From Tabletop to Desktop

How communication affordances in tabletop role-playing games change in the transition from offline to online play

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2016/2017

Abstract

This paper seeks to analyze the differences in communication affordances between offline and online variants of tabletop, or "pen & paper" role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*. The main research we will be answering is how communication affordances in these role-playing games changes in the transition from an offline social setting to an online mediated setting. Theories on layers of communication in role-playing games by Gary Allen Fine will be discussed, as will frame theory by Ervin Goffman. The methodological approach of the paper is to analyze the online role-playing platform Roll20.net and try to identify communicative affordances within the platform that may lead to a change in communication between the participants of a role-playing game. Several communicative and gameplay tools found within the online platform will be analyzed. Several of the findings lead to a possible change in communication between several of the layers the theory of Gary Allen Fine suggests. On one hand, role-playing online may lead to a more fragmented type of communication, as the computer desktop (and therefore mediated communication) acts as a barrier between players. On the other hand, the affordances within Roll20 could also lead players (who understand the inner workings of the platform) to a more streamlined game-experience, absolving the need for unnecessary and/or noisy communication. Lastly, the analysis also leads to unexpected avenues of possible follow up research. The implication on immersion in the online variant of role-playing is still up for debate, as there are both findings that would possibly suggest a more in depth and immersive role-playing experience than the offline variant, but also vice-versa. Cheating is another possibility that raises questions through this research which are still unanswered but interesting enough to follow up.

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1. Introduction

Ever since tabletop game designer Gary Gygax first introduced *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS* to the world back in 1974, tabletop role-playing games have been a staple amongst gamers everywhere (Kushner, 2008).

The general concept of a role-playing game is that a group of players, usually in-between 4 to 6, gather around a table and act out various fantasy characters with one of the players acting as storyteller, weaving together plotlines and fantastical battles for the player characters to engage in (Barton, 2008). In the past couple of years, tabletop role-players have sought new ways to play their games. They are increasingly played online, with players often citing the lack of available players in their immediate social circle as a reason to seek groups to play with online (Antwiler, 2011).

Due to a keen interest in how role-playing games of this type would function in an online environment, I chanced upon the website Roll20.net. Roll20 is an HTML web-space serving as a framework for playing role-playing games online. Roll20 provides many tools which can be used to play online, but does not feature a specific game, meaning it is not a digital adaptation, but rather a toolset.

The changing of communication from an offline to online setting is a topic communications scholar Nancy Baym frequently discusses in her work *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* (2010). Baym suggests that the most interesting aspect of 'mediated communication' are the different changes that communication goes through in different media, for instance how things like visual cues, emotions or tone are expressed in a mediated environment (Baym, 2010; 53). According to Baym, mediated communication is therefore inherently different than offline, face to face communication. Another example of this can be found in the recent study by linguist Tyler Schnoebelen. In his research, Schnoebelen analyzed how and why certain emoticons we're used on Twitter. Schnoebelen writes that emoticons, which are a staple of mediated communication "[…] are not simply representations of internal emotional states" but "They are more interactive in nature, positioning authors and audiences around propositions" (Schnoebelen, 2012; 118). Schnoebelen here suggests that emoticons preserve part of what happens in actual speech, a part that might get lost in text-only communication.

Baym also places emphasis on the fact that the use of technology is important to consider when thinking about how mediated communication enriches the nature of communication. She writes that *"As a consequence of people's enthusiasm for digital social interaction, developers have created ever richer means for us to communicate"* (2010, 60). Think here about apps such as Twitter and Instagram, which both introduces new, different kinds of mediated interaction. This point of

view could suggest that in the case of Roll20, developers have specifically designed parts of the platform to enhance (perhaps otherwise difficult) communication, which makes Roll20 an intriguing topic of research.

A quick glance at how the platform functions reveals some interesting topics for discussion. There are a number of (chat)-logs available, tables, calculation tools, drawing tools etcetera seemingly designed to 'communicate' a wealth of information to all players at once; information that might be relayed differently when playing the game in an offline setting. An example of this is addressed in the 2015 article "Voice in Virtual Worlds: The Design, Use and Influence of Voice Chat in Online Play" by Wadley et al. The authors claim that the communication media in online environments is chosen based upon the experience the player will want to have. Players would choose text-only chat if eavesdropping was a concern or if they wanted more control over their self-presentation (Wadley et al, 2015; 3-4). On the other side, using voice chat could improve sociability and a more "hands off" style of playing (Wadley et al, 2015; 3-4). Both examples indicate a difference of communication, and both could be applicable to using certain Roll20 tools.

Consider now how the concept of the tabletop role-playing game itself is for the most part a highly sociable experience, for example Media and Communications scholar Sarah Bowman writes that "(…)role-playing, as a practice is, at its roots a fundamental aspect of human interaction" (Bowman, 2010; 12). The process of playing a role-playing game online would indicate that a shift in communication aspects takes place. For example, Constance Steinkuehler and Dmitri Williams have noted similar findings when analyzing social cohesion between players in MMOs (Massive Multiplayer Online games). They write that:

"*By providing spaces for social interaction and relationships beyond the workplace and home, MMOs have the capacity to function as one form of a new ''third place'' for informal sociability much like the pubs, coffee shops, and other hangouts of old*" (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006; 886).

Yet for a tabletop role-playing game, which thrives on the combined fantasy and interaction between players to be successful, could a shift from offline to online role-playing possibly alter the core aspects of the game itself?

Ultimately I aim to research how communication affordances could change when tabletop role-playing, with *Dungeons & Dragons* as the most well-known variant, changes from an offline social event to a digital online variant. My main research question will be as follows:

How do communication affordances of tabletop role-playing games change in the transition from offline to online play?

Sociologist Gary Allen Fine suggests that a three-layered communication structure can be conceived in role-playing games. In short these are the *exogenous* layer (casual talking), the *endogenous* layer (communication *about* the game and its rules) and the *diegetic* layer (communication *inside* the game and its fictional world) (Fine, 1983).

From this theory I have extracted three sub-questions that will help me answer the main research question:

How do exogenous communication elements change?

How do endogenous communication elements change?

How do diegetic communication elements change?

2. Theory & Methodology

2.1.   Theory

In his book *Shared Fantasy,* Gary Allan Fine proposes a three layered structure in role-playing games: A primary social frame inhabited by people, a secondary game frame inhabited by players and a tertiary diegetic frame inhabited by characters (Fine, 1983; 181-204). All three layers of the role-playing frame will lead to different types of communication i.e.: communication outside of the game (General and informal talking); communication on the formal aspects of the game (communication about rules and variables) and In-game communication (communication inside the fictional game world) (Fine, 1983; 186). Fine calls these layers Exogenous, Endogenous and Diegetic respectively. As we read earlier, online communication is inherently different than offline communication (Baym, 2010), thus the layers Fine describes may change when the setting of the game transfers to an online space. No longer is communication in this aspect simply defined as talking to each other on different topics but it is also altered into text-chat and voice-chat. The communication is mediated.

Fine's framework for role-playing games was inspired by sociologist Erving Goffman's theory on *Frame Analysis.* Goffman writes on how 'frames of experience' govern social worlds and interactions, and how these frames are situational definitions that stem from the organized principles that govern both the social events and the participants, or in our case players of the event (Fine, 1986; 182) (Goffman, 1974; 10-11). Fine describes frame analysis as being original as it explores the social organization of interaction to uncover perceptions of experience (Fine, 1986; 182). Goffman claims that individuals pass from frame to frame constantly in these social events (Goffman, 1974). In this context, frame analysis as defined by Goffman suggests that players jump to and from different contexts (frames) of interaction or play depending on the social event. Sarah Lynne Bowman writes about these interactions as a form "Prescribed roles on the stage of social expectation". Furthermore she states that:

"We may be asked to embody the roles of child, parent, teacher or student depending on necessity, and we unconsciously shift our behavior to suit these requirements in order to establish social cohesion" (Bowman, 2010: 12).

In the case of role-playing Bowman states it is important to remember that individuals are allowed and encouraged to create their own narrative. Unlike in most films or television programs, Individuals who play Role-playing games can be categorized as both audience as well as participant, therefore the "audience" of a role-playing game both "invent" the narrative and experience it (Bowman, 2010: 14). From the standpoint of Goffman's theory, this would mean that players may experience the game on both a personal subjective level, from the eyes of a character, as well as a

more distant objective level, as a player. The player would jump from a frame in which he or she knows the boundaries of the game and its rules to a frame where his or her character only has (limited) knowledge of the fictional world. Here we should ask the question as to how these experiences will change when the method of playing a role-playing game changes from a close knit environment to a mediated one. The chance that online role-playing induces bigger changes than simply the methods of communication is a definite possibility, if only because the changes in communication already provide a different experience as was discussed earlier.

The social cohesion between a group of players is perhaps the most important aspects of the role-playing game, by the examples of multiple levels of communication that Fine addresses, we could state that a 'successful' game is dependent on the success of a group's communication. The frame of interaction the players will find themselves in is determined by the proceedings of the game itself and from there on govern the actions and limits of possibility to be taken by players.

The crux in this discussion is that most of the theories presented are based on face-to-face social interaction. As stated before, the most interesting aspect of this paper is that I will be analyzing a platform created to specifically play role-playing games in an online setting. In general, this means that the social interaction as well as the social cohesion between a group of role-players will change. On the most basic of levels, imagine a group of players sitting around a table. They are not playing yet, but are passing around some drinks, chit-chatting and maybe they are trying to decide on what kind of pizza they shall order when dinnertime comes. It may not seem so at first, but this type of *exogenous* communication takes up a bulk of a social role-playing gathering (Fine, 1983; 186). The fact that in an online environment, players are all sitting behind their computers, perhaps having multiple internet tabs open and chatting using voice chat is already a significant change in the social cohesion of a group of players playing a *group* game. As Wadley et al. write:

"*There is a virtual distance between any two players, which is independent of the physical distance between them, but which must, like physical distance, be overcome by a communication medium in order for them to converse*" (Wadley et al, 2015; 31)

And

"*They understand which portion of their bodily and situational reality is on display and which is not, and use this knowledge to construct a performance (in the sense of Goffman, 1959) in order to achieve social goals. Thus the use of voice changes the social opacity of virtual worlds, with implications for the construction and maintenance of fictional social presence*" (Wadley et al, 2015; 30).

The attention of players may be diverted from purely the game to other points of interest. When another player is taking some time with his or her turn, there's little else one could do in an offline game, yet online players could easily drift off, pay less attention than needed and therefore impacting the group's social cohesion.

Harking back to Gary Allen Fine, we know that social interaction in a role-playing game takes place on multiple levels of communication as players shift from one frame of interaction between another as per Goffman's Theory. This social cohesion, an understanding of the roles we take on as human beings, players and characters is a fundamental aspect of the role-playing game, in an *offline* setting. So when means of communication change, the social cohesion between players in a game could possibly change as well (see Wadley et al. above), leading to a discussion if online role-playing could perhaps be a totally different experience altogether.

Therefore, this thesis will concentrate on *which* communication affordances change, on the multiple levels as explained by Fine, in an online role-playing setting by analyzing the tools provided by the Roll20 platform and looking into how these tools provide the means to communicate in this digital setting.

2.2.   Methodology

As a case-study I will be analyzing the digital role-playing platform Roll20.net as stated before.

To determine how the platform can change communication in role-playing games, I will be looking at the affordances of the platform in respect to these communicative elements. The term affordance was used by James Gibson in 1979 to identify *action possibilities* latent in an environment, dependent on the capabilities of an *agent* (people or animals) to use them correctly (Gibson, 2014; 138-140). Gibson's definition is, however, a too broad approach for our subject since we are concentrating on computer mediated communication, therefore, I went in search of a more narrowed down definition of the term.

Donald Norman brought a different approach to affordances in 1988. Norman described affordances as "The perceived and actual properties of the thing, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used" (Norman, 1988; 9). Norman's definition of affordances takes into account the design element of an object, a visual clue which lends his theory more to interface analysis or general human-computer interaction. With Norman we arrive at a definition more suited to the specific case, however lacking is a specific look at different types of affordances in conjecture with their function, as we concentrate specifically on communication.

Ultimately, a more narrow approach to finding and analyzing affordances in the Roll 20 platform can be derived from Andrew Richard Schrock and his article *Communicative Affordances of*

Mobile Media: Portability, Availability, Locatability and Multimediality. In his work, Schrock explains his framework on how he analyzed communicative affordances of mobile media as a platform to find out how these affordances change or replace traditional ways of communication for users.

Schrock writes that Communicative Affordances may be understood as *"An interaction between subjective perceptions of utility and objective qualities of the technology that alter communication practices or habits"* (Schrock, 2015; 4). He describes an interaction between a user and the technology's possibilities which could lead to an alteration of the communication practices the technology is used for.

The closest definition of the method I will be using will be a software affordance analysis on an interface level into several elements of the software, i.e. Roll20. Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost explain that an analysis of software can be approached on a number of layers such as the code, the interface or even from the perspective of the hardware (Montfort & Bogost, 2009; 145-146). I will be specifically looking at the interface because it is the most direct layer with which the user will come into contact. From here, the Roll20 interface will grant the user access to several tools which underline the different elements that the software provides for the user to interact with and reach a certain desirable outcome.

To gain an understanding of some software elements that I will be analyzing we can reference Media and Culture Scholar Matthew Fuller's book *Software Analysis: A Lexicon* (2008) in which a selection of media scholars lay bare the many elements one can find when analyzing software. Some of the elements that will be analyzed into their affordances will be:

Buttons, which Søren Pold explains as initiating an '*Immediate action'* and are '*developed with distinct functionality and signification*' (Pold in Fuller, 2008; 31).

Lists, which Alison Adam explains as being a '*fundamental way of classifying and ordering information*' and is '*a form of knowledge representation that can free knowledge from the limitation of having to be passed down*' (Adam in Fuller, 2008; 174). Lists in Roll20 are especially present in order to quickly communication information to users.

Preferences, which are arguably the most common in the Roll20 interface. Søren Pold explains that preferences can:

'*manipulate the very staging of the interface, its colors, language, interaction menus, fi le handling, auto functions, warning messages, security levels, passwords, cooperation with other software, networks, peripherals, and so on*' (Pold in Fuller, 2008; 218).

In a way, the preferences are the bulk of the Roll20 interface. These are the options that the game master has to set up the interface and how he or she chooses to reveal or withhold information. The preferences also incorporate the direct communication tools that are presented to

users.

I will analyze how the tools of the Roll20 platform present themselves as communication utilities and categorize their purpose if and how they can be used to communicate in a different way than the tabletop role-playing variant. I will be looking at tools that contain (voice)-chat functions, calculator functions, and ordering/archival functions (Image 1). These tools could possibly change communication in a way that information may readily at hand instead of having to be asked for, since the computer is a medium with which information can be accessed much easier and possibly without the help of others. I will also be looking at tools that serve symbolic or metaphoric functions such as tokens and the possibility to tag them with information or conditions (Image 2). This too could relay information to players automatically, in contrast to an offline game where questioning the who's and what's of the gameplay situation is necessary considering the limited possibilities of emphasizing certain gameplay conditions on a physical table.

Ultimately it is my goal to uncover how the communicative affordances in the Roll20 platform are unique in that they change the communicative process of the tabletop role-playing game. It may be that certain forms of communication will simply disappear or be rendered obsolete due to the affordances of the platform considering that these forms of communication were necessary for face to face play, but can be accessed without communication with each other when playing in a digital environment. All of this could definitely raise the question whether online role-playing is a different experience or even a different game altogether in contrast to offline roleplaying.
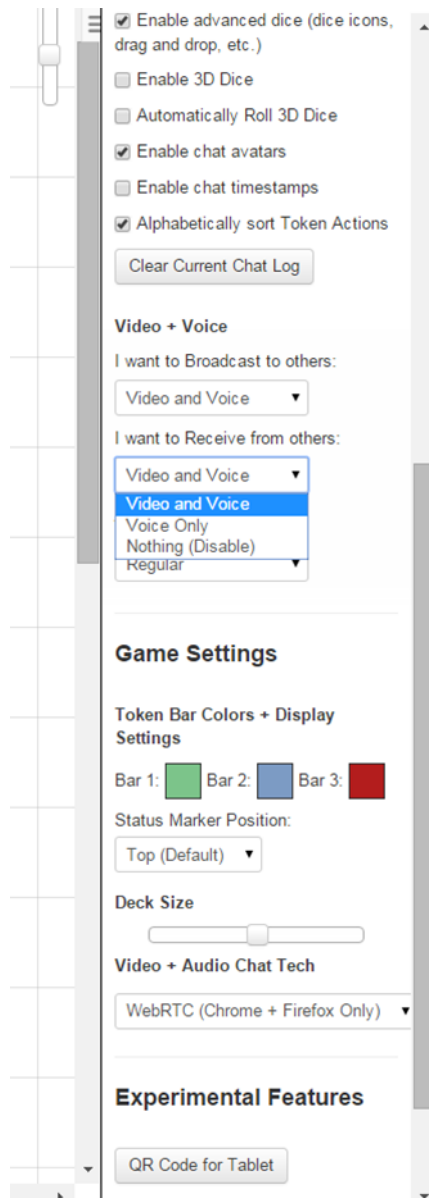
Image 1.

Image 2.

3. Roll20 Platform Analysis

3.1 Chat and Video options

The most basic level of communication in tabletop role-playing games is the act of simply being able to talk to each other. Gary Allen Fine describes this as exogenous communication, a manner of communication that can incorporate anything outside of the game being played (Fine, 1983). This manner of communication is not exclusive to role-playing games, as friendly talking, banter or discussion on off-topics can be expected in any sort of activity.

Playing role-playing games with Roll20 means that most of the time, the players will not be physically in a room together. Rather, the players will each sit at a separate computer desktop or laptop in their respective homes, and will communicate with each other using digital communication options. For the purposes of this paper I will ignore alternative modes of communication programs such as Skype, Ventrilo or Team Speak, which are all possible to use in combination with Roll20, and I will focus on the tools that the platform offers by itself.

Roll20 offers a multitude of options for basic communication. Keep in mind that this communication can be on any level as described by Fine. First and foremost there is the chat-window found on the right side of the Roll20 interface. This window can be used for anything text chat related, but also has a built in function for players to roll virtual dice, send private messages to each other and even allows the GM (or eligible players) to 'talk' as other characters in the game (Image 3). This harks back to what Wadley et al. write on players using text-only chat in order to avoid 'eavesdroppers' (Wadley et al, 2015; 3-4), players could send private messages to each other to strategize or scheme without the other players or GM noticing.

The other methods Roll20 offers for communication is the voice and/or video options. Here, players who have a microphone can link up together in a voice-chat room together with the GM and talk as normal. If the players happen to have a webcam, they could even choose to use video-chat to see each other. These options serve as the closest way a true tabletop game might be experienced, Roussel and Gueddana suggest that the goal of immersive environments was "to make the communication more natural, more intuitive and more realistic" (Roussel and Gueddana, 2007). However, there is an implication we should address.

The affordances stemming from the communication tools in Roll20 allow players to exert communication in a multitude of ways. However, if we look at the manner of communication taking place from the perspective of Ervin Goffman's frame theory (1974; 10-11) we could conclude that like in offline tabletop games, players jump from and to different frames according to the subject of their communication. However, playing online results in having an additional 'barrier' or frame present at all times: the computer. In an online game, nothing in Roll20 prevents players from surfing

the web, watching videos or even chatting with people outside of the game whilst playing. In his book *Interface Culture: How New Technology Transforms the way we Create & Communicate* (1997) Media Theorist Steven Johnson states that '*In an average day working at a computer, chances are you switch back and forth between dozens of different modes without thinking twice about it*' (Johnson, 83). Johnson means that while on the computer, a user will constantly switch from a variety of windows, programs or internet pages without giving it much thought. This statement is in correlation on the discussion of the creation of *Windows* as a more intuitive operating system, but it solidifies the aspect of the computer being a machine to access dozens of 'frames'. Online role-playing would in fact not only change levels or frames of communication but add to them, for better or for worse. The frames through which a player or user can switch is not limited to the game only; rather it could encompass all the possibilities and affordances of the computer, if the player was willing.

The affordances of the Roll20 communication tools could therefore result in a more fragmented type of play in which players not only divert their attention from and to different game topics or roleplaying topics, they could also divert attention from game topics to completely different activities altogether.
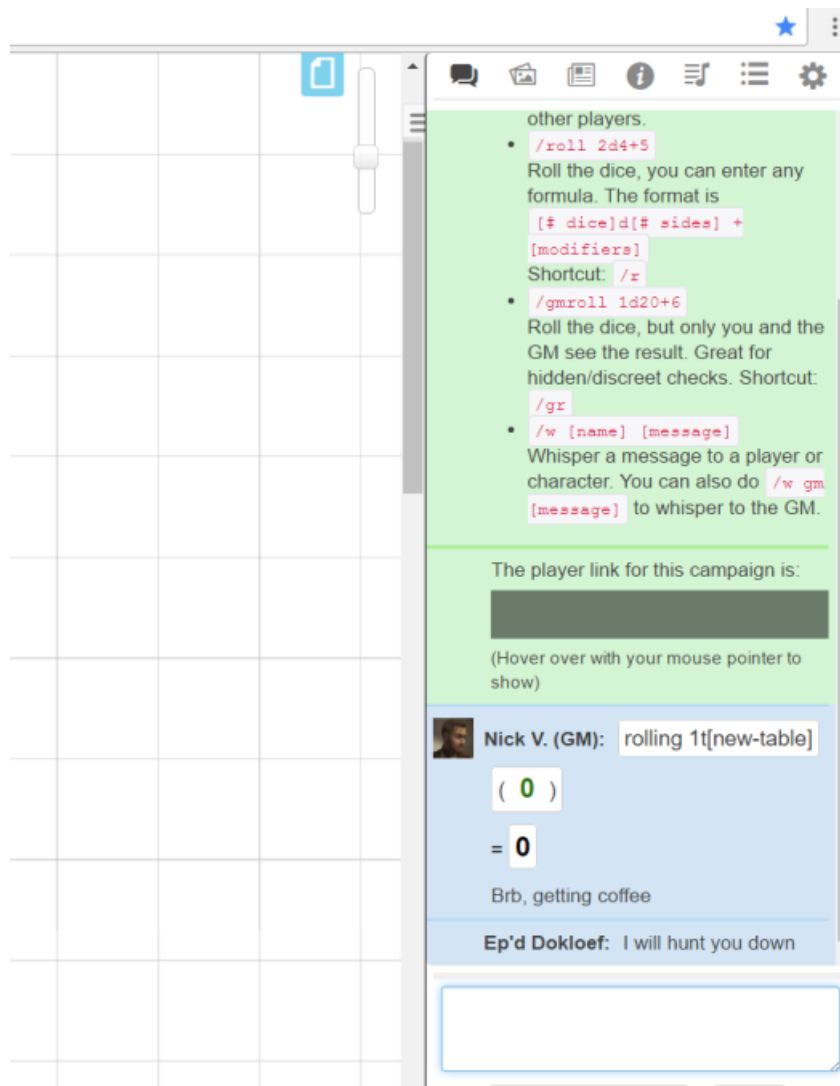
Image 3

3.2 Tokens and other visual indicators.

In an offline game of tabletop role-playing, tokens are often placed on a grid paper or plastic map to indicate where characters or enemies in the game are in relation to the player characters (who often also have a personal token). Information regarding the tokens is held at the discretion of the GM (game master) and may be relayed to players verbally (endogenous communication as per Fine (1983). This information can be interesting to players on both a gameplay/endogenous level, such as their placement, equipment and obstacles; as well as a role-playing/diegetic level, such as the names of characters and foes, visible scars or shortcomings etc. However, this information has to be verbally transmitted from the GM to other players and can result in having to be repeated if anyone was not paying attention or did not hear the info.

In Roll20, the token customization options allow a wealth of information to be added to each individual token currently on the map. GM's can even create and store tokens and their information

well in advance. For players, the amount of information they can get directly is now changed. In an offline setting, the only information is placement and general look of the figure, considering the token even looks like the in-game character. All other information has to be directly acquired from the GM, often multiple times over. In Roll20, all the information a GM would *want* to give about a character can be added to each token (Image 4). Even more so, as we can see in both Image 2 and 4, extra small indicators can be added to tokens in order to perhaps say something about their condition. GMs can choose a net to if they want to tell the players the character is entangled, or a vial and skull to remind players that a character or foe is poisoned.

From a gameplay and communication perspective, we can indicate a clear difference between the offline and online variants. The token customization is an example of an affordance within the Roll20 platform that is not possible to recreate offline without some form of verbal discussion. The token customization affordance regards communication within the game as well. In the offline variant players would spent more time discussing the various "characters" they would meet in the game (i.e. the tokens on the grid map). However, when the amount of information is available more directly, like Roll20 allows, instead of communicating it verbally, this means that players are often less engaged on an endogenous level of communication when discussing this particular aspect of the game.

On the other hand, we could state that players may in fact stay *more* focused on the role-playing, or diegetic level of communication, since the information they need is already there and it allows the players to directly interact with it. For lack of a better term, we can make the careful assessment here that when players stay more involved with the diegetic communicative aspects of the game, they could become more *immersed* in the game.

Immersion is a term that is not easily defined; Laura Ermi and Franz Mäyrä take several aspects of the term in their paper *Fundamental Components of the Gameplay Experience: Analysing Immersion* (2005). On videogame immersion, they state that it could be experiences as '*the sense of being in a world generated by the computer instead of just using a computer*' (Ermi & Mäyrä, 2005; 4). Gordon Calleja expands on the idea of immersion with a framework detailing the possibly ways with which a player can be engaged in a game. Some of the types of involvement Calleja addresses are: Narrative; Spatial; Tactical and Shared involvement (Calleja, 2007; 84), all of which can have implications on how Roll20 is experienced as a role-playing platform. However, although immersion is a very interesting concept to explore, it is not the focus for this paper. Even more so, the fact that online play would be more immersive actually clashes with the previous notions that computer mediation may divert attention from the game, rather than enhance attention. The implication of immersive play in offline as well as online roleplaying games does lend itself well for later individual research.
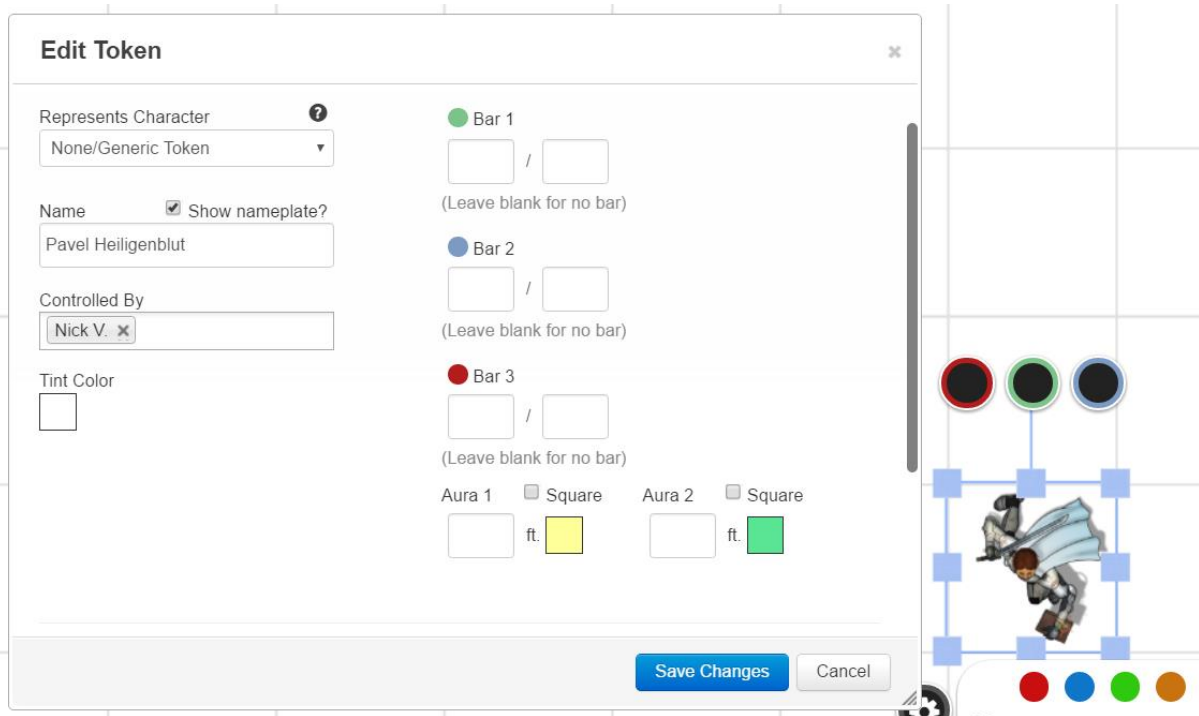
Image 4.

3.3 Turn trackers, Reference tools and calculations

Lastly, I will be discussing the options provided by Roll20 regarding the meat of a tabletop game's mechanics. A lot of the endogenous communication that takes place within the space of a tabletop role-playing game is regarding mechanics or rules. Since the process of play is not automated (unlike most video/computer-games) players often find themselves discusses various rules regarding the actions their characters may take. Furthermore players will have to roll dice and tell the GM their result, or a piece of paper will be filled in with information regarding the current gameplay scenario.

Roll20 provides several tools to accommodate this type of communication. The platform for instance incorporates a turn tracker, in which a GM can automatically add tokens and which uses one simple button to communicate to all players whose turn it is (Image 5). There are also automatic calculations that can be done when having to throw multiple dice at once. The chat-window regarding the dice-rolls will automatically add up every die, and can even be colored-in to directly communicate a successful or failed result. Albeit small, these customization options could possibly provide a better experience for those who would wish options like this.

The final tool I will be discussing is the reference tool. This tool incorporates a large database filled with information about the role-playing game that is chosen at the creation of the session. For my research, I chose the role-playing game Pathfinder and Roll20 provides a wealth of information to both the GM and players on anything they may need (Image 6).

However, there is an implication here that the possibility for *cheating* can arise. Players could

use the reference tool in order to look up information about enemies or other characters such as endogenous information like statistics or quirks. This could be info that their characters would never know on a diegetic level. Mia Consalvo addresses this kind of 'cheating' in her book *Cheating: Gaining advantages in video games*. In chapter 2, Consalvo discusses strategy guides:

"Guides solidified for many readers the various elements essential to gameplay (and game capital), and further hierarchized particular elements such as the game-consistent traveler's guide, bare-bones directions and puzzle solutions, and secret areas and items to be found" (Consalvo, 2009; 42).

Even though they are not entirely interchangeable, the reference tool found in Roll20 does serve similar functions. Like in strategy guides, the reference tool offers possibilities to look up statistics or info about monsters or other aspects of the fictional world that a player's character would never know. The player could look up weaknesses or certain strategies to get a tactical advantage. Even though this is a far stretch from an "infinite lives" code, we should still consider it cheating.

However we must address the fact that the reference tool is *not* available to all role-playing games selectable on Roll20, an attempt to start a 'new' game with *Shadowrun* as the preferred game instead of *Pathfinder* resulted in the reference tool being absent.

All of the tools I discussed above may result in a change in endogenous communication as I have previously discussed in section 3.2. The affordances created by these tools result in a wealth of information that is usually widely discussed in an offline game, but now readily available for anyone to see. The tools provided could perhaps result in gameplay rules and mechanics being discussed less frequently, therefore we could argue that the endogenous layer of communication could subside. There is, however, the notion that each player (especially the GM) would be required to learn the ins and outs of the Roll20 platform and during initial gaming sessions, the inner workings of the platform play a much larger part in the player's discussion, therefore adding a new type of layer to the endogenous communication of the players: The 'mechanics of Roll20'. This means that instead of having discussions on the mechanics and rules of a particular role-playing game, the players would be discussing the inner workings of the platform.
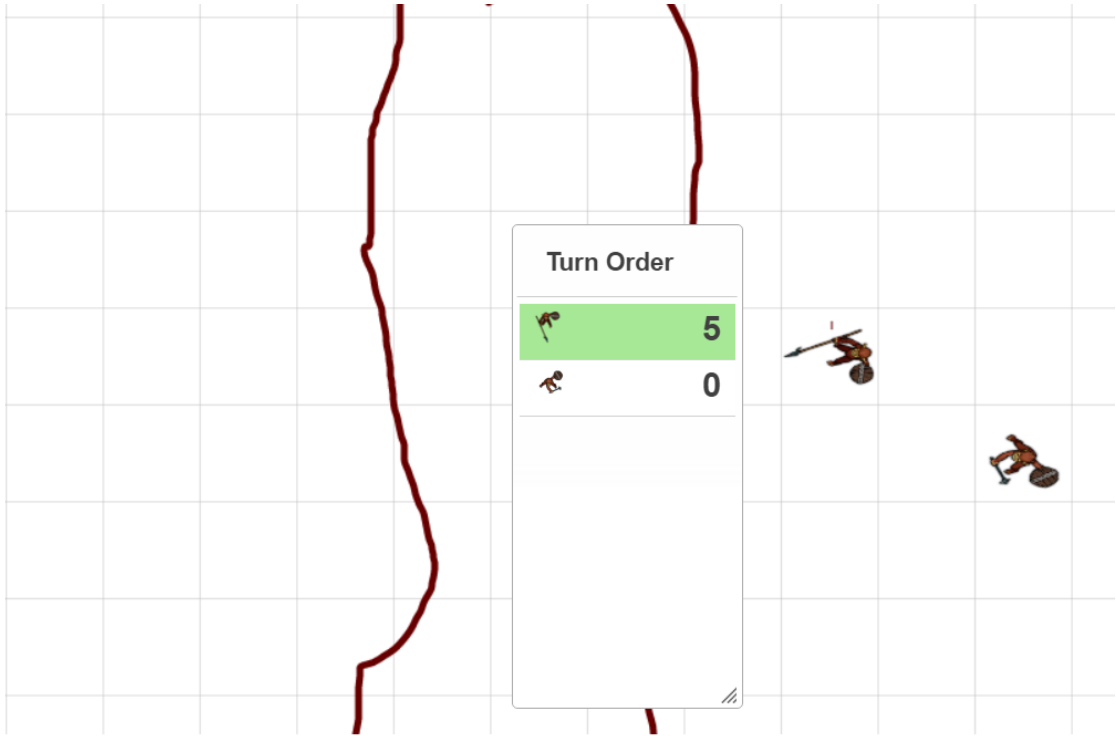
Image 5.

Image 6

4. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have tried to answer the research question *How do communication affordances of tabletop role-playing games change in the transition from offline to online play?*

In order to properly come to a conclusion, an analysis was made of the online platform Roll20 with which online role-playing games are being played. In this analysis, the main research question was divided into three sub-questions, namely: How do exogenous communication elements change; how do endogenous communication elements change; and how do diegetic communication elements change? The analysis of Roll20 was approached as a textual analysis into the affordances of the platform, concentrating on the platform tools that consist of communication elements.

The study revealed that on an exogenous level, communication can become broader and fragmented. Players can not only communicate with each other, but also their surroundings and are, in general, more divided amongst each other. Mostly due to the fact they are not in the same space together, but are communicating through a mediated environment.

On an endogenous level, communication could transfer from open verbal discussion to a more symbolic one, as many endogenous elements that would need clarification in an offline game are readily available in an online setting, provided the platform tools are used in the fullest extent.

Due to the fact that on an endogenous level, communication can become less frequent, it could alter the way diegetic communication takes place in the game. With much information available without need for discussion, players could in fact become more immersed in their game. This would result in diegetic communication, true roleplaying, becoming easier and more accessible.

In conclusion, the study reveals that the affordances of the Roll20 platform may allow communication to take place on any level like in an offline game, but is heavily mediated by the computer, the platform and the use of mediated communication tools. Endogenous communication especially could change from player to player interaction to a more static player to medium interaction, possibly allowing the diegetic role-playing communication level to increase.

Ultimately, the outcome of this research proves to be problematic. Even though a study into the affordances of this particular kind of platform is interesting in order to bring the possibilities of digital role-playing to light, merely the theoretical implications on how communications could change falls short of a truly interesting research analysis.

Furthermore, we must not forget that Roll20 is simply one of many platforms that allow this specific kind of online role-playing. Other platforms include *Tabletop Simulator* and *Fantasy Grounds: Virtual RPG Tabletop Application*. All of these platforms have their own tools that come with their own specific affordances that might solidify the conclusions of this research, or nullify them.

To come to any sort of solid conclusion, further research into the phenomenon should be done on a larger empirical or observational scale. A possible avenue to explore could be the analysis of a livestreamed game played through Roll20 in order to get a solid idea on how the platform and its tools are used in practice. The research likewise addresses implications of other gameplay influences such as *immersion* and *cheating* as a possibility. Especially Calleja's Digital Game Involvement Model (Calleja, 2007; 83-89) is a very interesting topic to explore, especially from the perspective of a tabletop role-playing game.

5. Bibliography

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