

Unified Discourse Analysis & Tabletop Role-Playing Games

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Introduction

Unified Discourse Analysis is an extension of Discourse Analysis proposed by former professor and linguistics scholar James Paul Gee. Discourse Analysis is an approach to the study of discourse, the contextual interactions between two or more active parties via speech, text, or other form of communication, with a specific preference for the study of naturally occurring interactions. Discourse Analysis provides methods with which to analyze the specific meaning of discourse through the lens of context, whether that context be cultural, sociological, or temporal. Professor Gee posits in his 2015 book *Unified Discourse Analysis: Language, reality, virtual worlds, and video games* that the tenets of Discourse Analysis can be applied to more than just natural language. His book walks through the application of Discourse Analysis to video games as conversations between player and game using the shared language of the game's controls and mechanics, and given situated meaning by the context provided by the game's world and the player's preconceptions of the game's genre and format. Professor Gee's work on Unified Discourse Theory can not only be used to study games as conversations, but for game designers to better design games based on the analysis of language, context, and meaning.

Tabletop role-playing games (TRPG), interchangeably called pen-and-paper role-playing games (PnP RPG), are games in which players embody characters and act out a collectively improvised story through either speech or text, depending on the method of play. In most TRPG systems, a specific player, generally referred to as the Game Master, is responsible for arbitrating the rules of the game, narrating the top-down story, embodying all non-player characters, and driving players forward. There are hundreds of tabletop role-playing games available, most driven by one of a few dozen core rule systems. Common among nearly all tabletop role-playing game systems are character statistics and

attributes, skill proficiencies, and fictional backstories. Central to the play of a tabletop role-playing game is the assumption and expression of one or more roles through which action takes place.

This paper aims to establish that tabletop role-playing games can effectively be studied through James Paul Gee's theory of Unified Discourse Analysis. This will be done through the explanation of, application of, and critique of each of the nine questions that make up Gee's framework of discourse analysis. Each of Gee's nine questions will be briefly explained, as well as how they are applied to video games by Gee. Along with the description of each question will be the way Gee's form of analysis would be applied to tabletop role-playing games as written, most often using the most popular TRPG Dungeons & Dragons as an example. Lastly, each question will be critiqued as it pertains to tabletop role-playing games to establish if the question as written is suitable, or if some alternative or additional questions are more appropriate for the format.

Who or what are the conversational partners? What histories and complexities do they bring to the encounter?

James Paul Gee's first question of discourse analysis is used to establish the avatars, identities embodied by the participants, and the contextual background those avatars bring to the discourse. The question of conversational partners is important as it establishes the active participants in the discourse. The question of histories and complexities provides much needed background on the avatars participating in the discourse, which is required in order to effectively analyze the contextual meanings of interactions between the actors. In the context of video games, this question is generally resolved as a number of conversational partners equal to the number of players in a game plus one conversational partner as the game itself. Players of a game bring their own personal histories with the real world and with games into the conversation, as well as their own skills and abilities that pertain to the execution of

their avatar. The game's participation in the discourse brings along with it the inherited history of its style and genre, as well as the will and culture of its designers. The discourse between a seasoned first-person shooter player and a traditional first-person shooter game will be distinctly different than between a seasoned match-three game player and a traditional first-person shooter game.

Gee's first question, for the most part, applies the same to tabletop role-playing games as it does to video games. The players are the predominant conversational partners, and each player brings with them some history or lack of history with role-playing games, specific rule systems, and the multitudes of pop culture and mythological influences that factor into role-playing games. Additionally, as tabletop role-playing games primarily function as shared world-building and storytelling acts, players bring with them their experience and comfort level with improvisation and storytelling. The specific game's lore and rules system acts as another conversational partner, as it provides guidance and boundaries to the actions of the players. Much like in video games, the lore and rules systems of tabletop role-playing games bring with them historical assumptions and conventions as written by the game's designers which affect and give context to the setting, rules, and mechanics that form the game.

The above general analysis of tabletop role-playing games as it relates to Gee's framework's first question intentionally fails to mention the role of game master. Game masters, in most systems, are a required element of the game and their role in the discourse depends greatly on the rules system being used and on the style of game being played. The game master is an active player who generally controls one or more non-player characters as well as guides the other players, but their role in the discourse is vitally distinct from the other players. The role of the game master in a tabletop role-playing game is much like a video game's engine in that it facilitates the execution of a game's rules and story as it is interacted with, but a game master's role often extends much farther than either the player or rules do as conversational participants. Game masters are arbiters of the rules system and have the responsibility to administer the game's rules fairly to all other players, their characters, and the non-player characters

involved in the story. In that way, the player in the role of game master fills the roles of three separate conversational partners simultaneously: a normal player, in their control of one or more characters; a storyteller, who through words and actions conveys a unique story to the players; and an arbitrator, responsible for translating player actions and game rules into meaningful events within the game.

How does syntax work? What are the basic units and how are they combined?

James Paul Gee's second question in the framework for discourse analysis pertains to the syntax used in the discourse of a game. Syntax is the words and phrases that make up the structure of a message, the atomic units and combinations of units that form a comprehensive idea. In Gee's Unified Discourse Analysis, syntax is extended from more than just words and phrases. A game's syntax covers all aspects of a game and a player's interaction with a game that could have some meaning applied to them. In a conversation with a game, words are replaced by button inputs and responses replaced by action on the screen. As such, a game's syntactic elements include the inputs themselves, the setting that the game takes place in, and objects in the virtual world. Out-of-world elements such as progress bars, reticles, and other interface elements also make up part of a game's syntax.

Gee's second question applies to tabletop role-playing games the same way it does to video games. The syntax of tabletop role-playing games includes the setting of the game, whether it is based in fantasy, or science fiction, or a realistic modern world. The characters, locations, and objects in the game's world are syntactic elements. Abstract concepts in tabletop role-playing games such as health, skills, attributes, and character classes are a major part of most tabletop games' syntax. Additionally, since tabletop role-playing games are shared storytelling games, the syntax of the game may also

include some large subset of the syntax of the entire language used by the players and game master as it pertains to the game.

Tabletop role-playing games pose a uniquely complex problem when attempting to analyze the syntax of any given game. Before any actual play happens, the syntax is static and rather straightforward. Games have mechanics, those are syntax; games have worlds, those are syntax; games have characters, those are syntax. But when the time comes to commence actual play of a tabletop role-playing game, the syntax immediately becomes nearly limitless. Since tabletop role-playing games take place exclusively in shared imaginative worlds fueled by improvisation, a key syntactical element of the game may come into existence in the same moment it is given meaning and acted upon. This makes the analysis of a tabletop role-playing game an ongoing process as new syntax is established during each session of play, and those syntactic elements likely only exist in the universe of one group of players. The expansion of a tabletop role-playing game's syntax is not unlike the expansion of syntax in another specialized field, such as engineering or mathematics, when new research is conducted.

How does semantics work?

James Paul Gee's third question addresses the semantics, or meaning, of the established syntax of a game's world. Semantics are what give syntax purpose and are how messages are meaningfully carried between two parties, be they player or game. Gee's question of semantics further breaks down the problem into the identification of a Universe of Discourse, or the summation of all entities in the game's domain, and the analysis of how the established Universe of Discourse assign semantic meaning to the syntax of the game. In a video game, the Universe of Discourse is composed of the character or characters in the game, the game's world, and the various skills and abilities the characters possess. This Universe is used to give meaning to the actions and events of the game's world in context.

Since tabletop role-playing games are based on and conducted in natural language, much of the semantics of these games are based on the semantics of the languages being used. Aside from their meanings established in natural language, syntax in tabletop role-playing games is given meaning by the game's rules and Universe of Discourse. In Dungeons and Dragons 5e, the phrase "ranged spell attack" carries a very specific semantic meaning unique to that game engine. A tabletop role-playing game's Universe of Discourse can also expand outside of itself and contain elements of, or entire, pop culture properties and genres. Telling the game master that your character is attempting to "do a Legolas down the stairs" only has semantic meaning because the game's Universe of Discourse includes the game's characters, the game's rules, and the Lord of the Rings film franchise.

We established above that a tabletop role-playing game's Universe of Discourse is constantly expanding to include new ideas and meanings as sessions are played, making the semantic meanings applied to each element of syntax can change dramatically over the course of a campaign. The shared world-building and improvisation elements of tabletop role-playing games causes their semantics and Universes of Discourse to behave more like natural language discourse than those pre-defined by a video game's designer. This puts the tabletop role-playing game's game master in a unique position as rules arbitrator to interpret and codify elements of their individual game's Universe of Discourse as they come up during sessions of play, influencing in real-time semantics much like a designer would in the early stages of a video game's development.

What is the avatar?

James Paul Gee's fourth question in his framework for discourse analysis is the establishment of the player's avatar within the game, as well as how they function as identities, toolkits, and surrogate bodies. In video games, these character avatars are most often pre-defined based on the needs of the game's mechanics, story, and world. Depending on the game, an avatar may act as a wholly distinct

identity from the player or may function as a self-insert of the player into the game's world. Avatars within games act as the player's surrogate body, allowing players to interact with virtual worlds either directly or indirectly based on the avatar's virtual physiology and ability. Lastly, Gee's analysis examines video game avatars as toolkits that offer the player abilities to interact with the virtual world through the avatar's skills, abilities, and prowess that the player would otherwise lack. The identification and analysis of a video game's avatar provide additional context to the game's elements and the player's interaction with the virtual world.

Avatars in tabletop role-playing games are, for the most part, the characters controlled by the players in the game. These characters are most often created from scratch by their corresponding player or by the game master, and frequently serve as an identity in the shared role-play of the game. Tabletop role-playing game avatars allow the player to enforce their will upon the imaginary world, acting as a surrogate body to the player that can interact with the shared world based on the player's improvisation and the avatar's unique abilities. Player avatars within tabletop role-playing games are generally established and used in ways functionally like those in video games, with the added element of improvisation and ultimately flexible identity.

Tabletop role-playing games have a unique relationship with avatars as defined by Gee's Unified Discourse Analysis. As an almost necessarily collaborative game among a group of players, player avatars are defined not only by their own identities but also by their role in the makeup of a unique party. The identity and toolkit of a healer-archetype carry additional significance if the avatar is the only one that can heal and the party is made up of foolhardy characters that rush into danger. In addition to player avatars being uniquely defined by their role in a party, I posit that the party is an avatar unto itself. Its identity is the fused will of all party members, and it acts as a surrogate body and toolkit for the group of players while their individuality has no specific semantic meaning.

The game master is another unique element of tabletop role-playing games that merits additional detail as it pertains to Gee's framework of discourse analysis. Game masters play the role of allies, enemies, and forces of nature, each of which could in turn be considered an avatar for the purposes of Unified Discourse Analysis. The game master must embody these myriad avatars and identities simultaneously during a game session, affecting the game's world through the scope of each avatar's individual toolset to achieve their goal for the game. In addition to the in-world avatars that the game master creates and embodies, I feel that the identity of the rules arbiter is a distinct avatar within the tabletop role-playing game. The rules arbiter is separate entity that the game master controls, with a toolkit capable of changing the integral fabric of the shared improvisation that makes up the game's world. In embodying the rules arbiter, the game master sheds their normal roles as both player and character and acts independent of the game's lore and narrative to correct or codify the syntax and semantics of the game's world.

How are affordances and effective abilities aligned?

James Paul Gee's fifth question in the framework for discourse analysis pertains to establishing how affordances, what an object or environment makes available to the individual, relate to an individual's effective abilities, the toolkit that allows an individual to act on the world. In video games, affordances and effective abilities can vary wildly based on the type and style of video game being analyzed, as can the relation between these two ideas. In a game with fully destructible buildings a wall provides the affordance to the player avatar of destroying and passing through the wall, whereas in a game without such mechanics the wall may afford the player the option to seek cover. Affordances exist in objects and the environment, but those that are not well aligned with the player avatar's effective abilities will either be difficult for impossible to take advantage of. A swinging rope across a chasm does not have the affordance of a means of traversing the chasm if the player's avatar lacks the effective

abilities to grab and swing from the rope. Video games are most satisfying when affordances in the environment line up with the effective abilities of the player's avatar, and what the player expects to be able to do can be done.

As games of shared worldbuilding and collaborative improvisation, tabletop role-playing games have a unique relationship with affordances and effective abilities. Unlike a video game where a designer has specified the exact affordances each object and environment provide, tabletop role-playing games rely primarily on the players to improvise affordances into being based on their avatar's effective abilities. While most tabletop role-playing game systems and pre-written adventures have predefined affordances for players, such as certain objects being well suited as weapons or tools, those affordances are only the narrowest baseline of the affordances that exist or can exist. Players in tabletop role-playing games use improvisation to create affordances within the environment as guided by their avatar's effective abilities, personality, and backstory as well as the player's own creativity. Unlike in video games, designers can only hope to capture and codify a vanishingly small minority of affordances.

The role of game master in a tabletop role-playing game has a dramatic effect on the affordances, effective abilities, and alignment of such in their game. Many game masters follow the wisdom of the "rule of cool," wherein any semi-logical affordance a player's avatar may find is accepted as available, regardless of the avatar's established effective abilities, such as a spellcaster reusing a normally offensive spell to perform a non-combat task. Other game masters follow a more rigidly structured adherence to the rules of the game system as written, allowing only actions to be performed if an avatar's effective abilities align perfectly with the affordances the environment provides, such as restricting the affordance of a lock being picked to specifically avatars proficient with lockpicking tools. Further still, some game masters impose lore or backstory restrictions on the effective abilities and affordances in their games, such as limiting a faith-based spellcaster's ability to function based on their continued faith even when no written rules specifically require that. Much like video game designers

must think of the player avatar's effective abilities and how they align with the environment's affordances, tabletop role-playing game designers must provide a strong yet flexible framework for how avatars' effective abilities can affect the game's world, and game masters must be aware that in games where collaborative improvisation is the primary means of gameplay, affordances in game's world are primarily decided by the players imagining that world.

How does X-ray vision function?

James Paul Gee's sixth question of the framework of discourse theory for video games concerns the idea of X-Ray Vision, or the ability of the player and avatar to see beyond the literal virtual environment and distill the pertinent information about the game's world using the avatar's perspective and effective abilities. Players grow accustomed to experiencing the virtual world both as the avatar themselves and as players of the game. Video games often follow common design patterns to jumpstart the players' x-ray vision, such as interactable objects being slightly more saturated than those that are mere background elements. Video games also supplement the player's vision with analogs to senses that the avatar possesses that cannot be naturally displayed on a screen, such as a mini map substituting for the avatar's spatial awareness and geographic recollection. Players also develop their own aspect of x-ray vision as they play video games, more easily identifying threats and opportunities that neither the game nor the character make explicitly known.

Gee's concept of X-Ray Vision applies in much the same way to tabletop role-playing games as it would to real life. Unlike video games, where a designer has meticulously laid out the sensory and extra-sensory abilities of the player's avatar and planned for how those abilities give the player insight into the virtual world, players in tabletop role-playing games must analyze the text or speech of the game master to parse out relevant details and ignore details which act purely as padding and set dressing. Since playing a game entirely in the shared imagination of a group of players means that the bounds are

theoretically limitless, designers of tabletop role-playing games often codify ways in which player characters can perceive the game world in order to guide players towards meaningful interactions. Most role-playing rules systems contain one or more attributes and skills which the player can leverage to perceive the imaginary world through their character's senses and perception, such as the Insight skill in Dungeons and Dragons being used specifically to interpret the emotions and intent of a target. This type of sensory coding helps game masters and players discuss their imaginary world in common terms that convey specific meanings.

The game master's role in the X-Ray Vision of tabletop role-playing games is paramount. As the primary storyteller, guide, and arbiter of the rules, the game master has or has the means to establish the truth of the universe in which the game takes place. Conveying this information to the players through text or speech itself gives the player avatar's x-ray vision into the game world based on how descriptions are phrased, what narrative elements are given the most weight, and the cadence of the description. A game master's description of a room can give the players subtle clues to what happened in the room, who was there previously, and when they left, all potentially driving players towards interactions and conclusions that they otherwise might not discover. The game master's choice of words is as important as what goes unsaid during the description of locations and events in a tabletop role-playing game, driving players' attention toward relevant aspects of the world and away from those that serve no narrative purpose.

How is meaning being situated? How are situated meanings created?

James Paul Gee's seventh question of the discourse analysis framework asks how situated meaning, meaning derived from the context of a game's world and the avatar's position in that world, is derived. Video games provide meaning to the entities and events within them by way of the context of the game, its setting, story, and lore, and by the way the player's avatar construes that context relative

to themselves. A game's world is construed differently by characters with different abilities, physiologies, and social standings, which can assign different meanings to the same actions much as it does in the real world. The situated meaning of elements in a video game can also change over the course of the game as the player's avatar gains new abilities or the plot unfolds and repackages the context in a new light relative to the avatar.

Tabletop role-playing games rely heavily on context and situated meaning. Since each player has a different view of the shared imaginary world, the game master's descriptions of events and of the locations players encounter are key to building as consistent a world as possible so that players interpret the meanings of events and entities the same way. Many tabletop role-playing games assist their players with this context by setting many of their published adventures in the same world, which allows the context of one adventure to build into another's, much like a video game set in the Lord of the Rings universe builds atop the contexts of both the book and film franchises. The context of a tabletop role-playing game is construed differently by each player and by each player's avatar in the game world depending on many factors. Players with more experience within the rules system and prior adventures in the same world will interpret the context in one way, while players fully role-playing their character's point of view will interpret the context in another.

Since tabletop role-playing games take place in the theater of the mind the role of packaging, or the linguistic structure of the words and phrases that describe an entity, is as important as it is in natural language. The way in which events and objects are described by the players of a tabletop role-playing game can change the contextual meaning of those aspects of the game's world. Players build their unique view of the game's shared world based on descriptions from other players, the game master, and the shared lore of the setting, and can only take actions as their avatar relative to that view of the game's world. This makes the need for consistent packaging and structure of discourse between the

players and game master very important, as the words and phrases being used can literally change the shape of the world they are referencing.

What is the role of story; cultural, social, scientific, or other sorts of theories, models, schemas, or frames; and beliefs, values, and ideologies?

James Paul Gee's seventh question of the framework of discourse analysis asks how a game's written story, the story from the top-down perspective as written by the designers, affects the game as a discourse. Top-down stories in video games are influenced by dozens of factors and interpreted uniquely by players in unlimited ways. The story of a video game can be based on popular culture, mythology, or any of a hundred different bases, and each story is affected by the culture and social elements of the authors. In the same way that one story could be interpreted in a million ways based on the consumer, a single story can be told in a million ways based on the author. A video game's top-down story is an important factor in giving meaning to the game's events but can also be detrimental to the player's own interpretation of the game's events if the designer's story conflicts with the player's story.

The top-down story of tabletop role-playing games depends wildly on the system being used, the sourcebooks that supplement it, and the game master guiding the players on their adventures. Many tabletop role-playing games are set in fantasy worlds or pop culture properties, which give players distinct expectations for how the story is structured and from what cultural background the story is founded. Players in a tabletop role-playing game based in Arthurian legend will have specific expectations as to how the physics of the world works, how the power structure of the world works, and how socioeconomic classes function relative to one another. These types of out-of-game aspects of the story affect the discourse as much as the explicitly designed in-game aspects do.

The role of collaborative improvisation in tabletop role-playing games and their reliance on a shared imagined world makes true top-down storytelling almost impossible. Tabletop role-playing games are purely driven by the choices and actions of the player avatars, with the top-down story most often functioning as a loose framework or bullet points in an attempt at an overarching narrative. Published adventures often attempt to provide a compelling top-down story, but generally end up being used as a primer on the setting and lore for a campaign more so than a proper top-down story. This is by design, as tabletop role-playing games are all about collaborative storytelling. The rules, adventures, and game master all just function to serve the players as guides and inspiration.

How is a “player’s story” being constructed by the choices, decisions, actions, interactions, successes and failures the “player” experiences as he or she talks, acts, and plays?

James Paul Gee’s final question of the discourse analysis framework is the establishment of how the player’s story, the uniquely lived story of the player’s avatar, is constructed from the player’s choices within the game’s world. All video games have player story, as any interaction with the game world or chance to succeed or fail contributes the player’s individual story with the game. Open world games rely on this phenomenon of self-directed story creation as their primary method of storytelling, allowing the player’s perception of and their interaction with the game world to create the player’s unique story. More narratively driven games still allow for the creation of a player story in how the player interacts with the game’s world and succeeds or fails when encountering the challenges that the game provides. Narrative games can also hurt the player story when wrenching control away from the player and making the player’s avatar behave incongruently with the player’s story during cutscenes and scripted segments.

Tabletop role-playing games are built almost entirely of player stories. Published adventures, sourcebooks, and game masters all try to frame and guide the actions that take place in the game's shared imagined world, but the actions of the player avatars are what truly creates the game and drives the story along. This is primary element that makes role-playing games distinct from video games, and a large part of their popularity. In a tabletop role-playing game, players improvise their actions based on the description provided by the game master and by their understanding of the game's world. Additionally, most players take part in at least partial role-playing, making their decisions and actions based on the personality and backstory of their avatar and their avatar's position within the group. So not only is there a player story which is constructed during play, but an avatar story which is distinct from the player's story. Player and avatar story are so important and meaningful to the play of tabletop role-playing games that many players will reprise their role as a certain avatar in campaigns for years, across groups, and even across game systems.

The role of the game master in a tabletop role-playing game can be an overwhelmingly beneficial or detrimental factor on the player's story. Game masters who follow the "yes, and" principle of improvisation may see their own pre-planned story goes off the rails, but the resulting player story of all the participants will be stronger for it. Game masters that don't embrace the "yes, and" principle, or those that adhere strictly to a "no, but" rules-based approach to gameplay, are rarely asked to reprise their role as game master once the adventure is completed. In tabletop role-playing games, where improvisation is the key story driving action, killing the flow of the collaborative story leaves a bad taste in the players mouths.

Conclusion

James Paul Gee's Unified Discourse Analysis, and the nine questions that make up the framework for discourse analysis, can be used, almost without modification, to study the discourse of

tabletop role-playing games such as Dungeons and Dragons, Pathfinder, and more. Tabletop role-playing games function as a median between natural language conversations and the play of video games, with freeform improvisation providing the majority of the input and actions to the game and a designed system of rules in place to resolve the effects of those actions. Role-playing game players embody avatars much in the same way that video game players embody the avatars of their characters, and both use the toolkits of those avatars to interact with and affect the game's world. Meaning is provided to both types of games through the game's world and the avatars' unique perspective of those worlds.

The only necessary modification to Gee's framework for discourse analysis as it pertains to tabletop role-playing games is the additional consideration of how improvisation on both the part of the players and the game master affect the game. Tabletop role-playing games are primarily fueled by improvisation, which means that the feel of a game can change drastically depending on how the other players, the game master, and the rules system itself responds to player improvisation. Improvisation and the shared imagined universe of a role-playing group define the syntax and semantics of the game in real-time based on collaboration and creativity.

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