

Preparing a Tabletop Role-Playing Game Experiment: Methodological Notes for Studying the Immersion of Tabletop Role-Playing Game Participants

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ABSTRACT:

The study aims to contribute to the research that seeks a better understanding of the language of tabletop role-playing games through the analysis of video recordings of game sessions. In the autumn of 2021, the Tabletop Role-playing Game Research Group at the Department of Communication and Media Studies of the University of Debrecen performed an experiment, the aim of which was to analyse the communication of role-playing participants through video recordings. During the experiment, the research team recorded 38 hours and 47 minutes of video footage of the games played by participants with no previous role-playing experience; a text transcript was made of the recordings, in which different types of utterances were marked with colour codes. In this study, we present the preparation and execution of the experiment, paying special attention to preliminary proposals for similar experiments in the future. The experiment served as a basis of a subsequent quantitative and qualitative analysis, the purpose of which was to make the role-play participants' immersion the subject of a closer examination. It is important to emphasise that this study does not discuss the results of the analysis due to the partial processing of the video recordings. However, it scrutinises the methodological possibility of examining the immersive experience of role-players through their communication.

KEY WORDS:

ergodic media text, focus group discussions, immersion, language, speech type categories, tabletop role-playing game, team psychological safety, video recording.

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Introduction

The scientific study of tabletop role-playing games (hereinafter referred to as TTRPGs) goes back four decades. As early as 1983, Fine's (1983) pioneering work, the *Shared fantasy – Role-playing games as social worlds* laid out the methods by which this interactive media text can be subjected to social scientific investigation. Following Fine's (1983) research, three distinct paradigms for the analysis of TTRPGs have emerged over the past decades: 1) examination of written documents related to TTRPG (rulebooks, fanzines, novels, etc.); 2) examination of TTRPGs through interviews with the participants of the game; 3) examining TTRPGs as a participant observer (either as a player or as a game master). Just as Fine combined these methods in his research, there are also studies today that mix these approaches. A good example of this is the work of Dormans (2006), focussing on the rules of TTRPGs:

In this article I will examine the gaming element of roleplaying; I will try to expose the role played by dice in these games. In doing this I have drawn on the study of existing texts on roleplaying, the rule-set and descriptions of published roleplaying games, lengthy interviews I conducted with players from different groups and my own experience as a player of these games. (Dormans, 2006, para. 2)

However, it is more typical that authors choose one of these three methods during their research. What these methods have in common is that they do not examine the TTRPG

as an ergodic media text (Aarseth, 1997), but instead they analyse the role-playing culture through intermediary channels. A tabletop role-playing session, similar to a theatre performance, is unrepeatable and not accessible to analysis like a film, book, or comic book. At the same time, in recent years there have been studies that attempted to preserve the unfolding games for later analysis by making video recordings. For example, de los Angeles (2016) based his research on live action role-playing games documented with “point of view (POV) and handheld cameras” (p. 22). This study presents an experiment using a similar method. Its purpose is to present preliminary proposals for similar experiments in the future.

The Tabletop Role-playing Game Research Group at the Department of Communication and Media Studies of the University of Debrecen conducted an experiment in the autumn of 2021. During the experiment, video footage of the university students participating in TTRPGs was recorded, and transcripts were made of these video recordings. From the data collected, the research group set a number of speech type categories based on the transcripts with the aim of analysing the immersion of the participants. In this paper, we present a description of the preparation phase, of how the experiment was conducted and the main methodological considerations of the experiment in addition to the speech type categories that we found typical of the verbal communication of the participants. It is important to emphasise that this paper – due to the partial processing of the experimental material – does not yet discuss the insights gained during the research about the immersion of new role-playing participants.

In the following, we will rely on the work of Zagal and Deterding (2018) to define TTRPGs. In their review of various types of role-playing games, they define the prototypical TTRPG as follows:

- A group of players sits face-to-face around a table to play together (co-located and synchronous);
- Players create, enact, and govern the actions of individual characters in a fictional game world;
- A referee determines the game world, manages and communicates it to the players, and enacts all NPCs;
- Players and referee collaborate towards a shared enjoyable experience;
- The game world, including PCs and NPCs and their actions, are constituted by talk between referee and players, often with supporting props, like character sheets, miniatures, rule books, or maps;
- The game world is usually some form of genre fiction: fantasy, science fiction, horror, etc. or a mixture thereof;
- Attempted PC actions are limited by the imagination of players;
- The abilities of characters and the outcomes of their actions are usually determined by a quantitative-probabilistic rule system, with extensive rules for combat resolution;
- The game is open-ended and can be played over multiple sessions;
- In-game events may be guided along a pre-planned plot through the design of the game world and referee steering or emerge from player initiative;
- Player characters improve over time via systems for progression. (Zagal & Deterding, 2018, p. 31)

From the point of view of the research, the most important part of this detailed definition is the fifth criterion, which considers verbal communication as an essential element of a TTRPG.¹ This aspect of TTRPGs is highlighted by other definitions, Montola (2008), for example, puts it this way: “In tabletop role-playing the game world is defined predominantly

1 Remark by the author: Although there are border areas of TTRPGs without verbal communication (card or text message driven, silent or solo TTRPGs), the prototypical TTRPG is based on verbal communication.

in verbal communication” (p. 24). Although it is possible to imagine a TTRPG where the participants rely exclusively on non-verbal communication, in the fifty-year history of modern role-playing games, the game has been primarily organised around verbal communication. Our research aimed at a better understanding of this special communication situation, as well as whether players’ immersion into character can be examined through their utterances.

TTRPG and Immersion

Although recipients of any media text, such as books, movies or comics, can experience immersion, the concept has a privileged position in understanding games – especially TTRPGs. Some researchers consider immersion to be the most essential part and primary goal of role-playing games (Pohjola, 2003; Fine, 1983). While theorists on the subject agree that immersion is a common experience of TTRPGs, the perception of the concept has changed a lot in the last four decades. In the following, we summarise the different approaches and the most controversial areas of the topic, also presenting the model used during the research.

Game reviews (whether about board games, video games or TTRPGs) tend to refer to the state of consciousness experienced during the game overall as immersive. However, it is important to emphasise – and we founded the experiment on this assumption – that games can trigger several types and degrees of immersion depending on their subject matter, game mechanics, goals and components. In recent decades various models have spread, on the one hand, about the extent of immersion, and on the other hand about its quality. Regarding the extent, we find more general divisions, but also taxonomies developed specifically for each type of immersion. For example, Brown and Cairns (2004), distinguish three levels of immersion: *engagement* (“the lowest level of involvement with a game and must occur before any other level”), *engrossment* (“when game features combine in such a way that the gamers’ emotions are directly affected by the game”) and *total immersion* (“at this point in the scale of immersion the game is the only thing that impacts the gamer’s thoughts and feelings”) (p. 1297-1300). Turkington (2006) illustrates immersion into character by using a theatrical metaphor, and distinguishes four levels:

As a marionette, where the player does not inhabit the object, but dances it through the fiction with a directed will ... As a puppet, the player inhabits the object only partially, all decisions are unmitigated by the puppet ... As a mask, the player maintains a distinct identity within the character object, but has established an emotional, often empathic connection with the object ... As a possessing force, the player abandons a personal identity and surrenders to the character object as a goal of play in order to directly, experience the full subjective reality of the character. (Turkington, 2006, paras. 5-8)

Similar descriptions can be found when differentiating between various aspects of immersion too. Therrien (2014), for example, follows Ermi and Mäyrä (2005) in distinguishing three types of immersion: *sensory*, *challenge-based* and *imaginative*. The first type is related to the number of attached sensory organs and the extent of their occupation; the second can be related to the flow experience described by Csíkszentmihályi (1975): its essence lies in optimised challenges; and the third represents the feeling that the recipient experiences by ‘transporting’ into an imagined world. Another popular theory by Bowman (2018) adapted and applied Calleja’s (2011) immersion model to role-playing games, distinguishing between six types of immersion: immersion into activity, immersion

into game, immersion into environment, immersion into narrative, immersion into character and immersion into community. This approach is characterised by a high degree of media awareness, considering the specificities of the TTRPG medium; in addition to the types of immersion, it also takes those factors into account that are responsible for triggering it – therefore, we chose this model to study immersion during the experiment.

Bowman's (2018) categories not only describe types of immersion, but also direct attention to the game components responsible for triggering different kinds of immersions. Although it may seem self-evident that a speech containing in-game events elaborated in detail and effectively presented by the game master can help the participants immerse themselves into the narrative, or that printed and digital maps can be responsible for immersion into environment, in fact – since the various immersions overlap during a game session – a single game component can be suitable for triggering several types of immersion.

During the experiment conducted in the autumn of 2021, we based the examination of player immersion on the insight that the immersion of the participants into character can be closely related to their verbal communication during the game. In order to experience immersion into character during TTRPGs, it is necessary for the players to identify themselves as much as possible with the character played in the diegetic world. The identification is presumably manifested in the player's verbal communication. Based on the analysis of the text transcripts made from the recordings of the game occasions, we determined eight types of speech of the participants, of which we identified in-character utterances as signs of immersion into character. During the analysis, we focused on whether there was a change in the participants' speaking in character during one game, as well as during successive games. We were also interested in which game components could help the participants speak in character. In the focus group discussions that followed the experiment, the participants reported that they had also experienced other types of immersion during gaming sessions in addition to immersion into character (e.g. immersion into narrative, into game or into community), however, we did not see their verbal communication as suitable for their identification, so we did not examine them. For similar reasons, we rejected the examination of the degree of immersion among the participants.

Preparation of the Research

The primary goal of the research was to examine whether the players' immersion into character can be analysed through the verbal communication of participants with no previous primary TTRPG experience during the game. We also paid special attention to whether it is possible to identify game elements that are more suitable than others to induce immersion into character.

The experiment conducted for the purpose of the research consisted of four stages: 1) selecting the students participating in the experiment, 2) preparing the selected students for the experiment, 3) conducting TTRPG sessions, 4) and finally, a short discussion of the players' experiences in focus groups after the last experimental session. We recorded audio and video footage of the second, third and fourth experimental stages for subsequent analysis.

Before the game sessions, we considered the environmental factors that could make immersion into character difficult and during the designing phase of the experiment, we tried to reduce them. In TTRPGs, players can identify with an imagined character and, to a greater or lesser extent, shape the chosen character through their behaviour during the game.

In some groups the players may actually stay “in character” during the whole session: they act and speak like their characters the whole time, sometimes even changing their voices, adopting fake accents and wearing costumes. Most groups mix “in-character” and “out-of-character” conversation, seamlessly switching from one mode to the other, or staying “out of character” the whole time. (Dormans, 2006, para. 12)

Shaping the character is a form of behaviour different from the everyday attitude of the players – many environmental elements can help or hinder the realisation of this. One of the biggest obstacles can certainly be the feeling of alienation. In order to reduce this, when preparing the experiment, we strove to create an environment as homely as possible for the participants. The goal was to achieve a state of team psychological safety, which – according to Edmondson (1999) – “is defined as a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking” (p. 354).

Although, prior to conducting the experiment, informal discussions with the students of the Communication and Media Studies master program made it clear that another experiment could also be implemented in which we would involve students with more tabletop role-playing experience, ultimately we decided to design the experiment for participants with no prior tabletop role-playing experience. We based our decision on the assumption that, for routine players, a media environment different from the usual one – mainly the constant presence of a camera, microphone and research assistant – would have a stronger influence on their verbal and non-verbal communication than in the case of new players. Routine players associate the experience of tabletop role-playing primarily with a closed, private space, which – as Huizinga (1949) put it – functions as a kind of “magic circle”, “the consciousness that it is ‘different’ from ‘ordinary life’” (p. 28). The transformation of this private space can strongly influence their behaviour.

Role-playing language is different from everyday language, because the worlds created in role-play are not merely a reflection or extension of everyday life; they are fictional. The essence of role-playing lies in the endeavour to be someone else, and/or at another place, and/or at another time, and quite often that necessitates a simulation of a world very different from the everyday one. (Ilieva, 2013, p. 28)

We assume that the effect of the media environment created in the experiment for new players is – although by no means negligible – smaller than in the case of regular players: for participants with no previous gaming experience, the environment of the experiment becomes a familiar one. After the final game sessions, the majority of the participants in the focus group discussions reported that they could easily ignore the presence of the technical apparatus. For example: “Several times I noticed that the camera was almost facing me, but it was not disturbing at all” (ASZJK-12);² “I wasn’t really bothered by the camera at all” (ASZJK-14); “I completely forgot about such technical devices, both the microphone and the camera ceased to exist for me halfway through the first time. The only thing that bothered me was ... that sometimes you had to push them like that, and it was a bit distracting” (ASZJK-15).

Also, in order to achieve a state of team psychological safety, we decided to select participants for the experiment exclusively from a single department and a single year of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Debrecen. Otherwise, by involving students from several domestic universities, several majors or several cohorts, there would have been a risk that the players would show more restrained behaviour towards strangers than if they were playing with friends. For similar reasons, we decided to exclude first-year students

2 Remark by the author: In order to anonymize the participants of the experiment, we provided the players with a unique identifier, which follows the ASZJK-‘number’ pattern.

from the experiment: in the case of students who spent at least one year in the university environment, there was a higher chance of forming groups of close friends and acquaintances than among freshmen. When designing the research, it was considered that the role of game master should be taken on by an instructor or a person not affiliated with the university in any way. Being aware that both solutions can have an alienating effect,³ we finally decided to involve an instructor. We based this on the assumption that the students selected for the experiment feel more comfortable participating in an adventure performed by a person they already know (even if as an instructor) than in the story of a complete stranger. During the small group discussions following the final game sessions, the majority of the players did not mention the person of the storyteller as a hindering factor; the reactions were mostly about the game master's expertise in the field of tabletop role-playing rather than about them being instructors. For example: "It gave me reassurance that the management of the game was in safe hands. ... It was strange, but I got used to it very quickly" (ASZJK-15); "It didn't really bother me. ... I felt like an equal party within the game" (ASZJK-14); "I felt that I was in a safe environment. If I didn't know something, I felt free to ask" (ASZJK-07); "He [the game master] really got into it himself, and because of that we were able to get into it as well" (ASZJK-03).

Despite all efforts, not all of the alienating circumstances could be eliminated.⁴ We must mention the selection of the location. When planning the experiment, it was suggested that it should be carried out at an external location, independent of the university, thus enhancing the impression that they are taking part in a distinctly extracurricular event.⁵ Eventually, the availability of the technical apparatus necessary to conduct the experiment did not allow the change of location. During the focus group discussions, the majority judged the experimental site as neutral. For example: "The location itself was neutral for me, I can't imagine what would have been a better location" (ASZJK-07); "In fact, the location was neutral for me, ... it neither added nor took anything away" (ASZJK-14); "We weren't ... in a room where we've been before in classes ... so it wasn't like I was connecting courses to it" (ASZJK-06).

Selection and Preparation of Experiment Participants

Taking the above into account, we finally selected the students participating in the second-year communication and media studies bachelor's program in the autumn of

3 Remark by the author: The involvement of a storyteller not connected to the university can be alienating due to the lack of personal acquaintance, and the involvement of an instructor due to the students meeting a person they know in a different role than they are used to .

4 Remark by the author: We must mention the austerity measures due to the coronavirus pandemic. We did not exclude from the experiment those who, for any reason, did not have a vaccination certificate in the autumn of 2021, but in order to minimise the chance of infection, we made it mandatory for them to use face shields during the experiment. Based on the analysis of the video recordings of the games, it can be concluded that the verbal communication of the players was not significantly affected by wearing a face shield (it did not impair the intelligibility of their speech). However, based on the feedback after the last game, it can be said that wearing the face shield for several hours involved a certain degree of discomfort, but this was evaluated by the participants as an acceptable solution (for example: "This face shield was very good for me It is also a hundred times more comfortable than a mask." [ASZJK-03]).

5 Remark by the author: The participants of the experiment completed an optional university course, which, being an obligation, could make it difficult to immerse themselves in the game in any way, but it helped to minimise the number of absences and prevent dropouts. This is proven by the fact that a participant was only absent from the nine games a total of two times.

2021.⁶ First, we organised an information session for the groups, where, in addition to sharing with them what they were undertaking by participating in the experiment, we also assessed the ratio of routine tabletop role-players and those who had not yet had prior tabletop role-playing experience. At the end of the information session, we registered the applications for the experiment from students who had no prior experience in playing a TTRPG. Of the seventeen students who applied in this way, fifteen were finally selected for the experiment – afterwards they could register for the university course that accompanied the experiment. We considered that it is ideal for the experiment if the number of groups is the same and the number of individual groups does not exceed five people, so that individual players have sufficient opportunities to express themselves.

As a second step, on September 24, 2021, we held a four-hour training session for the participants of the experiment. During the session, we informed the participants about 1) the schedule of the experiment, 2) the scenario of each experimental session, 3) the specifics of the TTRPG, 4) the most important details of the TTRPG rule system (*Pathfinder Roleplaying Game*) chosen for the experiment, 5) the world serving as the location of the adventure module chosen for the experiment (Golarion / Osirion), 6) the background of the adventure module which was the *Mummy's mask – The half-dead city* (Groves et al., 2014), 7) the characters that can be selected during the experiment, and 8) the starting situation of the adventure. After a theoretical lecture, we tried to deepen the introduction to the TTRPG genre with two short interactive exercises. During the first, the research leader and the research assistants acted out a situation in order to demonstrate how tabletop role-playing actually works. In the second exercise, the participants in the experiment had the opportunity to try out the genre of the TTRPG in three groups led by the research assistants as game masters. During the short test games, the participants could get to know game mechanics such as the description of actions, the narration of the game master, the use of the abilities of the characters, dice rolls and the effect of their results on the adventure. At the same time, we did not want the game with the research leader and the research assistants to serve as a strong model later in the experiment, which is why we designed the time frames to be relatively short (10 minutes).

As an administrative part of the training, we recorded the basic data of the participants and divided the participants into groups, who could then decide with which pre-made character they would participate in the adventure. The participants were divided into three adventure teams of five. The students were sorted into the groups based on who had worked with the others in previous group projects (e.g. created a podcast together as a course assignment). When forming the groups, we tried to create parties with approximately similar gender composition and prior knowledge of the tabletop role-playing genre. Finally, the composition of the three groups was as follows:

- First group: 3 women, 2 men, number of people with prior knowledge of the tabletop role-playing genre: 1.
- Second group: 3 women, 2 men, number of people with prior knowledge of the tabletop role-playing genre: 2.
- Third group: 4 women, 1 man, number of people with prior knowledge of the tabletop role-playing genre: 1.

6 Remark by the author: Although, on a theoretical level, nothing in the composition of a university year precludes the possibility of students of different ages attending the same year, only young people between the ages of 18 and 20 took part in the experiment.

Conducting the Experiment

As will soon become clear from the following, some of the preparatory operations described in this chapter preceded the selection and training of the participants. Nevertheless, it is still worth discussing them here, because these decisions are more closely related to the implementation of the experiment.

The experimental sessions took place between October 8, 2021, and December 10, 2021, on eight Fridays and one Saturday. During the experiment, the three five-person experimental groups played a TTRPG three times per team. We tried to schedule these occasions in the experimental period in a proportionate fashion with three weeks passing between two sessions of the same group. However, the pacing of the academic year and the individual circumstances of the students did not allow this schedule, so changes were made during the experiment compared to the ideal schedule (Games of the first group: October 8, October 29, November 26.; Games of the second group: October 15, November 20, December 3; Games of the third group: October 22, November 19, December 10).

Bearing in mind that the implementation of a TTRPG is always unique and unrepeatable (the same adventure module cannot be played the same way twice), the experiment was designed by incorporating constant and similar factors. Our goal was to observe patterns regarding immersion into character, which could serve as starting points for a later experiment with more participants. Therefore, the conditions of the three groups were the same in many aspects during the experiment. The players could embody the same five pre-made characters per group (human warrior, half-orc ranger, elf wizard, half-elf rogue, dwarf priest): the ability scores, skills, feats, equipment, and alignment of the characters were the same for each team; the gender, name and appearance of the characters could be chosen by the players.

Players took part in the same pre-made adventure. The adventure had the same background story and starting point (a group of friends visiting the city of Wati in hopes of getting rich, where they participate in a lottery for exploration sites), and the adventure also included milestones that were practically unavoidable for the players (for example: meeting Remus, the mysterious treasure map seller; arrival at the Tomb of Akhentepi; spirit summoning in the trap-equipped corridor). In addition to these, however, because “in a tabletop RPG, there are many points at which the players need to make decisions that affect what happens to their characters in the follow-up” (Weiner, 2018, p. 21), the game of the three groups resulted in vastly different narratives and playthroughs.

During the adventures of the three groups, the research leader as game master narrated the adventure each time. Apart from him and the players, only one research assistant was present in the experimental room, who supervised the operation of the technical apparatus and ensured that the preliminary time frames were adhered to. During the game, the same technical equipment was available every time, the recordings were always taken from the same angle, and the interactive surface of the adventure was always projected onto the same wall surface.

When designing the research, specific attention was paid to choose the right TTRPG rule system. On the one hand, we wanted to choose a system of rules that would ensure a complex game experience for the participants, on the other hand, the time to learn the rules was limited by the fact that the participants in the experiment were taking part in an optional university course. Strongly positive effects of the latter factor can also be discovered, but the motivation to learn the rules was not increased by the fact that the

participants had to utilise the acquired knowledge within a planned time interval.⁷ Ultimately, we ended up using a simplified version of the *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game* rule system published by Paizo Publishing in 2009, which turned out to be a less than ideal choice afterwards: due to its complexity, several of the participants did not show sufficient confidence in their rule expertise up until the final game session of the experiment, and the explanation of the rules made up a significant part of the playing time. For example: “There are so many abilities, modifiers, etc. that even the third time around it was always hard to find them” (ASZJK-13); “The system of rules was quite complex ... and it is not possible to fully understand everything in such a few sessions” (ASZJK-15).

The experimental sessions were based on the same scenario. The participants started the game at 10:00 a.m., took a 10-minute break every 50 minutes, a half-hour lunch break took place from 1:00 p.m., and the game ended at 3:30 p.m. The only cases when we deviated from the strict time schedule was when a break would have interrupted a fight in the game world. We initially assumed that interrupting the fight in these cases would negatively affect the immersion of the participants – a hypothesis which was later confirmed by the players’ reflections. Undoubtedly, the time schedule used during the experiment is not how regular TTRPGs are usually played – where, most often, during longer games, the players divide the time they spend in-game and out-of-game – but for the sake of participation rates, we found this solution to be the most suitable. However, it is important to note that breaks were mentioned by several participants as factor hindering the immersive experience. For example: “of course, there was no immersion in the break” (ASZJK-12); “and the break was there, too, that broke the illusion” (ASZJK-15).

Focus Group Discussions

In the week following the last game, focus group discussions took place with the three experimental groups, moderated by two research assistants and the research leader. The main topic of the conversation was the immersive experience of the participants: the analysis of player feedback was not aimed at identifying game components suitable for triggering different types of immersion, but the mapping of whether it is relevant to investigate any kind of immersion in connection with the experiment. During the conversations, we were also interested in whether the decisions made in order to achieve a state of team psychological safety during the preparation of the experiment were effective.

The participants of the conversation reported different degrees of immersive experience, and several of them could also recall specific game episodes. They implied that their experiences can be related to immersion into character. For example: “For me, I think [the most immersive moment] was when I got scared ... I wanted to pay attention and concentrate so much that I completely forgot about it, and I was really scared, so I think that was the moment when I really got into it” (ASZJK-14); “It was much more immersive when we were in the city, so when there were speech-based situations and we talked ... I really forgot about everything there” (ASZJK-09). Mixed feedback was received regarding whether the game components help or hinder immersion. The maps, character and monster representations visually displayed during the game serve as a good example for different judgments about the game components. While some participants attributed great importance to these in creating an immersive experience, others reported the opposite.

⁷ Remark by the author: Although in theory nothing precluded the participants of the experiment from engaging in tabletop role-playing even after the experiment, the feedback revealed that this activity was not continued after the end of the trial period.

For example: “It was easier to imagine, for example, the wooden puppets, battle, things like that” (ASZJK-07); “Perhaps this was one of the things that made the immersion difficult, because I was watching this as a player, I mean from the outside” (ASZJK-12).

The Speech Type Categories of TTRPGs

We created a text transcript from the 2,327 minutes of video recordings of the experiment conducted in the autumn of 2021, in which we marked eight types of utterances identified during the research with colour codes. Transcription and colour coding prepared a subsequent quantitative and qualitative analysis. Quantifying the utterances of the players can help assess the proportion of different types of utterances present in the verbal communication of new TTRPG participants; and whether these ratios change as participants’ experience with the game increases (for example, does the rate of discussion of game rules decrease after several playing sessions).⁸ The focus of the qualitative analysis was on in-character utterances that show a connection with immersion into character – analysing their context can help identify game components that trigger immersion into character. During the research, we identified eight types of utterances that the participants used:

1. *In-character communication*. Utterances by role-playing game participants that are made by players clearly impersonating their character or by the game master clearly impersonating a non-player character. A reference to the world of the adventure or to the speech situation can help identify this type of utterance. For example: “GM: [impersonating a city guard] ‘Good morning, you are the first. The early bird catches the worm, right?’. ASZJK-15: ‘That’s right, my friend! ... Then don’t run into any ghouls’. ASZJK-15: ‘Into what?’”.
2. *Describing actions*. Utterances that describe an action or event that has been implemented or is intended to be implemented. For example: “ASZJK-15: ‘I’ll shoot one in the middle of the mirror’. GM: ‘Will you take out your longbow?’. ASZJK-15: ‘I’ll shoot one’. GM: ‘You aim and shoot’”.
3. *Describing conditions*. Participants’ utterances that describe the condition of environmental elements (for example, buildings, streetspace, objects) or a physical state. For example: “GM: ‘Imagine a dome-like building covered with all kinds of marbles, greenish, whitish, a bit milky’”.
4. *Technical communication*. Utterances that refer to the rules of the game and the abilities of the characters. For example: “ASZJK-12: ‘It’s just that I have perception’. GM: ‘Yes, perception is a skill that everyone has, so that anyone can perceive’”.

8 Remark by the author: The quantitative analysis of the recordings will be detailed in a later study. Based on their partial analysis, the following observations can be made: 1) the most dominant speech types of the verbal communication of the players participating in the experiment (except for the game master) in descending order are non-character player communication, ambiguous utterance between non-character player communication and in-character communication, describing actions and technical communication. The most dominant speech types of the verbal communication of the game master participating in the experiment in descending order are non-character player communication, technical communication, describing actions and describing conditions. Based on a partial analysis of the recordings, it can be concluded that the verbal communication of participants with no previous tabletop role-playing experience is more strongly influenced by the genre of the adventure being played (e.g. a socially interactive adventure, exploring and fighting in a dungeon, creating an action plan), rather than the routine gained game-to-game in the field of tabletop role-playing.

5. *Non-character player communication.* The utterances of the participants in which they are clearly not impersonating a character, do not describe an in-game action or event, and do not refer to the game technique. Its purest form is the exchange of information between two players or one player and the game master. We also list here statements that refer to the possibility and planning of an action or event – but not to its realisation or execution. For example: “ASZJK-14: ‘I also thought that they are such rich people, maybe they are interested in something about such eternal life’. GM: ‘So the assumption is that they might be interested in something like ancient secrets or occult science. You don’t know, you don’t know that much about the family’s history’”.
6. *Out-of-the-game communication.* The statements of the participants that clearly refer to events and information outside the game situation. For example: “GM: ‘Sorry [ASZJK-15], I have to ask you to put your mobile away’”.
7. *Ambiguous utterance between non-character player communication and in-character communication.* In cases when it is not possible to clearly decide whether they belong to the category of non-character player communication or in-character communication. It most often occurs when players are talking to each other, but do not make clear references to either the adventure or the players’ world. For example: “ASZJK-07: ‘Maybe we’ll come back there later, but I think we’re halfway to our goal now’. ASZJK-15: ‘I think so too. We discussed that...’. ASZJK-07: ‘Straight there’”.
8. *Ambiguous utterance between describing actions and in-character communication.* The utterances of the participants in which it cannot be clearly decided whether they describe the actions of the characters or make a statement by shaping a character. For example: “ASZJK-12: ‘Okay, come on then!’. ASZJK-07: ‘I’ll go then’”. The answer of ASZJK-07 falls into the ambiguous category because it is not clear whether she is answering her partner or describing her actions.

Conclusion

In table role-playing games, the immersion of the participants requires a state of team psychological safety. In the tabletop role-playing experiment conducted at the University of Debrecen in the autumn of 2021, several solutions were aimed at creating an environment that supports the immersive experience of the players. Without control groups, we cannot draw conclusions about whether one solution is more effective than an emerging alternative. Nevertheless, several preliminary proposals for similar experiments in the future can be identified based on the focus group discussions following the experiment:

1. The experiment was designed for participants who had no prior experience with TTRPGs. Our hypothesis was that the media environment of the experiment quickly becomes comfortable for them, since – unlike routine players – they have no previous experience of the activity. During the focus group discussions, the participants reported that they got used to the presence of the technical apparatus in a short time.
2. Due to the accessibility of the technical equipment, the experiment took place at the university. It can be argued that a location independent of the university results in a more relaxed atmosphere, but based on the feedback, the university office was also an acceptable choice, the majority of the participants considered it neutral.

3. The role of the dungeon master was played for the participants by a university instructor . It is possible that with a storyteller, a complete stranger to the players, they would have immersed themselves into character more efficiently than with an instructor. However, based on the feedback, it was not the person of the storytellers but their experience and expertise that was important to the participants – this was uniformly judged positively.
4. Second-year university students were selected for the experiment. The experiment groups were made up of students who had already worked together in their previous university courses. It is possible that the experiment could have been carried out with freshmen as well, but it was hypothesised that having worked together before, the participants would adapt to the role-playing environment more effortlessly.

In retrospect, two solutions proved to be less effective: the chosen TTRPG system and the choice of time frames. In the case of the former, the complexity, and in the case of the latter, the frequency of breaks became a factor hindering immersion. Regarding the ideal time frames, the participants of the experiment formulated a proposal in the focus group discussions: “I would have rather played for two hours at a time, and then we take a break of say half an hour” (ASZJK-09).

The video recordings made during the tabletop role-playing experiment and the method developed for their processing paved the way for a quantitative and qualitative analysis, which can lead to a better understanding of the language of role-playing games. The analysis can help to understand which game components encourage players with no previous primary TTRPG experience to immerse into character, and how this immersion changes over several consecutive play sessions. By examining the context of the participants’ in-character utterances, game elements that increase immersion into character can be identified. Although a significant amount of footage of game occasions were recorded during the experiment, due to the small number of participants, the results of the analysis cannot be considered representative in any way, but they can help to describe patterns, which can be verified by a later experiment with a larger number of participants.

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