Metadiscourse in Collaborative Narrative Construction

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I. Introduction

Texts are collaboratively constructed in a variety of real-world communications. Whether it be written reports, meeting minutes, or a group of friends relaying an oral tale, texts are rarely constructed by individual authors. Examining these texts can provide insight into the metadiscourse strategies used to negotiate meaning, and many scholars have pursued research into the metadiscourse surrounding co-constructed texts.

Typically, rhetorical critique falls into one of two schools: the analysis of texts for their historical importance, and the analysis of texts in order to determine how they facilitate debate and compromise. In this second school "textual structures are identified, discussed, and in some cases dismantled to determine how they operate to create understandings, to sanction particular ways of viewing the world, or to silence particular people or points of view" (Gill & Whedbee, 1997). One unique setting that has undergone little such analysis is tabletop roleplaying games.

A tabletop role playing game (TTRPG) is a collaborative storytelling exercise centered on narrating in-game actions that are governed by the metadiscourse surrounding the game's rules. The game exists solely in the minds of the players and the referee (called a GM, or Game Master), and the reference books they carry. TTRPGs typically have no winners in the traditional sense of the word, as they are considered to be successful as long as players have a good time (Hendricks, 2006). The collaborative nature of TTRPGs means that actors are all working toward the same end. The metadiscourse (out-of-character) about the game should reveal players working to tell a good story within the constraints of the hegemonic discourse set by the written rules of the game and the game master, who plans and leads the adventure. However, these constraints do not parallel those found in traditional he-

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gemonic discourse (Gill & Whedbee, 1997). The rules are open to interpretation, and in many cases can be ignored for the sake of the story. The GM, also, is free to interpret the rules and the players' actions as he sees fit to best serve the narrative. Another major deviation from traditional rhetoric is the use of randomization to determine the outcome of major actions. TTRPGs are unique because, no matter how an argument is constructed, some of the decisions are left to dice rolls.

It is in this setting that I decided to investigate rhetorical moves and metadiscoursal strategies. How are decisions made in a TTRPG? How are arguments presented and accepted when all actors are intent on the same end? Do they follow the same patterns for discourse established by rhetorical critics of the past? How is the randomness of the dice mitigated through metadiscourse strategies?

This paper is an introductory look at some of the patterns I found in the collaborative storytelling sessions. None of the rhetorical modes or metadiscourse strategies are delved into carefully. Instead. My intention here is give an overview of some of the findings of my observations before I begin more detailed analyses in the future.

II. Methods

I observed and audio recorded two 3-hour sessions of a role playing gaming group. The audio recordings were then transcribed and coded for analysis. Transcripts were coded for the presence of rhetorical modes (*ethos, pathos, and logos*) and other common aspects of rhetorical composition (such as hegemonic oppression and kairos). I also conducted a follow-up interview with the two GMs that lasted 80 minutes. This was also recorded and transcribed.

The site of the study was the role playing club at a public research university in California. "DRAGON" is an officially sanctioned club that meets every Friday night from 6 pm to 10 pm. The club meeting is split into two main sessions: a larger, whole-group session at the beginning where the members play card games and mingle, and smaller groups later in the evening where they play a variety of TTRPGs.

I gained access to the site by first contacting the club's student president who invited me to join them on the first meeting of the quarter. I was introduced to several GMs from the smaller games and explained my study to them. Several GMs invited me to observe their games. I chose to observe a group playing the superhero TTRPG "Champions" for three reasons. First of all, it was a brand new group just starting up a new game. Though these were experienced players, not all of them had played together before. This meant that the subjects would likely be making more experimental rhetorical moves than a group of long-time friends might. Secondly,

the group was mostly older players (30 to 60-years-old). This meant that the subjects had more experience with rhetoric both in-game and in the real world. It was my assumption, through interactions with TTRPG gamers in the past, that older players are more careful and more group and story-oriented than younger players. Finally, the Champions group had a disproportionally high number of women compared to the other groups. Most of the other groups were less than 20% female. The Champions group was 40% female, and even had a male and female GM team. This balance gave me more opportunities to look at differences in rhetorical moves by gender.

In total, 10 subjects were observed: 8 players and 2 GMs. Abe and Stacy co-GMed the Champions game. Because they had 8 players interested in playing, they split into two groups and played two separate parts of the campaign, resolving to bring the two groups of superheroes together at a later date. In the follow-up interview, the GMs said that they do this because it is unwieldy to have 8 players in an RPG. An ideal number of players is between three and six. On the first observation, I stayed with Abe and four players. For the second observation, I stayed with Stacy and three players (one player was absent).

Most of the samples in this paper are drawn from the second session for two reasons. The first is that the initial session (the week I observed Abe) was primarily spent creating characters and teaching the Champions system of combat to one player who was new to the system. Every TTRPG has different combat mechanics, and the complexity of the Champions character creation meant that combat was also complex. Therefore, most of this first session was spent out of character and few rhetorical moves were made until gameplay finally started. The week I observed Stacy, however, the players jumped right into playing the game and working together to tell the story. The second reason I pull most of my samples from Stacy's session is because the audio recording was much clearer and the players sat much closer to the central table, making it easier to transcribe and code everything said by all four subjects.

III. Metadiscourse

Metadiscourse in WAE is especially problematic for non-native speakers. Hyland (2005) summarizes the features that are mostly unique to "Anglo-American academic English", saying it is more explicit both in structure and in purpose, uses more citations, has fewer rhetorical questions, is less tolerant of asides and digressions (a rule I am very guilty of breaking), is more cautious when making claims, has stricter conventions for titling subsections, uses more sentence connectors (i.e. *however*), and, above all, "place[s] the responsibility of clarity and understanding on

the writer rather than the reader" (p.117). It is for these reasons that I chose to look at metadiscourse. If there were some way to let second language writers experience metadiscourse in context and embodied experiences as suggested by situated cognitivists, even though the venue is almost completely oral, their WAE might improve in ways that can't be lectured on in a writing classroom. I believe that by giving language learners the opportunity to practice TL metadiscourse strategies via embodied experiences, we will increase their ability to use that language in non-situated contexts (like in WAE...). I think that the fact that these experiences are primarily oral in TTRPGs is of no consequence. It is not a matter of oral language ability transferring to written. Rather, it is the *cognitive* ability to understand and use metadiscourse that is transferring. The oral and written natures of the production are just vehicles of language output. What matters, instead, is embedding the input in contextually rich, social environments where the learners have the ability to observe and produce the target feature in embodied experiences.

Metadiscourse, according to Ken Hyland, is a way of "conceptualizing interactions between text producers and their texts, and between text producers and users" (2005, p.1). Metadiscourse is the language and rhetoric that writers use to guide their readers through a text. It is a word or phrase (usually an adverb) that describes the purposes of the text itself. Metadiscourse refers to *explicit* external devices used by the writer. This explicitness is important "not only for the practical purposes of identification, but also because it is this explicit presence which is textually and rhetorically interesting" (Hyland, 2005, p.28). In written academic English, metadiscourse is anything done to the text (underlining, commas, italics), but generally analyses focus on textual devices that signal a writer's stance and can range from individual words to clauses to multiple sentences. In oral rhetoric, the speaker must adhere to this same principle of guiding, elaborating, and clarifying for the listener. In TTRPGs, this is often done overtly. In this one question from Abe, one of the GMs, a clear signal is sent to the players that the GM is now finished describing a scene and is awaiting player input.

> Abe(GM): There was the sound of grinding crashing concrete coming from inside the bank..
> Dave: Thunk, kerblonk, thud\.
> Sharon: Yeah\...
> Abe(GM): So who's doing what?

The GM is clearly deferring to the players, awaiting their input into the story. While through my observations this expectation of cooperation seemed to be universal knowledge (the players are generally quick to offer their own input before the GM asks, as Dave does in the same example above by adding sound effects), the explicit

request for input from the GM drives this point home.

As much of this narrative co-construction deals with a lot of negotiation and argumentation, this paper will focus primarily on the three Greek modes of persuasion: *ethos, pathos,* and *logos. Ethos* concerns the speaker's credibility. Even though a speaker might have credibility before the interaction, they must re-establish it throughout. *Pathos* refers to the affective appeals the speaker makes to the audience. *Logos* is the speech itself, as well as the types of arguments and evidence used. Hyland states specifically how these relate to metadiscourse: "Logos when [metadiscourse] explicitly links elements of the argument...Ethos where it refers to the writer's authority and competence...Pathos when it signals respect for the readers' viewpoint or the message has direct relevance to the audience" (p.65).

1. "G.E.N.O.C.I.D.E."

Prior to the interaction in Appendix A, the in-game characters have discovered that a non-profit organization has been giving funds to four genetic research companies of various sizes in order to provide relief to babies born with mutant powers that leave them hideously deformed. The players have discovered that one of these companies is using this funding to conduct acts of genetic terrorism against the mutant (superpowered) population of the world. In the excerpt below, the players have already singled out the most suspicious of the four companies, and are now trying to figure out how they are going to discover whether it is a front for the criminal organization "G.E.N.O.C.I.D.E.". Carol and Barry, both players, are trying to work out a plan to present to Stacy (the GM), who, for the first part of the exchange, is busy looking over a character sheet (a page with statistics and power descriptions on one of the characters). Ally and Carol begin by talking about the skills each of their characters possess, as this is their first time playing together. The GM, Stacy, begins this interaction by checking over Barry's character sheet, and she and Barry begin the interaction having a separate conversation from Ally and Carol.

I will be reprinting parts of the interaction from Appendix A many times in my analysis. I present it there in it's entirety with glosses to give the reader a sense of the context of the exchange. Because interactions involving TTRPGs take an extra level of context building (interactions in TTRPGs are situated in a reality which is again situated out of reality, after all), I felt it might be beneficial for the reader to become familiar with one longer interaction rather than me trying to re-explain new contexts every time I want to present something new.

2. Boosters and Hedges

One of Hyland's aspects of metadiscourse unique to written academic English is the fact that writers are more cautious when making claims and asserting their

perspectives. It should come as no surprise then, that hedging is a big part of effectively communicating in written academic English. It seems that TTRPGs share this aspect of metadiscourse with written English. Hedging was a prevalent discourse strategy for my subjects, and exercised caution in voicing their ideas and rebuttals.

Hedging indicates caution and is used to either soften a potentially harsh opinion or show a lack of certainty. Boosters act in an opposite manner; marking a text when the speaker is especially confident. Boosters can be the "iron fist" that one uses to "[head] off possible objections while leaving the reader in no doubt of [the writer's] views" (Hyland, 2005, p.69), but they can also simply be a means of marking the speaker's certainty.

Hedging, on a basic level, can be used to show uncertainty. Carol and Barry, in the Appendix example, do it through backchanneling.

Carol   err...

～～～～～～～～～

Carol   Can I steal USB ports?
Barry   hmmm...

Barry also seems to be hedging through his stuttering and rephrases. It is most prevalent when he first takes initiative in discussing a plan for infiltration:

Barry   well ok, uh..ok. since. ok depending on how um. (sighs)
        how s-uh ok. genre appropriate we are running this, you (pointing to
        Carol) could possibly sneak in.to this organization if I pose as a um as
        a representative of a philanthropic or- organization.this will distract
        them and focus them on me and you will be able to uh, stealthily sneak
        in.

However, once he and Carol had solidified a plan, he became much more confident and the restarts decreased. By the time he was making his final appeal to the GM, he had no restarts or stutters in his speech. Because his proposed plan of action was so precise, the hedging softened the proposal and left openings for other players to interject changes.

Another use of hedging is to soften boosters. Throughout the interaction in Appendix A we can see examples of hedging mixed with boosting, and there doesn't seem to be a pattern in terms of which must come first. The only thing that stands out is that a boost almost *never* stands on its own, but hedges do.

Though rare, there are instances where a boost is used without any softening. In this example, Carol uses a boost with no hedge (He's gonna go...) to put forth her argument to the GM. However, Barry jumps in and offers a hedge to soften the impact of Carol's presentation (I-I-I want to...).

Carol   he- he's gonna go in as a. member of a.[philanthropic society]..to check
GM   [(incomprehensible)]
Barry   [Yes] I-I-I want to. verify their secur...

There was also evidence of language socialization while the players were building the narrative, especially when it came to the use of hedges. Carol was a relatively new TTRPGer, and so she was still finding her footing and learning the rules at the time of my observations. Just looking at hedges and boosters in the short exchange in Appendix A, there seem to be a few missteps in being too direct.

Carol   and steal files?..
err..

Carol responds to Barry's proposed action with a question that, though not a booster lexically, proposed a clearly defined action. When Barry failed to immediately take up the conversation after the long pause, Carol perceived the breakdown and back-channeled to distance herself from the certainty of the action. It happens again on her next turn. When she poses a question that calls for a decisive response from Barry, Barry backchannels (hmmm...). In both of these examples, the hedging is used as a face saving technique, but does not appear to progress the narrative. Instead, hedging is used to repair communication breakdown.

As written above, Carol commits a more overt act of boosting when she tells the GM:

Carol   he- he's gonna go in as a. member of a. [philanthropic society]..to
        check

Barry, the more experienced player has to quickly repair this in his next line:

Barry   [Yes] I-I-I want to. verify their secur...

Carol seems to pick up on the hedge use a few lines later, saying "...I thought I would...". Whether or not she knew how to use hedges in her planning, but forgot, or if she is just starting to learn the accepted patterns of communication would be interesting to investigate further.

3. Pathos, Ethos, and Logos

The appeal seems to be the most prevalent technique for progressing the narrative. Players of all levels use it (from Carol the newbie to Jason the expert), as do the GMs. Hyland remarks that metadiscourse contributes to the "rational, credible and affective appeals which have characterized persuasive discourse since the time of ancient Greece" (p.63). He further outlines three specific uses of metadiscourse in

persuasion and argumentation:

"it promotes rational appeals when it explicitly links ideas and arguments; it relates to credibility appeals where it concerns the writer's authority and competence; it addresses affective appeals when it signals respect for the readers' viewpoint or that the message has direct relevance to the audience" (Hyland, 2005, p.63).

Ethos: Appeal to credibility

One strategy used is the appeal to credibility. This is a direct appeal to some authority, and is primarily used by the GM. In this excerpt, Jason (an experienced player) is creating his character during the opening hour of the first session. He asks Abe (a GM) how frequently he can use a particular power that he is planning to give his character:

Jason   Is all cold attacks considered uh..uncommon attack or a common -

Abe   -all.*cold* attacks?

Jason   yes\

Abe   um..I would say that it's.u:::m..

It's up to *you* whether you want that attack to be a common or uncommon attack\

common attack/

I'll throw in more cold bad guys\

Jason: o:k/..

Abe: honestly, um.on attack types. (laughing) The more common you make it,/ the more villains with that special effect I throw in the game\

(5 sec pause)

Abe   and then I don't have to worry about what is a common attack and what isn't/

Abe appeals to his own authority as GM, which seemed to have put Jason off (o:k /..). It seems that Abe didn't want to let Jason's ability to be used so commonly in order to prevent him from building an overpowered character and dominating the game (which Abe would prevent by making more enemies immune to that overpowered ability, effectively making Jason's character useless). If this was indeed his intention, he could have used a different means of appeal so as not to upset Jason. Perhaps an appeal to emotion by telling him (Jason) that an overpowered character would ruin the fun for everyone. This is, of course, just an assumption on my part. Abe may have had other reasons for blocking Jason in this manner that cannot be determined from a discourse analysis.

Logos: Appeal to Reason

Rational appeals are "logical connections used to elaborate an argument by adding, comparing, sequencing, or explaining its elements" (Hyland, 2005, p.75).

They are words and phrases that spell out for the listener the structure of an argument. In TTRPG discourse, they appear frequently when players want to convince the GM to allow an action. Players can use it to appeal to the rules in order to remind the DM the rules she is bound by, which Barry does twice in this short segment:

> Barry   well ok, uh..ok. since. ok depending on how um. (sighs) how s-uh ok. genre appropriate we are running this, you (pointing to Carol) could possibly sneak in.
> to this organization if I pose as a um as a representative of a philanthropic or- organization.
> this will distract them and focus them on me and you will be able to uh, stealthily sneak in.
>
> Stacy (GM)   and steal files?.
> ~~~~~~~~~
> Stacy (GM)   Steal what, pen drives and things?
> Barry   I think realistically it's kind of uh..It-It's kind of unfeasible for. no matter how sneaky you are to just walk into a place that doesn't want to be walked in on while they're operating.
> But, if we're gonna be genre appropriate, you should be able to.
> Stacy (GM)   mmhmm.

First he remarks to Carol that, if they are playing the game "genre appropriate", he should be able to distract the front desk of this large corporation while Carol sneaks in. He appeals to the rules of the genre, knowing that such a tactic (sneaking into an office building) would likely not work in a more realistic setting. However, since they are more or less the main characters in a superhero comic book (and, he seems to imply, walking talking *deus ex machina*), the laws of reality generally bend around the characters to allow for more or less impossible social actions. Barry does not seem to be making this appeal to Carol, however. He is aware that Carol is new to superhero TTRPGs. Instead, he seems to be readying his arguments for the final stage of the negotiation. This is evidenced when, later, he repeats the appeal to genre. This appeal to the rules of the genre seems to be Barry's trump card. In his presentation, he only mentions the genre appropriateness after the DM asks "Steal what, pen drives and things?" Sensing that she might not be on board with the idea, Barry then appeals to the genre as likely allowing something like this to occur. This appeal is risky because it is effectively going over the authority of the GM. He seems to know this, and counteracts the severity of the appeal by preceding it with an affective appeal.

Pathos: Affective Appeal

GM   Steal what, pen drives and things?

Barry   I think realistically it's kind of uh..It-It's kind of unfeasible for. no matter how sneaky you are to just walk into a place that doesn't want to be walked in on while they're operating.

         But, if we're gonna be genre appropriate, you should be able to.

GM   mmhmm.

There are two types of affective appeals. One lets the listener know that the speaker understands or even sympathizes with the listener's perspective. It is a hedge; an attempt to soften the impact of the speaker's actual idea. The second type of affective appeal is one where speaker indicated that his message has direct relevance to the listener.

In the above exchange, Barry senses the GM's skepticism about the group's plan, and, having already tried an appeal to reason and a lot of hedging, tries to appeal to the GMs rule-abiding nature. As an expert player, Barry likely understands that, in reality, a person wouldn't be able to walk into a high-security office building unnoticed. He says as much in the first half of his turn. The use of "But" signals his switch to presenting his own argument, clearly laying out for the GM his intentions. But this is not *logos.* He has already laid out his thesis and supported it. He is using *pathos* here to appeal to the GM's perspective of the level of realism in the game ("if we're gonna be genre appropriate").

4. Metagaming and narrative control

In TTRPGs, the GM co-narrates the game along with the players. But GMs are also the moderators and rule enforcers. The GM has final say on what is or isn't allowed, and most of these decisions are made through *metagaming* or talking out of character about the rules of the game and the decisions of the characters. Metagaming is an aspect of TTRPGs that set is apart from other types of discourse. When co-writing an academic essay, for example, two students might discuss the rules of presenting a good argument before writing one on the paper. Their metadiscourse reveals their knowledge about argumentation, and they can then represent that knowledge in their text. But TTRPGs are different because the characters in the game are not privy to the metadiscourse that occurs between the players. Players have to walk a fine line between in game and meta knowledge. Take, for example, a barbarian type of character. Barbarians are typically described as having great strength but very low intelligence. But the player controlling the barbarian like has a much higher level of intelligence than the in-game brute. Such a player must take care that metagaming does not creep into his arguments and storytelling. A player

may have a great idea for an attack plan, but must carefully consider whether the *character* would have come up with the plan.

But these limitations on metagaming are what make TTRPGs attractive to players. Consider the argument presented by the two GMs from our follow-up interview:

Abe: The *first* thing [new players] do is they build themselves as the character. They do this because it's... easy to understand, it's easy to come up with the motivations, and they think it'll be easier to play. And, *almost* without exception, what they find out is that if they were suddenly given superpowers, they'd be kinda really boring cause they wouldn't want to go out and get hurt. All the behaviors that keep you safe in your ordinary day-to-day life translate over to that character... and that character's kinda not a lot of fun to play. And besides, that character has all *your* same problems *you* deal with every day... so yea, just... *why*? You might as well just go out and live your own life. You'll have as much fun.

...So, they drop that character in a week or two, and they find it utterly uninteresting in playing. The *next* character they build is nothing *like* them, and is often more... is often either someone they *wish* they were like, or someone, y'know...the *opposite of them.* It's very much experimenting with new behaviors.

Stacy: mmhmm. But, it is. It's a chance for people to stretch their personalities in a safe environment, and I see that a lot in LARPs. And it's actually, i think, one of the reasons why LARPs end up getting so kinda dramatic and emotionally laden because a lot of people are experimenting socially within the context of the LARP. It makes them vulnerable because they're putting part of themselves into their LARP characters.

This experimentation is what makes metadiscourse necessary. Players need ways to justify actions they would not normally take because their characters are very different from their real selves. The rulebook and the GMs give them guidance for formulating these actions.

This project is just a small step toward what I really want to do with metadiscourse and rhetoric in TTRPGs. Next I want to look at the in-game events that cause players to stop talking in 0 character and revert to metadiscourse. I am also interested in looking at differences in metadiscourse strategies between players and GMs.

This introductory look at TTRPG metadiscourse strategies revealed many similarities to the way arguments are presented in more traditional rhetorical styles. However, the differences present in collaborative storytelling make TTRPGs an in-

teresting site for future research.

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Appendix A－Transcript Excerpt from Session #2

Player A   She's a hacker...

Player B   We need that.

We need somebody who can do something besides, follow people-

DM   -so I'm taking...

B   and hold people. We can follow people and I hold people.

A   who follows people?

B   I have..stealth and concealment.

A   AH!

I...ok my main character is not. good at combat at all.

Thats why I have my little iron kitty [with].

B   [mmhmm].

A   shoots lazers...she's good at hiding and directing [(??? overlap)]

DM   (looking at C's character sheet)   [Major Mithril goes] twice on twenty? really?

Player C   Twice on twenty?

DM   What? Why would Major Mithril go twice on twenty?

C   uh..(exhales sharply) 'tsee, wheres my spee:d, on this...

Phases? um, my..character sheet only goes up to twelve.

DM   I don't know what Abe *did* here.

C   [I]-

DM   [*A:be*]

C (to B) well ok, uh..ok. since. ok depending on how um. (sighs)

how s-uh ok. genre appropriate we are running this, you (pointing to B) could possibly sneak in.

to this organization if I pose as a um as a representative of a philanthropic or- organization.

this will distract them and focus them on me and you will be able to uh, stealthily sneak in.

B   and steal files?
      err..
C   uh. possibly.
      I just thought that well I could ask them. I-Id like to insp-.make..sure that your facilities
      a:re cutting edge
B   can I steal USB ports?
C   hmmm...
DM   hang on a moment a:nd let me:.just make sure I have-
B   and Give them to Penny? @@@
C   you should ask her about that.
      she's got a real [head for some of those computers]
DM   [Bitcat. a:nd...Twobit]...
      Ok.
      (to B and C) Sir, wat was the question?
B   he- he's gonna go in as a. member of a. [philanthropic society]..to check
DM   [(incomprehensible)]
C   [Yes] I-I-I want to. verify their secur...
DM   [mhmm]
C   that they have advanced security systems and have them tell. their. full story
      and meanwhile she'll- she'll be sneaking around and hopefully I'll be [a distraction].
B   [I have stealth and sleight]
      of hand and...concealment and I thought I would go in and steal USB ports from their
      computer and give them to (???).
DM   Steal what, pen drives and things?
C   I think realistically it's kind of uh..It-It's kind of unfeasible for. no matter how sneaky
      you are to just walk into a place that doesn't want to be walked in on while they're op-
      erating.
      But, if we're gonna be genre appropriate, you should be able to.
DM   mmhmm.
C   since you're a. super..
B   Yep. and I have teamwork, so
C   Yea [hey] that- well that's for combat
DM   [well]-

DM   yep, [but]-
C   [that works] great though
B   well, but I have sleight of hand, stealth, shadow and concealment, so-
DM   yes you do Carol, and so [you should be able] to get in provided that Barry is providing
      sufficient distraction, I have no objection to that.
B   [I should be]
C   ok