From screen to society: second language learners’ cultural adaptation and identity reconstruction in virtual knowledge communities

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of computer-assisted language learning on cultural adaptation and language learning in non-traditional classroom settings.

Design/methodology/approach – The data of this study came from extended periods of observation, multiple rounds of semi-structured interviews and home visits. Using narrative inquiry, it analyzes an immigrant’s journey of language learning and cultural adaptation within a virtual knowledge community.

Findings – The findings of this study reveal the profound impact of virtual knowledge communities on enhancing second language learning and facilitating cultural adaptation.

Originality/value – This study offers original insights by demonstrating the transformative power of virtual knowledge communities for the purpose of second language acquisition and cultural adaptation.

Keywords Computer assisted language learning, Cross-cultural adaptation, Virtual knowledge community, Identity, Language learning, Immigration

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Over the past two decades, there has been a growing recognition of the significance of culture in language teaching and second language research (Gao, 2006; Kramsch, 2013, 2014; Kramsch and Hua, 2016; Solgi and Tafazoli, 2018; Wang, 2008). Similarly, within the field of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), exploring the humanistic aspects of language acquisition facilitated by technology has become a growing trend. This trend has led to a concurrent rise in scholarly investigations into the integration of cultural elements within CALL practices (Godwin-Jones, 2013; Levy, 2007; Shih, 2015; Tafazoli et al., 2018). Despite the growing interest in the cultural aspects of CALL, one relatively underrepresented area in CALL research is the examination of how CALL can impact the identities of both language learners and teachers (Alonso-Belmonte and Vinagre, 2017; del Rosal et al., 2017; Klimanova, 2021).

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Learning a new language involves immersing oneself in the culture associated with the target language (Kramsch and Zhu, 2020). This cultural exploration not only enhances second language learners’ understanding of their identity but also shapes it in significant ways. As technology facilitates access to the target culture for language learners (Kim, 2020), it is important to understand how language learners’ identity reconstruction can happen in relation to the target culture in the context of CALL. Language learners usually undergo a process of identity reconstruction and transformation, which often takes place in the context of a language and culture distinct from their own (Darvin and Norton, 2017; Nasrollahi Shahri, 2018; Norton and De Costa, 2018). Given these aspects, examining how technology facilitates this transformative journey is critical to understanding the evolving landscape of culture and CALL.

Computer-assisted language learning, culture and identity
Technology has profoundly influenced the landscape of language learning and teaching over the years (Hubbard, 2023). Beyond various technological tools designed for language acquisition, the emergence of online chatrooms and group messaging platforms has greatly expanded the scope of this field. These digital environments offer unique opportunities for members to engage in an informal learning environment (Loewen and Reissner, 2009). Virtual knowledge communities are “a unique type of personal/professional learning community network with in and around virtual spaces, connecting teachers’ physical experiences to virtual engagement” (Hu et al., 2018, p.98). They provide a platform where members can communicate with each other in a more dynamic and interactive environment (Chen et al., 2013). Within such online learning environments, the identities of language learners may experience transformations due to the dynamic and collaborative nature of these platforms, as well as their exposure to the target culture (Kitade, 2014; Liaw and Wu, 2021). Numerous research studies have indicated that the acquisition of a second language and the effect of the target culture on the identities of language learners (Norton and De Costa, 2018; Norton and Pavlenko, 2019; Parker, 2019). Therefore, it becomes crucial to explore how the process of language acquisition and engagement with the culture associated with the target language influence the identities of language learners in virtual learning settings (del Rosal et al., 2017; Van Deussen-Scholl, 2018).

Language learners do not solely acquire a new linguistic system but also immerse themselves in a new cultural context. Language and culture are inherently interconnected and inseparable (Godwin-Jones, 2013; Han, 2019; Levy, 2007; Wee, 2018). Consequently, when language learners engage in linguistic interactions within a new cultural framework, they may undergo a reconfiguration of their identities (Norton and De Costa, 2018; Norton and Pavlenko, 2019; Parker, 2019). The process of constructing new identities or reconstructing existing ones is a common experience among language learners, especially immigrants. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize that this journey of identity transformation is often accompanied by its unique set of challenges such as adapting to new linguistic and cultural norms, negotiating new social roles and navigating intercultural communication (Block, 2021; Norton, 2010).

One group facing considerable challenges in language learning is immigrants who also concurrently navigate cultural adaptation and the difficulties associated with adjusting to a new environment. Clothey (2022) argued that language learning for immigrants involves more than just linguistic aspects and encompasses issues related to ethnicity, politics, and education. Fuentes’ (2018) study revealed that English learner identification policies in the USA enable immigrants to reshape their identities. However, this often leads to marginalization and alienation. Mobasher (2006) concentrated on the challenges of Iranian immigrants in the USA,
like the participant of this study, regarding identity reconstruction and cultural adaptation. He argued that the ongoing negative image of Iran and the association of Islam with terrorism in the American mainstream media has contributed to the formation of new ethnic identities among Iranians immigrants in the USA.

Several studies have also demonstrated the substantial impact of CALL on enhancing the cultural awareness of language learners (Neville et al., 2009; Shih, 2015; Tafazoli et al., 2018). Most of these studies center on the utilization of technology and virtual platforms to improve cultural learning experience of language learners. Nonetheless, there remains a significant gap in the field regarding how CALL influences the identities of language learners as they engage with the target language and culture. Thus, it is crucial to delve into the role of CALL in shaping the identities of language learners concerning both language acquisition and cultural adaptation.

Theoretical frameworks

Cross-cultural adaptation theory

In this study, I built upon Kim’s (2001) theory of cross-cultural adaptation. Cross-cultural adaptation refers to the degree to which immigrants can successfully establish and maintain relationships in the new culture (Kim, 2001). Several researchers have investigated cross-cultural adaptation in relation to immigrants and international students. For example, Gallagher (2013) found that communication plays a pivotal role in the cultural adaptation of international students. Similarly, Wang et al. (2018) argued the importance of cross-cultural adaptation for international students’ success and further discovered that cultural adaptation tends to progressively increase over time.

While acculturation refers to the process through which individuals adopt certain elements of the host culture, integration highlights their active social involvement in the new community and assimilation encompasses their full integration into the host society (Kim, 2017). Cross-cultural adaptation encompasses a broader scope and describes:

The entirety of the dynamic process by which individuals, upon relocating to new, unfamiliar, or changed cultural environments, establish (or reestablish) and maintain relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationships with those environments (Kim, 2001, p. 31).

Communication theory of identity

To enhance and deepen the insights offered by the cross-cultural adaptation framework, this study also incorporates the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI), developed by renowned communication scholar Michael Hecht in 1993. CTI acts as a complementary framework, providing a multifaceted perspective on the complex and layered aspects of identity in the realms of culture, language learning and technology. (Hecht, 1993; Hecht et al., 2001; Hecht et al., 2005; Wadsworth et al., 2008). This integration allows for a more comprehensive exploration of how individuals’ identities evolve and interact within new cultural contexts.

Within the CTI framework, identity is comprehensively examined through four distinct frames, each of which plays a vital role in understanding how technology-enhanced language learning affects language learner’s identity. According to Wadsworth et al. (2008), the first frame, personal identity, pertains to the core sense of self that resides within an individual, aligning with classical notions of self-concept (Wadsworth et al., 2008). Specifically, it explores the participant’s beliefs concerning the concepts of individuality and self-identity within the realm of language learning facilitated by technology. Enacted identity, the second frame, manifests through communication behaviors and interactions with others. This aspect is a central focus of the study, as it scrutinizes the participant’s relationships with her friends.
and colleagues in English as her second language. Relational identity, the third frame, emerges through roles and social interactions with other individuals. In this study, relational identity is discussed in relation to the participant’s identity which is not only individually constructed but also co-created and influenced through relational dynamics within the context of technology-enhanced language learning. Finally, the fourth frame, the communal frame, involves the collective or group as the unit of analysis and pertains to society attributing an identity. This aspect is examined by discussing the expectations that American society has for immigrants in terms of learning English.

Incorporating both the cross-cultural adaptation theory and the CTI provides a comprehensive theoretical foundation for this study. While Kim’s framework (2001) offers a broad view of the adaptive processes in new cultural settings, Hecht’s CTI (1993) delves into the nuanced changes in individual and social identity that occur within these processes. Together, these theories allow for a thorough exploration of an ESL learner capturing both the external adaptation to a new cultural environment and the internal identity transformations that accompany this journey.

Although numerous studies (Neville et al., 2009; Shih, 2015; Tafazoli et al., 2018) have explored the impact of CALL in enhancing cultural understanding among language learners, there is still a notable gap in research concerning the effect of CALL on the identities of these learners as they interact with the target language and culture. Thus, this study focuses on how CALL affects the identity of language learners in relation to the target language and culture. Therefore, this study addresses the following questions:

Q1. How does language learning with technology impact the identity reconstruction of language learners in a new cultural environment?
Q2. What factors influence language learners’ cultural adaptation in the context of CALL?
Q3. How does learning in a virtual knowledge community affect language learners’ understanding of the target culture?

Methodology

Research design: narrative inquiry

This study aimed to examine the impact of a virtual knowledge community on the identity reconstruction and cultural adaptation of an immigrant ESL learner in the USA. Given the significance of her story and life experiences to the research, narrative inquiry was deemed the most suitable methodology. Narrative inquiry goes beyond being just a research method; it serves as a profound tool for understanding the complexities of human experiences (Clandinin and Connelly, 2004; Craig, 2019).

The research participant

The participant, Bahar, immigrated from Iran to the USA in 2014 when she was 34 years old. She was primarily a monolingual Persian (Farsi) speaker. Her proficiency in English was at a basic level, with quite restricted abilities in communication. Upon her arrival in the USA, she encountered numerous challenges including feelings of isolation and difficulty in understanding people due to her limited English fluency which is a common problem among immigrants (Kim et al., 2011). Bahar also found that her original Persian first name, which is not disclosed in this paper to maintain anonymity, carried a derogatory connotation in English. This led to awkward interactions with native English speakers. Consequently, she embarked on an intricate journey of identity reconstruction and eventually chose to adopt the name
“Bahar”. Nevertheless, managing her dual identity continued to be a subtle challenge when engaging with both Iranian and non-Iranian acquaintances.

Data collection
In this qualitative research study, multiple data sources were used to enhance both the trustworthiness and robustness of the findings (Chamberlain et al., 2011). The data collection encompassed six rounds of semi-structured interviews with Bahar over two years. Each interview lasted about an hour and was conducted in Farsi. During our initial conversation about her life story, three themes emerged: challenges of learning English, adapting to the new culture and the affordance of the virtual knowledge community. Each interview had five questions on one of those themes. However, her responses usually made me produce a few follow-up questions.

Insights into Bahar’s challenges were not solely derived from interviews; our text message exchanges, especially those related to her ESL queries, played a crucial role. In addition, given that Bahar was a friend who often sought my assistance for ESL, home visits were also used as a data source, providing a window into her daily life and experiences. These communications deepened my understanding of the obstacles she faced and were a valuable contribution to the data collected for this study. By employing this diverse range of data collection methods, the study aimed to achieve a holistic understanding of Bahar’s experiences and her identity reconstruction process within the context of her language acquisition journey and cultural adaptation in the USA.

In compliance with IRB guidelines, a pseudonym (Bahar) was used for the participant, and all other identifiable details have been omitted. Bahar provided her consent for participation, fully informed that she could withdraw from the study at any time without any justification. The data for this study, including recorded interviews, screenshots of text messages and her emails to me, were securely stored on an encrypted virtual drive.

Data analysis
Building upon Braun and Clarke (2006), this study used thematic analysis to deeply analyze the research questions from different perspectives. To do so, an inductive-deductive thematic approach (Tafazoli and Meihami, 2023) was used. The first research question focused on exploring the impact of technology-assisted language learning on the identity reconstruction of learners in a new cultural setting. The second question addressed the factors influencing language learners’ cultural adaptation within CALL. The third question examined the effects of participation in a virtual knowledge community on learners’ comprehension of the target culture. The deductive analysis was based on predetermined codes derived from the research questions. These included “CALL and Identity Reconstruction” linked to the first research question, “CALL and Cultural Adaptation” associated with the second research question, and “Virtual Knowledge Community and language learning” corresponding to the third research question.

Inductive analysis was carried out in line with Braun and Clarke’s (2006) method, using Bahar’s narratives from interviews and text messages. The interviews were coded using both semantic and latent approaches. From these codes, various themes emerged. These themes were then reviewed and revised after consultation with two experts in the field of language and identity, leading to their finalization. Subsequently, selected quotes from Bahar’s narratives were chosen to enhance the findings of this study.
The trustworthiness of the study
To have reliable findings, I built upon Ary et al. (2014) and addressed the credibility, transferability and dependability of the data. The themes underwent a review process where two experts in language and identity provided feedback. Furthermore, as native speakers of Farsi, they also examined my translations of Bahar’s narratives from Farsi to English, leading to some minor revisions. Considering the study’s focus on a single participant, transferability was addressed by examining Bahar’s experiences in both her home country and Iran, representing different EFL and ESL environments. Additionally, her challenges were contextualized within the broader scope of similar issues documented in the literature from various settings. To ensure dependability, external coders evaluated the codes, achieving a consensus of 90%.

Findings
This study’s findings highlighted six key themes: the struggle with traditional language learning methods; enduring challenges in an ESL context; discovering a new path: the virtual knowledge community; developing a new identity and language learning with technology as a way of life. In this section, each theme is examined in detail. Additionally, Bahar’s narrative is presented in relation to each theme, offering specific insights and perspectives.

The struggle with traditional language learning methods
Bahar’s experience with learning English in a traditional setting is a tale of prolonged struggle and limited success. Despite her prolonged exposure to English, her proficiency remained stagnant, a common plight among many language learners. Bahar recalls:

I’ve been learning English since junior high, but no one can learn English in Iranian public schools because they don’t teach you how to communicate. It is all about grammar and translation.

This reflection highlights the ineffectiveness of traditional language education that focuses heavily on grammar and rote learning, often at the expense of practical communication skills.

Enduring challenges in an ESL context
Bahar arrived in the USA with only a basic level of English proficiency and limited communication skills. This situation led to numerous challenges for her, including feelings of isolation and difficulties in interacting with others. Discussing her initial months in the USA, Bahar describes, “with the little English that I knew, I wasn’t able to communicate with anyone. I became very isolated and depressed”. Bahar later shared how her experience of isolation impacted her mental health, leading to self-doubt about her ability to learn English and adapt to the new culture.

Discovering a new path: the virtual knowledge community
The turning point in Bahar’s language learning journey was her discovery of a virtual knowledge community. Bahar explains:

Accidentally, I met an Iranian ESL teacher who invited me to join a Telegram chat group for ESL learners and immigrants. In the chat room, there were two American teachers as well and twelve other ESL learners from countries Iran, Syria, Korea and Mexico. The teachers would share materials for language learning almost daily. We also had the option to post our questions using audio and video recordings as well as texts.
Over time, the chat room transformed into a knowledge community. Bahar established bonds not just with the teachers but also with other ESL learners sharing similar challenges. She elaborated that:

The most enriching aspect of the chat room was our weekly reflections, where each group member shared their weekly challenges and achievements, particularly regarding ESL, and others provided feedback. Gradually, we developed a familial bond, and there were times when I lost sight of the fact that our primary objective was language learning. The chat room became a safe community for me to express myself and discuss my difficulties without fear of judgement. The genuine support I received there was unforgettable and has left me with lasting memories.

**Navigating cultural nuances**

Bahar’s struggles were not limited to English proficiency but extended to the cultural nuances embedded within the language. This complex relationship between language and culture was particularly evident in her experiences at work. Bahar shares:

The first day that I went to work as a sales assistant my supervisor could not stop laughing when I pronounced my name as my Persian name means something very offensive in English.

This experience underscores the unexpected cultural challenges faced by language learners as an immigrant’s name, which is a fundamental part of her identity, can become a source of discomfort and alienation in an English-speaking context (Tummala-Narra, 2016). It illustrates how language learning transcends vocabulary and grammar, delving into the realm of cultural sensitivity and awareness.

**Identity crisis**

The impact of linguistic and cultural differences on personal identity is a critical aspect of language learning (Zou, 2012), as evidenced by Bahar’s narrative. Her struggle with her name in the English-speaking world highlights the intimate connection between language, culture, and identity. Reflecting on her name’s impact, Bahar says, “My name became an enemy. I wasn’t even able to express myself and pronounce my name”. Bahar’s account reveals how language and cultural differences can lead to an identity crisis. The meaning of her name in English, contrasting with its significance in her native culture, created a barrier to her self-expression and acceptance in the new cultural milieu. This incident exemplifies the profound ways in which language learning is intertwined with cultural adaptation and personal identity.

**Developing a new identity**

Bahar’s decision to change her name was both thoughtful and informed. Immersing in the English language and engaging with the virtual knowledge community, she learned about cultural nuances and linguistic aspects that often cause misunderstandings. Realizing that many immigrants face similar challenges, she chose a new name, symbolizing her cultural adaptation. Bahar explained:

I learned a great deal about American culture, as well as the misunderstandings languages can cause, all within the chat room with the teachers and other language learners with diverse cultural backgrounds. When I became aware of these cultural distinctions and realized that it wasn’t anyone’s fault that my Persian name had an offensive meaning in English, I officially changed my name to Bahar, which brought me much relief.
While immigrants often strive to balance their native culture with the new one, the challenges can be daunting. For Bahar, deeply connected to her Persian name, adapting to American culture led to the realization of its cultural mismatch. Thus, she chose a new name to better fit into her new environment, easing her interactions but also underscoring the complexities of merging two distinct cultural identities.

Language learning with technology as a way of life
Bahar’s experiences eloquently illustrate that learning a new language using technology is tantamount to embracing a new way of life, with profound implications for one’s identity and worldview. She reflects:

I got to explore all those non-linguistic aspects of English through this chat room. I was so lucky to get to know other students with different cultural backgrounds in the same chat room which helped me to realize that some of my challenges were similar to theirs.

This statement encapsulates the transformative impact of technology for learning not the language but the culture as well. Through interactive platforms learners can engage in immersive cultural experiences, gaining insights into customs, traditions and societal norms. This digital exposure goes beyond textbooks, allowing learners to connect with authentic content, native speakers and global communities.

Discussion
Virtual knowledge community and identity reconstruction
Bahar’s immigration to the USA brought with it the hope of rapid language acquisition which is a common myth in ESL contexts (Nelson and Davis-wiley, 2017). However, she soon recognized that despite the advantages of being in an ESL environment, diligent and persistent study over an extended period is still essential for ESL students. Consequently, when she faced communication challenges during her first year in the USA, she experienced feelings of isolation. This phase of Bahar’s journey underscores a crucial aspect of language learning – the profound impact of linguistic proficiency on social integration and mental well-being (Kim et al., 2012).

Bahar’s journey in learning English encapsulates the transformation from conventional classroom learning to an innovative, technology-driven approach within a virtual knowledge community. Her narrative illustrates the challenges and frustrations typical of traditional language learning (Walia, 2012) and how a shift to a more flexible, informal learning environment fostered significant personal growth and language acquisition (Dressman and Sadler, 2020).

Emerging open-access technologies, such as cloud-based, multimedia chat rooms, offer an efficient means of informal language learning (Loewen and Reissner, 2009). In this study, a virtual knowledge community served as a platform for cultural adaptation and informal language learning which can effectively complement cultural understanding alongside language acquisition (Isbell, 2018). Knowledge communities allow teachers and learners to engage in reflective practices while also benefiting from the experiences and knowledge shared by others (Craig, 2007, 2020). They serve as a secure and collaborative space for both teachers and students to exchange their insights, fostering not only academic growth but also personal development (Kelley et al., 2024; Zhong and Craig, 2020).

Virtual knowledge communities have a similar mission but are different in nature. A virtual knowledge community is a virtual group or platform in which members, including teachers and learners, share not only their successful strategies but also their failed experiences (Razmeh, 2021). They seek help, advice and support in a non-threatening, stress-free and
informal friendly atmosphere. Virtual knowledge communities offer an immersive experience through which learners can gain a holistic understanding of the interplay between language and culture (Altarriba and Basnight-Brown, 2022). When learners from different geographical locations come together to achieve a common linguistic goal, they naturally engage in exchanges that involve sharing cultural anecdotes, norms, beliefs and practices (Fauzi, 2019).

Revisiting the research questions

Addressing the first research question regarding the impact of technology-assisted language learning on the reconstruction of identity in a new cultural setting, this study revealed that the identity of ESL learners in CALL settings can reconstruct in relation to the new cultural context (Norton and De Costa, 2018; Norton and Pavlenko, 2019; Parker, 2019). For example, Bahar’s active participation in a virtual knowledge community not only helped her bridge her Iranian heritage with her new American life but also fostered a significant evolution in her personal identity. By interacting with her ESL teacher and peers, Bahar didn’t just improve her language skills; she underwent a profound change in how she viewed herself and related to her new cultural surroundings.

In relation to the second research question, which explores the factors affecting language learners’ cultural adaptation within CALL environments, various elements within CALL were found to have influenced Bahar’s process of cultural adaptation. Bahar’s journey in language learning highlights the deep intertwining of linguistic skills with cultural understanding (Kramsch and Hua, 2016). Her engagement in the virtual knowledge community was crucial, providing an immersive environment for understanding American culture. This platform enabled her to share cultural experiences and participate in meaningful dialogues, crucially contributing to her cultural adaptation. Factors such as the nature of interactions in the virtual community, the diversity of cultural perspectives presented and the opportunity to apply language skills in culturally relevant contexts played significant roles in her cross-cultural adaptation process (Kim, 2001). This study further confirmed that incorporating cultural components into the informal language learning context can facilitate a more comprehensive comprehension of the intricate interplay between language and culture (Gao, 2006; Kramsch, 2014; Kramsch and Hua, 2016; Levy, 2007).

Addressing the third research question on how learning in a virtual knowledge community affects language learners’ understanding of the target culture, this study finds that virtual knowledge communities play a vital role. These communities, emerging from open-access technologies like cloud-based, multimedia chat rooms, provide an effective avenue for informal language learning (Loewen and Reissner, 2009), facilitating cultural adaptation and complementing cultural understanding alongside language acquisition (Isbell, 2018).

Conclusion

The transformative journey of Bahar, in alignment with the theory of cross-cultural adaptation (Kim, 2001), underscores the pivotal role of CALL in reconstructing the identities of immigrant language learners and contributing to their cultural adaptation, (Shadiev and Yu, 2022; Tafazoli et al., 2020). As an example, virtual knowledge communities can provide an immersive learning environment that surpasses traditional language teaching methods, incorporating aspects of cultural learning (Isbell, 2018). This blend of language and cultural education in CALL environments not only enhances linguistic proficiency but also fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation of the cultural intricacies of the target language.

Moreover, this study highlighted the transformative impact of CALL on social and cultural identity reconstruction among immigrants (Kane and Levina, 2017). Bahar’s
journey from a phase of self-doubt and social isolation to one of confidence and cultural adaptation exemplifies the role of CALL in enabling learners to reconstruct their social and cultural identities (Andrew, 2009; Liou, 2012; Ushioda, 2011). This journey reveals the essential need for CALL programs to address the emotional and social aspects of language learning, providing a supportive environment for personal growth and cultural adaptation.

Reflecting the principles of CTI, Bahar’s experience with CALL significantly influenced her personal, enacted, relational and communal identities (Wadsworth et al., 2008). Technology-enhanced language learning offered her a platform to redefine her self-concept, adapt her communication behaviors, adjust her social interactions and align with societal expectations in her new cultural setting. This multifaceted transformation highlights CALL’s role in facilitating a comprehensive identity evolution within the realms of language and culture. It emphasizes the necessity of integrating identity-focused strategies in CALL to effectively assist learners in navigating the complexities of a new linguistic and cultural landscape.

Implications
This study’s findings have profound implications, particularly in recognizing the role of CALL in not only enhancing linguistic skills but also helping cultural adaptation and identity reconstruction among immigrant language learners. It emphasizes the necessity for language education programs to integrate technology-based learning platforms, which extend beyond conventional teaching methods, to provide immersive experiences enriched with cultural context. For educators, the study underscores the importance of an integrative approach that merges language proficiency with cultural understanding, equipping learners to effectively engage in and contribute to diverse, multicultural environments. Additionally, the insights gained from this study are instrumental in shaping the development of CALL curricula and platforms, ensuring they cater to the varied cultural backgrounds of learners and foster an inclusive, effective learning atmosphere.

References


**Further reading**


**About the author**

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