

Face and figuration in RPG play

William J. White

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Abstract: This article employs a perspective that sees issues of *face* (i.e., social identity and connection) and *figure* (i.e., meaning and metaphor) as fundamental features of communication in order to examine a snippet of actual play from a game called *Spirit of the Century*, run and recorded by the author at a gaming convention for an “actual play” podcast. The in-depth exploration of this moment of play underscores the multiplicity of frames within a role-playing game and the sophistication with which players negotiate these frames for both diegetic and metacommunicative purposes. The implications of this analysis for game design are briefly sketched.

It may be too much to say that role-playing in any form is a serious thing, but like many activities undertaken for pleasure, it is a thing that we do in fact take seriously—for example, by wanting to understand how it works, and how to make it work better. With respect at least to the two major forms of face-to-face role-playing (i.e., tabletop gaming and larp), one insight that consistently emerges in the analysis of play is its *multiplicity of frames*—as both social encounter and creative performance, a role-playing game is several things at once, and so “good play” requires the ability to navigate this multiplicity and perhaps even leverage the ambiguity that results for creative ends. For example, Brenne (2005) shows how laiv players (Norwegian larpers) shuttle back and forth between fiction-generating performance and play-sustaining metacommunication in order to generate and maintain both the *diegesis* (Montola, 2003) of the game (i.e., the fictional world) and the solidarity of the social encounter (i.e. the playing of the game as a lived experience). In this way, distinctions among real and unreal often become blurry; Waskul and Lust (2004) observe that role-players “inevitably find themselves a part of ‘but one infinite game’” (pp. 352-353) as they recognize the extent to which their so-called “real world” personae are also at least to some degree enacted roles rather than true selves.

However, despite this blurring, we are never confused: we do not mistake the game for reality, the fiction for the truth, nor the parts for their players. Or do we? Consider this excerpt, taken from the early moments of a tabletop RPG game:

- [1] (13:30) GM: Rex, didn't you in fact take out a huge loan to finance the construction of the Redhawk? And doesn't that mean that if you lose the race, you'll also lose the company? What do you say to that?
- [2] REX RICH: Who's asking this?
- [3] (13:42) GM: I'm asking this...I'm the, I'm the, I'm the, um... ah—

[4] REX RICH: Well, I mean is there...

[5] (13:47) GM: —I'm the narrator.

[6] [Laughter]

[7] REX RICH: Okaay...

[8] [Laughter]

Several interesting things take place in this segment of talk. The GM's initial statement is an attempt to contribute to the shared diegesis. He asks the player it affects to validate his contribution, either by accepting or rejecting it. But the player does neither! He turns the contribution into a *problem* by asking about the source of the “factual” diegetic claim: where does it come from? The GM is clearly discomfited by this problematization. He has no immediate answer, and when he finally finds a response, it is met with laughter from the others around the table and an ironic rejoinder from the player himself. The player's “Okaay...” does not mean that he accepts the answer: the drawn-out vowel sound with its falling inflection signifies doubt and skepticism.

This essay explores this moment of play in order to say more about *diegetic negotiation*: the way in which players coordinate their contributions to their shared understanding of the fiction. The analysis is centered on an 80-second excerpt of which the transcript above represents the first several seconds. The game in question is a four-hour convention slot of *Spirit of the Century* (Donoghue, Hicks, & Balsera, 2006), a tabletop RPG of pulp adventure in the 1920s; players of the game expect there to be fisticuffs and swordplay atop out-of-control zeppelins, dogfights and car chases aplenty, and a modicum of mad science and mystic secrets. This expectation emerges from the rules themselves, which feature an extensive discussion of pulp's genre conventions, and is reinforced by “epitexts” (Genette, 1997) such as on-line discussions in which over-the-top pulp action is bruted as a mainstay of the game (Ellis, 2008). It was recorded for a podcast called *Virtual Play* (M. White, 2008a) that extracts snippets of gaming sessions in order to discuss interesting aspects of role-playing

for an audience familiar with small-press or “indie” tabletop games. The audio recording of the complete gaming session is available on-line (M. White, 2008b). The excerpt was selected because it seemed likely to reveal some interesting dynamics of play bearing on the question of how speech at the table is used to introduce new elements into the fiction of the game—what has been called contributing to the “shared imaginary space” (Edwards, 2004) or the employment of “incorporative discourse strategies” (Hendricks, 2006) as well as interactive diegesis construction (Montola, 2003).

Before continuing with the rest of the excerpt, however, a short summary providing the context of the game is necessary. Following the excerpt is a brief theoretical discussion to animate the analytical reading of the transcript that is the heart of this essay.

The game

There are six people around a table in a hotel ballroom of no great size. The Game Master (GM) has recruited five players, each of whom has selected a character prepared by the GM for the adventure. The characters are thus “pre-generated”: players receive a *character sheet* detailing their character’s game-mechanical abilities and attributes as well as a two-page summary of their fictional history together, divided into pulp-like episodes, e.g.:

SCIENCE WONDER STORIES #4 “Rex Rich and the Sky Pirates of Africa.” At war’s end, when Rex Rich and Jack Redstone attempt a record-breaking around-the-world dirigible flight, their journey is cut short over equatorial Africa by a squadron of sky pirates, who shoot down Jack’s scout plane and take Rex’s dirigible in tow to a secret base. Their leader AIR-BARON ZEVO challenges Rex to a series of contests to demonstrate the superiority of *homo futurian* -- Futurian man! Meanwhile, Jack befriends a tribe of intelligent apes who help him repair his plane. Homing in on the radio beacon that

Rex secretly activated, Jack manages to find and infiltrate the Futurian base. Together, the two friends make their escape, and Rex returns to Hub City with secrets taken from the Futurians that he will use to start his own aviation company.

It is early in the game. The GM has set the scene: it is the spring of 1921, and the characters are present at a fly-off between two rocket-planes at an airfield in New Jersey to decide which one will be put into production by the U.S. War Department as an intercontinental interceptor. One of the competing rocket-planes, the “Redhawk,” is the brainchild of the pre-generated player-character (PC) Rex Rich, a wealthy aviation entrepreneur in the mold of Howard Hughes; the other PCs include Dr. Einstein (observing on behalf of the League of Nations), local girl reporter Lucy Lovelace (looking for a good story), private eye Max Mensch (in the employ of Rex Rich, keeping his eyes peeled for trouble), and Martian rebel Tan-Gliil (come to Earth secretly seeking the aid of Dr. Einstein).

So much has been explicitly narrated by the GM and accepted by the respective players. An interesting feature of *Spirit of the Century* is its use of descriptive character elements called “Aspects.” These are short phrases that encapsulate some essential feature of the character, including possessions, life experiences, attitudes, relationships and so forth. For example, the character Rex Rich has an Aspect called “*I’m Paying You—Just Make It Fly!*” which impressionistically conveys both the intensity of the wealthy aviation entrepreneur’s will and the brusqueness of his manner. The rules make clear that Aspects are double-edged. Invoked by the player, they provide either a game-mechanical or narrative advantage; “compelled” by the GM, they produce a penalty or disadvantage to the character. Negotiating these invocations and compulsions requires a currency of “Fate tokens” that represent the ebb and flow of advantage and disadvantage.

In the first few minutes of the game, before the excerpted segment begins, the GM has explained these rules to the the players and then started to put them into practice by going around the table to each player and

presenting him or her with a “compel.” Dr. Einstein’s player has accepted a compel of his Aspect *Devout Pacifist* and begun asking nosy questions of the supervisor of the test, General Douglas MacArthur. The player playing girl reporter Lucy Lovelace has accepted the GM’s claim that her editor will bury her story on an inside page unless it is a good one, and started looking for a story that will make headlines. At this point, the GM turns his attention to the Rex Rich’s player, and addresses him as his character. Play then proceeds as above: the player problematizes the GM’s contribution, the GM stammers out a response, laughter and skepticism result. The remaining portion of the transcript indicates what happens next.

The transcript

Each individual “utterance” is sequentially numbered for ease of reference; the GM’s utterances are marked with a time hack to provide a sense of how the utterances are distributed in time. The orthography is more or less standard, with some effort to represent pauses, interruptions, talking-over, disfluencies, and so forth when they are markedly present in the audio recording. However, the extensive and specialized transcription scheme of conversation analysis (see Schiffrin, 1994, for a summary) was not judged to be necessary for the purposes of this analysis.

The structure of the transcript establishes the problem this essay attempts to explore. The GM’s first remark to Rex, at the utterance marked [1] above, is diegetic: the GM proposes that something is true in the game-fiction (namely, that Rex’s company is at risk), and anticipates that Rex’s player will regard this as an opportunity either to accept or reject the proposal, and in so doing he will make a performative statement about the player’s vision of his character. The utterances at [2-5] are an attempt between the player and GM to reach some sort of intersubjective understanding of the warrant validating the GM’s diegetic effort. In [6-8], the failure of that attempt becomes clear, as we have seen above.

The rest of the transcript picks up below from this point. At [9-12], the players engage in some ironical play that has the effect of demonstrating

the unsustainability of the GM’s warrant—they are unwilling to allow a “narrator” with the explicit ability to address the characters, perhaps because this violates their sense of appropriate genre conventions or “interaction codes” (Fatland, 2006), so that [13-23] shows the GM reframing his diegetic attempt game-mechanically rather than narratively, and the players cooperating in that reframing. Finally, the utterance at [24] by Dr. Einstein’s player—notably, one of the authors of the game being played—is a kind of coda to the episode.

[9] TAN-GLIIL: It’s your guilty conscience.

[10] REX RICH (theatrically): Damn! How does it always know?
Why now?

[11] [Laughter]

[12] MAX MENSCH: And where does that voice come from?

[13] (14:00) GM: So let me make some, lemme, um—yeah—um, I’m sorry—I should say that what I’m, what I’m, what I’m, um, what I’m looking towards, what I’m *eyeballin’* on your sheet is the Aspect—

[14] REX RICH: Yes, but *That’s a Risk I’m Willing To Take*.

[15] (14:16) GM: Yes, exactly. And notice that one of your stunts is, um, like “Gambling Man”—

[16] REX RICH: Oh, okay.

[17] (14:22) GM: —and that means that risk-related compels are doubled in strength, so that if you want to get out of this, you have to pay me *two* Fate, or you can just take the two Fate. So your company is now on the line—

[18] REX RICH: Oh, I see.

[19] (14:34) GM: —so that if you lose the race, then...

[20] TAN-GLIIL: Then *you lose it all!*

[21] (14:40) GM: You lose it all.

[22] REX RICH: Well, I can't make a claim like that without backing it up, so I'll take it.

[23] (14:45) GM: Okay. That's a risk you're willing to take. Good, good, good. All right. Um, okay.

[24] DR. EINSTEIN: That's a lovely stunt for really amping up your Fate point total. (14:50)

The calculus of face and the geometries of figure

Two fundamental concepts for making sense of the multiplicity of frames in this short excerpt of play—in which, nonetheless, much takes place—are *face* and *figure* (W. J. White, 2008). The idea of face comes from the work of sociologist Erving Goffman (1959; 1967; 1969), who defines it as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (Goffman, 1967, p. 5). In other words, face is a currency of social interaction signifying that one is adhering to the norms, conventions, and other social expectations to which one's claimed role (or “line”) makes one subject. Usually, Goffman says, *all participants* in a contact work to save or preserve each other's face, with the goal of sustaining social solidarity (although sometimes aggressive facework is undertaken for strategic reasons, to “put someone in her place,” for example). So moments where face seems to be threatened, and then is either restored or lost, promise to reveal something about the dynamics of play as communication.

But paralleling the social dimension of face is the meaning-related dimension of figure, or figuration. This idea acknowledges that language is meaningful from more than a purely instrumental calculus of how it enables us to one-up others in social interaction: we use words to establish intersubjectively our sense of the shape of the world—how things are, in other words, and what they mean. One approach to this aspect of talk in a general sense is communication scholar Michael Silverstein's (2004) discussion of the “poetics of discourse”: the rhetorical or semiotic patterning taken up by participants in discourse as they make ideational distinctions

and connections in their talk. In plain language, our use of words establishes associations and contrasts as the things we talk about (including ourselves) are either likened to each other or distinguished from them. For example, consider the instance of an Austrian woman who had survived the Holocaust at Auschwitz and an SS physician who had served there but had been acquitted of war crimes, meeting in front of cameras at the behest of a documentary film-maker (Frankfurter & Cernyak-Spatz, 2000). Despite the obvious and acknowledged social inhibition under which the interlocutors operate, they establish a web of meanings oriented around culpability and innocence, accusation and vindication: the woman asks the physician why he served the regime so faithfully; the physician offers exculpatory formulations: his arrival at Auschwitz was accidental, his refusal to select prisoners to be killed was laudatory, and so forth. In this way, the “discourse space” constructed by their talk is occupied by distinctions between choice and necessity: “You served [the Nazis] to the end,” the woman says, and that ultimately is the distinction that separates them.

More generally, the concept of “figuration” draws upon the rhetorical concept of the *figure*: the use of pictorial, metaphorical, or poetic language (rather than literal, plain speech) to organize or express ideas. Narratives are figurative in this sense: by showing us the attributes of the hero on the one hand (he or she may be young, handsome, brave, inexperienced) and those of the villain on the other (old, scarred, calculating, cunning), the story establishes contrasting “philosophical pairs” (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969) and invites us to evaluate them, positively or negatively. The process of establishing these pairings—as in revealing characters via storytelling—is figuration.

Facing the game master

That facework takes place in this excerpt is easy to see. The threat to face begins at [6], when the GM finally manages to respond to Rex Rich's question at [2] ("Who's asking this?") by saying "I'm the narrator," at [5]. That claim is met with laughter: a sign that something unexpected or incongruous has been said. Note that there initially was a potential threat to Rex's player's face—if the GM had had a ready response to the player's query and that response had been met with acquiescence by the other players, that is—but by the time the laughter occurs, almost 30 seconds into the episode, it is clearly the GM who is discomfited. Rex Rich's non-plussed response to [5] "I'm the narrator" is at [7]; he uses the word "Okay," with a rising and drawn-out inflection on the second syllable; he is not sure what to make of the GM's claim. The GM's discomfiture grows worse as the players playing Tan-Gliil, Rex Rich, and Max Mensch engage in what reads as a kind of mockery, playfully imagining the GM's diegetic attempt not as the words of an external narrator but instead as Rex Rich's conscience addressing him, at [8-12].

Beginning with [13], the group begins to repair the threat to face. The GM reframes his initial attempt at diegesis by bringing in an "ally"—Rex Rich's character sheet, which holds the Aspect that the GM was trying to invoke in his initial utterance—and the players help him! Both Rex Rich and Tan-Gliil anticipate the GM's words (at [14] and [20], respectively), and Rex Rich provides positive feedback at [16] and [18], signaling his agreement with and understanding of the GM's technical and game-mechanical explanation before accepting the compel in a way that preserves his own line as player at [22]. Dr. Einstein's comment at [24] provides an additional face-saving element by framing the episode as an exploration of the game-system and its capabilities.

Digging deeper

The level of face is mere surface, however. Its calculations rely on the deeper geometries of meaning drawn upon and articulated in play. The first distinction that emerges in this game-talk is the one between “narrator” at [5] and “conscience” at [9] as potential in-game interlocutors for a character. A diegetic authority claim premised on the strength of GM-as-narrator was rejected by the players; similarly, the alternative presented of GM-as-conscience was also rejected—Rex Rich’s theatrical response to the pangs of conscience at [10] must be taken as ironical or even ludicrous.

In that context, an interesting distinction emerges at [12-13] between “voice” (in Max Mensch’s joking contribution to the discourse) and “eyeball” (in the GM’s effort to repair and re-assert his diegetic authority). The effect of this distinction is to shift the question of authority from being warranted by a *voice*—whether that of an external narrator or an internal conscience—to being justified by *sight*: ironically, the GM begins to claim diegetic authority on the basis of *what is already present in the game*, what is *visible* to him in terms of what has been recorded about the characters. The players accept this justification, lending their support to the GM’s diegesis by treating it as established fact.

This is particularly visible in terms of the reasoning Rex Rich offers in accepting the compel, at [22]. He says, “Well, I can’t make a claim like that without backing it up, so I’ll take it.” The player *takes ownership* of the Aspect *That’s A Risk I’m Willing To Take* at the level of the character, “backing it up” by accepting the compel—not because it is game-mechanically advantageous to do so (as Dr. Einstein indicates at [24]), but because it is true to who the character is. In this way, the fiction is allowed to drive (or at least rationalize) the face-saving move that validates the GM’s diegetic contribution from all the way back at [1], in a way that is particularly sensitive to the concerns of face: it brackets off the question of “who said that?” by accepting the risk taken by the character as emerging from the player’s own understanding of the character himself rather than

as an obstacle interposed by the GM (at the level of the table), or a query posed by another character (at the level of the fiction). Dr. Einstein's comment does two things, in that case: it praises the GM's construction of the characters as consistent with the philosophy of the rules, and it contributes to making a distinction between the fiction (as a thing with story and characters) and the game (as a thing with rules and players).

Conclusion: the dissociation of voice and eye

Through processes of face and figuration, the game progresses in such a way as to constitute both the fiction of the game-world and the social interaction at the table (more broadly, the social encounter). In the players' use of language, we see their attentiveness to matters of face (i.e., the integrity of the social situation) and figure (the coherence of the networks of meaning they have to draw upon). The most interesting observation to emerge from this analysis is the "dissociation" (distinction) of voice and eye that emerges from the GM's attempt to repair his diegetic authority, a dissociation that partakes of and contributes to other distinctions. We observe *what is heard* and *what is seen* being evaluated according to different diegetic criteria, the first associated with *the fiction* and the second with *the game*; the first with *play* and the second with *the rules*; in other words, we see the construction of the difference that Roger Caillois (2001) calls the difference between *paidia* and *ludus*, where the former is characterized by the child-like appreciation of unrestrained playfulness and the latter by a sometimes fussy insistence on adherence to the rules and procedures of the game for their own sake.

This analysis reminds us of that distinction, with its implication that an important consideration in the design and play of face-to-face role-playing games is attention to the alternate ways in which diegetic and metacommunicative contributions can be marked (or masked!) so as to make them less (or more) ambiguous. For example, one can imagine a game in which *what is said* must remain strictly in-character while *what is seen* (gestures and use of objects, e.g.) has a game-mechanical or rules-

based effect on the game. Such a constraint might have a fruitful impact on creative play.

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