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Framing Contexts and Immersion:

The Functionality of TRPG Frames in *Dimension 20's*
Fantasy High Series

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Abstract

This paper uses a form of rhetorical criticism known as frame analysis to analyze the perspective frames within the context of tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs). The three frames of interest in this study include the person frame, the player frame, and the character frame. These frames are used to contextualize certain person, player, and character interactions and immersion contexts within the first season of *Dimension 20*'s actual play podcast, *Fantasy High*. Through these three frames, we can see the breakdown of the person, player, and character mindset, as well as the overlap of thought, emotions, and ideas between frames. It is found that these frames help situate certain actions and narratives in TRPGs, but the unstable nature of those frames means that players constantly shift between those frames while interacting with others in a TRPG setting.

Keywords: frame analysis, immersion, role-playing games (RPGs), tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs), *Dungeons and Dragons* (D&D), *Dimension 20*

Introduction

Dimension 20 is a tabletop role-playing game series that is produced by CollegeHumor. The show is primarily hosted by actor and comedian Brennan Lee Mulligan, who acts as the series's regular dungeon master (DM), while also featuring a recurring cast who play in campaigns that use the ruleset from *Dungeons and Dragons* 5th Edition (Mulligan et al., 2018). Since its creation in 2018, the series has received recognition for the emerging success of actual play podcasts and web shows. Its success and popularity is comparable to *Critical Role* (2012), another long-running web show that features a group of professional voice actors who play *Dungeons and Dragons* (D&D) (Mercer et al., 2018).

Dimension 20 debuted in 2018 with its first campaign, *Fantasy High*. *Fantasy High*'s setting is slightly odd due to its mixture of modern comforts, medieval weaponry, and magical creatures. The campaign is set in the world of Spyre; however, the entire first season takes place in the town of Elmville, which is located in the nation of Solace. According to Brennan Lee Mulligan, "Solace may be home to elves, orcs, dwarves, and gnomes, but it resembles more of a 1950s through 1980s America" (Mulligan et al., 2018, 00:00:24). The campaign follows a group of intrepid heroes who meet in detention during the first day of their freshman year at the Aguefort Adventuring Academy. The group, who are eponymously dubbed "The Bad Kids," is made up of Figuroth "Fig" Faeth (played by Emily Axford), Gorgug Thistlespring (played by Zac Oyama), Adaine Abernant (played by Siobhan Thompson), Fabian Aramais Seacaster (played by Lou Wilson), Kristen Applebees (played by Ally Beardsley), and Riz "The Ball" Gukgak (played by Brian Murphy) (Mulligan et al., 2018).

There are multiple ways to view the series; the most common ways are either through videos of its live game sessions or through a professionally mixed audio-only podcast (Mulligan

et al., 2018). Regardless of which format the viewer prefers, the content within their game sessions does not change. As the series progresses, it becomes easy to differentiate between the attitudes, actions, and gestures of the actors versus the characters they are playing, as well as the narrations offered by the dungeon master (DM). These are components that are inherent in all tabletop role-playing games, however, *Fantasy High* provides an excellent artifact of analysis because viewers are given an outsider perspective to the usual processes that occur when engaging in a gaming session. Usually, players would experience firsthand the types of narratives and rhetoric found in role-playing games by playing the game themselves, but the growing popularity of actual play series like *Dimension 20* provides an excellent avenue to study the communications processes inherent in tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs).

This paper seeks to explore the function of frames in the rhetoric of tabletop role-playing games by examining the different levels of person, player, and character interaction and immersion. It bridges the gap between traditional TRPG studies and modern renditions of actual play TRPG podcasts by applying frame analysis to a modern *Dungeons and Dragons* campaign that was intended to introduce and entertain like-minded fans of role-playing games. This foundation allows for the application of frame analysis to examine the ways people understand the situations and activities found in a fictional world, like the ones usually seen in role-playing games. As a result, we can see the breakdown of actions, thoughts, and speech in the context of an actual D&D campaign that was produced with rewatchability in mind.

Literature Review

Despite being around for almost fifty years, role-playing games (RPGs) are a subject that has been neglected by academia. First published in 1974, *Dungeons and Dragons* was the first commercially available tabletop role-playing game with a universal rule set that anyone could

follow. For many years D&D and other TRPGs were considered a niche product, and as a result have very few academic studies on the conventional rhetoric inherent in any role-playing scenario. The earliest known analysis of TRPGs is Gary Alan Fine's *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (1983), where he introduced frames to categorize the different levels of person, player, and character interactions. Since Fine's initial analysis, Fine's frames have been recognized as a cornerstone of TRPG analysis, leading to various scholars expanding upon his initial hypothesis. Given that the RPG genre has grown in popularity over the past forty years, scholars have sought to understand interactions within RPGs by establishing more in-depth analyses that better explain the ways people navigate within and between frames.

One of the most common methods of examining TRPGs involves a modified version of Erving Goffman's *Frame Analysis* (1974). In essence, frame analysis is the dominant sociological approach that examines the ways people construct, organize, and differentiate meaning in a given situation (Goffman, 1974; Fine, 1983; Matthes, 2009; Williams et al., 2018). Scholars since then have expanded frame analysis to "comprise shared norms, expectations, and understandings of what things, events, and roles to find in a given situation; how to behave in those situations and for what purposes" (Williams et al. 2018, p. 230). As an established form of rhetorical criticism, frame analysis is beneficial to the study of role-playing games because it provides insight into the layered nature of a game's performative aspects, player and character identities, and the actions that take place within each frame. Frame analysis is perhaps the most useful form of analysis when considering TRPGs, providing a convenient structure to examine not only what comprises each frame, but also the ways in which they overlap to create unique discourse between participants.

Fine (1983) was the first to apply frame analysis to early RPGs, examining the different levels of the person, player, and character frames in gameplay. Fine's analysis only identified three possible frames: the "primary framework" based in the real world; the "game context," which is composed of the players; and the "game world," the world where the characters operate. Since then, scholars have adapted frames to examine different aspects of RPGs. In his exploration of the performativity of TRPGs, Daniel Mackay (2001) considers the inherent narrativity of role-playing games. Mackay splits Fine's game frame into three more distinct frames: the "performative frame," where the players use gestures and speech to role-play as their characters; the "constative frame," where the game world and setting are narrated by the gamemaster; and the "narrative frame," where the players describe their character's actions (2001). Jennifer Grouling Cover (2010) retains Fine's three frame model, but leaves in Mackay's narrative structure. Cover's work heavily focuses on narrative definition, where she adapts Marie-Laure Ryan's (1991) theory of possible worlds to posit narrative perspectives within Fine's social frame. Similar to Cover, Sarah Lynn Bowman (2010) examines the interpersonal processes of RPG players by exploring the concept of a player's different personas within frames. Bowman (2015) later postulates a phenomenon known as "bleed," which is the spillover of thoughts, relationships, personality traits, and emotions between players and characters. While Mackay attempted to define the constraints of TRPGs using frames, Bowman's and Cover's analyses present an understanding of frames that is similar to Fine's initial approach—that frames are inherently unstable and are susceptible to overlap between the person, player, and character frames.

In order to differentiate frames in an RPG setting, one must first be aware of the different levels of immersion. Immersion usually refers to a person or player's engrossment in a particular

setting. Fine (1983) first introduced the concept of immersion by building off Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss's article "Awareness Contexts and Social Interaction" (1964) to construct player awareness in the context of frames. According to Glaser and Strauss (1964), there are four structural types of awareness contexts: open awareness, closed awareness, suspicion awareness, and pretense awareness. Fine argues that TRPG players almost explicitly use pretense awareness, which is the context where players are aware of the true nature of something, but pretend they are not (Fine, 1983, p. 187). Pretense awareness is essential to Fine's concept of engrossment, which he describes as "the acceptance of the fantasy world as a (temporarily) real world [that] gives meaning to the game, and the creation of a fantasy scenario and culture" (Fine, 1983, p. 4). Mackay tries to bridge Fine's engrossment theory by applying "fictive blocks," which are the "material interface to an immaterial idea that exists wholly within the imagination" (Mackay, 2001, p. 78). Mackay states that players can gather materials from a variety of outside sources, such as scenes from films, musical lyrics, and plays, to stitch together the emotional response and actions required to perform what is expected of their character. Bowman, however, claims that characters live in a world that is similar to our own. She claims that a player's research into a topic related to their character further grounds that character in the real world, blurring the lines of fiction versus reality (Bowman 2010). Whereas their characters would be unaware of the references being used to produce such a result, the player retains full knowledge of the items used to create their response. While Fine, Mackay, and Bowman have slightly conflicting definitions of what immersion means in the context of frames, their definitions nevertheless build on one another to further support their own definitions of TRPG frames.

Analysis

In D&D, each player has a character sheet that outlines everything important about their character, including their race, appearance, skills, background, and much more. While the information on the character sheet helps players keep track of their characters' abilities and skills as they level up, it also provides the basis for the mindset the player has when role-playing as that character. This is evident in *Fantasy High*, where each of the actors express their own interests and personalities that are different from their characters'. This is not to say there is no overlap between the players and characters—on the contrary, the characters' actions are often motivated by the desire and experience of the players. However, there are outside influences as well, such as the narration of the dungeon master, any comments made when the players “break character,” and the tense atmosphere created by the game's combat system. The players often bring their outside experiences forth to produce dialogue and actions that may not otherwise exist in the game's fantasy setting, and even sometimes forget which character they are supposed to be portraying. These circumstances are what make frames crucial since a game of D&D is never wholly based in a single frame. Players will move in and out of different frames routinely, even if this process is not noticeable to an outside observer.

Using a combination of previous scholarly interpretations of frames, this paper will examine the different levels of person, player, and character immersion in *Dungeons and Dragons*, using *Dimension 20's Fantasy High* series as an example where appropriate. To do this, Fine's original delineation of frames has been simplified, yet includes elements from other scholars, including Mackay's narrative frame and elements from Bowman's persona and bleed theories. The three frames that will be used for this analysis include the person frame, the player frame, and the character frame.

The Person Frame

The literature on the person frame designates it as the foundation for every other frame found in a TRPG context. It is often described as the only frame to be fully constituted in the real world (Fine, 1983; Mackay, 2001). Due to its positioning in the real world, the person frame is the only frame where there is “action without laminations” (Fine, 1983, p. 186). The person frame can be described as the “ultimate reality of events,” meaning that the rules that govern life still apply (Fine 1983, p. 186). In many ways, the person frame is simply a representation of how an audience would view players in a game setting. To an outsider, the players are simply people engaging in a narrative adventure or activity. Despite being the frame that is most constricted in terms of creativity, the person frame is essential to gameplay. In the person frame, the people participating in gameplay are strictly aware of not only themselves as individuals, but also of the game they are playing. It is the people in the person frame that compose the player and characters found in the other two frames. Without the person frame, there would not be other frames on which to deliberate.

In *Fantasy High*, the group of people that gather to participate in the D&D campaign are based entirely in the person frame. From an outside perspective, the audience may or may not be aware of who these people are. In a normal D&D game the people playing can be virtually anyone; however, *Fantasy High*'s assembled cast is composed of relatively well-known comedians and actors from other CollegeHumor productions. Brennan Lee Mulligan acts as the campaign's dungeon master, but Mulligan is also a successful actor and the creator of *Dimension 20* (Begleiter, 2019). The other would-be players are Emily Axford, Zac Oyama, Siobhan Thompson, Ally Beardsley, Lou Wilson, and Brian Murphy (Mulligan et al., 2018). While their professions and interpersonal relationships with one another are not exactly important to the development of the game, it is important to have a good rapport with one another to avoid

conflicts (Fine 1983, p. 172). However, the person frame represents who these people are as individuals and any history, experience, or relationships that exist between them. For example, Emily Axford and Brian Murphy are married, but this is not something you would notice when they are playing D&D together, because as players and characters they do not acknowledge their relationship (Easton, 2017). Likewsie, Ally Beardsley identifies as nonbinary and uses they/them pronouns in their everyday life, but their *Fantasy High* character, Kristen Applebees, identifies as female (Juliatt, 2019). While these facts are grounded in the person frame, many features can overlap with the player and character frames, but these details tend to be representations of the people as they are grounded in reality.

The Player and Character Frames

The player frame is identified by the game context, which is perhaps the most integral part of participating in an TRPG scenario (Fine 1983, p. 186). Essentially, the player frame is composed of people from the person frame who are actively participating in gameplay. Unlike the person frame, which is composed of real world rules and logic, the player frame consists of *players* whose “actions are governed by a complicated set of rules and constraints” (Fine 1983, p. 186). “They manipulate their characters, having knowledge of the structure of the game, and having approximately the same knowledge that other players have” (Fine 1983, p. 186). In this frame, players do not act within the confines of the person frame, instead relying on conventions found in the game. In many ways, the player frame can be considered the middle ground in any role-playing scenario. It pulls elements from the person frame to create the fictive reality of the game world. However, the player frame also directly influences the character frame, because players constantly shift between narrating their characters actions and becoming the characters themselves.

Similar to the player frame, the character frame is where players control a character's actions by *becoming* that character (Fine 1983, p. 186). In short, they assume the identity of that character and act within the confines of the fantasy world. Players constantly switch between the player and character frames, providing narratives, actions, and speech when doing so (Mackay, 2001). The character frame almost always borrows actions from the player frame because it is the player dictating those actions. It is not uncommon for personality traits, emotions, and relationships developed in the person and player frames to spill over into the character frame (Bowman, 2015). However, this "bleed" effect most often occurs between the player and character frames because players will become embroiled in the scenarios being presented by the DM and other characters (Bowman, 2015).

In *Fantasy High*, the actors that were present in the person frame are now *players* in the player frame. Instead of being individuals aware of the game being played, players are actively engaged in the world being narrated by the dungeon master. For example, when Brennan Lee Mulligan DMs, he tends to speak in the third person. While the role of the DM is fundamentally different from a normal player, the DM fills in setting, scenarios, and context, while playing the part of any non-player characters (NPCs). Only when he is filling in as an NPC does Mulligan speak as that character. Doing so means that he moves in and out of the player and character frames. This shift is often seamless, which adds to the storytelling narrative. This same movement happens to players who constantly shift to the character frame in response to the DM. This movement tends to only happen between these two frames because a game of D&D will prompt players to spontaneously switch between action and role-play.

NPCs become easily identifiable in *Fantasy High* because the actors employ various accents and music to assist in telling the tale. One of Mulligan's most notable characters is a

biker named Johnny Spells. While playing as Johnny Spells, Mulligan adopts a 1950s greaser accent and puts on a tough guy act (Mulligan et al., 2018). However, Mulligan constantly shifts between that accent and narrates the scene before him. A similar shift happens with players as well. For example, Lou Wilson adopts a very pretentious and upper-class sounding accent when role-playing as his character, Fabian Aramais Seacaster, who is the son of a retired rich and famous pirate (Mulligan et al., 2018). Siobhan Thompson also uses a very pronounced regal accent as well because her character, Adaine Abernant, is the daughter of the elven ambassador from the neighboring country of Fallinel (Mulligan et al., 2018). Despite their use of a different voice, Wilson and Thompson can easily switch back to their player mindset, dropping the voice in the process. It is important to note that the *Dimension 20* cast tends to refer to their characters in the first person while in the character frame. They will often begin their actions with first person identifiers, further blurring the line between the player and character frames.

A final defining characteristic of these frames is the knowledge held by players and characters. When playing D&D, all players tend to be sitting together around a table. This means that the players can obtain information from settings when their characters are not physically present. For example, the beginning of the *Fantasy High* campaign features a montage of character introductions that set the scene for each of the individual character's backstories (Mulligan et al., 2018). Mulligan narrates these scenes, providing an introduction to role-playing aspects by having each of the player's characters interact with their parents at home. Despite all of the players being present for every character's introduction, only one of the characters is present in each scene. Sometimes this generates confusion, leading to the players asking if their character is present. This becomes less frequent in later campaign sessions since the adventuring party tends to stick together, but there are moments when they are forced to split up and must act

accordingly. This includes relaying information in character and providing delayed backup in combat. Regardless of how this is done, players must situate themselves in the appropriate frame to avoid breaking immersion.

Discussion

According to previous scholars who have examined frames in role-playing games, frames are considered a valid method of rhetorical criticism that has been accepted since Fine's first attempt to study TRPGs from a sociological perspective. Despite the theoretical model being applied by scholars such as Fine, Mackay, Cover, and Bowman, none of their studies attempted to examine frames from a preexisting TRPG campaign perspective. This is to be expected, as TRPGs like *Dungeons and Dragons* have been stigmatized in the past and have only recently emerged as a more accepted form of entertainment. The growing popularity of actual play podcasts has not only accelerated this acceptance, but has also provided a wealth of material on which to base observations and analyses. In the past, scholars based their analyses on interpretations of TRPG gameplay. While Fine's work laid the foundation for the study of TRPGs, his work tends to focus more on social commentary rather than the actual theoretical implications in TRPG frames. Mackay's analysis, while more grounded in the performative arts, is ultimately bogged down by his attempts to classify TRPGs from a theatrical perspective. Cover attempts to justify frames from a writing studies perspective to examine creation narratives, which ultimately inhibits the true purpose of communal narratives in role-playing scenarios. Bowman's study, however, examines character personas at length. While extremely informative, Bowman's personas would be difficult for an outsider to apply to a TRPG scenario since her investigation involves more personal details than the previous methods of analysis.

The study of frames in TRPGs could be explored much more in depth in the present day, because there is a wide range of web shows, podcasts, and streams being produced. This paper uses examples from *Dimension 20's Fantasy High* campaign, however, there are other campaigns that could be used, such as *Critical Role*, *Friends at the Table*, *Girls Who Don't D&D*, and many more (Tousignant, 2018). Not only does the popularity of TRPGs make them more visible and accessible to a wider audience, but the increasing number of public actual play campaigns also provides a growing pool of resources that scholars can actually apply their theories to. Doing so could help scholars gain a greater understanding of the person, player, and character mindsets found in TRPG contexts, which in turn would provide more literature for an under researched topic.

Some of the key takeaways from this paper include the distinction of frames in TRPGs, the instability of those frames, and the possibility for future applications of previous research. Frame analysis is an interesting form of rhetorical criticism, and scholars recognized the value of applying it to TRPGs less than ten years after D&D became a commercialized role-playing game. Despite this, frames are a complex method of analysis that can differ from person to person. Depending on one's knowledge of TRPGs, the breakdown of frames can change. Whereas Fine proposed a simple three frame model, similar to what was explored in this paper, others have added frames and subframes to his pre-existing model (Fine, 1983; Mackay, 2001; Cover, 2010; Bowman, 2010). There is no fault to be found in this because TRPGs are constantly evolving, and frames can be applied to fit the necessary context. While those frames help classify certain perspectives, they constantly shift to accommodate new experience, knowledge, and actions. Due to this constant shift, it is important that scholars continue the study of frames in TRPGs. The growing popularity of role-playing games means there will likely be an increased

interest in the study of TRPGs. Scholars are likely to continue to research role-playing games, especially given the growing number of artifacts available for analysis.

Conclusion

Frames within role-playing games offer a degree of analysis that helps us understand the different levels of the player and character self, as well as the degree of immersion within the context of TRPGs. The frames discussed in this paper—the person, player, and character frames—are integral to the understanding of certain gaming narratives, settings, and worlds. While there is an infinite number of frames that could be applied to TRPGs, the person, player, and character frames are the most commonly accepted and widely agreed upon in TRPG analysis. Scholars who have broken down TRPG frames in the past have curtailed their frames according to certain awareness contexts and to the discipline in which their studies are based. Despite this, there is a general lack of scholarly material concerning TRPGs, which can likely be attributed to preexisting stigmas that are slowly dissipating as actual play podcasts grow in popularity. This paper examined one of those podcasts, *Dimension 20's Fantasy High*, and attempted to contextualize certain person, player, and character interactions observed within the campaign with their corresponding frames. In using these three frames, we can see the breakdown of the person, player, and character mindset, as well as the overlap of thoughts, emotions, and ideas between frames. It was found that these frames help situate certain actions and narratives in TRPGs, but the unstable nature of those frames means that players constantly shift between those frames while interacting with others in a TRPG setting.

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