Verbal Communication of Story Facilitators in Multi-player Role-Playing Games

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Abstract. Multi-player role-playing games form one of the key examples of interactive, emergent and collaborative storytelling systems available. These games and the collaborative stories that they create, are commonly facilitated by a specialized participant, the game master. In the current study, the verbal communication of game masters in a series of role-playing game sessions is categorized and analyzed depending on form and content, using protocol analysis, establishing a model for the verbal communication of game masters.

Keywords: Game Master, Role-Playing Game, emergent narrative.

1 Introduction

Role-Playing Games form one of the major genres of games, represented in non-digital, digital and embodied formats. Depending on the form, role-playing games (RPGs) can be played with a single to thousands of participants interacting simultaneously in physical as well as virtual environments. Several varieties represent examples of collaborative, emergent interactive storytelling systems [2]. This is especially true for the classical expression of RPGs, that of the table-top RPG where a handful of participants partake in a collaboratively generated story framed by rules. No digital systems exist that surpass the flexibility of tabletop RPGs - not even player-controlled modules run with e.g. the AURORA and ELECTRON game engines for the PC game Neverwinter Nights [14], and they therefore form a rare example of a very pure interactive storytelling system. Just like in digital interactive storytelling systems, the players - or users - take on the role of fictional characters, operating in a fictional environment [3]. Inherent in RPGs is the same key problem that are facing designers of character-based, emergent interactive storytelling systems, that of reconciling the need for a coherent plot structure with the freedom of the user to affect the unfolding narrative [9, 10]. Table-top RPGs solve this problem by dividing the authorial control of the collaborative story – there are at least two – unevenly between the participants. Typically one (in some cases more than one) of the participants take
on the mantle of managing the overall flow of the storyline by taking control of the fictional world the player-controlled characters (PCs) operate within and determining how the world and its inhabitants react to the actions of the PCs within it. This concept of story facilitators are common to all RPGs, even live action role-playing games and massively multi-player online RPGs [4], and the functionally is named differently in different games, with the most common term being Game Master (GM) [7]. The operations of GMs form a source of inspiration for the construction of digital storytelling systems, because their function in effect is to reconcile the demands of a pre-authored plot with user influence (as well as user motivation and interest with engaging in the storytelling activity in the first place) [2, 12], in the process utilizing NPCs (autonomous agents). Existing work on GM functionality has addressed the basic processes of non-digital RPGs [8, 14]; the question of division of authorial control, and story planning and updating in runtime [2, 9, 12]. However, while this work has taken initial steps in developing models for the operations of GMs, it does not address the questions of what GMs actually verbally communicate to the players (users) during a multi-player RPG session? [14] presented an initial study of verbal communication in multi-player RPGs across tabletop and digital platforms, however, the focus was on the communication between all the participants; the GM was not considered as a separate entity. In the current study, protocol analysis [6] was applied to transcribed utterances from RPG sessions, which are categorized depending on form and content, and additional context-analysis applied to form an initial model of the verbal communication of GMs.

2 Experimental Setup and Methodology

A series of five PnP game sessions were run with groups of five players and one GM in a laboratory featuring one-way mirrors to permit participant observation without intrusion. Each group played the same RPG module – a form of pre-planned overview of the game story which the GM utilizes to facilitate the collaborative story - and negotiated the premises for the division of authorial control individually. The sessions were recorded, covering approximately 28 hours of game play. The game module utilized in the experiment utilized simple game rules, comparable with the Dungeons & Dragons D20-system. The module featured a sci-fi themed story, which pitches the player character in the middle of a war against a race of - alleged - terrible aliens. Characters were pre-defined.

Verbal communication and participant behavior was subsequently transcribed for approximately 40-60 minutes of playing time from five PnP sessions, distributed over three scenes from the beginning, middle and end of each game session, each with varying game story content (to accommodate variations in communications, as a function of playing time and game-story content). The transcriptions were subsequently subjected to protocol analysis, a method utilized within communications for studying both groups and individuals [6]; and applied in the context of multi-player games by [13,14]. Protocols are in this context recorded behaviour of the study objects, represented by video and audio recordings [1]. Protocol analysis generally produces large sample sizes and numerical data for which standard variations and similar statistical measures can be calculated. The data were analyzed in terms of raw