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Dialogue and Interaction in Role-Playing Games: Playful Communication as Ludic Culture

Frans Mäyrä

Introduction

Dialogue is at the heart of role-playing games (RPGs). The actual play of games belonging to the various role-playing subgenres is typically highly language oriented – something that is not common for games in general, as such popular genres as sports, puzzle or action games prove. In table-top role-playing games significant part of interaction involves players speaking their part in-character, pretending to be their fantasy role-playing character. Also in a computer role-playing games the player is commonly expected to read and engage with texts of various kinds, including both the background storylines or world descriptions that are designed to immerse and engross the player into the fictional universe underlying the actual game, as well as spoken or written dialogues between characters in these, typically puzzle solving and storytelling oriented games.

As the history of role-playing games is rooted in strategic, simulation based war games (Peterson 2012), this is not an obvious direction for evolution in the history of games, and the field of RPGs remains divided in more action-oriented and interaction or storytelling oriented game and play forms. The multiplayer role-playing games complicate further the dialogical situation, as the actors in a digitally mediated or simulated, multiplayer role-playing game include both characters that are played by real humans (player characters) as well as non-player characters, some of which may be managed by real people (e.g. game masters), while some are artificial or pre-programmed software actors. The participation in online, massively multiplayer role-playing games has been acknowledged as important stimulus for developing rich constellations of literary practices (Steinkuehler 2007; Steinkuehler & Duncan 2008), and active role-playing of other types also involves similarly accessing and interacting with varyingly complex resources and practices.

The dialogue in role-playing games serves multiple purposes, some of which are related to its functional role in mediating in-game clues or actions, some in the role of language in the collaborative construction of shared fantasy (Fine 1983; Bowman 2010). The studies that have looked deeper into the actual language and interaction patters in fantasy role-playing games have unearthed a complex layering or "framing" of dialectic positions, where typically a role-playing participant constantly shifts positions and negotiates information and interests that relate to the "real-world" roles, game-system level roles as a game player, and in-game or game fantasy level roles as fantasy role-playing characters (Goffman 1961; Fine 1983; Kellomäki 2003; Harviainen 2012).

The aim of this chapter is to identity the multiple roles dialogue has in role-playing games, and provide illustrative examples and analyses of dialogue in different types of role-playing games. The examples are chosen also to highlight the similarities and differences between three key RPG forms, table-top (also known as pen-and-paper) RPGs, single-player computer RPGs and multiplayer, online computer role-playing games. It should be noted that live-action role-play (larp) is excluded from this discussion, being so rich and diverse field to require a special treatment of its own. From this chapter, the reader should both learn to appreciate the diversity of role-playing games as an innovative form of language use, as well as to identify the many dimensions and functions that interaction that combines language with gameplay action holds at the social levels of play situation, in various game system-level interactions as well as in the construction of in-game characters and fantasy worlds.

Multiple Levels of Dialogue in Table-Top Role-Playing Games

The dialogic nature of role-playing games can be approached from several perspectives, the main ones relating to them being game systems on one hand, and play activity on the other. As games, the dialogic nature of games is rooted in their interactive fundamental structure. The dynamic structure of something that is designed to be a game typically involves various challenges that the players of the game try to overcome. The "classic game definition" that Jesper Juul has synthesized on the basis of several earlier studies has six key elements that a proper game should include: games are (1) rules-based systems, with (2) variable and quantifiable outcomes, where (3) different outcomes are assigned different value, and the (4) player needs to exert effort in order to influence the outcome, while also (5) being attached to the outcome, and (6) the consequences of game play need to be negotiable. (Juul 2005, 36.)

This manner of approaching games inevitably mixes elements that are (formal) characteristics of games as textual or media systems, with the (informal) characteristics how games are intended to be played and enjoyed. The negotiable consequences, for example, emphasise that games are typically designed for entertainment purposes, and "real world consequences" such as loss of money, stature or even one's life are not usually considered parts of proper game playing. Cultural historian Johan Huizinga in his *Homo Ludens* (1938/1955, 13) claimed that all true play is activity that is not connected to any material interest, and that no profit can be gained by it. Nevertheless, there are professional players who gain monetary rewards from their playing, and in the case of gambling, it is precisely having real money (as contrasted to "play money") on the table that provides this game type with its particular, tempting and perhaps even dangerous character. However, if gaining money and making profit are the only reasons for the design and use of a particular system, then it is typically designed to be much more utilitarian and instrumental by character. While work and play can mix, designs of tools for work generally tend to differ from the designs of games, or toys. There is built-in dynamics of use that is meant to be inherently enjoyable in games, and game play can be an end in itself, whereas tools are designed to be means towards some (external) end; game designer Greg Costikyan (2002)

has discussed this as the “endogenous meaning” of games as systems. Anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1955) on the other hand had observed young animals play-fighting and he introduced the concept of “metacommunication” for various ways in which the players communicate how a “playful bite” should be interpreted in a different contextual frame from that of “real bite.”

It is within this more general context of playful frames and ambiguous “playthings” where role-playing games also came into being. The history of role-play and role-playing games is complex and forks into multiple directions. The most common historical narrative derives RPGs’ origins primarily into the first published commercial role-playing game system: *Dungeons and Dragons* (D&D; TSR, 1974). This on its part was deeply anchored in long history of wargaming, which often involved the use of miniatures to mark military units that were then manipulated according to rules for playful simulation of battle. D&D changed this basic setting for providing each player with a single player character to control, and then expanding the play situation into much more storytelling and drama oriented simulation of events in an alternative reality. A “Dungeon Master” (DM) acts as the referee and also plays out the actions and dialogue of non-player characters – including the fantastic monsters and mythical beings that player characters often face in a typical D&D fantasy scenario. While the early wargames in the eighteenth century were designed as tools for military training and tactical exercise, a role-playing game like D&D is driven by different motivations of use. (Barton 2008; Peterson 2012.)

Dungeons and Dragons will be used next to showcase the various dimensions or aspects of dialogue that inform table-top role-playing games in particular. The main dimensions that will be discussed here include dialogue around the world and character creation, dialogue that relates to game play, and negotiated dialogue that takes place between player characters, in the diegetic frame of in-game fiction. The discussion of game frames relies primarily here on frame analysis, pioneered by Erving Goffman (1961; 1974) and its application to the study of role-play games as “shared fantasies” by Gary Alan Fine. Following and applying Goffman’s thought, Fine distinguished between the primary framework (which covers all non-diegetic frames), game frame where players interact with each as regulated by the game system’s rules, and, thirdly, the frame of player characters, which is the domain of in-game, diegetic fiction (Fine 1983, 186). It is important to note that the basic character, goals and understanding of the role-playing situation can change, depending on which of these three frames is highlighted – or “up-keyed” in Goffman's terminology. Fine emphasises that the fantasy frame provides each player character distinctive identity of their own, in manner that differentiates role-playing game from other games, such as chess; it would make no sense to discuss information or intentions that individual chess piece would have, for example. In fantasy role-playing game, the player character has distinctive set of features, abilities and “life goals” that should not be confused with the player goals. In reality, this boundary line is not so easy to maintain, though.

This basic layering of a role-playing game is perhaps best highlighted when it becomes debated and a source of conflict in the actual practices of role-player community. The USENET discussion forum “rec.games.frp.advocacy” featured such intense discussion during

the summer of 1997. There were different role-playing styles and priorities among the practitioners that often became source of disagreement. It was in the “Threefold Model” document that was compiled as the summary of the discussion where three basic goals for role-playing were identified: Drama, Game and Simulation (Kim 1998). The model reduces the ways in which players negotiate the different layers of role-playing situation into three fundamentally different interpretations about goals of RPGs, which in its turn gives birth to different playing styles that are then agreed upon by the gaming group in their (sometimes explicit but most often implicit) “game contract.” A ‘dramatist’ playing style “is the style which values how well the in-game action creates a satisfying storyline”, a ‘gamist’ playing style emphasises the role of challenges and fair ways of solving them, whereas ‘simulationist’ style values above all the internal consistency of the diegetic game world, and emphasises that in-game events should be influenced only by “game-world considerations” (ibid.). Comparing the three alternatives to the RPG frames Fine had identified, it could be said that for one faction of players, a role-playing event is primarily organised in order to the participating (real) people to have fun and entertaining social interaction together (‘dramatists’), the second group is participating to play a game, to solve a puzzle and master the rule-based game system (‘gamists’), and the third group perceives the character frame and the in-game fantasy world as the main priority (‘simulationists’). It should be noted that the playing styles do not necessarily define the player: it is perfectly possible to prefer one style in the context of one game, and change the preference while moving to another playing context.

In addition to there occasionally being disagreements between different game players on how the role-playing event should be organised, there are also important dividing lines within the level of a single player. Fine notes (ibid., 188) that “player, person, and character share a brain”, and provides examples of how the actions of fantasy game characters are influenced by the real-world knowledge that the person behind the character has (but the fantasy character strictly speaking should not have access to), and of how players' system-level information about the game situation can also “leak” into the game world and influence character’s actions. The dialogue between players and the referee (“Dungeon Master”) often involve negotiations about which information will be allowed to become parts of the shared, diegetic in-game reality:

> *Barry*: I'm going to see my father in the Great While Lodge [a magical lodge that other characters have mentioned, and which he knows about as a player – but not as a character – of which his father is the leader].
> *George*: You don't know anything about the Great While Lodge.
> *Barry*: I’ve heard about it.
> *George*: Well, you might have heard about it.
> *Barry*: In mythology, you know.
> *George*: That’s about all you’ve heard. You don't even know there is a leader there.
> *Barry*: Yes, I do.
> *GAF*: You certainly don’t know it’s your father.
> *Barry*: No, but I always wanted to see him.
> *George*: Well, but everybody wants to see someone important. That doesn’t mean anything.

(Gary Alan Fine's field notes; Fine 1983, 190-91.)

The actual dialogue in a table-top role-play situation can develop into much more complex forms than in this above example. In addition to several players discussing about rules (game system level interpretations), or enacting direct or indirect speech of on behalf of their player characters, there might also be elements of speech that relate to the actual, off-game reality. This has been analysed by Johannes Kellomäki (2003), who has further divided the player frame into the frame (or level) of actual player and frame of surrogate player, who is responsible for managing the role-playing narration. According to this analysis, a table-top role-playing situation has four levels of interaction and dialogue (see below, Figure 1).

Level of social interaction	***general social conventions***	member of the society			
	Level of role playing	*role playing contract*	actual player		
		Level of narration	*conventions of narration*	surrogate player	
			Level of characters	*social conventions of the narrated reality*	character
Each outer level includes the more internal levels.					

Figure 1: the interaction layers in role-playing game (according to Kellomäki 2003, 34; FM's translation from Finnish).

These four levels where role-playing dialogue can be positioned can be illustrated with a transliterated sample of actual table-top role-playing game session:

A: Is it dark?
K: Now it is like evening dusk. Throw two times 'eyesight'.
(J, A and T throw dice)
J: 'Marginal success'.
A: Easily succeeds.
K: Ok, so you can see. Because there are really...
T: Fails.
K: … three ships approaching.
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K: He says, this Valas, like, says that *this is not probably a question of any vendetta here any more. I think that those surely do not look anything like the ships of Sherwyn. Let it be said that there is something else going on here*.
T: Yes.
K: **Wait a minute. My papers are always like mixed up somehow**.

A: **Who has been reading the IT Week magazine again?** (laughs)
J: **It was me**. (laughs)
(Kellomäki 2003, 29; FM's translation from Finnish.)

The speech in **bold** in the above sample refers to common, everyday social interaction, where players are in “off-game” mode, interacting with each others as real-world friends, not as game players. The underlined speech, on the other hand is taking place within the level of actual game play: the comments about ability checks and dice throw results, for example, communicate information between players and the game master that maintain and change the game state, according to the rules of this role-playing game. The discussion about dice does not, however, take place within the diegetic, in-game domain of fiction that game characters inhabit. This is interaction between ‘actual players’ who need to orient their actions according to the facts of game system, represented here by the ‘eyesight’ ability test and results from the associated throws of dice. The next level (non-marked in the sample) is one of surrogate players, which can be likened to the distinction between actual speaker and substitute speaker (and hearer) in Marie-Laure Ryan’s theory of fictional communication (Ryan 1991, 74-76). The narrative reality of game world in a role-playing game is largely constructed in this level of communication. The game master (or Dungeon Master, in D&D games) has much power to utter speech acts that immediately take the status of facts in the imaginary world of role-playing fantasy (“there are… three ships approaching” in the sample). The fundamentally interactive character of role-playing game, however, allows multiple actors to have their say on how events proceed. Dice are thrown, rule systems are interpreted, and the final outcome in the role-playing event is subject of negotiation. It is perfectly possible for players to protest, and question game master’s initial judgement, like Barry did in the above sample recorded by Fine.

The final level (or frame) that is featured in *italics* in Kellomäki’s transliterated sample is the level of character speech. The player characters and non-player characters such as helpful villagers or intelligent fantasy monsters can interact at this level of “acted speech” – which can also often be indirect, reported speech (“Valas… says *that this is not probably a question of any vendetta here any more*”). Consequently, the table-top role-playing dialogue appears rather complex and rich form of speech, considering also that all these different levels of discourse take place in tightly interwoven ways, and in some cases a single utterance can take place in several levels at one. This is illustrated in the sample by K saying “**Wait a minute. My papers are always like mixed up somehow**”, which is both directed towards handling the game system level events and the associated “papers” such as character sheets, maps and player notes, but is also partly a personal, off-game comment. The multiple frames or levels of dialogue identifiable in a table-top role-playing game situation serve as a point of comparison as we move next to analyse dialogue in computer role-playing games.

Computer Role-Playing Games: Rule-Systems and Fiction

Roger Caillois (1958/2001, 13; cf. Jensen 2013) has made the distinction in dividing game play according the axis between *paidia* and *ludus*, where paidia consists of improvisational and free play form, whereas the ludus style of play is more formal and rule-bound. In role-playing this duality is reflected in the design and use of role-playing rule-sets, or game systems, where other systems emphasise more free improvisation and interactive storytelling, while others start from the basis that it is more fair for everyone that all key events are rather strictly resolved according to rule-systems and game mechanics such as the use of dice. While there are diceless role-playing game systems, and rather free-form "storytelling games", most contemporary table-top role-playing games balance informal negotiation with some "strict" rules, which are meant to structure the game playing and (in the form of dice or other randomizer tools) also to provide unpredictability to the ways in which events proceed. Accessing a mainstream, popular commercial game system one can take a look for example at the *D&D Player's Basic Rules* (version 0.3, available as a free download from the Wizards of the Coast website[1]); the guidebook starts by emphasising the role of imagination, storytelling and fantasy world as the setting for D&D gameplay. The three key elements of RPG gameplay that D&D rulebook identifies are:

1. The DM describes the environment.
2. The players describe what they want to do.
3. The DM narrates the results of the adventurers' actions.

These three stages in dialogue-based gameplay are then employed into the "three pillars of adventure", which the D&D rulebook lists as exploration, social interaction and combat. While the free-form and storytelling oriented game systems ostensibly provide much room for introducing spontaneous, improvised elements of fantasy into the collective narration, there are always some kinds of limits and implied, if not explicit rules for what kinds of actions and general tone the shared creation should be based on. For example, the D&D rulebook explicitly notes that social interaction should be role-played in a manner that should be informed by elements such as character classes (which are sort of fantasy adventurer professions), characteristics of fantasy races (orcs should be played differently from elves, or dwarves), and the rules that dictate how the ability scores and various modifiers (as recorded in the player's character sheet) affect what a game character can do, what her motivations are, and how other characters are likely to react to her. If the role-playing game is set into a complete fantasy campaign world, such as the "Forgotten Realms" of TSR/Wizards of the Coast, then the geography, history, mythology and cultures of peoples inhabiting it become a major player in directing the ways in which player characters are able to interact with each other, and with the world they inhabit.

In a digital role-playing game, the opportunities and conventions for dialogue are understandably rather different from face-to-face game play. While there exists considerable tradition of work directed at analysing digital, computer-mediated communication, and live action as well as table-top role-play have also received their fair share of scholarly attention during recent years, the analysis of computer role-playing games (CRPGs) has taken perhaps a bit secondary role in research. The evolutionary history of computer CRPGs itself is rather well documented in various, both popular as well as more academic accounts (e.g. King & Borland 2003; Barton 2008). As the single-player CRP lacks

negotiation between human players, both its dialogue, storytelling and action are structured differently from table-top role-playing games. While many accounts position centrality of player character and character development at the heart of CRPs as a genre, a "character" in computer-based role-play has typically more instrumental role than in more fantasy and improvisation oriented table-top or live role-playing forms. Jon Peterson (2012, 369) notes how already the early experiments in RPG design tried different alternatives on how individual player characters could have a "personality", turning to quantified and measurable "abilities" as the key solution. There is nothing in the original published system of *Dungeons and Dragons* (1974) that would encourage the players to aim for "deeper identification" with their characters, as Peterson notes – indeed, according to him, the term 'role-playing' does not appear in the initial edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* at all (ibid., 371). Thus, the computerized versions of role-playing games in their early forms did not need to venture very far from how the classic, D&D style RPG systems were built: their programming code aimed to implement spatial simulation of a fantasy world, combined with a storyline of events (typically organised into a series of puzzles, or larger "quests"), a developing player character(s) and her inventory of accumulated items. Nevertheless, dialogue remains important part of CRPGs, as it is in their table-top counterparts.

Already the earliest computer adventure games featured elements of gaming fantasy that link them to the legacy of D&D and other role-playing games. The ADVENT (or "Colossal Cave Adventure" as it is also known), the earliest known text text adventure game, programmed by William Growther in 1975-1977, was partially based on a real-world Mammoth Cave system in Kentucky, partly relying on fantasy conventions, such as introducing magic weapons, and fantasy races such as dwarves (Jerz 2007). Technically, the central part of dialogue in text adventure games, and in early computer role-playing games that followed them was the textual exchanges that player carried out through parser, the software that interprets natural language input. In early games, software could only understand simple verb-noun constructions like "go inside", "open door", or "get key". The software is programmed to respond by describing environment, consequences of action, or character speech. In later text adventure games and contemporary interactive fiction, the user input can consist of much more complex sentences and the artistic and technical range of possibilities for expression are consequently also larger. (Montfort 2003.) The computer role-playing games diverged from evolution of interactive fiction by their pronounced emphasis on quantified improvement, or "levelling up" of characters through accumulation of experience and treasure, making the characters more capable of encountering harder challenges and opponents.

The early single-player computer role-playing games were constantly pushing against the limitations of available technology. For example, *Pool of Radiance* (TSR/SSI, 1988) came with a printed booklet, "Adventurer's Journal", which included longer texts and images of posters, maps and other information that players (and characters) came across in the game but which could not reasonably be reproduced on home computers in the late 1980s. In relevant parts of the game, an instruction on screen advised player to refer to an element or another of that kind in the Journal. The in-game descriptions and dialogue displayed in the low-resolution computer screen of the time typically consisted only of few lines of text, in addition to character statistics and a small graphical window that in the "exploration mode"

displayed a first-person view into the game world. A standard encounter with a non-player character (NPC) might involve display of the graphical image of the NPC, e.g. the Harbor Master of New Phlan (a city in Forgotten Realms fantasy world), and text output: "The Harbor Master tells you boats leave for the west, the east, Sokal Keep, and the north side of the Bay. 'Round trip passage is 1 platinum piece. What passage can I sell you?'" The player interaction is provided here through the keyboard, with the lower part of the screen displaying a menu of highlighted shortcut keys (s, e, w, b, and none) to inform the player about the available alternatives (buying trip to Sokal, east, west, or Bay).

A decade later, both the computer technology and game design had advanced to the point that allowed enhanced control and interaction at the level of game mechanics, as well as expanded opportunities for game engines to provide more support for dialogue and audiovisual storytelling. *Baldur's Gate* (BioWare, 1998) is a highly successful computer role-playing game of the era, and provides examples of both the advances as well as certain remaining limitations in CRPG design. Right from the start, *Baldur's Gate* is heavy with textual material, which is typically also accompanied by voice narration and pre-scripted (non-interactive) cutscenes. A starting player is first in the game provided with the long animated cutscene where a mysterious armoured figure attacks and kills a helpless victim in the dark of the night. The scrolling, long text of Prologue is also provided, accompanied by non-diegetic voice-over, informing the player that her character is an orphan, growing up in the city of Candlekeep in the world of Forgotten Realms. The storyline underlying the actual gameplay is set into motion through Prologue's hints of player character's mysterious past, and recounting of ominous signs of some danger approaching. Following next is a key element where the player is able to influence the way the CRPG unravels: the character generation, where player is provided freedom to choose the name, gender other characteristics, such as "alignment" of her character. In the applied "Advanced Dungeons&Dragons" (AD&D) game system these range from "lawful good" to "chaotic evil", reflecting the moral consistency and ethical orientation that the character is supposed to follow in her fantasy world adventures.

Baldur's Gate was created using new game technology, carrying the name "Infinity Engine". The promise of such graphical game engine and the new generation of CRPGs was focused on enhanced opportunities for "immersion" – imaginative, audiovisual and fluently flowing action, all designed to transport the player into alternative, fantasy universe. While extensive and highly-detailed sensorial simulations of alternative, game world support such immersion to a certain degree, it is the actual playing of the game, and degree of engaging interactivity that it is able to provide that dominates the experience of most game players (Ermi & Mäyrä 2007). In the table-top role-playing situation, player is basically limited only by her imagination, verbal abilities and the (implicit or explicit) role-playing contract that sets the frame for fantasy role play among this group of players. *Baldur's Gate* and its Infinity Engine allows the player to move the player character around the game world easily through the point-and-click graphical interface; the immediate environment is presented from "pseudo-3D", top-down perspective, allowing the player to initiate various actions and explore the world through the player character. The move from text parser based interfaces to the more graphics oriented environment however was also linked to lesser emphasis being put to text input. The amount and quality of dialogue available in *Baldur's Gate* is

considerably enhanced from an early CRPG like *Pool of Radiance*, but the actual degree of interactivity in dialogic exchange is limited to player using mouse (or a keyboard shortcut) to choose from pre-scripted alternatives. *Baldur's Gate* also provides an example of how real-time action is becoming the norm also in CRPGs. While the dialogue adds flair and structures the underlying structure of *Baldur's Gate*, the player is likely just to quickly click on an available dialogue option that is most likely to move the sequence of game events forward. Here is an example taken from the end of *Baldur's Gate*, where game pauses before the final battle with Saverok, the main opponent, who by now is revealed to be the half-brother of protagonist (the player character), and also a child of Baal, the evil God of Murder.

> Sarevok: – You are indeed family. No other could have lived to oppose me in person. Of course, it will not matter in the end. Ultimately I will prevail, and a new era will be born unto the Realms.
> 1: - You are mad! What do you hope to gain by resurrecting a dead god?
> 2: - There must be another way, brother! We could rally, and fight this evil together!
> 3: - By what right do you claim ownership of this new era? What if I intend to take it from you?
> 4: - Your evil ways end here tonight! This god stays dead and you will join him!
> (*Baldur's Gate*, Chapter 7; BioWare, 1998.)

It is apparent to anyone versed in the genre conventions of computer role-playing games, that this is the moment where "final boss battle" is starting, and the fight is indeed what is going to ensue, if the player wants to move forward in the game. The entire game has been steering the player to unravel Sarevok's role as the evil mastermind, and then collect enough resources, help and skills that are needed to defeat him and his minions. In a sense, most of the dialogue in a CRPG like *Baldur's Gate* operates like decorations that provide dramatic framing and tone to the actual gameplay activities. In a rather negative tone, Markku Eskelinen (2001) has a bit similarly written about stories being "just uninteresting ornaments or gift-wrappings to games", and claimed that the study of stories in games is just waste of time and energy. Actually, adventure and role-playing games are among those digital games where in optimal case clues and story-driven puzzles seamlessly coincide with the gameplay dynamics: in story-driven games encounters and objects embody both information and aesthetics, as they measure progress as well as tell the tale. The real critique in the case of CRPs should perhaps be directed at the range of actual interactivity and freedom of choice that is made available for the player. In her analysis, Diane Carr has written about how in *Baldur's Gate* she made the attempt to go against the pre-scripted plotline of events and choose the "evil options", to truly follow the player-chosen moral alignment. Already early on the game, taking the "wrong course" of action would be punished by some powerful NPC who would strike her evil character down. She also notes:

> Limits are also imposed by the dialogue options, because they are supplied by the game. In most conversations there is an obliging or curious option, a noble response, and a rude or villainous retort. If my protagonist is too rude, or too violent, none of the game's other characters will help her. (Carr 2006, 51.)

When compared to table-top role-playing game, there is apparent lack of flexibility and freedom for role-playing in CRP that concerns available action lines, and limitations for dialogue, and also narrowing down of how game scoring and progress support efforts to pursue “non-preferred” strategies through in-game dialogues.

The pre-scripted dialogue options typical to CRPGs such as *Baldur’s Gate* have their limitations and certain mechanical quality. From the perspective of fiction, they might of course also be considered in a manner superior to the free-flowing speech that is improvised by the players in a standard table-top role-playing situation. The professional script writers have taken care to consider both issues related to the style of speech, character personality, as well as overarching plot implications while designing the dialogue. The character speech produced by amateur role-players is no doubt often somewhat rough or uneven, as it is being improvised as the events progress. On the other hand, all key dimensions relating to in-game fictional consistency, narrative or drama-driven priorities, as well as the personal interests of game players, both regarding their interpersonal relationships as well as preferences in implementing game system’s rules can, and will direct the dialogue and gameplay in a table-top role-play session. Participation in a single-player computer role-playing games is inevitably more impersonal, as the commercially produced game relies on manufactured code, rather than on collaborative interplay and improvisation. The social dimensions of multiplayer digital role-playing games hold potential to bridge the gap between these two opposites, but in reality it comes with its own, distinctive challenges or limitations.

Complexities of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing

The early text-based multiplayer role-playing games are today known as “MUDs”, according to the first Multi-User Dungeon, developed by Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle (1978-1980). The text interface in these online games gradually was replaced by graphical clients, in evolution much like the parallel one taking place in single-player computer role-playing games. The “MMORPGs” (as in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) particularly started growing in popularity as *Ultima Online* (Origin Systems, 1997) and *EverQuest* (Sony Online Entertainment, 1999), followed by even more popular *Lineage* (1998, NCsoft) and *World of Warcraft* (“WoW”; Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) grew their subscriber numbers first into hundreds of thousands, then into millions of active players. The actual degree of social interaction, however, varies; even while the numerous servers host multiple versions of the fantasy game worlds, each “shard” (parallel server world) holds only fraction of this population, and the actual interaction between these players is limited by smaller social formations, such as improvised pickup groups or more long-lasting guilds.

The existing studies into online role-playing interaction have uncovered rich range of various phenomena, from significant differences in playing styles and motivations (Bartle 1996; Yee 2005) to understanding the associated social and communicative conventions (Mortensen 2006; Williams et al. 2006; Mäyrä 2015). From the perspective of role-playing dialogue, one of the crucial questions is, how much actual role-play, or communication in general, takes

place between people in these online games. The basic division line is between players who approach the MMORPGs primarily as games to collect points and score high, rather than as environments where to jointly engage in dialogue and creation of shared fantasy role-play experiences – this translates into the "gamist" versus "dramatist/simulationist" divide of aforementioned Threefold Model, or "achievement" versus "exploration/socializing" styles that Richard Bartle identified in his early MUD study (Kim 1998; Bartle 1996).

The results from a large scale study that Nicholas Ducheneaut and team (2006) carried out in *World of Warcraft* game servers suggests that interpersonal interaction does not form the main part of behaviours that take place in MMORPGs. In their study, they automatically tracked characters ("avatars") in-game, and found out that characters did spend only 30-35 % of their game time as teamed up in groups, while most of time is spent as "solo", playing alone. On the other hand, also for a solo player communication serves multiple useful purposes and a further study by Mirco Suznjevic and colleagues documented large numbers of chat messages taking place among WoW players – 456,228 messages were recorded having been sent during the tracked 11,775 game play sessions (104 WoW players were tracked and surveyed in this study). In addition to using the text-based chat channels provided by the game client (proving access to /say, /yell and similar functionalities), the surveyed players were also active users of voice communication tools. Communication was the second most typical activity carried out while playing WoW, second only to raiding (missions targeting hard opponents that require coordinated work of many player characters). And almost 70 % of WoW players reported using voice communication tool such as Ventrilo during raiding. (Suznjevic et al. 2009; Suznjevic & Matijasevic 2010.)

While there might be plenty of interaction and communication taking place in MMORPGs, that is not a guarantee that all these players are actually engaged in something that might be called role-playing. It is perfectly possible to play a game like *World of Warcraft* without any substantial engagement or reference to fictional, in-game reality the characters are inhabiting. The achievement oriented "gamist" player will most likely in her dialogue stick to the first two levels in Kellomäki's model discussed above. Lacking interest (or, indeed, ability) to interact with other players in the role of their character, they are more likely to address others as "actual players", dealing with game system events, rather than narrating or interacting via their fantasy player characters. According to many MMORPG researchers, and as is obvious also to any casual observer, this is indeed what is taking place in most popular MMORPGs such as WoW. Technical and abbreviated requests for gaming company with specific kinds of player characters, money, or equipment dominate most communication channels in game, and it is hard to find actual role-playing dialogue among all the "leet" speech – leet being the internet slang which is filled with abbreviations and creative (or just lazy) combinations of letters and numbers.

In their stydy of role-playing in WoW, Esther MacCallum-Stewart and Justin Parsler (2008) conclude in very critical terms that role-playing is actually almost impossible within (mainstream) MMORPGs. There are several reasons for that, including lack of social norms and responsibilities, or even rules or guidelines for how to role-play in a MMORPG. There are dedicated "role-playing servers" in WoW and in some other games, but those are in the minority, and most players do not bother to take the extra effort required to develop

history, personality or distinctive style of speech for their player characters, as there is no built-in reward available for those who do role-play. But a minority of players are self-motivated enough to indeed engage in developing their characters, participating in role-playing guild activities and even in writing extensive fan-fiction of characters and events drawn from the game world. Some of those players have also developed and shared specific tools and game add-ons to support imaginative immersion and to protect the stylistic and linguistic integrity of in-game, role-playing speech. MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler provide the example of "Eloquence", the add-on which made real-time translations of in-game chat from dominant "leet speech" to dialogue more suitable for a fantasy context:

> ne1 kno wher uc is at → Does anyone know where the Undercity is?
> lf1m rouge SCHLO → We want one more Rogue for Scholomance.
> CAN SUCK MY A$$ FUKTARDZ → You can plunge into a gaping chasm for all I care.
> (MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler 2008, 243.[2])

In contrast, the guides developed to support engagement in MMORPG role-playing take care to emphasise the multiple dimensions that a player who wants to seriously interact within the fantasy frame needs to take into account: out of character talk needs to be limited to minimum, and clearly signalled (e.g. denoted by double brackets in chat), and both in-game actions and dialogue needs to be motivated by player character's back stories, personality and life goals. In this example, "heavy role-player's" Night Elf character walks by and interacts with other players and their characters in Stormwind, the largest human city in Azeroth (WoW) – role-playing, or not so:

> *HeavyRPer2(night elf):* [Darnassian] Ishnu alah
> *HeavyRPer(night elf):* [Darnassian] (To you too)
> *MediumRPer(human):* Ah, an Elven in Stormwind? What does this man owe the pleasure?
> *HeavyRPer:* Hello human brother, I'm meeting kin in the park, good day
> *LightRPer(dwarf):* Hullo elf!
> *HeavyRPer:* /em scrunches up her nose at the dwarf
> *HeavyRPer:* Errm... good day
> *IndifferentRPer(gnome):* Hey, can you open this lock?
> *MediumRPer:* Hmmm, I am in no great hurry. Why not, let's have a look at it.
> (lock pops)
> *IndifferentRPer:* woot! Its a 12slot thx
> *MediumRPer:* Huh? You sure speak funny, gnome
> *IndifferentRPer:* wat?
> *MediumRPer:* /huff, never mind, good day
> *Anti-RPer:* its faster to run, press the / key
> *MediumRPer:* ...
> *Anti-RPer:* /dance
> *MediumRPer:* .leave me be
> *Anti-RPer:* lololo
> (WoWWiki Guide to Roleplaying.[3])

To conclude, the complexities of role-playing dialogue stem partially from the multiple dimensions of role-playing situation itself and partly from the different interpretations, motivations and levels of engagement that different players bring to the role-playing interaction. RPGs, CRPGs and MMORPGs all involve interactions that relate to these cultural forms being both games and rule-based systems, and on the other side also fantasy – participation in collaborative world creation. A table-top game is based on face-to-face interaction of a small group of selected players and thereby can rely on flexible, social contract that accommodates both multiple levels or frames of interaction, while also requiring everyone to interact in-character. A computer game maintains the coherence of its fantasy and stylistic integrity of player character speech in different ways, by limiting player freedom. The dialogue in a typical CRPG is pre-scripted by the game designers, and it can rather easily be cast into a secondary role as compared to player's involvement in gameplay action or puzzle-solving. The main challenges for role-play in MMORPGs are again different: in these online, multiplayer games, the large number of casual, non-roleplaying players dominating these environments goes constantly against the intentions of few committed role-players, who try to maintain a coherent fictional frame in their interactions and dialogue. Role-playing needs to be carefully framed, negotiated and maintained to happen at all.

Discussion: Building Bridges into the Ludic Culture

Fantasy role-playing games provide the players with the possibility of vicarious visit to the alternative reality, a world of mystery and magic. The guidebooks and rule-systems of table-top role-playing games, and the software code and audiovisual simulations in computer role-playing games both support and set limits to how this transfer to or interaction with the fantasy world is structured. Dialogue holds an important part in this interplay, as the information carried between players and the game masters (or, computer software) includes both information about the current game state and events to players, as well as of their game characters' thoughts, emotions and motivations within the fictional reality. The "inputs" and "outputs" in dialogue, technical or more free-form, also include meta-communicative hints about the playful or non-playful character of interaction. The style of speech is important, as the example of MMORPG role-playing shows. When the other people do not use the proper grammar, stylistic means and lexicon belonging to the fantasy frame, the role-playing is easily spoilt for those who try to engage in it.

Ability to read games and playful situations in rich and meaningful ways is part of "ludic literacy": analytical and functional ability to appreciate, analyse and produce various forms of play and games. In his book *Ludoliteracy*, Jose Zagal has argued that anyone with real competence in ludic literacy should be able to analyse games in meaningful ways, know why different kinds of games evoke certain experiences, and know how games and play can be used as an expressive medium. Furthermore, having detailed and precise enough vocabulary for critical and analytical discussions of games is an important element, and something where also academic game studies and research-based game education can have

a constructive role. (Zagal 2010, 2.) In more visionary terms, game scholar and designer Eric Zimmerman has written about the cultural move to a "Ludic Century", an era that is dominated by dynamic and playful engagement with information systems rather than by written text or moving image. "It is not enough to merely be a systems-literate person; to understand systems in an analytic sense", Zimmerman writes. "We also must learn to be playful in them. A playful system is a human system, a social system rife with contradictions and with possibility." (Zimmerman 2015, 21.) Role-playing games, with their rich array of various materials, rule-sets, multidimensional and interactive play situations and complex stylistic conventions, in optimal case combine the strengths of literary fiction with those of interpersonal communication and ludic cultural forms, thus contributing to dialogue also at more general levels of expression and culture.

Endnotes

[1] See: http://dnd.wizards.com/articles/features/basicrules. Accessed: 29 June, 2015.
[2] The Eloquence add-on as a player-created project has since then been abandoned; one can check the original text filter examples at: http://wow.curseforge.com/addons/project-1513/pages/main-de-de/r1/source/. There have been other similar projects (Alias, Textfilter, etc.)
[3] "Guide to roleplaying." WoWWiki. Online: http://wowwiki.wikia.com/Guide_to_roleplaying. Accessed: 2 July, 2015.

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