

“Table Talk”: Defining Metadiscourse of Analog Games

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ABSTRACT:

This paper discusses the communication in tabletop role-playing games that we call metadiscourse. Prior study of gaming and the act of play prove that the space is inherently social. However, we speculate that, through metadiscourse, the social aspect of the tabletop role-playing game is central to group cohesion and perpetuation of the gaming subculture. Metadiscourse involves conversation not linked to the current game but could be cordial and relational, critical, or completely unrelated to the game. However, it is an informal conversation that would not occur if there was no game. In metadiscourse there are determinations of gaming capital, or elements of value. Participation in metadiscourse allows an individual to feel included in the game and gaming subculture. However, metadiscourse demonstrates a level of gaming capital through situatedness and affordances that can act as a gatekeeping function for individuals.

KEY WORDS:

discourse, game capital, popular culture, sociology, tabletop role-playing games.

Introduction

Discussion is critical for tabletop role-playing games. According to Montola, “as role-playing games are seen as communication constructs, information is the basic building block of the imaginary game world”.¹ As an exercise of collaborative interaction, the discourse among participants becomes a key portion of the act of play, more so than digital games and board games. Several researchers have discussed issues surrounding the discourse that occurs in tabletop role-playing games.² However, there has yet to be an in-depth discussion regarding the structural impacts of communication that occur during a role-playing game session. The act of the role-playing game, as an extension of imagination and ingenuity, brings about a number of social interactions at the table. Because tabletop role-playing is an act of gaming, there is an interactional component that involves the players on at least three levels: (a) the players as game participants, (b) the players as their imaginary characters, and (c) the players as people who are engaged in a social activity with other people. It is the communication associated with this final category, which we refer to as metadiscourse, which will be theorized in this paper.

This theoretical idea builds heavily on the original framework of S. Q. Hendricks who was discussed the nature of discourses at the gaming table, in response to the work of G. A. Fine.³ Ultimately, this takes the discussion begun by J. G. Cover and her expanded con-

1 MONTOLA, M.: The Invisible Rules of Role-Playing: The Social Framework of Role-Playing Process. In *International Journal of Role-Playing*, 2009, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 31.

2 For more information, see: COVER, J. G.: *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2014.; DASHIELL, S.: Hooligans at the Table: The Concept of Male Preserves in Tabletop Role-Playing Games. In *International Journal of Role-Playing*, 2020, Vol. 1, No. 10, p. 26-39.; HENDRICKS, S. Q.: Incorporative Discourse Strategies in Tabletop Fantasy Role-Playing Gaming. In HENDRICKS, S. Q., WINKLER, W. (eds.): *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2006, p. 39-56.

3 See also: HENDRICKS, S. Q.: Incorporative Discourse Strategies in Tabletop Fantasy Role-Playing Gaming. In HENDRICKS, S. Q., WINKLER, W. (eds.): *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2006, p. 39-56.; FINE, G. A.: *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

cept of 'off record speech' to flesh it out and place it more deeply into the social context of the magic circle and socio-structural issues of the gaming subculture. We seek to mesh components of P. Bourdieu's theory of practice with J. P. Gee's ideas about situated meanings and affordances in gaming to illustrate how the 'table talk' that is metadiscourse can seem superficial but serve as a gatekeeping mechanism in the tabletop role-playing subculture.

Background

As M. Consalvo states, "[g]ames are created through the act of gameplay, which is contingent on player acts".⁴ Tabletop roleplaying games serve as collaborative narratives modified by player agency and a structure determined by the game master. A functional way to understand how tabletop role-playing games are formed is through the magic circle, a term coined by J. Huizinga in 1938, and adopted and expanded to game studies by K. Salen and E. Zimmerman.⁵ In contemporary thought, there is a great deal of critique of the concept, but in the translation of imagination into a gamer space, as occurs in *Dungeons & Dragons* and other tabletop role-playing games, the model is apt. Note this interpretation as made by J. Huizinga: "All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the 'consecrated spot' cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e., forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart".⁶

In short, we must understand the distinction between the gaming space created by the efforts of players and the 'real world'. As M. Montola notes, "the idea that play is somehow differentiated from the rest of our social existence seems intuitively necessary for the study of play".⁷ Discourse, then, makes that possible in tabletop role-playing games. According to D. Mackay, "the role-playing game exhibits a narrative, but this narrative does not exist until the actual performance".⁸

Discourse in Games

Discourse is an involved term; it is used in many ways in various disciplines. For the purpose of this research, we use the definition of linguist and games researcher J. P. Gee, who notes discourse as "a sort of 'identity kit' which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so to take on a particular role that others will recognize".⁹ This term is related to another in J. P. Gee's lexicon, social language, or "distinctive styles or varieties of language with which people enact specific

4 CONSALVO, M.: There Is No Magic Circle. In *Games and Culture*, 2009, Vol. 4, No. 4, p. 408.

5 For example, see: SALEN, K., ZIMMERMAN, E.: *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. Boston : MIT Press, 2004.

6 HUIZINGA, J.: *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. New York : Random House, 1946, p. 10.

7 MONTOLA, M.: *On the Edge of the Magic Circle: Understanding Pervasive Games and Role-Playing*. [Dissertation Thesis]. Tampere : University of Tampere, 2012, p. 48.

8 MACKAY, D.: *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art*. Jefferson : McFarland & Company, 2001, p. 50.

9 GEE, J. P.: Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics: Introduction. In *Journal of Education*, 2009, Vol. 171, No.1, p. 7.

socially recognizable identities and actions or activities”.¹⁰ The space of gaming, and particularly tabletop role-playing games, generate a specific type of discourse and social language, one that holds significance due to the significant role of speech acts in tabletop role-playing.

S. Q. Hendricks was one of the first researchers to examine discourse in games.¹¹ In analyzing the work of G. A. Fine, Hendricks discussed the nature of discourse in the fantasy frame, specifically the construction of a shared vision, which he defines as “a set of beliefs and understandings about a fantasy world that are shared among gamers during game play. These beliefs and understandings can refer to physical descriptions of objects and people, cultural norms, environmental effects, components of the fantasy”.¹² S. Q. Hendricks goes on to discuss how players employ discourse around the table: “They are using discourse to create a shared culture or set of beliefs and understandings about the fantasy frame. The sets of beliefs and understandings that are included in each individual’s frame are adjusted based on the discourse, and the intersection of the sets becomes closer to a single intersected fantasy frame that is shared by the participants. This emergent intersecting frame then impacts the actions taken by the gamers through the game, even as it is being developed by the gamers”.¹³

S. Q. Hendricks theorized that players and game masters can move effortlessly through the game world and the real world discursively. In doing this, participants can employ pop culture references, or information outside the role-playing world. Hendricks, however, saw this as purposeful in terms of game realism, as “it strengthens the fantasy frame by creating an avenue by which a gamer can access the fantasy frame and allowing other players to elaborate on the fantasy frame so as to continue to narrow its possible variations”.¹⁴ Thus, S. Q. Hendricks understood the value of pop culture references not so much as social connection but emboldening the magic circle.

T. Fuist, in his consideration of an agentic imagination surrounding tabletop role-playing games, sees discourse as part of the binding ritual that links players together in a collective identity of gamers. “Someone who knows the jargon from books [...] understands the references in gaming narratives [...] and participates in the rituals [...] is able to understand and communicate effectively via the collective identity of role-playing”.¹⁵ T. Fuist recognizes the importance in the ability to communicate one’s ability to recognize and participate in these rituals, and the discourses he describes occur in a liminal space between the game and the player. T. Fuist’s interpretation of agentic play begins a conversation regarding specific communication as demonstrative of belonging. One cannot only interact with others at the gaming table, but using this shared language specific to the subculture, the player demonstrates they belong and have what T. Fuist relates as connectivity.

J. G. Cover designed a complex framework of the nature of narrative and discussion in the role-playing game, making a distinction between what she labels as high and low narrative.¹⁶ At the social level of high narrative J. G. Cover discussed what she refers to as off record speech: “[...] off-record speech, which contributes the least to the narrative and is often everyday talk rather than part of the narrative. Off-record speech shows the players reacting

10 GEE, J. P.: Discourse Versus Discourse. In CHAPELLE, C. A. (ed.): *The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics*. Hoboken : John Wiley & Sons, 2012, p. 1961.

11 For more information, see: HENDRICKS, S. Q.: Incorporative Discourse Strategies in Tabletop Fantasy Role-Playing Gaming. In HENDRICKS, S. Q., WINKLER, W. (eds.): *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games*. Jefferson : McFarland, 2006, p. 39-56.

12 Ibidem, p. 42.

13 Ibidem, p. 43.

14 Ibidem, p. 50.

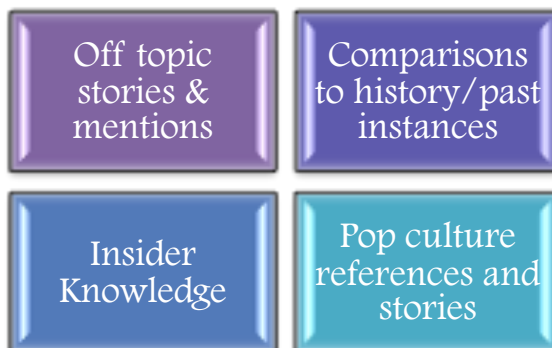
15 FUIST, T.: The Agentic Imagination: Tabletop Role Playing Games as a Cultural Tool. In TORNER, E., WHITE, W. (eds.): *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing*. Jefferson : McFarland, 2012, p. 112.

16 See also: COVER, J. G.: *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*. Jefferson : McFarland, 2014.

to the story as an audience by relating events to other cultural texts or making jokes about the actions and characters in the story [...]. Off-record speech may or may not be related to the game and narrative frames, but is clearly a part of the social frame [...]. While these pop culture references may actually add to the immersion in the storyworld by allowing players a common reference point, they can also branch into tangents that have little to do with anything other than maintaining the social atmosphere".¹⁷ This interpretation by J. G. Cover is important because it repurposes off record speech in a way different than S. Q. Hendricks' assessment of popular culture references. Moreover, off record speech reinforces social connectedness, in that it involves humour and pop culture references to invite individuals into the discussion. J. G. Cover's work begins a discussion on the place of this style of communication, which she notes as indicative, but does not deeply engage with how important it is.

Metadiscourse

Metadiscourse is best described as communication between players that is not critical to the game but would not occur if not for the gaming scenario. Unlike the two other types of communication, we mentioned above, metadiscourse is less related to game mechanics and speaks more to social connections between individuals. The concept of metadiscourse is highly related to what K. Bergström refers to as *non-diegetic non-activity related pose*, which "in most sessions is considered a disruption", while "in more casual sessions it is seen as a common feature".¹⁸ We would argue while metadiscourse pulls away from the game or story, it is not disruptive but natural to the social language that occurs at the gaming time. Though the other types of communication operate on a stratification system enforced by the game (player and game master), metadiscourse assumes equanimity between all who participate in the game. However, as we will discuss, effective metadiscourse is linked to a cultural capital, and if individuals have less knowledge of the game system, cultural artifacts in the subculture, and weaker social bonds, they will have less involvement in metadiscourse, which could have impacts that bleed into other communication patterns that occur at the table. As discussed by S. Q. Hendricks, T. Fuist, and J. G. Cover, what makes up metadiscourse can manifest itself in gaming situations in a number of different ways (Picture 1).



Picture 1: Metadiscourse topics

Source: own processing

17 COVER, J. G.: *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*. Jefferson : McFarland, 2014, p. 97.

18 BERGSTRÖM, K: Framing Storytelling with Games. In MEI, S. et al. (eds.): *International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling*. Heidelberg : Springer, 2011, p. 176.

While pop culture references are indeed a part of metadiscourse, there are other notable components. First, metadiscourse can involve off topic stories, which have little to do with the game or game system but might centre on the people at the table. This type of conversation, an across the table small talk, if you will, strengthens primary relationships while affirming the social nature of the game. This type of discourse can also be a valuable 'mood lightener' when there is a rules dispute that involves only a portion of the gaming group. Second, individuals at the table can engage in discussions of past actions and circumstances that might be like the current one. While this type of discourse is indeed about the game, it is no doubt unrelated to the current scenario, and speaks to a conversation between players with a shared history, rather than characters. Similar to off-topic stories, this type of metadiscourse has a direct function of strengthening social bonds, while denoting a level of gaming experience. Third is pop culture knowledge, which discusses references to television shows, movies, characters, and other cultural artifacts that have value in the gaming subculture. Knowing references to movies such as *The Princess Bride*¹⁹, for example, and using those in comedic ways to reference game situations displays this form of metadiscourse. The last type of metadiscourse involves what we call insider knowledge, or information pertaining to tabletop role-playing subculture, such as information about conventions, sourcebook releases, etc. While this is off topic, it is specific to gaming knowledge, and serves a purpose of demonstrating how embedded an individual may be inside the subculture.

What all these forms of metadiscourse have in common is an underlying ability to bestow cultural capital onto the individual who employs them. As coined by P. Bourdieu, capital is "accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its 'incorporated', embodied form) which, when appropriated [...] by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor".²⁰ More specifically, cultural capital "refers to specific repertoires of knowledge, tastes, dispositions and objects of desire that individuals within particular social spaces perceive and employ for status accumulation".²¹ While P. Bourdieu notes three different forms that might exist, embodied (knowledges and mannerisms), objectified (items and things), and institutional (credentials), as a form of communication in the gaming subculture, metadiscourse only represents the embodied state. We would argue that metadiscourse can reflect fields of knowledge and familiarity that would commonly be available if one were firmly ensconced in the gamer subculture, and this membership can be transmitted through metadiscourse, as an indicator of one's embodied cultural capital.

Metadiscourse can be more deeply understood as a manifestation of capital given its importance to the game. While J. G. Cover saw off record speech, as she called it, as something ancillary to the actual game, she still recognized its importance. "Off-record speech is least likely to affect the narrative; this is particularly true of off-record speech that serves only as a bond within the social sphere. Yet, if this social sphere collapses, so does the narrative sphere".²² Thereby, gaming must be understood as a social space, and metadiscourse serves an important function of social connectivity. But there is caution about importance of the social situation at any game table, as it forms its own microculture. M. Montola reminds us that "[t]he goals of the social level vary immensely from one gaming culture to another".²³ What one seeks to gain from the social connections at the table can be wide and varied. However, general norms involving an enjoyable, cohesive game with little meaningless conflict could be understood as somewhat universal, and metadiscourse helps to make this possible.

19 REINER, R. (Director): *The Princess Bride (20th Anniversary Edition)*. [DVD]. Burbank : Warner Home Video, 2007.

20 BOURDIEU, P.: The Forms of Capital. In RICHARDSON, J. (ed.): *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. New York : Greenwood, 1986, p. 241.

21 BRIDGES, T. S.: Gender Capital and Male Bodybuilders. In *Body & Society*, 2009, Vol. 15, No. 1, p. 89.

22 COVER, J. G.: *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*. Jefferson : McFarland, 2014, p. 105.

23 MONTOLA, M.: The Invisible Rules of Role-Playing: The Social Framework of Role-Playing Process. In *International Journal of Role-Playing*, 2009, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 26.

Situatedness and Affordances of Metadiscourse

As K. Bergström discussed concerns of the potentially disruptive and derivative nature of what this paper considers metadiscourse, a way to demonstrate the value of the interaction is to highlight the situatedness of metadiscourse in terms of the gaming subculture. Situatedness in games speaks to how individuals frame their shared practices in the social world. As S. Gherardi notes, “we can say that people share a practice if their actions are appropriately regarded as answerable to norms of correct or incorrect practice, to criteria of aesthetics taste, and to standards of fairness”.²⁴ S. Lammes points out, in terms of gaming subculture, “situatedness enables an approach in which games are seen as an outcome of local cultural practices”.²⁵

J. P. Gee in his research on the discourse of games expanded on the concept of *situatedness*, linking it to *affordances*. For him, “[s]ituated meanings are determined by what speakers/writers and listeners/readers take as relevant aspects of context. Situated meanings are also determined by shared cultural knowledge”.²⁶ Situated meanings speaks to a notion of applied relevance of a topic based on cultural applicability. Thereby, while popular movies, television shows, and game systems are brought up around the table, it is understood due to its appropriateness to the circumstance. Metadiscourse requires an ability to ‘read the group’ to understand what could be seen as appropriate in terms of off-topic references that will not disrupt the magic circle.

Moreover, a reference needs to be understood by the majority of the table. While it may seem like an individual practicing metadiscourse is gambling with the possibility of situatedness in any scenario, the more invested an individual is in the subculture, the greater the likelihood of the appropriateness of a comment. This awareness is more important given that a metadiscourse that is not situated could threaten the magic circle and result in negative sanctions from players or the game master. At its core, as S. Lammes notes, “situatedness is closely linked to what games are in essence about”, as “situatedness secures that the local embodiment that is part of every game is put on the agenda”.²⁷ A game is as much about its players and their shared experiences as an expression of culture, as it is about the game that is played.

With affordances, J. P. Gee is discussing “what things are good for, based on what a user can do with them”.²⁸ He explains his idea of affordance more deeply: “In conversations with others, the other is the ‘world’ we are probing and we are in turn the other’s world, since the other has goals as well when they respond to us and take their turn at talk. In conversations with others we seek affordances in their talk, attributes, abilities, desires, skills, character, and language resources for which we have the necessary effective abilities to use (yes, sometimes, manipulate) for our purposes (goals)”.²⁹ J. Linderoth notes

24 GHERARDI, S.: Situated Knowledge and Situated Action: What Do Practice-Based Studies Promise?. In BARRY, D., HANSEN, H. (eds.): *The Sage Handbook in New Approaches to Management and Organization*. New York : Sage, 2008, p. 523.

25 LAMMES, S.: Approaching Game-Studies: Towards a Reflexive Methodology of Games as Situated Cultures. In BABA, A. (ed.): *Proceedings of the 2007 DiGRA International Conference: Situated Play*. Tokyo : DiGRA, 2007, p. 29.

26 GEE, J. P.: Discourse Analysis of Games. In JONES, R., CHICK, A., HAFNER, C. (eds.): *Discourse and Digital Practices: Doing Discourse Analysis in the Digital Age*. London : Routledge, 2015, p. 22.

27 LAMMES, S.: Approaching Game-Studies: Towards a Reflexive Methodology of Games as Situated Cultures. In BABA, A. (ed.): *Proceedings of the 2007 DiGRA International Conference: Situated Play*. Tokyo : DiGRA, 2007, p. 29.

28 GEE, J. P.: Discourse Analysis of Games. In JONES, R., CHICK, A., HAFNER, C. (eds.): *Discourse and Digital Practices: Doing Discourse Analysis in the Digital Age*. London : Routledge, 2015, p. 24.

29 Ibidem, p. 26.

that affordances are “affected by the use of tools”, as tools “become an extension of our bodies, and we can do things we could not do without them”.³⁰ Discourse, particularly at the gaming table, can be viewed as much as a tool as dice, paper, or laptops, given conversation can impact the agency and effectiveness of the participant.

In a conversation there is an assessment of what can be gained, and language becomes the vehicle, or tool, towards any possible gain. In terms of metadiscourse, there are affordances in the participation of topical discussion that is tangentially related to the game. Knowledge about pop culture, upcoming conferences, and the game industry inform about how involved one is in the gaming subculture, and how there might be the possibility for deeper conversation that extends beyond the game. If someone has no knowledge of these things, then they are not useful as a subculture member. It is important to note that someone could still be useful in the game, but someone who lacks the knowledge expressed in metadiscourse is assumed to be uninformed in matters of the gaming world, and then, by extension, unfamiliar with deeper intricacies of the game.

Thereby, while K. Bergström, G. A. Fine, and J. G. Cover saw metadiscourse as superficial and at times disruptive, we argue that the situatedness and affordances that are the result of engagement in metadiscourse are valuable. It is not only what one communicates in metadiscourse that cements one place in the microculture of the table. The ability to engage affirms that the discussant has certain amount of knowledges – about the game, about popular culture, and gaming as a larger and vibrant subculture. While the nature of metadiscourse may seem to take away from the game, it does the opposite. It demonstrates that a player is sufficiently knowledgeable about the gaming world and has adapted enough of the practices that are appreciated in gaming to communicate that the player understands what is valuable in the social space of the table, employing the social language embedded in metadiscourse to make this known.

Gamer Capital and Metadiscourse

As a reflection of cultural capital, metadiscourse echoes an important function at the table. While not key to the actual game, metadiscourse, as an exemplification of the social interaction that is adjacent to the game, reinforces components of what is prized in gamer subculture. As discussed before, metadiscourse can reflect an embodied cultural capital, demonstrating a command over knowledges and conversations that are valued in the gamer scenario. Metadiscourse can be seen to reinforce a gamer capital, identified by M. Consalvo as “a way to discuss the role knowledge, experience and skill have both for an individual, but also for the larger cultural and economical system that surrounds digital games”.³¹ H. L. Mello notes a player must “acquire social capital specific to the subculture, the ‘social norms and skills, social networks, gaming lore and knowledge’”.³² All of these are reinforced by the cultural capital of discourse, giving players the ability to express this knowledge in an unobtrusive way, with valuable knowledge and command of structural knowledge embedded in talk unrelated to the game. Moreover, there is a positive relationship between social

30 LINDEROTH, J.: Why Gamers Don't Learn More: An Ecological Approach to Games as Learning Environments. In *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds*, 2012, Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 51.

31 MÄYRÄ, F.: Gaming Culture at the Boundaries of Play. In *Game Studies*, 2010, Vol. 10, No.1. [online]. [2021-07-05]. Available at: <<http://gamestudies.org/1001/articles/mayra>>.

32 MELLO, H. L.: Invoking the Avatar: Gaming Skills as Cultural and Out-of-Game Capital. In HENDRICKS, S. Q., WINKLER, W. (eds.): *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games*. Jefferson : McFarland, 2006, p. 178.

connections and this gamer cultural capital. The only way one can gain greater knowledge and skill is through participation, and effective participation requires the social connections that are provided by metadiscourse.

Additionally, the conversations that form metadiscourse are, indirectly, impacting game capital given their occurrence at the gamer table. As S. M. Ortiz notes, the central element of game culture “is not about playing games, or even playing them well, but rather about knowledges...and the ability to share this information with other”.³³ The connections forged between players, those who can freely engage in metadiscourse, hold the possibility of transference to other aspects of the game and wider subculture. A player with wider knowledge of inside jokes and game-related canon, as demonstrated through metadiscourse, might influence one player to have their character connect to another. Metadiscourse could be understood, then, as what F. Mäyrä sees as “the more invisible aspects of cultural bonds, including language, ritual and thought patterns”.³⁴ These aspects of capital aren't easily visualized or transmitted, but it becomes evident when they aren't present. An individual who is unskilled or nonparticipatory in metadiscourse is likely to have a tenuous relationship with the gaming subculture; both at the table, and more generally. It is fair to say metadiscourse helps to reinforce the social order in the gamer subculture, helping to mark the difference between the experienced gamer and the 'noob' who cannot employ cultural capital and has weak social networks at the table.

It is important to note that metadiscourse has the ability of being transgressive and disruptive to play. There are times when the elements of metadiscourse are not helpful (or to be clear, capital-building), but are in fact an impediment. Thereby, during those times the game master is attempting to build the scene or there is a deep discussion about rules occurring, metadiscourse could be read as inappropriate. Being able to interpret when the different types of communication are necessary highlights an almost covert prestige in in gaming table discourse – a realization of when these seemingly informal conversations are appropriate versus disruptive.³⁵

Gatekeeping Aspects of Metadiscourse

Beyond the structural function of metadiscourse in terms of gamer capital, there are other outcroppings based on the participation in this or any type of social interaction at the gamer table. S. Dashiell notes, “the discourse at the table discusses a world of fantasy, and as such, individuals may feel certain liberties and freedoms are afforded their characters regarding actions that might be deviant in the contemporary social world. However, considering there are multiple types of conversation occurring at the game table, these liberties may bleed into other discourses”.³⁶ Metadiscourse is a blurry space between the imagined game world and the 'real' world and can then borrow on qualities from both. Like J. Stenros' interpretation of the magic circle, metadiscourse operates in “a special space with a porous boundary

33 ORTIZ, S. M.: The Meanings of Racist and Sexist Trash Talk for Men of Color: A Cultural Sociological Approach to Studying Gaming Culture. In *New Media & Society*, 2019, Vol. 21, No. 4, p. 881.

34 MÄYRÄ, F.: Gaming Culture at the Boundaries of Play. In *Game Studies*, 2010, Vol. 10, No.1. [online]. [2021-07-05]. Available at: <<http://gamestudies.org/1001/articles/mayra>>.

35 LABOV, W.: *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1966, p. 40-57.

36 DASHIELL, S.: Hooligans at the Table: The Concept of Male Preserves in Tabletop Role-Playing Games. In *International Journal of Role-Playing*, 2020, Vol. 1, No. 10, p. 35.

is created though social negotiation [...]. It is also clearly separated from the mindset of the participant and the rules of a pre-existing arena".³⁷ As such, the norms and values that frown upon circumstances of sexist or racist discourse may occur in spaces of metadiscourse, given a belief that such concerns do not exist in the same fashion in the imagined game world.

The space of flipped norms can be disconcerting, notably for women, gamers of colour and sexual minority gamers. As E. Vossen notes, "we see a model where deviant behavior has been reversed and those of us drawing attention to sexism and racism within games and games culture are the ones that are considered deviant and disruptive to the established magic circle".³⁸ As gamer culture operates as a male preserve, there exists the likelihood of a more hooliganish style of discourse at the table. Thereby, it is possible for metadiscourse to be peppered with sexist, racist, or misogynist jokes as much as it can be pop culture references or more innocuous discussion. To call those issues out would be deemed as taking the conversation, and game, as 'too serious' or 'out of context'. Further, to be critical of this metadiscourse would hinder one's gamer capital.

K. Gray asserts that in gamer culture, "behaviors are identified as bad, undesirable, or unacceptable on the basis of rules made by those in positions of power".³⁹ As discussed before, holding power is not about being the game master or even an older player, but maintaining and asserting more game capital as a complex form of cultural capital. While this can be done at the table through discursive efforts such as rules lawyering, metadiscourse serves as another means of power demonstration.⁴⁰ Minority players are, then, provided three options when dealing with metadiscourse that could be offensive - leave the table, take no notice, or participate. This loaded choice serves as a gatekeeping method for a number of individuals who play, compounding how serious metadiscourse is.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have expanded on the ideas of J. G. Cover's original idea of off topic talk to develop the concept of metadiscourse. We discussed how the conversation, while seeming unrelated to the act of gameplay, is integral to the social connections of the table, and the affirmation of the magic circle. Additionally, we discuss how metadiscourse has elements of discursive power, offering affordances and to individuals who participate. Metadiscourse represents a form of cultural capital at the gaming table. Lastly, we discussed the implications of metadiscourse in terms of the broader gamer capital, and how it is used to reinforce power systems in the gaming subculture.

Both S. Q. Hendricks and J. G. Cover had early discussions about metadiscourse, with both seeing it as integral to the magic circle but in different ways. According to S. Q. Hendricks, what he calls pop culture references help to strengthen the magic circle through enhancing the fantasy elements of the game. J. G. Cover argues that off record speech supports the magic circle by encouraging social connectedness; people want to stay in the game because of the interactions. My interpretation of the more complex idea of metadiscourse

37 STENROS, J.: In Defence of a Magic Circle: The Social, Mental and Cultural Boundaries of Play. In *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association*, 2014, Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 176.

38 VOSSEN, E.: The Magic Circle and Consent in Gaming Practices. In GRAY, K., VORHEES, G., VOSSEN, E. (eds.): *Feminism in Play*. London : Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 214.

39 GRAY, K. L.: *Race, Gender, and Deviance in Xbox live: Theoretical Perspectives from the Virtual Margins*. London : Routledge, 2014, p. 36.

40 See: DASHIELL, S.: Rules Lawyering as Linguistic and Symbolic Capital. In *Analog Game Studies*, 2017, Vol. 4, No. 5. [online]. [2021-07-05]. Available at: <<https://analoggamestudies.org/2017/11/rules-lawyering-as-symbolic-and-linguistic-capital/>>.

acknowledges a purposeful role in the maintenance of the magic circle but expands out to the social connections and capital that exist in the subculture away from the gaming table.

Metadiscourse on its surface appears to be a very light, diversion-oriented style of discourse that would happen in the space of gaming, but it disguises its impact well. Within the act of engaging is a measure of cultural capital, which we discuss is highly related to gamer capital. Moreover, topical information involved in metadiscourse, and mechanisms of delivery, are recognizably more permissible from 'stereotypical' gamers – those who are white, male and heterosexual. It is then possible metadiscourse has a gatekeeping function, as the discourse might be scrutinized when it comes from diverse populations. Given the affordances of metadiscourse are inexorably linked to one's identity and interpretations of situated meanings, some populations could be at a natural disadvantage in their efforts to engage. This is what separates my interpretation of metadiscourse from previous works; metadiscourse implicitly reinforces the hierarchies of the subculture by serving as a form of gaming capital.

T. Fuist reminds us tabletop role-playing games “represent one of the few ways in which social groups come together to weave meaningful narratives through unfolding social interaction, allowing for the multi-directional processes of imagining into the shared imagined spaces and then imagining out into the larger gaming community or other fields within the real world”.⁴¹ In a gaming scenario where discourse and communication are key elements of gameplay, no conversation is without value. More than that, it is the conversations that seem the most trivial that might hide the power that results from social connections at the game table. Metadiscourse has a pervasive impact, which might be interpreted as negative, because it is reflective of hegemonic and patriarchal ideas that dominate the overarching social structure. However, metadiscourse more than anything is an expression of the formation of interactional bonds between people, and how homogeneity manifests itself in the gaming space. A singular game, or a gaming campaign, is and of itself a social event. However, we must understand it merely as one piece of a puzzle in a more complex set of social practices in the gaming subculture. It is true that not all people are engaged or invested in tabletop role-playing subculture at the same level, but participation does mark a tacit level of inclusion. Metadiscourse exists as one marker that can embolden and inhibit how much any individual is involved in the tabletop gaming world; the easier metadiscourse is for an individual, the more gamer capital individuals can take to places other than the singular gaming table.

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