

## **Just Rol[l/e] with it: The Sense-Making Practices of a Tabletop Roleplaying Game Community.**

The paper details research conducted on a pair of groups who engage in Tabletop Role Playing Games (TRPGs), in the interests of observing information behaviour around the practice of collecting, collating, and interpreting official sources of information (rule books).

This paper aims to provide links between the academic disciplines of Library Information Science (LIS) and Role Playing literature; and demonstrate the value of applying techniques developed to explore how people get information to players of tabletop roleplaying games (TRPGs). The key learnings for practice (of Library Information Science) is in being able to observe a leisure-based Community of Practice (CoP; Brown & Duguid 1991). The study draws together concepts from CoP, Sense-Making (Dervin 1992) and information practices (Savolainen 2007) research. As the theoretical lens of Sense-Making is observed in a wider variety of activities (Olsson 2010; Prigoda & McKenzie 2007), this study adds to the literature on the use of Sense-Making as a practice situated within social activity in Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS; Savolainen 1995), specifically in the context of leisure activities.

TRPGs are a type of role-playing game that involves the co-creation of a shared fictional reality between the players, the official rules, and the GM (Game Master, a lead storyteller figure). Commonly, TRPGs will have tensions between their game rules (or mechanics) and their description of the setting the game takes place in (referred to as 'the fluff', due to its typically prosaic nature). TRPG groups engage with frequent discussions of how to interpret the rules as applies to the situation the group is creating. The study found that the predominant method of solving tension took the form of sense-making; creating a bridge between a state of uncertainty to a specific destination (Dervin 1992; in this case, agreeing upon a shared meaning so that the game could continue) in the social context of a negotiation between the TRPG group, the official information sources as the game's ostensive leader, the Game Master (GM).

The study was carried out on a large group of established TRPG role payers (10 people, where the average is 4-5), and a smaller group of role players (2 additional people) with less experience, to observe the information behaviour involved. It was conducted through a series of interviews; each separate group within two weeks and a span of approximately six months between the two groups. The object of the interviews was to collect information on how rules were interpreted, although the Practices of the Community were invariably an additional focus.

Whilst studies in the Role Playing literature generally adopt a dyadic discourse (see for example Brackin 2012, pp. 241-3; Evans 2012, pp. 182-3; Kim 2003; or Rose 2012, pp. 270-4), framing gamers in a binary opposition between 'role' and 'roll' players, this study found a more complex picture in participants' sense-making abilities, where all participants described using engaging with both discursive frameworks in order to produce a satisfactory result.

Sense-Making in leisure ELIS is prevalent in the Practices of TRPG groups; observable, transferrable, communal, and discursive.

Reference List:

- Brackin, A. 2012, 'You Got Your Gameplay in My Role-Play!', in J. Cogburn & M. Silcox (eds), *Dungeons and Dragons and Philosophy: Raiding the Temple of Wisdom*, Open Court, Chicago, Illinois, pp. 239-53.
- Brown, J.S. & Duguid, P. 1991, 'Organizational learning and communities-of-practice: Toward a unified view of working, learning, and innovation', *Organization science*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 40-57.
- Dervin, B. 1992, 'From the mind's eye of the user: The sense-making qualitative-quantitative methodology', *Qualitative research in information management*, vol. 61, p. 84.
- Evans, M. 2012, 'The Secret Lives of Elven Paladins', in J. Cogburn & M. Silcox (eds), *Dungeons and Dragons and Philosophy: Raiding the Temple of Wisdom*, Open Court, Chicago, Illinois, pp. 179-92.
- Kim, J.H. 2003, *Story and Narrative Paradigms in Role-Playing Games*, viewed 04/09/2015, <<http://www.darkshire.net/jhkim/rpg/theory/narrative/paradigms.html>>.
- Olsson, M.R. 2010, 'The play's the thing: Theater professionals make sense of Shakespeare', *Library & Information Science Research*, vol. 32, no. 4, pp. 272-80.
- Prigoda, E. & McKenzie, P.J. 2007, 'Purls of wisdom: A collectivist study of human information behaviour in a public library knitting group', *Journal of Documentation*, vol. 63, no. 1, pp. 90-114.
- Rose, J. 2012, 'The Gunpowder Crisis', in J. Cogburn & M. Silcox (eds), *Dungeons and Dragons and Philosophy: Raiding the Temple of Wisdom*, Open Court, Chicago, Illinois.
- Savolainen, R. 1995, 'Everyday life information seeking: Approaching information seeking in the context of "way of life"', *Library & Information Science Research*, vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 259-94.
- Savolainen, R. 2007, 'Information Behavior and Information Practice: Reviewing the "Umbrella Concepts" of Information-Seeking Studies<sup>1</sup>', *The Library*, vol. 77, no. 2.