

Analysis of the Rocket League Discourse Community

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A discourse community (DC) is a community whose members have at least a vague sense of unity in goals pertaining to some particular topic, as well as a method of intercommunication. There are eight characteristics these DCs share when viewed from the perspective of the renowned linguist Swales' framework (2020), which largely revolve around communication and codes of behavior. Today there are countless DCs, with the topic of this paper being the DC that is Rocket League (RL): an online multiplayer video game. It consists of a closed field where players compete against each other in soccer, whilst "being" a car. The cars hit around an overly-sized soccer ball—trying to push it into the other team's net—with arcade-like physics. The official website describes the game as "the high-powered hybrid of arcade-style soccer and vehicular mayhem" (Psyonix, n.d.). The focus here will be on the expectations players have of each other on a team, and the unique lexis, both of which are a part of Swales' criteria (2020). How communication is facilitated will also be considered. The aim is to show that RL forms a complex DC that has its players act and communicate in a distinctive way.

In the beginning of each RL game, the players are positioned in distinct locations, and the ball is placed in the middle. In the three-against-three game mode some players on each team are placed closer to the ball than others. Without explicit communication, it is understood which player should go for the ball. For instance, when two players are placed closer to the ball, the player on the left is expected to go for the kick-off, while the one on the right stays back. This is an arbitrary selection that players typically adhere to for the sake of efficiency and optimal positioning. Additionally, positioning after the kick-off is very important, and is a vital skill to learn in order to integrate into higher ranks. Failure to position properly often results in harsh

criticism from teammates. This displays its nature as a DC; that players silently adhere to practices and have relatively specific guidelines applied to their gameplay, which is one of the vital functions of a DC. As such, the RL DC has met the eighth criterion of Swales (2020) quite clearly, which is developing expectations and “value systems for what is good and less good work” (p. 10).

Secondly, a fascinating part of the RL DC is the diverse terminology used to describe different “mechanics”. A mechanic is a certain action or movement a player can do which typically involves some complicated string of inputs. These movements are not realistic and are special to RL due to the unique physics of the game. For example, consider the “Musty flick”. A “flick” in itself is a type of mechanic which involves quickly tilting your car in order to hit the ball. The “Musty flick”—named after the YouTuber Musty who popularized it—involves doing a sort of incomplete backflip while the ball is on the front of your car. This is just one example among many; others include “Kuxir pinches” and “horse-dashes”. An interesting consequence of this RL-specific lexis is that it is an unavoidable barrier in integrating into the RL DC. As University of Toronto professor Seeley et al. argue (2021), entering into a DC necessitates gaining an understanding of the social context of communication, and the RL DC certainly serves as an example of exactly that. To enter the RL DC and gain notable authority, you must first know the terminology, then eventually learn how to perform these mechanics yourself.

Finally, the communication is mostly done through the RL chat system. The vast majority of messages sent over this system are through the use of pre-selected dialogue options that RL makes available by shortcuts. Players use this system to tell their teammates information about their position and what they expect of them. Naturally, however, this can be used for the sake of “toxicity”, or in other words, to give destructive criticism. For example, by default, pressing 1

then 4 types out “What a save!” in the chat on PC. The intended usage is as a complement, but it is instead nearly always used to mock a player when they have terribly missed a save. The quick nature of this system makes communication overall quite impulsive. This contributes to RL’s reputation as a deeply toxic community. It single handedly introduces lots of the core characteristics associated with the RL community, and as communication is crucial in a DC (Swales, 2020), it is clear why. This way of communication also offers people a way of gaining authority—learning when and how to “trash talk”. Players can talk negatively to either their teammates or opponents to express their superiority. When aimed at opponents, it can cause them to become irritated and subsequently make bad decisions, which allows for more mockery. In the end, so long as the person using toxic language wins, it increases their authority.

To conclude, Rocket League is a video game which has formed a DC that possesses some special characteristics due to the unique gameplay. From a bigger picture view, RL as a DC is remarkably similar to the DCs formed by many other games in that they have the same pattern of forming terminology and rules to adhere by. As with many games, the “jargon” used by players and their hostility towards anyone they are mildly annoyed by can push people away. It is still important to understand how their communication is shaped, and as Pattanayak asserts (2017), people tend to not look at others who are foreign to a community with empathy given they are unfamiliar with the underlying rules. This serves as a lesson to both RL players, and people who have never played the game, to try and understand each other.

References

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