

Dungeon & Discourse: Turn-Taking in a Role-Playing Game

Tabletop role-playing games (hereafter TTRPGs) pose a unique situation for discourse analysis. They possess many qualities of a formalized speaking situation, with a single topic that is retained throughout the interaction, someone to lead the course of discussion, and even structured turn-taking in some parts. On the other hand, TTRPGs are largely informal and casual situations, lending them plenty of interruptions and overlap. With respect to structure, they have qualities of both a narrative and a conversation between multiple people. They also utilize a rather unique group mechanic, with multiple interacting static and fluid roles filled by the different participants. This fusion of several conversation styles and features makes TTRPGs a particularly interesting type of interaction to study.

In TTRPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons*, there are two highly different interaction formats in a typical session. The bulk of the interaction takes place in a loosely-structured, free-for-all style, as players communicate with the Dungeon Masters (often referred to as “DMs”) how their characters react to the situation at hand. I will refer to this interactional style as “freeform interaction”, or “FI”. However, when the players enter combat, the interaction style changes into a more strictly structured format, where each player has a set turn in the turn order where they are allowed to communicate what their character does during that round of combat. This interactional style will be referred to as “combat interaction”, or “CI”. Although combat provides a structured method of turn-taking, it also

allows players to more easily split off into sub-groups, as they know exactly when their turn to play will be.

Although there is not a plethora of research into the discourse of role-playing games, most of the existing research analyzes TTRPGs from a content or social perspective, as opposed to a mechanical perspective. In particular, there are quite a few analyses of the structure of narrative and collaboration in a TTRPG setting. For example, Grouling discusses the collaborative creation of narrative, as well as ways in which TTRPGs fit and don't fit into traditional definitions of narrative. Although the narratives of role-playing games are structured in a similar manner to typical narratives, Grouling points out that, unlike traditional narratives, TTRPG narratives are not characterized by a single speaker telling a story. Quite the opposite, TTRPG narratives are composed of numerous utterances from different individuals, a structure more consistent with that of a conversation than a standard narrative.

The distinction between traditional fiction (e.g. novels and movies) and interactive fiction (e.g. TTRPGs) is reliant on the idea that relationship between a Dungeon Master and the players is fundamentally different from the relationship between an author and the audience. Kim points out that a narrative dominated by the DM is actually seen as a flaw. Each participant has the ability to steer the course of the narrative in a different direction; they are not simply a passive audience. In fact, as the DM also experiences the formation of the narrative, they can be seen as a member of the audience rather than just an author (Grouling 2005). Therefore, the both the DM(s) and players are authors and audience. Harviainen goes even further, stating that role-playing games have no true audience, only authors. Hendricks agrees, noting that there must be a "shared vision"

between all participants, as they collaboratively create their game world. Similarly, Hitchens defines a role-playing game's narrative as being constructed by a "continual process of communication and feedback between the participants", each of which affects other participants' future contributions.

For the purposes of this paper, I will make a distinction between interruptions and overlaps. An "interruption" will be a case of simultaneous speech where there is a successful change in speaker. "Overlap" will be a case of simultaneous speech where there is *not* a change in speaker. This is similar to the distinction defined by Sacks et al., though they classify very brief simultaneous speech resulting in speaker switch as an overlap. I will define such a switch at a transition-relevant place as an interruption if the original speaker tries to continue to speak, and as overlap if they do not.

Although tabletop role-playing games are often mechanically compared to their digital equivalents, the distinction between them is readily made from a discourse analysis perspective. While computer RPGs (also referred to as CRPGs) are finite, with a fixed set of possible actions and outcomes, tabletop RPGs are unlimited and infinite in scope (Lindley 2005). Grouling supports this distinction between computer RPG narrative and tabletop RPG narrative, even quoting Gary Gygax, the creator of *Dungeons & Dragons*, stating that CRPGs aren't even RPGs. Due to this, Grouling even claims that it is "irresponsible for scholars not to respect this differentiation [between TTRPGs and CRPGs]". As TTRPGs cannot, as stated earlier, be analyzed in the same manner as traditional stories and narratives, and cannot be analyzed in the same manner as CRPGs, they necessarily have to be thought of as a unique type of discourse.

As research into the discourse of tabletop RPGs typically focuses on the structure and formation of collaboration narrative, I decided to steer clear of that for this paper. Instead, I will focus primarily on the mechanics of turn-taking in a TTRPG setting. In particular, I will look into the prevalence of overlapping and latching, as well as who performs these overlaps and latches. In addition to exploring what types of features arise and when they appear, I will attempt to find the reason *why* such features can be found during these interactions. I have also added a few footnotes to add context to the functional parts of the game, as they might assist in understanding what's going on during the excerpts.

The recordings discussed in this paper are of a single *Dungeons & Dragons* group recorded four times on Fridays in February and April. They vary in length, but are between half an hour and three hours each. Each of the sessions recorded took place in a room in the Link on campus. As there is little else going on in that building on Friday night, the recordings do not include anything not part of the sessions themselves. There are eight members of the group: the two Dungeon Masters, Felix and Jerry, and six players, Chuck, Ren, Otto, Dave, Wendy, and myself. All the participants are either UMW upperclassmen or recent graduates and are in their early twenties. Wendy and Ren are women, while Felix, Jerry, Chuck, Otto, and Dave are men. All of the participants besides Otto are Computer Science majors, Otto being an International Relations major. The participants have all known each other for long periods of time, ranging from roughly nine months to four years. Although the same eight participants can be found in each recording, not all of the participants are present for every recording. In particular, Chuck is missing from the second recording, and Wendy and Otto are missing from the third recording. The

February recording consists only of FI speech, while the April recordings consist of a mixture of FI and CI styles. As all of the recordings analyzed in this paper were of a single *Dungeons & Dragons* group, it would be beneficial in the future to analyze the speech of different groups to see if the features found with this group are group-specific or universal.

In these recordings, there are two static roles the participants are a part of. Felix and Jerry, as the DMs, take on the static role of Dungeon Master. The rest of the participants take on the static player role. Unlike most types of discourse where there are only two fluid conversation roles (e.g. speaker and listener), TTRPGs contain three different roles: Dungeon Master (DM), Active Player (AP), and Inactive Player (IP). In this context, APs are players who are currently interacting with the DM and discussing the actions of their character or who are otherwise leading the conversation. IPs are the players who aren't currently interacting with the DM, instead listening in on the conversation between the DM and AP in order to decide what their character should do next. Due to the nature of the game, players are free to move between the AP and IP roles, while they are unable to access the DM role. DMs, on the other hand, are allowed to move between all three roles, though they typically stay within their own role. Relatedly, as Dungeon Masters have the final say on what does and does not happen in the game, the DM role is the most powerful in the conversation. Active Players have more power than Inactive Players, by virtue of APs being the players who are currently in control. This hierarchy is important from a narrative perspective, as the more powerful a role is, the more relevant to the game and the narrative their utterances become.

Overlap is a major feature in all of the recordings. Though there several reasons for overlap, one of the most common situations where overlap arises is when a player with the IP role attempts to shift into the AP role. For example, in Excerpt 1, Ren is currently an Inactive Player. She tries to shift her role to that of an Active Player by overlapping with Otto. Her attempt at role-switching was a failure, as she failed to gain the attention of one of the DMs, and therefore failed to acquire the AP role:

Excerpt 1

- 1 OTTO: [1it was]
- 2 JERRY: [1you didn't go to hell.]=
- 3 REN: =[2is Nulnach (x)]
- 4 OTTO: [2there was a displacer] beast and like this snake [thing with a head,]
- 5 REN: [are you DM or Nulnach?]
- 6 FELIX: [there was a skeleton snake.]

On the other hand, during the second recording (seen in Excerpt 2), Ren attempts to take the AP role once again by interrupting with Otto. Otto initially concedes to the role-switch, ending his utterance with “b-” and allowing Ren to speak. However, he then fights this by overlapping Ren’s speech. His attempted interruption is unsuccessful, leaving it as just overlap. In the end, Ren manages to take up the AP role when the DM, Jerry, acknowledges her input:

Excerpt 2

- 1 JERRY: yeah and (0.4) y- all you called me earlier was a discount wizard.
- 2 OTTO: well you're still a discount wizard. [b-]
- 3 REN: [hey] are you going to go talk to this lady or not?
- 4 I'm gonna let the [#like the charismatic, (1.0)] bruh go do that.
- 5 OTTO: [they're not mutually exclusive categories].
- 6 JERRY: you said it's a ladder?
- 7 REN: yeah it's a rope ladder.

With no established turn-taking procedure and a strong desire from all participants to take the floor, FI speech is laden with overlapping. In a CI context, however, overlap cannot

give the AP role to a participant. As it is far less useful for role-switching in CI, overlap in combat is largely restricted to side conversations or short interjections.

In addition to the role-switching between Active and Inactive Players, there is a bit of role-switching between the Dungeon Master and Active Player roles. This type of switching can most commonly be found being performed by Jerry. In the group, Jerry serves as one of the two DMs, but he is also responsible for playing a prominent non-player character called Nulnach¹. When he is acting as Nulnach, Jerry's fluid role shifts from that of a Dungeon Master to that of an Active Player, where he is able to interact with Felix as any other Active Player would. In addition, he is able to interact with the other players in a different context than he would while holding the DM fluid role. One such switch can be found in Excerpt 2 above. In line 1, Jerry responds to Otto while acting with the AP role (i.e. in-character as Nulnach). Then, in line 7, he switches to the DM role, as he is clarifying the state of the situation that Ren puts forward (i.e. confirming that Ren's character put up a ladder). At times, the fluid role he is currently utilizing is even ambiguous, which has repercussions in the game and narrative. Such an event is shown in Excerpt 3:

Excerpt 3

- 1 FELIX: [#alright.]
- 2 OTTO: [#alright] people. I literally *went to hell*. (0.8) [there are *zombies*.]
- 3 JERRY: [not quite.] (0.7) you didn't go to hell.=
- 4 OTTO: =and,
- 5 JERRY: I can I- I'll just go ahead and [#tell #you #this #now.]
- 6 OTTO: [th- th-]
- 7 FELIX: [there was a] displacer beast,
- 8 OTTO: [it was]
- 9 JERRY: [you didn't go to hell.]

¹ Note on terminology: a non-player character who is a member of the *Dungeons & Dragons* party and who is typically played by a Dungeon Master is usually referred to as a "DMPC".

If Jerry is currently in the AP role, and his assertion in lines 3 and 9 are in-character as Nulnach, then the information given cannot necessarily be taken as entirely true. That is, it might just be a conclusion Nulnach as a character has come to. However, if Jerry currently fills the DM role, then his assertions *are* necessarily true. Ren attempts to resolve this conflict of roles by asking Jerry the question “are you DM or Nulnach?” as seen in Excerpt 1. Due to this ability for a Dungeon Master to shift into the role of Active Player, the different roles in the interaction are vital to the formation of the narrative in the game.

Side conversations regularly form during the recordings, typically consisting of off-topic speech within a sub-group of participants. In these situations, the structure of conversation temporarily shifts from the standard TTRPG format to one more similar to typical interactions with only two roles: speaker and listener. When these sub-groups form, the prevalence of overlap drops while latching becomes more common. For example, in Excerpt 4, Evan, Jerry, and Otto go off on a tangent about origin of kobolds², a common type of enemy, in *Dungeons & Dragons*:

Excerpt 4

- 1 EVAN: [kobolds] were literally Germanic goblins.=
- 2 JERRY: =Gerald and the Kobolds.=
- 3 OTTO: =<hp>ayy</hp>=
- 4 EVAN: =Jerry and the Kobolds.=
- 5 OTTO: =word f- word f- f- for goblin in German is kobold.
- 6 EVAN: yeah.
- 7 OTTO: it’s wonderful.=
- 8 JERRY: =that’s really funny.=
- 9 EVAN: =yeah th- and then DnD made them the little lizard guys.

² While kobolds are small lizard-like enemies in *Dungeons & Dragons*, they were originally a type of goblin-like creature in Germanic mythology.

In addition to totally off-topic conversation, sub-groups will form to participate in semi-off-topic conversation. I define semi-off-topic conversation as speech which is related to the game being played, though not intended to be taken as an actual part of the collaborative narrative. Excerpt 5, taken from the third recording, gives an example of semi-off-topic conversation:

Excerpt 5

- 1 DAVE: I'm just keeping you, y'know, up to date.=
- 2 EVAN: =right you just li- jus- like directly connected your ears to the brain-o-phone
- 3 so I just hear everything that's going on.=
- 4 DAVE: =@@@
- 5 FELIX: it's like um it's like daytime television for you.=
- 6 EVAN: =right?

Once again, as the participants no longer have to vie for control of the Active Player role, overlap is replaced by latching as the dominant turn-taking feature.

Within sub-group conversations such as the two previously mentioned, it appears that a unique set of sub-roles are created for the duration of the side conversation. While the side conversation is going on, the primary roles of the interaction – Dungeon Master and Active/Inactive Players – are temporarily ignored in favor of the roles created for the sub-group. The static roles for these conversations are Initiator (the participant who introduces the off-topic conversation) and Responder (the participant or participants who join in on the off-topic conversation). The fluid roles are those of a typical conversation: Speaker and Listener. These side conversations are distinct from typical topic shifts in an interaction, as the participants have no intent of permanently changing the topic of conversation. Once the topic of the side conversation has been discussed, the participants shift back to being on-topic, and the primary roles of the discourse return.

Side conversations are quite prevalent during combat sequences. During such interactions, the player who holds the Active Player role is determined by a predetermined order rolled up when combat begins.³ As players are unable to take the Active Player role by overlapping and interrupting other players, the utility of such actions is greatly reduced. On the other hand, the players know exactly when they will be given the AP role, and don't have to worry about not acquiring it due to a lack of verbal boldness. Because of this, the players appear to feel safer splitting off into sub-groups during CI even more so than they do during FI. The side conversations in a CI context also seem to be longer than those during an FI context. For example, for a time during the fourth recording, there were two separate side conversations going on at the same time as Felix and Ren were discussing Ren's move during combat. Excerpt 6 shows a portion of this three-way overlap:

Excerpt 6

- 1 WENDY: [u:m (0.8) get to like,]
- 2 CHUCK: [that wasn't War was it?]
- 3 OTTO: no that was [(xx)]
- 4 WENDY: [u:m]
- 5 OTTO: they're different [people.]
- 6 WENDY: [we actually,]
- 7 EVAN: what day is that?
- 8 OTTO: I'm talking about [(xx).]
- 9 REN: [u:m] I'm gonna use [the second charge,]
- 10 EVAN: [during dead week?]
- 11 WENDY: [yeah during dead week.]
- 12 REN: [on my um,]

In this situation, while Ren and Felix were occupied discussing what Ren's character would do during that round of combat, Evan and Wendy split off into a sub-group, as did Chuck and Otto. Ren is known to take an especially long time on her turns in combat,

³ When players enter combat, they all roll dice. The order in combat is then created by ordering the players and enemies from the highest roll to the lowest roll.

which might be the reason why two separate groups split off during her turn. This suggests that there is a bit of prediction involved in the formation of side conversations, as the participants estimate how long it will be until their turn based on how long the current Active Player typically takes during combat.

Although I've largely been depicting freeform interaction as something of a free-for-all, where only the most verbally assertive are able to take on the role of Active Player, that isn't entirely the case. In *Dungeons & Dragons*, players will often make "skill checks", rolls of the dice added together with their skill points in a skill, in order to see if they successfully perform an action. Normally, skill checks are performed when the player with the AP role attempts to do something. Sometimes, however, a DM will call for a specific skill check from some or all of the players at once. When this happens, the player(s) the DM has told to make the check will roll and report the result of their roll to the DM. Usually, the player whose character passes the check (or the one who rolled highest, if several characters end up passing the check) is immediately granted the Active Player role. Excerpt 7 consists of an example from the second recording. Ren rolls an Insight check⁴ and gets a 12, then Evan and Wendy roll Insight checks as well:

Excerpt 7

- 1 EVAN: I'll do an insight check as well .
- 2 REN: you should do an insight check too:
- 3 WENDY: [I'll do an insight check.]
- 4 REN: [because (xxx)] way [(xx)]
- 5 EVAN: [twe:lve.]
- 6 WENDY: my insight check [wa::s]
- 7 EVAN: [exact same.]
- 8 WENDY: uh twenty. not natural though.
- 9 FELIX: okay. u:m. (2.5) you: (1.0) heard her pause when she gave her name
- 10 and suspect that that's not actually name.
- 11 WENDY: yeah.

⁴ Insight checks are typically rolled when a player wants to find out if an NPC is telling the truth or not.

As Wendy rolled the highest on the Insight check, Felix responds to her instead of Evan and Ren, who also rolled Insight checks. Therefore, due to her rolling the highest, Wendy was given the AP role, while Evan and Ren remained in the IP role. Due to nature of this type of skill check, the game mechanics are able to influence the structure of the game discourse by affecting which participants have which fluid roles.

As an exercise in interactive fiction, the discursive practices used during a TTRPG are able to affect the game mechanics. As only Active Players and Dungeon Masters are able to effect change on the state of the narrative and game, participants must use various strategies to maneuver themselves into the role of Active Player. The narrative will be most significantly shaped by those who are the most assertive in taking the AP role. In addition, during combat interaction and in the event of the previously mentioned skill checks, the game mechanics are actually able to influence the TTRPG discourse. In CI, dice rolls determine the order in which players are given the AP role, and thus determines their ability to participate in the story. With skill checks, the person who rolls the highest is the one who is considered to have performed the action, and is thus also granted the AP role. This synergy between game mechanics and discursive practices makes TTRPG discourse different from any other type of interaction.

In conclusion, the mechanical structure of discourse in a tabletop role-playing game can largely be explained as the interaction of two static roles – Dungeon Master and Player – and three fluid roles – Dungeon Master, Active Player, and Inactive Player. Those with the Dungeon Master static role may switch between the Dungeon Master and Active Player fluid roles, while those with the Player static role may switch between the Active and Inactive Player fluid roles. From this underlying role system arises the turn-

taking system of the game. The distribution of these roles affects and is affected by the discursive strategies of the participants and the mechanics of the game itself. Finally, from the distribution and interaction of these roles, the nature of the collaboration and creation of narrative as discussed by other authors can be clearly seen and understood.

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Appendix
Symbols Used

Meaning	Symbol	Alt. Symbol
Speaker labels	NAME:	
Line numbers	1 NAME: speech 2 PERSON: speech	
Utterances	I don't want that	
Unintelligible	(x) for each syllable	#word (for guesses)
Falling Intonation	.	
Rising Intonation	,	
Question	?	
Emphasis	I don't <i>want</i> that	
Volume	I DON'T WANT THAT	
Pauses (longer than 0.2s)	(0.2)	
Overlap	What about [this] [Well,]	[₁ Matching subscripts] [₁ disambiguate]
False starts	fal- false start	
Latching	=	
Pitch/Voice Quality	<hp>Oh my god!</hp> <lp></lp>	
Laughter	@ for each pulse	(laughter for 5 seconds)
Speed	<fast>What do you</fast> need?	
Lengthening	:	
Nonverbal sounds	<in-breath> <sniff> <coughs> <click>	
Body language	(describe body language)	