al. 2012). The latter normally coincides with English, whose standard rules are creatively and critically modified (García and Li 2014) and which is subject to accommodation and meaning-negotiation strategies (Cogo and Dewey 2006; Mauranen 2007). These actions are connoted from a multimodal viewpoint, for language is normally integrated by senders with extralinguistic features. In so doing, they exploit the multimodal composition intending to make their messages and utterances cognitively and linguistically accessible and available to recipients (Widdowson 1991).

The above considerations constitute the grounds of the investigation of English uses in online interactions between gamers. Such uses, though, are scarcely explored in the literature, where the notion of ELF is normally inspected in its academic and educational (Jenkins 2014; Christiansen 2017; 2019), institutional (Lacey 2015) or business (Facchinetti et al. 2020) contexts. This study is meant to tackle this research gap, starting from the consideration of the main traits of a 'communicative competence' that belongs to online players. In ELF Studies, the notion of Global Communicative Competence (GCC) is associated with business interactions

(Louhila-Salminen and Kankaaranta 2011) and is the product of mixing 'business know-how,' the choice of relying on a shared code due to "having different native-tongue speakers working together" (Caleffi 2020, 242), and the "awareness of the challenges posed by the different cultural backgrounds that have come into connection," or 'multicultural competence' (Caleffi 2020, 242). These conditions indeed suit the exchanges under examination; therefore, we are now elaborating a specific type of communicative competence. It originates from the association between what could be defined as 'gaming know-how,' or the technological familiarity with those multimodal text types, 'linguistic competence,' or the users' awareness of having to find and adopt a common linguistic means, and 'multicultural competence,' entailing that one expects to find players that do not come from the same geographical areas. Labelled Online-Gaming Communicative Competence, or O-GCC, this is a distinctive quality of the virtual places of interest to this research. O-GCC preserves GCC's original focus on the creation and preservation of a "community framework" (Wenger 1998; Seidlhofer 2007) where participants resort to "ELF users' linguistic choices" (Jenkins 2017, 8) that are characterized by the prevalence of "communicative and pragmatic strategies rather than on conformity" to standard norms (Facchinetti et al. 2020). The delineation of O-GCC aims to stress that online players also act like "pro-active" ELF users (Pitzl 2010), who choose a common linguistic means (Mondada 2012; Jenkins 2015) in order to make their intentionality accessible and acceptable to their receivers (Kecskes and Kirner-Ludwig 2019, 88) and counteract miscommunication. The latter is, in fact, perceived as one of the main potential causes of defeat—and avoiding defeat is what urges people to seek the help of other players over the Internet, even though this requires them to speak a non-native language.

The main research hypothesis behind the examination of the selected corpus of online exchanges, and the attempt at identifying the predominant steps of COOPING, is that gamer perception and acknowledgment of creating and joining virtual communities determine the search for a linguistic means to attain cooperation through communication. This entails that the common linguistic means is picked because of the urgent need for gamers (the functional need of advancing the virtual adventure) and their expectation of a non-physical world inhabited by avatars corresponding to people from different areas of the world (cognitive dimension), where cooperation is nonetheless decisive to whether or not they will prevail. The research question that this paper addresses is whether a specific model can support the examination of how players interact through English by adopting the cognitive-functional perspective that is defined here.

3. Players' steps towards COOPING

In international exchanges, the lack of equivalent strategies of textualization and communication of one's experiences may lead to miscommunication, which is contrasted by English lingua-franca uses reflecting the "solidarity" amongst members of cross-cultural communities and groups (Caleffi 2020). Guido (2008) has proposed a specific model for the investigation of cross-cultural exchanges, which are described as being characterized by four elements—Implicature, Inference, Negotiation, and Acceptability. The pragmatic notions of Implicature and Inference focus on the influence of the senders' and recipients' L1 backgrounds at the time of providing and interpreting all the pieces of information that are considered necessary for the appropriate identification of the intended messages. This is reflected by participants when they actuate accommodation and meaning-negotiation strategies (Cogo and Dewey 2006; Mauranen 2007) or when they request feedback to enquire into the appropriate conveyance of their intentionality. Interactants' socio-cultural and experiential schemata then undergo processes of mediation and Negotiation leading to the production of neologisms or simplifications of the standard syntactic forms and use of verb tenses (Seidlhofer 2004). Conceived as a development of Grice's (1975) maxims, Guido's (2008) model is designed as a framework that can be adapted for a number of various and specific communicative situations where speakers' mutual assistance is essential and, actually, even expected by participants. Such attitude is found in most of the types of online interaction under consideration, where lingua-franca variations serve the actualization of cooperation between players, who are aware of belonging to a community of practice.

For these reasons, we enquire into the possibility of devising the COOPING Model as a further development of both Grice's (1975) general maxims and Guido's (2008) specific principles describing ELF uses. It is intended to highlight the characterization of online multi-user domains as a reflection of the cognitive and social rules governing the offline world. It was kept in mind during the elaboration of the model that participants in multiplayer gaming sessions also have high or low status. Yet, after the observation of the exchanges included in the corpus under construction, it seems legitimate to deduce that the difference in participants' statuses does not lead, in most of cases, to asymmetric interactions or misinterpretations of the illocutionary force—as instead happens when reformulating migrants and asylum-seekers' oral reports (Guido 2018), or when rendering legal texts more accessible to foreign receivers, in translation, through English (Provenzano 2008). High-status participants, in symmetric online gaming, may coincide with the players that are elected as leaders by team members themselves. Their role is to determine the etiquette and communicative norms, such as deciding when a

member may take the floor, selecting the best language variation to interact with each other, or determining the tolerance level towards the deviations from standard norms. And those aspects are indeed reminiscent of the inclusive speakers' attitude in 'offline' ELF interactions (Mauranen 2012, 167; MacKenzie 2013, 43).

The COOPING Model is composed of the four phases that are listed below:

1. Evaluation
2. Acknowledgment
3. Negotiation
4. Manner

The following sections will introduce the above steps while observing a number of practical examples from the selected excerpts of online, intercultural interactions through English.

4. Examination of players' COOPING

The interactions that are examined in sections 4.1 and 4.2 are part of the corpus that is under construction at UniSalento's Research Centre on Lingua Franca Variations in Intercultural Communication. Research about ELF uses in online gaming started comparing English variations in actual and "scripted" conversations in video games (Iaia 2016) and is now concentrating on the definition of the COOPING Model by investigating only actual multiplayer sessions. As of now, data are being obtained by involving a number of undergraduate and postgraduate students from the University of Salento, the Autonomous University of Barcelona and the University College of London. Subjects have agreed to record their multiplayer sessions live, or to store them by performing screen captures of their phone and tablet displays in cases of mobile gaming. Furthermore, they are also taping 'think-aloud' personal considerations about their habits and attitude as online gamers. The extracts commented on here come from the video games *Clash of Clans*, *League of Legends* and *World of Warcraft*, which are completely based on synchronous cooperation and interaction. The analysis aims to demonstrate that: (i) gamers first evaluate the team members' behavior in order to assess their cooperative attitude (phases 1 and 2); and (ii) once English is actively chosen, this may generate conversation turns that reveal the typical traits of lingua-franca uses (phases 3 and 4).

4.1 Phases 1 and 2: Evaluation and Acknowledgment

Phases 1 and 2 encompass players' earlier actions, after the selection of a video game and the creation of their avatars, and are normally found in the opening turns of online conversations. In most cases, potentially symmetric dialogues over the Internet are approached with the

expectation of finding other members of the community of practice. An anticipation that has anyway to be confirmed by examining the interlocutors' behavior and the general setting of the online world that gamers have just reached. People try to assess the presence of other players that share the experience with specific multiplayer multimedia, as well as their consideration of guilds and parties as places where there is room for teamwork. They therefore scrutinize the communicative and ideological dimensions of the virtual team which they enter (first criterion) so as to acknowledge (second criterion) the attitude towards foreigners. Exchange (1), from *Clash of Clans*, represents a case in point:

(1) 10. P1: i m Italian
     11. P2: gold 2
     12. P3: Bronze 3 :)
     13. P3: english experte halt
     14. P1: i d like to speak german :(
     15. P1: i have never studied german
     16. P3: and you don't understand everything
     17. P3: [P1] you are the onliest who came from italian that is cool
     18. P1: speak english?
     19. P3: :)

In the conversation above, P[layer]1 has just entered a room where a match had already started, and this can be inferred from P2's and P3's comments on the loot (turns 11 and 12). In order to evaluate the members' attitude towards foreign players, P1 communicates her nationality, and when P3 (the leader) replies by alerting those who can use English (turn 13), P1 adds that she does not speak German (except for very basic terms). The short exchange does help evaluate the existing gamers' attitude towards playing with outsiders thanks to a lingua franca, which represents the common tool to make the multiplayer experience more enjoyable and fruitful. A refusal, in fact, would block cooperation, as is evident from a previous study (Iaia 2016, 90). The successful outcome, in (1), is revealed by P3's emoticon. The inclusion of the extralinguistic element, which is another habitual feature of computer-mediated communication, has two functions. On the one hand, it indicates that P3 approves the possibility of using the proposed lingua franca and, on the other hand, it unveils the symmetric attitude that resides in the team. The very first example already demonstrates that the four phases of the Model are separated only for the sake of description, since in actual conversations—like the ones examined here— the boundaries of each step are more blurred. In the examined excerpt, P1 and P3 acknowledge

that intercultural cooperation is possible, revealing the positive conclusion of the evaluation of the party's attitude, and selecting English as the common language for the time being. Evaluation is also in extract (2), from *League of Legends*, which is again a portion displaying the initial moments of a conversation:

(2)   7. P1: speak english please
        8. P2: ok!
        9. P1: here

P1 and P2 find themselves in the same team when they realize that they come from different geographical areas. Communication in English is therefore essential for the success of the session, and this authenticates the functional nature of the linguistic actualization of cooperation. (2) is also interesting to show other recurrent characteristics of these exchanges, in particular the on-screen rendering of turns and their typographic features. As concerns the former, turns are generally divided into sub-parts, reproducing the structures that are found in chat groups (Carpenter and Fujioka 2011), although this fragmentation leads to an interruption on the part of addressees, who can reply to someone's request even before the request itself is completed. In the above exchange, this is visible in P2's "ok!". It can be read as an acknowledgment of their intention to use English, which in any case comes before P1 finishes listing the conditions. And listing conditions is one of the reasons behind naming the third phase of COOPING Negotiation (see also section 4.2). Other regular features of online messages are the inclusion of abbreviations, the omission of capital letters and the lack of standard punctuation. These aspects, which are peculiar to computer-mediated communication, also contribute to the definition of the English variations under examination as an instance of 'lingua-franca' uses (Iaia 2016). The origins of those conventions seem to be in the interactants' specific communicative competence, labelled O-GCC in section 2, whereby they remark the sense of perceived similarity and solidarity amongst gamers, who consider themselves as members of the same community of practice, eventually putting the respect for standard rules into the background.

After enquiring into the possibility of using English as the common language, players are expected to confirm the linguistic choice, and for this reason the second phase of the COOPING Model is called Acknowledgment. (3), from *World of Warcraft*, includes the positive response on the part of a player. P2 wants to reassure his interlocutor:

(3)   1. P1: Hey boys

     2. P1: this is my first time playing this character
     3. P1: can you help me with it? I don't know how to use him
     4. P2: Np mate, just follow my advices and you'll survive :D

(3) contains a number of interesting properties. At first, turns 1-3 confirm the functional nature of this virtual TIG, as it is evident when P1 fears that his probable inexperience with specific types of characters may prevent team members from winning. Survival depends on one's experience with how video games work. Team preservation hinges on the ability to develop strategies to fight enemies and train stronger characters to progress. When P2 takes the floor, he agrees to help his colleague, but indeed also specifies that he is the leader to follow, if P1—and the whole team—want to survive. P2's turn hence confirms the sort of natural selection between high-status and low-status participants, which is typical of the virtual groups under consideration, as anticipated in section 2 within the theoretical grounds of the COOPING Model. In fact, this quality highlights the intrinsic symmetric nature of the parties under discussion, for status differences are prevalently meant to simplify the organizational dimension in terms of ludic—and, indeed, functional—efficiency.

Similar emphasis on what is defined as "gaming know-how" in section 2 above is found in (4), from *World of Warcraft*, when a new player joins a team. P1 below is concerned about not being considered less experienced with the specific video game, as this would undermine the other members' permanence from the functional viewpoint, as well as the perceived similarity between P1 and his colleagues:

   (4)   16. P1: dont let me alone
         17. P1: i cant fight them
         18. P1: noob

P1's worries validate the perception of online gamers as promoters of virtual transient international groups based on the members' gaming know-how (see Section 2). P1 is actually stressing his potential lack of appropriate knowledge of how to deal with the mechanics of the specific title, by defining himself "noob," newbie. In addition, P1 (who is Italian) uses English immediately, entailing that he is aware of the fact that the team he has just accessed is made up of international players, who need that language so as to enable intercultural communication.

As it has been pointed out before, the four phases are separated only for didactic and descriptive reasons, should this Model be adopted to train mediators about lingua-franca uses in the

examined instances of online interactions. Phases 1 and 2 have been devised as the initial parts of the COOPING Model to foreground the cognitive-functional perception of the virtual floor that players decide to inhabit. The other two phases, instead, zoom in on the processes of actively re-modelling the lingua franca that players agree to use.

4.2 Phases 3 and 4: Negotiation and Manner

The 'Negotiation' phase starts when team members acknowledge that they need to search for a common language to foster cooperation and achieve the shared objectives. Their research mostly ends when players agree to use English. A selection can be more straightforward, as in the previous exchange, or can result from an actual negotiation leading to an agreement. This is visible in (5), which is the second part of dialogue (1). For this reason, players are re-named using the conventions from (1), where P1 is an Italian player hoping to be welcomed in a group initially composed by German people only:

(5)   18. P1: speak english?
        19. P3: :)
        20. P4: opfer
        21. P1: i m not german
        22. P1: hi

When P1 enters the team (see (1) above), she enquires into the possibility of using English. Her question indicates what language is considered the lingua franca that can help avoid miscommunication, and English is eventually chosen by all members, despite the fact that different degrees of proficiency are found in the team (see also the following dialogue). The use of English is officially validated in turn 22 by P1's greetings. Before turn 22, turn 20 exemplifies gamers' adaptive behavior, which is tailored to the arrival of members from other countries. P4 writes "*opfer,*" which is a German noun for 'victim,' to end a previous section of the game, when people having the same nationality were in the group. Since P1 has joined, they realize that they are going to have to assist the newcomer, as this is essential to preserve the squad. Hence, negotiation in conversation (5) leads to adopting English only, at least as long as foreign affiliates are in the group.

(5) illustrates again that the passage from phase 1 to phase 4 is, actually, more fluid, meaning that the perception of the need to reach the same goal and the evaluation of the existing players' positive attitudes lead to the active search for and choice of shared communication means. In other words, English comes into play only when everyone (or, at least, the high-status

participant) agrees that people from other linguistic and cultural contexts may enter the team. When that happens, the virtual transient group turns into a virtual transient international group of online gamers. The use of English as a lingua franca is the concern of the next phase of the Model, called Manner. The latter term covers the features of language variations uttered or written by participants, which reveal the interactants' focus on the accessibility and acceptability of their messages. The authors' intentionality is delivered by means of simplified sentences, repetitions or, even, through words that reflect the influence of their native languages. Some of these characteristics are in dialogue (6) below, from a later portion of the multiplayer session examined in (1) and (5):

(6)   59. P3: tomorrow we are level 2
        60. P1: what is important is the communication :)
        61. P3: I find too
        62. P1: it is a wonderful clan
        63. P2: [P3] is not the best in english
        64. P3: would you habe some trupps

Gamers in (6) are conversing about the complicity that has been established among them, which has evolved into trading their strongest characters. The dialogue above is interesting also from the perspective of online players' perception of the cooperation level in Internet groups. The awareness of sharing objectives, and the consciousness of achieving them through communication, make gamers overlook potential mistakes or misspellings. The latter reflects the attitudes that ELF speakers show in real-life symmetric exchanges (Seidlhofer 2011; MacKenzie 2013), which is made explicit, in turn 60, by P1. From a merely syntactic perspective, P3's utterances—remembering that P3 "is not the best" in English, according to P2's warning—are rich in L1 influence. "[H]abe" and "trupps" remind one of German, the former being the rendering of the verb 'to have,' and misspelling, the latter, 'troops.'

Other instances of the conventional features of ELF uses are in extract (7), from *World of Warcraft*:

(7)   16. P1: dont let me alone
        17. P1: i cant fight them
        18. P1: noob
        19. P2: Np mate ahahah i will help you as soon as possible
        20. P3: i'll help too ok?
        21. [*in-game message: P1 killed an enemy*]
        22. P3: good job [P1]

23. P1: ty
24. P2: you see? you're good

(7) provides evidence that the division of COOPING into four phases is more useful from the didactic and descriptive viewpoints, for in real-time exchanges the boundaries between each step overlap. In turns 16-19, for example, Evaluation and Acknowledgment phases are evident. In addition, the above excerpt confirms that new players tend to be most worried about being a burden for their teammates, should they be perceived to be less experienced at gaming, rather than fretting because they have to speak non-native languages. Finally, P2's 'acknowledging' move serves two functions. Firstly, it confirms the team's positive attitude towards outsiders. Secondly, it signifies that P2 is the high-status participant, one of the leaders in fact. This can be inferred by the fact that it is P2 who decides when they have time to help the new players, as well as by P3's behavior. Indeed, the latter player adds his opinion only after P2 finishes his turn and, what is more, basically reiterates the leader's attitude.

As concerns Manner, P3's English displays the influence of their native language. P2 and P3 are Italians, and this is also revealed by the syntactic construction of the question in turn 24, which replicates the Italian counterpart, '*Vedi? Sei bravo,*' literally. Besides the influence of gamers' L1, other standard characteristics of ELF uses in these virtual floors are the frequency of abbreviations—such as "ty" ['thank you'] in the above excerpt—and the emoticons that are adopted as extralinguistic elements reinforcing the delivery of the author's intentionality.

Similar traits are in (8), the last dialogue that is considered in this study:

(8)   7. P1: where have you been this morning?
      8. P2: i was to university
      9. P1: uh me too
     10. P2: really?
     11. P1: what have studied?
     12. P1: yes
     13. P2: aerospace engineering
     14. P2: too hard
     15. P1: obviously xD
     16. P1: you live in Rome?
     17. P2: no i come from Greenland

The above exchange exemplifies MacCallum-Stewart's (2011) consideration that online players can also talk about their daily routine. Focusing on the 'manner' of English uses, P1's messages are influenced by Italian, his L1, in the two questions from turns 11 and 16. Both reproduce the

structure which those sentences would have in Italian, without swapping subjects and verbs or without using the dummy operator 'do.' The selection of verb tenses also complies with L1 conventions. When P1 asks what P2 did in the morning, he uses present perfect, producing a literal translation of how the same query is posed in their native language. Chat (8) takes place at night, so a native English speaker could have employed past simple. Yet, despite the non-standard adoption of tenses and construction of sentences, the two players still interact and execute their conversation, demonstrating that "what is important is the communication," as Player 1 triumphantly and happily claims, through ELF, at the beginning of dialogue (6).

5. Conclusions

Interactions (1)-(8) above have exemplified that in symmetric, intercultural and international exchanges over the Internet, players can exploit the lingua franca value of English. It is actualized through re-shaping its standard features to foster communication, and this study posits that the reason for players' commitment to communicating is their pursuit of shared ludic objectives. They know that the creation and preservation of teams is essential in order to achieve their targets, and this represents the main functional reason behind the construction and preservation of the virtual transient international groups of gamers.

This paper has presented the COOPING Model, which has been devised at the University of Salento as a tool helping researchers and scholars to monitor and describe the interactants' behavior in those virtual communities that are actually influenced by players' offline, psychological and linguacultural backgrounds. Online gaming has been inappropriately overlooked in the literature, but it is an area whose exploration can contribute to the development of ELF studies by providing more data about the linguistic—and also multimodal—actualization of cooperation through English. Analysis of further data (also from different video games) is now needed, to thus improve the definition of the steps composing the COOPING Model, while verifying the hypotheses behind its construction. Additionally, gamers' cooperation can also have an asynchronous nature, for example in the video games belonging to the *Souls* series, whose success eventually gave origin to a whole new genre of games, called 'souls-like.' It would be interesting to investigate to what extent the lack of the parallel presence of other people may cause changes in players' attitudes and in the accuracy of the construction of messages, especially when texts can be created only by assembling the limited number of words set up by developers. Finally, this Model may represent an initial step towards a more dedicated analysis of language use in virtual places, trying to extend its range to the exploration

of the basis of the anti-social behavior, which does permeate those scenarios (van Rooji et al. 2010), before counteracting it.

After all, the investigation of these virtual forms of ELF exchanges seems to be a game well worth playing.

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