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“I’ll just make sure we’re all on the same page”: Talking fictional worlds into being (Poster)

Abstract or Résumé:

This poster will present emerging results from a study of material and discursive information practices in tabletop roleplaying games. The focus will be on the ways in which players collaboratively construct and interact with the fictional worlds of play. A “big and small story” approach, influenced by the ethnomethodological methods of conversation analysis and membership categorization analysis, will be used to analyze the players’ talk as they intersubjectively create and sustain a fictional space of play.

1. Introduction

Tabletop roleplaying games, such as Dungeons & Dragons, involve collaborative storytelling as a part of gameplay. This poster will present emerging results from a study of information practices in tabletop roleplaying games. Cox (2013) has introduced the concept of “information in social practice” to bring attention to information behaviours that are a part of social activities where information seeking or use may not be the primary focus. In tabletop roleplaying games, there are many aspects that could be considered information behaviours and information seeking as the players create and locate themselves within a fictional space. However, these behaviours occur in the context of ongoing gameplay, of the in-the-moment interactions of the social and conversational practice of gaming. The focus for this study is on the ways in which players inform one another by talking the world into being during the course of play, and it is influenced by work on discursive approaches to information (e.g., Tuominen & Savolainen 1997).

Discursive approaches to the study of information and informing have been applied within the LIS field; for example, McKenzie (2009, 2010) and McKenzie and Spoel (2014) use discursive methods to examine information exchanges in midwifery care. In an interaction what comes before can be treated as a knowledge base to inform later parts of an interaction (McKenzie 2010), and groups may have shorthand references to recontextualize past stories for use in current conversations (Georgakopoulou 2007). This study uses these types of discursive methods to examine ways information is created, shared, and used in the in the moment-by-moment discourse of the social practice of tabletop roleplaying games, specifically with a focus on the ways in which the fictional world is created and engaged with during interaction.

2. Method

Data was collected from three different groups of players who were video recorded during actual gameplay. Each group was recorded on a minimum of two separate occasions. After gameplay had been recorded, interviews were conducted with the game masters (the game master is the person who runs the game and all of the characters that the other players meet) to gather further insights into how they build their worlds for play. The research was designed with a “big and small story” approach (e.g., see Oak 2013), where big stories are the types of interaction found in oral history and interview-style research, when narratives of past events are elicited and retold; and small stories are a part of in-the-moment interaction (for debates on narrative methods and big and small stories see: Bamberg 2006; Freeman 2006; Georgakopoulou 2007). Conversational methods used to inform and intersubjectively create a setting for the on-going play of each tabletop roleplaying game are the focus of the analysis that will be presented.

3. Emerging Results

Players use a variety of techniques to communicate game settings. This poster will focus on the analysis of portions of talk where the game master is introducing the players to the game-world, resuming play, or starting a scene. These points in the game contain accounts and descriptions that communicate details of the world as they are needed in the moment. Settings in spoken narratives can be analyzed as emergent (for an example see Ochs & Capps 2001, chapter 4), as details, descriptions, and retellings of events are used to orient players to the world and to continue the collaborative storytelling involved in gameplay. In the course of conversation, intertextual references and internarrativity (concepts from Georgakopoulou 2007, pp. 58–59) and category work (for examples see Housley & Smith 2011, Stokoe 2012) are used to build a sense of place. Examples of players using these methods will be shared on the poster and implications for discursive theories of information practice and behaviour will be discussed.

4. Conclusion

This poster is intended as a way to present examples of on-going analysis of information practices, particularly information sharing, in the context of tabletop roleplaying games. Recordings of talk in natural settings (or near natural, given the presence of the camera) provide the opportunity to closely analyze how information is constructed and exchanged moment-by-moment. It is our hope that the complex examples of multiple and layered methods of constructing a fictional setting presented on this poster will also spark discussion about methods for studying information practices and the social construction of information.

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