The Reality of Role-Playing Games: How Players Construct Reality through Language

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Abstract:
Role-playing games have a unique structure and exist in multiple mediums. Although some research is available on communication in computer mediated role-playing games, little exists on communication practices in tabletop role-playing games. In my research, I reviewed existing scholarly literature on tabletop role-playing games, as well as theory on the role language plays in constructing reality. I conducted passive participant observation on a group of people playing *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*. By applying theory to my ethnographic research, I demonstrated how players constructed a collective reality through communication. Players did this by demonstrating their own enthrallment with the game and by sharing a language code.

The Reality of Role-Playing Games:
How players construct reality through language.

Outline

Purpose: To inform an audience about the use of language in role-playing games.

Thesis: Through language, players construct reality in role-playing games.

Introduction
     A. Role-playing games are games that take place in a fictional environment, have quantified rules, and is based mostly on verbal communication between a gamemaster and other players.
     B. This research seeks to apply theory on the link between language and reality.

I. What makes a role-playing game a role-playing game?
     A. Role-playing games have a specific structure.
     B. Role-playing games exist in many mediums.

II. The role of language in role-playing warrants more research.
     A. A speck of research has been done on computer mediated role-playing games.
     B. Peter Stromberg looked at enthrallment in non-computer mediated role-playing games.

III. Although scholars have not done much research on language and role-playing games, there are scholarly works on the connection between language and reality.
     A. Sapir and Whorf claimed that language defines or at least influences one‟s construct of reality.
     B. Since language is collective, so is reality.

IV. I conducted passive participant ethnographic research on an *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* game.
     A. Ethnography is ideal for seeking to understand a cultural scene.
     B. Ethnographic interviews would have been easier, but not the best option for this research.
     C. Data collection consisted of multiple steps.

V. Results show participants communicated in a variety of ways conducive to developing a collective reality.
     A. The three codes of speech were as the actual participant, as the player, and as the character.
     B. Participants spoke as if they were their characters, using "I" references, and telling stories.
     C. I observed nonverbal elements, such as sound effects, kinesics, and demonstration of space.

VI. . Through their various means of communication, participants established collective reality.

      A. Through demonstrating enthrallment, participants demonstrated their own perception of reality and added to a collective reality.

      B. This group of participants shared a code of language; therefore, they shared the reality it constructed.

      C. By communicating space, participants made the imaginary-entertainment environment a real one.

VII. were implications or limitations to the study.

      A. Only one group of table top role-players was available for observation.

      B. Four straight hours of data was tedious to collect and analyze.

Conclusion

      A. Through language, role-players do indeed construct reality.

      B. In the future, it would be fascinating to make this research more comparative, and focus on specific aspects of the game.

Introduction

They meet in a tavern, but do not know each other yet. There is a cloaked mysterious character. A girl of 16 walks over to him and starts talking. It is a mix of flirting and business. He buys her a drink, and thus the game begins.

The objective of this study was to discover communication patterns in role-playing games, and how these practices yielded a shared reality. This study‟s data shows that participants constructed reality by demonstrating enthrallment and using speech codes specific to role-playing.

Mackay (2001) could not have put it better when he defined the role-playing game as an "episodic and participatory story-creation system that includes a set of quantified rules that assist a group of players and a gamemaster in determining how their fictional characters‟ spontaneous interactions are resolved" (p. 4). Role-playing games exist in many mediums. They all take place in a fictional world, or imaginary-entertainment environment. Tools such as dice, along with official rules of the games, determine the characters‟ fates. Communication in role-playing games of all medium, but especially table top, warrant more research.

There is research available on the connections between language and reality. Sapir and Whorf are especially renowned for their ideas on language being the construct of reality. This research draws on Saussure‟s collective reality as well.

Literature Review

Role-Playing Games: An Introduction

Mackay (2001) defined the role-playing game as an "episodic and participatory story-creation system that includes a set of quantified rules that assist a group of players and a game master in determining how their fictional characters" spontaneous interactions are resolved" (p. 4). Role-playing games evolved from strategy games, the first one being a Prussian tool to train soldiers. Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax developed *Dungeons and Dragons*, the first role-playing game, in 1974. More recently, Gary Gygax co-developed *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* (AD&D). Role-playing also grew to include various mediums and genres (Mackay, 2001).

As briefly mentioned, there are many themes of role-playing games. Such themes range from *Star Wars* type space adventures, to the magical worlds in fantasy science fiction novels. Creators drew from existing literature, especially *Lord of the Rings*, to develop the original *Dungeons and Dragons*. Novelists then drew upon the games for inspiration in their books. This led to an evolution in cinema, which inspired other themes in role-playing games (Mackay, 2001).

Role-playing games, regardless of their medium, have a distinct structure. They take place in an imaginary-entertainment environment, which is a fictional world the scenario is based in. A gamemaster serves as The All-Knowing One, enforcer of the game rules, story teller, and all extraneous characters in the imaginary-entertainment environment. The gamemaster may even be the sole creator of imaginary-entertainment environment. The rules of the game, serve as the rules of the universe, both limiting characters and supplying them with options to work with. Regardless of the medium of

the game, the tools of play, such as dice or cards, function as fate when players (gamemaster included) create their character traits and perform actions. The tools may determine what will happen, and to what severity or extent. Role-playing games are divided into units of sessions, episodes and campaigns or chronicles. One sitting is a session, which when continued by another session creates an episode. Chronicles or campaigns are multiple adventures which incorporate the same characters (Mackay 2001). Together, these aspects aid in forming an alternative reality for the players.

There are many mediums for role-playing games. The original medium of role-playing games, such as *Dungeons and Dragons* is the table top; meaning people generally played them on a flat surface, with paper, pencil, and dice. Players may use commercially manufactured or self-made maps laying out the character"s surroundings. Role-playing games also exist in the form of cards. The first role-playing card game is based on traditional Tarot cards. A newer medium, is computer based (Mackay 2001). It is important to note that my research focuses on the table top medium of role-playing.

Communication and Role-Playing

The study of communication in role-playing games is significant to the speech communication field, as little research seems to be available about this topic. There is some scholarly research on computer mediated role-playing games, but even that medium warrants more research according to Hancock and Peña (2006). The previous research on computer mediated role-playing games tends to focus on violence and other psychological affects (Hancock & Peña, 2006).

In non-computer mediated role-playing games, one relies heavily on verbal language such as storytelling to do anything, and thereby establishes a collective reality.

To quote Peter Stromberg (1999), through the use of language, "role-players construct a complex social situation in which persons are at once fully aware of their surroundings, as conventionally defined, and closely identified with characters in a collectively defined narrative" (p. 500). He argued that players convince themselves the game fantasy is somewhat real (though not completely real), which is essential for enthrallment[1]. The use of "I" to refer to oneself as one‟s character is a sign the participant is truly enthralled and perceives oneself as the character one plays (Stromberg, 1999).

Straying away from role-play specific studies, it is important to look at links between language and reality. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is canon. Whorf (1978a) wrote that through language, the mind categorizes and analyzes experiences, "constructing a house of… consciousness" (p.252). Bonvillain (2003) noted two versions. In its strict version, it states that language defines reality and cognition can only occur within its framework. Thus, if the language to express something does not exist, then the mind cannot perceive it as being real. In the looser version, language merely influences reality and guides cognition (Bonvillain 2003).

Whorf (1978b) expressed in "Language, culture and personality, essays in memory of Edward Sapir," that one‟s language interprets one‟s experiences. He quoted Sapir as saying, "the „real world‟ is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group… We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our communities predispose certain choices of interpretation" (p.134). Whorf (1978b) claimed that metaphors in particular played a large role on structuring reality. He emphasized how Standard Average European (SAE)

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[1] Stromberg (1999) defines the concept of enthrallment as "the contemporary phenomenon of intense involvement in the fantasies of advertising and entertainment" (p.490).

languages take abstract concepts (e.g. time), and make them spatial by attaching more tactile metaphors (e.g. quantity, shape, and movement). Whorf placed a heavy emphasis on the importance of spatiality in SAE languages, thereby leaving the impression that space makes the abstract real for speakers of SAE languages. This is not only seen in verbal communication (e.g. time as a contained substance), but in nonverbal communication (e.g. clasping gesture when trying to remember a thought). Thus, people in various language communities have varying perceptions of what is real (1978b).

Kronenfeld and Rundblad (2003) drew on Saussure to link language to collective reality. Language is a system of symbols held by a community. Since the system is collective, and not individual, this makes the reality of the system collective, and not individual. Hence, one may refer to "relevant systemic constraints" as collective reality (p.127.) These systems are composed of collective representations, which are "socially constructed and shared patterns of knowledge or understanding" (p.127).

<div align="center">Research Method and Procedure</div>

I conducted a form of ethnographic research called passive participant observation. According to anthropologist James P. Spradley (1979), ethnography is a research tool that one uses to understand a group of people in a particular place and time, or cultural scene. Spradley puts it best when he wrote that ethnography "seeks to document the existence of alternative realities and to describe these realities in their own terms" (p.11). There are various ethnographic methods, one of them being passive participant observation. In passive participant observation, one immerses oneself in the cultural scene, interacts with the informants, but only partially participates with them in

their activities (1979). In the case of my research, the cultural scene is a session of *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*, and the participants are college age adults.

An alternative method I could have used was the ethnographic interview. It is easier in the sense that individual participants are more readily available than groups of participants. To conduct an ethnographic interview, one locates people who were involved in a cultural scene, and questions them about it. However, according to Kristine Fitch, ethnographic interview is an imperfect tool to look at language and cognition in cultural scenes. In ethnographic interview, the cultural scene has already passed. The human memory is imperfect, thus, the participant unwittingly gives an abridged version of their dialogues. Therefore, participant observation is more conducive to language and cognition studies as the ethnographer is able to observe dialogues firsthand (2006).

Before beginning the actual data collection, I wrote up a project proposal and an Institutional Review Board proposal. These proposals laid out the point of this project, the ways I planned to conduct research, how it would impact the participants, and what I intended to do with the data.

I sought groups of role-players by networking. Before beginning this research, I knew of groups of people who participated in role-playing games such as *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*, *Mage*, and *Vampire*. There was also a student organization listed on a local university website that brought role-players together. I talked to people I knew, and emailed the student group with the intention of locating ideally three groups of people to study. Due to the nature of student participants, only one group came through for observation. I have addressed this issue in the implications section of this paper.

The group I observed planned the date of their game weeks in advance, and invited me to join them. They treated me like a player, only we all knew I was not really playing. I traveled to their usual venue to observe them, and arrived at the same time the players did. I sat with the players when observing them. I laughed and joked along with them. I also ate with the players, as a few of them brought communal snacks and beverages. I will address details on how the night ensued in the Results section of this paper. When the game ended, I left when everyone else did.

While I was in the cultural scene, I took jottings as well as an audio recording. Although the recorder picks up everything verbatim, technology can and will fail when least expected so it is good to take written notes too (Bernard, 1988). I began the jottings as soon as the participants signed the informed consent forms, taking note of what sorts of things they did to prepare for the game, things they said and did during the game, and manner in which they said and did them. I recorded (with all the participants" permission) for the duration of the game. After the game, I expanded on my written notes, adding general trends that I observed and things that I remembered could be important but did not have time to add while I was involved in the cultural scene.

The final step dealing with my data was transcription. I transcribed all of my jottings and expanded notes. I also listened to my recordings and transcribed select parts. With this, I looked for themes and applied theory from the literature review. I have addressed issues regarding transcription in the implications section of this paper.

Results

I observed a fascinating session of *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* (AD&D), version 3.5 (the latest version). I will begin with an overview of what the environment was like. I will then discuss how participants created reality through language.

A Brief Overview of the Game

The gamemaster, better known as a Dungeon Master (DM) in AD&D, held the game at his place on a Friday evening when the usual players were able to attend. He and a few of the participants brought food and beverages which they shared with the whole group. The group consisted of eight players: two female and six male. Two of them were married to each other.

I and all eight players sat around a cluster of tables used as the playing surface. A dry-ease grid took up most of the surface. The DM also kept his player hand books (PHB"s), laptop, and a screen on the table. He used the screen to hide what he was doing with extraneous characters he controlled. I also set my voice recorder in the center of the table to better pick up everyone"s voices.

The participants used several types of tools. Each player used a set of their own special dice. In a standard set of dice, there are four that have six sides, referred to as "D6." There is also a dice with 20 sides, which participants referred to as a "D20." There are others with varying numbers of sides, but the D6 and D20 were the most used. Some players had a PHB with them, which they occasionally referenced when questions arose about a character"s abilities, weapons, spells, what have you. The grid on the table showed the space the characters were in. Each participant, except the DM, used clay to make a character piece, which the DM baked before the game. The DM used various

sized candy to signify villains and other extraneous characters. The DM drew the character''s environment on the grid, each square on the grid representing five feet, and the players placed their characters where they wished them to be in that imaginary-entertainment environment.

Participants put a lot of thought into creating their characters. Approximately half an hour into the game, they went around the circle describing what their characters were like. They told their race (e.g. human, elf, half-elf, dwarf), class (e.g. rogue and cleric), age, hair and eye color, height, religion, attire, and anything distinctive that the other participants should know. Some decided to be "related" to each other as siblings. They also planned out which weapons they carried, which spells to have available to use, and any other accoutrements the character carried.

Reality in the Making

The participants used multiple codes of communication. They spoke as themselves, as players, and as their characters. As themselves, they talked about things non-related to the game, such as school, hair things, fingers, and the smell of the markers. However, they used this code the least. As players, they discussed game related matters, using specialized language (e.g. "class," and "race"), often incorporating their tools, particularly the grid and the dice. A common comment was "whose turn is it?" This code was quite task related. They announced doing particular actions, such as letting their robe fall to the side to show their long sword, or walking out of the tavern. Participants also spoke as their characters, often in dialogue with other characters, using distinctive accents, "I," and gusto.

Often, participants code switched, meaning they jumped from one code of speaking to another. At times, especially in the heat of battle, participants switched smoothly between player and character codes. Take for example one woman‟s reaction to the onset of villains: "(beginning in character voice) let‟s go! Whoo whoo! (then in player voice) I run." Alternatively, another example of code switching is "(in player voice) I point my fingers, wave my hand, (in character voice) in the name of Clast… (sound effect follows and then in player voice) and I can‟t think of anything else to say. I basically point and the touch attack does..." which was followed by silence as he rolled his dice.

The use of "I," "we," and "us" in character was very prominent, as well as the use of "you." Take this dialogue for example, "I hate men." "I take offense to that." "Well you‟re a guy." The use of "I" and "you" were ways of feeding the alternate reality, and making it manifest as collective. Participants used them a lot in player voice also, such as "we are making a shovel." Participants used "I" the most in questioning the DM about the situation. "What do I see?" "Can I hear them?"

Participants built off of each other‟s spoken actions. A participant said that they shot the dog with an arrow in player voice. Another person, in player voice, gave a lively commentary how the arrow went through the dog, and came back around and hit it again, as a way to describe that the arrow did an extreme amount of damage. That self-appointed commentator made colorful descriptions throughout the game complete with sound effects showing how things "appeared." That, however, was really the DM‟s job. The DM did not say anything, but would sometimes re-enact the action the way it happened in his own conceptualization of reality.

Storytelling was relatively prominent. Each participant had a story about where their character came from so to speak. The DM in particular was required to engage in story telling, as this served to inform the other participants about their imaginary-entertainment environment and the extraneous characters in it. Story telling occurred mostly in character voice. For example, a cleric constantly approached other characters, saying, "let me tell you about Clast" in character voice, and unless stopped, proceeded with his story.

Connected to story telling, participants brought up previous campaigns a lot. Some but not all of the participants present were involved in the campaigns mentioned. Nevertheless, they still talked about the campaigns as history, and the characters as real figures in those histories. The DM revived one such character, an infamous magical hat, in this session as a villain that fired magic missiles. It is important to note, that the hat was the original creation of a different DM, therefore reinforcing the fact that the previous campaign became a history, a reality, to the participants.

Participants used a lot of sound effects. The male participants especially used sound effects mostly in battle. An illustration was when a character used a spell to do damage to a villain. "I"m going to unload my little glowy spell at them, point my sword at them" and a whooshing sound effect follows. They also made sounds of pain that they perceived the monsters would have made when shot with an arrow or sliced with a long sword.

Kinesics (nonverbal communication with body movements) made the game quite real. Participants, especially the DM, used illustrators or acted out some of their actions. When a player in character looked at a map he took from a mysterious cloaked character

he met in a tavern, he "held it," and then handed it to another character, who "looked at it," only to "roll it up." Two characters insisted on burying an orc as part of their religious practice, and made shoveling motions in the process. The DM was particularly active during battles. Even though he had a chair, he rarely sat in it. His facial expressions reflected the expressions of pain the monsters would have made had they been real and just beat to a pulp. When performing the part of a man in charge of a fortress, the DM stood very rigidly, with arms folded and face serious as if he was that particular character. One participant, who played a mute character, used emblems to communicate in character. However, most of the time he spoke in player voice, and said what he would have said in emblems in character voice[2].

The concept of space was quite prominent. As mentioned earlier, participants used a grid to show the imaginary-entertainment environment as physical space, and clay figures and candy to show their spatial relationship to the environment and each other, therefore aiding the participants in constructing the reality of it in their minds. For example, one character found herself next to a rather vocal cleric and exclaimed in character "oh god I'm next to him?"

Analysis

Players constructed reality through multiple linguistic means. One way to look at it is players became enthralled in the game, and they demonstrated and thrived off of theatrical communication patterns. Another way to look at participant's construction of reality is they used a specialized language which defined their reality. Thirdly,

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[2] Ironically, even though this participant's character was mute, this participant was the most vocal in the group.

communication regarding space made the imaginary-entertainment environment a real environment.

Bringing in Stromberg‥s (1998) work, enthrallment was a key to developing reality in this AD&D session. Through language, participants created an imaginary-entertainment environment and showed they were living it, therefore reinforcing the reality of it. I observed this in the performance aspects of participant‥s communication, which included the use of code switching, use of first person expressions, storytelling (especially about history), sound effects, and kinesics.

Participants‥ language defined their reality and created a collective reality. The group of participants was a language community, which used a special code of language for the purpose of role-playing, and shared a history. It had a special lexicon that defined the types of tools (e.g. D20, PHB, types of character weapons) and beings in the imaginary-entertainment environment. There were also special ways that participants formulated dialogue in order to maneuver in the imaginary-entertainment environment, such as by announcing, "I leave the tavern" and proceeding to move their clay figure out of the tavern. By collectively engaging in role-playing language, and expressing their own perceptions (especially on the part of the DM) participants formed a collective alternative reality.

Nonverbal communication, such as kinesics and use of the grid, were imperative in that they lent structure or space to abstract ideas. To invoke Whorf (1978b), SAE language speakers make abstract ideas "real" by tagging the concept of space to them, be it with gestures or with metaphors. By being conscious of, and communicating about,

things like distance (e.g. height of the fortress wall), the imaginary-entertainment environment became a reality.

Implications and Limitations

There were many implications and limitations in this project, which included the ability to observe only one group of participants, the fact that I knew the participants well, and making a four hour long observation. The biggest implication was observing just one group. I had planned to compare and contrast ways in which the different groups interacted and displayed ways of creating a collective alternative reality. This reality may have been different for other groups than it was for the one I observed, and participants may have interacted differently depending on the size of the group, their generation, and their relation to other participants outside of the group.

A second implication is that I was friends with the people I observed. I went into the situation already having a good rapport with them, so maybe they were more natural around me than they would have been around a different ethnographer, which perhaps worked in my favor. On the other hand, they may have tried to explain certain things such as stories about previous campaigns to a stranger but not to me because they assumed I knew them already.

Observing for four hours may have negatively affected my note-taking abilities. Normally when I do ethnographic research, I take time to expand on all of my jottings when I leave the cultural scene. This time, 42 pages of jottings daunted me, and I instead skipped expanding them and continued with more general observations that I mentally noted throughout the game. I also found it difficult to listen to a four hour recording, which was longer than four hours when played at a slower speed. Because of this, I only

transcribed selective pieces of the recording rather than the whole thing. There may have been some fascinating dialogue that would have greatly benefited my research that did not end up in the transcription.

Conclusions

Through language, role-players do indeed construct reality. This study looked at the anatomy of a role-playing game. It examined existing research on communication in role-playing games, as well as how language influences reality. After doing ethnographic research on an AD&D session, this study found that various linguistic elements both demonstrated and reinforced the concept of a collective reality held by the group of participants.

In the future, it would be interesting to see more research on live action and tabletop role-playing games. A few specific aspects of interest are communication between genders, generational communication differences, the importance of story telling and campaigns as shared histories, player and character personality correlation, use of new technology (e.g. computers) in game, and dice superstitions.

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