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NEGOTIATING PLAYER IDENTITY AND INFORMATION IN TTRPGs (Paper)

Abstract or Résumé:

Tabletop role-playing games constitute a unique site for everyday life information behaviour. Non-participant observation sessions and semi-structured interviews with two gaming groups of 4-6 players will be conducted to understand more about both the negotiation of player identities and information seeking activities. Preliminary findings of this in-progress study will be shared that focus on how information sources are used both in and out of character, as well as on knowledge about barriers and facilitators to information.

1. Introduction: TTRPGs as a unique site for information behaviour

When participating in a tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG), an entire fictional world is created in a shared vision between the game master and the players. In *Dungeons and Dragons Fifth Edition* (D&D 5e) specifically, players are able to act within the bounds of the world as their characters and "solve puzzles, talk with other characters, battle fantastic monsters, and discover fabulous magic items and other treasure," (Mearls & Crawford, 2014, p. 5). Throughout this gameplay, the players are constantly negotiating between knowledge held by their characters within the world (i.e., "in character"), and the knowledge that a player may have from personal experiences (i.e., "out of character"). We will report on a study in progress that takes this unique context as the site to investigate the information behaviour that players of D&D 5e exhibit while acting both in and out of character. Our qualitative study is guided by two main research questions:

1) How do Dungeons and Dragons 5e players use and gain meaning from different sources of information during gameplay, both in and out of character?
2) What barriers and facilitators of information seeking emerge during gameplay?

2. Literature review and context: Information during gameplay

While there is growing information research in the context of the massive global phenomenon of online gaming (Adams, 2009; Harviainen & Rapp, 2018; Harviainen & Hamari, 2015) there is still scant research into the information behaviour of TTRPG players and game masters (Forcier, 2022, p. 121). Many studies pertaining to the behaviour of online role-playing gamers (Consalvo, 2007; Daniau, 2016; Moser & Fang, 2015) can be applied to the TTRPG space, as there are many similarities to the structure of both types of games. The studies by Harviainen & Rapp (2018) and Harviainen & Hamari (2015) analyse online role-playing games as information retrieval and trading systems, applying concepts such as controlled vocabulary and information negotiation to gameplay. Studies such as Gibson (2020), Harviainen (2012), Stobbs (2023), and Wylie Atmore (2016) examine the information behaviour of TTRPG players and game masters.

During a game session of Dungeons and Dragons 5e, the game master (GM) sets the scene by describing the location, any non-player characters (NPCs) that may be present, and any events that are currently happening. From here, the players are able to describe their actions within the world, roll dice to randomly determine the outcome, and the game master describes the consequences of those actions. There is an underlying narrative of these games that "is the result of the interactions of the GM, the players, the rules, and the random element," (Hendricks, 2006, p. 39). During gameplay, the GM and the players must have a shared understanding of what the fantasy world is like and must extend themselves into the world to participate effectively (Hendricks, 2006). The world itself only exists through the information that is shared by the GM and in turn acknowledged and understood by the players, therefore building the shared fantasy. Players are expected to "constantly and naturally switch between talking through their character, negotiating the application of game rules, offering narrative descriptions of their actions, and starting more informal discussions within the group," (Daniau, 2016, p. 431). There are many facets to a character that the players must understand. They must understand their emotions and goals, as well as the game mechanics that outline their skills and abilities. These two sets of information combined must be understood for a player to effectively seek information in the game. The goals of the players and the goals of the characters may align or differ as they navigate the fantasy world, and the information-seeking behaviour of each may differ.

By extending into the fantasy world, the character has significant ties to the identity of the player. The game sessions provide a "low-stakes but high-intensity arena for experimentation

with actual moral quandaries," (Hollander, 2021, p. 319) and this can thin the boundaries between player and character. The "bleed phenomenon" occurs when the feelings, thoughts, and relationships of the players spill into the characters, and vice versa, (Bowman, 2015). It has been shown that this "bleed" and connection can be so intense that TTRPGs can have "therapeutic, psychologically and socially strengthening, and even life-saving effects in the lives of individuals experiencing severe depression, disorientation, and meaninglessness," (Hollander, 2021, p. 323). Players that have intense ties to the narrative within the fantasy world, may make decisions and seek information differently than they would as non-game involved outsiders.

Despite how common bleed can be, players often fear being accused of meta-gaming or cheating with knowledge from outside of the game. Meta-gaming can be defined as "any time that 'out-of-character knowledge' informs a player's decisions about their character's actions," (Aldridge, 2012, p. 279). Meta-gaming is especially looked down upon if it breaks the immersion of the gameplay and severs the extension into the fantasy world by bringing the players back to reality. There are many different personal definitions for when meta-gaming occurs, as there is some level of knowledge about the world that players have prior to beginning. "Players have various ideas and information about games before they begin playing, and they gain further knowledge as they progress," (Consalvo, 2007, p.1) but some say that *any* information from outside of the game is cheating. This can cause conflict at the table or affect how players seek information, as they may be attempting to avoid meta-gaming or may be purposely trying to cheat.

Within the fantasy world, players have complete freedom to take any actions as their characters. They can interact with anything that is put in front of them, and therefore it can be difficult for players to understand how they need to approach solving problems. The structure of a TTRPG session and the GM's choices can be compared to an information retrieval framework. The GM needs to consider players' perceived autonomy in the story, yet still keep them attached to the narrative (Harviainen & Rapp, 2018). One example is the use of keywords to search for information (Harviainen & Rapp, 2018). In a TTRPG session, this may look like a player proposing a specific action while speaking out of character or asking the right questions while acting in character. The GM must find the right balance while running the session that ensures the players have the information they need. On the same note, the players are active participants in the game and will be exhibit information-seeking behaviour while interacting with the game

framework. Both the GM and the players benefit from working together to achieve this balance because, "having too little information prevents meaningful use of the game. Having too much information (e.g. spoilers), likewise, may make the game uninteresting or even unplayable" (Harviainen & Hamari, 2015, p. 1128).

3. Methodology: Observing TTRPG Sessions in Action

In keeping with online naturalistic research methods this project seeks to understand both contingent information seeking behaviour of online gameplay by observing it as it happens in real-time (Adler and Adler, 1994; Baker 2006) and as discussed post-game conversations. To meet these research goals, we opted for online unobtrusive non-participant observation combined with focus group interviews (Boddy, 2005, pp. 251-252; Morgan, 2022)

To understand the information behaviour of players in a Dungeons and Dragons gaming session, we will be performing non-participant observation of two pre-existing gaming groups during their regularly scheduled game sessions. Each group will include 4-6 participants, including the game master, as this is the average size of a Dungeons and Dragons group. During each gaming session, the game master will describe the scene and the players will have their characters interact with described locations, puzzles, non-player characters, and items. The goal of this observation is to make note of player interactions, decision-making, and the negotiation of information known in character versus out of character. The researcher will not participate in the game session so that they are distanced from the story of the game itself. This ensures that observations made are objective and encompass all the activities that are present at the table. Examples of key observations include how players swap between communication in the real world and in the fantasy world, common information seeking behaviour within the fantasy world, and how players deal will decision-making and conflict with only the knowledge of the character.

After each session there is an optional semi-structured group interview with the players to discuss the events of the session. The interviews will explore the internal thoughts of the players during pivotal moments in the game. This will ensure that we are getting an idea of both character and player behaviour. The group will be guided to discuss instances of observed

information seeking and their use of knowledge to solve problems. Participants will also be invited to discuss the plot points of the session that were most influential or important to them.

The gaming sessions and interviews will both be audio-recorded. All interviews will be transcribed along with key moments from the gaming session that are identified as being relevant. The transcribed sections of gameplay and the interviews will be analyzed for emerging themes and trends in behaviour (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

We expect to be able to make sense of the gaming contexts described above by engaging with classic theories of information behaviour including those that focus on barriers and facilitators to information seeking (Harris & Dewdney, 1994), the role of information mediators (Kulthau, 2004), serendipitous information encounters (Erdelez, 1997), referrals to other sources (McKenzie, 2003), and the everyday as site of meaningful yet often overlooked information practices (Savolainen, 1995).

4. A Work In Progress

At the time of writing, we are in the process of recruiting participants to collect data. By the time of the conference, we hope to report on our analysis of the information behaviour observed and recounted during the gameplay at the centre of this study.

This analysis will provide further understanding into the information-seeking behaviour that the players exhibited while acting as themselves and as their characters.

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