The Potential Affordances of Tabletop Role-playing Games

Jacob Reed

Kanda University of International Studies

reed-j@kanda.kuis.ac.jp

Abstract

Tabletop Role-Playing Games (TRPGs) such as "Dungeons and Dragons" (D&D) continue to entertain and engross players worldwide. However, little has been done to explore the potential affordances of such games for acquiring a second language. Drawing upon research from relevant disciplines, interviews with language teachers, and excerpts from actual gameplay with the same teachers, this paper outlines the affordances for second language learners evident within TRPGs。Therefore, the results are based on teacher beliefs. The paper concludes that TRPGs are a ripe locus of further inquiry for SLA scholars interested in identity, narrative agency, or the interaction hypothesis.

世界中のテーブルトップロールプレイングゲーム(TRPG)のプレイヤーは未だにダンジョンズアンドドラゴンズ(D&D)みたいな TRPG に耽るし、それを楽しみ続けている。但し、そういったゲームの第二言語習得に対する潜在的なアフォーダンスについての研究は殆ど行なわれていない。当研究は、関連分野の研究、第二言語の教師へのインタビュー、その教師が行なったゲームの実際の内容の3つのポイントに基づき、TRPGにある第二言語習得に対するアフォーダンスを概説する。従って、結果は教師習観に基づいている。この論文は、TRPG は、アイデンティティ、物語行為主体性、または相互交流仮説に興味のある第二言語習得の学者のためのさらなる調査の軌跡であると結論づけている。

There are good reasons for exploring games and the potential that they have for language learning. Gee (2003) outlines 36 learning principles within well-designed video games that, while a natural element of the games, are not necessarily so in modern education. He argues that teachers in any discipline could learn a lot from game design and how to implement the principles he identified into their classroom practice.

Following this, other scholars such as Kapp (2012) outline gamification -- the process of applying game-based elements to any activity to promote action, learning, and problem solving (Kapp, 2012, pp. 9-12) -- and suggests that gamification is an important and valuable theory of education not only because of the motivating properties of game-like systems, but also because of the successful usage of games for training in fields outside of education such as technology, the military, and business. Within teaching, Sheldon (2012) provides a plethora of case-studies from teachers who gamified their syllabi, as well as giving the reader details on how to effectively do the same in their own teaching. If games have been successful in other disciplines for learning, it stands to reason that they may be efficacious for learning a second language as well.

As hinted at above, much of the exploration at the crossroads between gaming and pedagogy has indeed focused on immersive online games such as *World of Warcraft* and *Ragnarok Online* (Rama, Black, van Es, & Warschauer, 2012; Reinders & Wattana, 2011), and digital games in general (Baierschmidt, 2014; Gee, 2003; Whitton, 2010). While there has been a great amount of work done about the learning principles and language learning affordances within video and computer games, very little scholarly attention within SLA has been given to the traditional Tabletop Role-playing game (TRPG) genre, perhaps because of its antecedent status. On the other hand, other fields including sociology, rhetoric, and performance studies have all looked at TRPGs with a critical eye, and found many potential benefits within them including development of narrative agency (Cover, 2010; Hammer, 2007), acquisition of problem solving skills (Bowman, 2010; Cover, 2010), exploration of identity (Bowman, 2010; Sullivan, 2010), as well as engrossment in and creation of cultural discourse (Mackay, 2001). Given that TRPGs may have untapped potential for language learning, it is high time that SLA scholars and language teachers passionate about these games explore their potential for classroom or self-directed use.

Literature Review

Tabletop Role-playing Games

Tabletop Role-playing Games emerged in the United States during the 1970's as descendants of tabletop war and military simulation games (Fine, 1983). The notable

difference between war-games and the TRPG is that the TRPG is a "role-playing game" in which players take on the role of a character within a particular scenario, similar to acting in a play, though having no script. Scholar Daniel Mackay (2001) defines the TRPG as:

> an *episodic* and *participatory* story creation *system* that includes a set of quantified *rules* that assist a group of *players* and a *gamemaster* in determining how their fictional *characters'* spontaneous interactions are resolved. These performed interactions between the players' and the gamemaster's characters take place during individual *sessions* that, together, form *episodes* or adventures in the lives of the fictional characters (pp. 4-5; emphasis in original).

According to Mackay's definition, there are two types of participants in a typical TRPG: *players* and *a gamemaster* (GM). Each *player* plays as a single *character* throughout the course of the game during each successive *session*. This character can be one that the player designs him or herself before the first session begins, or a character that is pre-designed as part of a pre-packaged module. The other type of participant, the GM, adjudicates rules disputes, designs and describes the fictional world to the players, poses challenges and interesting situations for the players to react to, and controls the actions of all non-player characters (NPCs) that the players encounter in the world. To put it another way, the TRPG is a game in which all participants are involved in the act of collective storytelling. Therefore, the "object" of such a game varies based on the interactions that take place in an individual gaming group. This means that one gaming group's goal might be to complete a reconnaissance mission on behalf of a local magistrate to look into a mine whose owner is rumored to be mistreating the workers, while another's might be to defend a stronghold being besieged by an enemy force. Less grandiose, smaller objectives such as haggling with a merchant, listening to street gossip, or finding lodging for the night are also commonplace. The possibilities for the narrative, the world, the situations encountered, and the depth and complexity of the characters and NPCs are limited only by the rules of the particular TRPG being played, the group's level of expectation concerning internal narrative consistency, and the imaginations of the players and GM.

Theoretical Foundations

The primary focus of this paper is providing a theoretical and practical basis for the inclusion of TRPGs or TRPG elements both within the SLA discourse and second language learning environments. To answer this question, it is helpful to investigate what affordances TRPGs have to offer. According to Van Lier (2000), affordances are part of an ecological approach to applied linguistics which considers language acquisition to be more than just a cognitive process; rather, learners' environments and surrounding realia are also taken into account and said to potentially hold affordances, which, when applied actively and critically, can assist with acquiring a second language. The TRPG, being a part of a player's and GM's environment, could be said to contain certain affordances.

In theory, the collective storytelling and interactive elements of TRPGs are paramount to its potential usefulness as a tool for SLA. These elements, when effectively used, invite players to be actively engaged cognitively and linguistically. This means that there are plenty of opportunities for meaningful, cognitively situated output, which is arguably one major component of SLA (Swain, 2005). The interaction hypothesis (Long, 1996; Gass, 1997) further postulates that interaction -- an essential part of a TRPG -- enhances and facilitates SLA, and prior work on interaction has found empirical support for its efficacy (Gass & Varonis, 1994; Mackey, 1999).When discussing interaction and games, this paper uses Reinhardt and Sykes (2012) description of "game-mediated discourses", which are those that occur in and around the game (emergent) and outside the central activity of playing a game (attendant). This discourse often concerns game rules, narrative, design, or strategy.

Research Question

The aim of this paper is to lay groundwork for further scholarly inquiry into TRPGs and to encourage teachers of a second language to make use of them. To do this, it is helpful to start by identifying the affordances within TRPGs that are relevant to second-language learners and educators. In other words, the question this paper attempts to answer is:

- What do teachers believe the potential affordances of TRPGs for second-language learning are?

Methodology

Data Collection

To answer the research question, the author played a character in an established TRPG group which met weekly at school, a restaurant, or one of the members' homes to play. Each gaming session lasted between 2 and 3 hours oncer per week and was recorded using a tablet device for later analysis. Because the TRPG group was already established before the research was conducted, the recordings do not include every gaming session the group took part in. Therefore, the recordings began at about the halfway point of the campaign and continue until the end. In total, there were seven recordings which were analyzed by transcribing and coding themes that emerged in the recordings (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

After finishing all game sessions and analyzing the recordings, follow-up 1 hour long interviews were scheduled with each of the participants. The interviews consisted of general questions about their TRPG experience, their disposition and beliefs regarding the use of TRPGs for teaching and learning a foreign language, and finally their thoughts on specific parts of the recordings in which their character featured prominently.

Participants

In total, there were 5 participants, three males and two females, including the author himself as a true participant-observer (Fine, 1983, pp. 250-252). The participants are referred to by their character's name in the game (described below in "The Game"), which doubles as a pseudonym. To avoid biasing the study as much as possible, the author did not make his own actions as a player during the game a focus of the data analysis.

All of the participants were TRPG gamers and EFL teachers, which places them in an ideal position to answer questions about language pedagogy using TRPGs or involving elements of them.

The Game

The game played was the Dragon Age TRPG (Pramas, 2010), which is a western style medieval fantasy setting based on the video game series under the same name and inspired by classic fantasy archetypes similar to *The Lord of the Rings*. The four players were Drak (played by the researcher), Wakanda, Callie, and Eckum. The GM was the most familiar with the Dragon Age TRPG's setting and rules, and was therefore in the best position to take on that role. The reason that the group chose to play Dragon Age was based primarily on the GM's preference.

Results

Game Sessions

The players' quest began with the realization that a contagious rabies-like disease had broken out, and that it could only be cured by gathering a special type of moss and using it to create a cure. Completing the quest required players to engage their characters in the narrative and formulate plans and strategies for overcoming problems along the way. This happened by interacting and producing language both in-character in the "game world" and out-of-character in the "real world."

In short, the themes that emerged during the sessions included problem solving, narrative agency, identity, and game-mediated discourses. Each of these themes and their relation to second language learning is elaborated on below in the interview data.

Interviews

The interviews were recorded and lasted approximately one hour each. Excerpts from the interviews below represent teacher beliefs concerning the themes that emerged in the game.

Problem solving skills development

Players of a TRPG may be developing problem solving skills. One question asked was: "Can you think of any situations in a TRPG that might help someone in their real life?" Wakanda stated comprehensively that:

> Another thing is strategy, thinking about how you're going to attack the problem. Like if this doesn't work, what's my next step? I think through playing those types of games, you definitely do think more about strategy once you understand how the game works. And I think that you don't gain that knowledge by yourself. I need other people questioning and asking and sharing their experience, and that helps me to see other options from people with different outlooks than me (personal communication, September 28, 2016).

Other participants in the study echoed this by saying, "sometimes I like to look for alternatives, and I am more willing to listen to others" (GM, personal communication, October 11, 2016), and "it goes back to needing to listen to everyone's opinion, and that you definitely want to explore options" (Eckum, personal communication, October 25, 2016). What these data show is that TRPG players need to be constantly communicating by sharing their ideas and opinions as well as listening to the ideas of others. Ultimately, players are comparing, contrasting, and at times synthesizing and refining their ideas in order to solve problems in the game world.

Narrative agency

Concerning the theme of narrative agency, participants were asked: "to what degree did you feel as if you had control of the game's narrative through your character's interactions?" While Callie considered the narrative to be "completely up to the gamemaster" where "some GMs will 'railroad' you and "others will give you choices about where the story goes" (personal communication, September 30, 2016), Eckum mentioned that the players always have the freedom "to diverge from that path [...] the characters can just decide to not care even" (personal communication, October 25, 2016). On the other hand, Wakanda saw the TRPG narrative as being constructed by "the interaction between the players and the GM" (personal communication, September 28, 2016). The answers to this question were mixed, which is interesting because it suggests that narrativity within TRPGs may be a fluid concept that depends on the culture of every individual game group. A player or GM with a forceful or outgoing personality may be in control of the narrative more than others.

Identity

Participants' interviews revealed that TRPGs may be an ideal environment for experimenting with identity. After having played Dragon Age, Wakanda thought about how she might use a TRPG with her students:

> there's quite a few [students] that have such a strong identity as 'not an English speaker,' but if you give them a new identity, like they're creating this whole new character, it gives them the opportunity to take more chances with their language and with personality (personal communication, September 28, 2016).

Another of the participants, Eckum, mentioned how he had used some role-playing in the classroom. In describing how his students reacted to being asked to consciously explore different identities, he mentioned how "the shyest student in class" was able to involve himself in the activity easily because of "the shared experience; [the students] might think it's absolutely ridiculous [to role-play], but they look around and everyone else is acting and speaking in weird voices, and they feel like they can do it too" (personal communication, October 25, 2016). TRPGs, by asking players and gamemasters to play different roles, give the opportunity to explore various modes of thinking and being.

Game-mediated Discourses

Participants did not speak about emergent or attendant discourses directly, but comments made during the interviews make clear that it may be a space ripe for more exploration. There was one intense moment in the game in which we as players were asked to choose between giving some special medicine they had acquired to a knight and his sick wife and child, or to the village they had agreed to help before. Ultimately deciding to give the medicine to the village, a battle ensued in which the knight decided he would rather die trying save his family than return to his village empty-handed. The GM, after listening to a short clip from this penultimate session of the game, said:

> This is the scene where [Callie] got pissed in real life. I vividly remember him being very angry. This went from an out-of-character discussion at the game to a Facebook conversation afterwards [...] I do remember that he was just very mad as a player when it came to that (personal communication, October 11, 2016).

Callie was angry that the knight would not negotiate with the group and opted for combat. The fact that Callie channeled the anger and frustration he had into a discussion

at the game and then continued to reflect on the Internet about the situation is an example of attendant discourses.

On a related note, Wakanda pointed out the potential power of emotional scenes like the above on students.

> it can be very powerful for students because the game itself is so memorable. You remember what you did with these characters, and it's exciting. They may even continue to talk with their team members outside of class about what happened (personal communication, September 28, 2016).

In effect, students who immerse themselves in a TRPG may be inclined to produce reflective and critical language as a result of encountering situations in the game and making choices.

Discussion and Implications

Based on the interview and game data summarized above, it could be said that TRPGs offer a number of possible affordances for language learning. The discussion here addresses the four major themes that emerged in the data.

TRPGs may be a viable environment for developing the problem solving skills of second language learners. Problem-solving skills are not only highly valued in the professional world (Bowman, 2010), but are also considered to be desirable in language education (New London Goup, 1996). Interviews with the participants in this study suggest that playing TRPGs could help students to develop skills helpful for learning a second language such as considering others' opinions and synthesizing their own ideas with them to create novel ways of solving problems.

TRPGs do indeed offer a space for creating a collective narrative through game-emergent discourse. Admittedly, dominant personalities or an overbearing GM may create circumstances in which players feel they have little or no agency. This is important because narrative agency is arguably one of the biggest draws to the TRPG as the worlds and possibilities of even the largest role-playing video games are limited by the boundaries of the code and graphics used to produce it. Without this agency, it is possible that students playing the game would lose interest in participating, or worse, it could create conditions in which lower motivation to use or study the second language in question results. Despite this, it is clear that the TRPG is a space that at least

encourages the co-construction of a narrative text, which can be both empowering (Cover, 2010; Hammer, 2007) and promote second language acquisition through output (Swain, 2005) and interaction (Long, 1996; Gass, 1997).

The ability to explore identity is another possible affordance of TRPGs. Because participants are asked to role-play, it is possible that players with a more reserved personality will feel empowered to produce language and thereby involve themselves in the narrative just as Wakanda theorized might happen, and as Eckum described actually did happen in his classroom. This is similar to what psychologist Erik Erikson referred to as the "psychosocial moratorium" (1968) in which a person experiments with various identities, but does not commit to any one. In other words, TRPG players and gamemasters are afforded a space in which real-world consequences of actions such as permanent or long term loss of face from committing a social or linguistic faux pas are mitigated.

Attendant discourses allow players to reflect on the game in critical ways, and may help in developing a greater command of analytical lexis in a second language as well as giving extra opportunities for output. In Sullivan's (2010) study on TRPGs using D&D, players extended their interaction about the game to an Internet forum. Forum posts included attendant discourses such as reflection and critique on the choices made by characters during the session. While the Dragon Age group did not engage in attendant discourses often, there was one major instance elaborated on above that was discussed by the group online. The depth and quantity of attendant discourses in a TRPG seem to depend on the game being played and the group in question.

Limitations and Conclusion

The current research is exploratory, not experimental. No proficiency groups were compared such as in Rama et. al's (2012) study, and no second language learners were participants. This means that this study alone cannot make any strong claims concerning the efficacy of TRPGs for SLA in any particular context

Even if TRPGs have potential, the TRPG is certainly no panacea for all of the ills of language learners. Many TRPGs including Dragon Age tend to have complex rules systems that have a steep learning curve. Furthermore, the experience of TRPG groups

can differ substantially based on a legion of factors. If the setting, game, rules, players, characters, or GM were different, it is difficult to claim that the experience would be the same. Teachers interested in using TRPGs must seriously contemplate these limitations and how to minimize them.

At the time of writing, my personal experience teaching non-native speakers using TRPGs has convinced me that these games have a lot of potential, and I plan to conduct a follow-up studies to answer questions about these games. More research needs to be done to ascertain whether or not these games can bring about the type of active, critical, resourceful, or multi-literate language users described earlier. Further research using TRPGs could address any of the subtopics touched on above such as narrative agency, identity, discourse analysis, or the interaction hypothesis. Other modes of inquiry would also be interesting such as studies involving task based language teaching, sociocultural theory, or communities of practice. The TRPG has many potential affordances for second language acquisition, and the time to examine them critically within SLA is long overdue.

References

Baierschmidt, J. R. (2014). Teaching English through video gaming. In Sondra, N. & Krause, A. (Eds.), JALT 2013 Conference Proceedings. Tokyo: JALT.

Bowman, S. L. (2010). *The functions of role-playing games: How participants create community, solve problems, and explore identity.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co.

Cover, J. (2010). *The creation of narrative in tabletop role-playing games.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co.

Erickson, E. (1968). *Identity, youth and crisis.* New York: Norton.

Fine, G. A. (1983). *Shared fantasy: Role-playing games as social worlds.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gass, S. and Varonis, E. (1994). Input, interaction, and second language production. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 16*(3), 283-302. doi: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263100013097

Gass, S. (1997). *Input, interaction and the second language learner.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Gee, J. (2003). *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy.*

New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hammer, J. (2007). Agency and authority in role-playing "texts." In Knobel, M. & Lankshear, C. (Eds.), *A new literacies sampler*, (pp. 67-94). New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing.

Kapp, K.M. (2012). *The gamification of learning and instruction: Game-based methods and strategies for training and education.* San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer.

Long, M. (1996). The Role of the Linguistic Environment in Second Language Acquisition. In W. Ritchie & T. Bhatia (eds), *Handbook of second language acquisition*, (pp. 413-68). San Diego: Academic Press.

Mackay, D. (2001). *The fantasy role-playing game: A new performing art.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co.

Mackey, A. (1999). Input, interaction, and second language development: An empirical study of question formation in ESL. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 21,* 557-587.

Miles, M.B, & Huberman, A.M. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis,* 2nd Ed. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Pramas, C. (2010). *Dragon age: Dark fantasy roleplaying*. Seattle, WA: Green Ronin.

Rama, P.S., Black, R.W., van Es, E., & Warschauer, M. (2012). Affordances for second language learning in world of warcraft. *ReCALL J. 24*(3)*,* 322-338. doi: 10.1017/S0958344012000171.

Reinders, H. & Wattana, S. (2011). Learn English or die: The effects of digital games on interaction and willingness to communicate in a foreign language. *Digital Culture & Education, 3*(1), 3-29.

Reinders, H. & Wattana, S. (2012). Talk to me! Games and students' willingness to communicate. In Reinders, H. (Ed.), *Digital games in language learning and teaching,* (pp. 156-188). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Reinhardt, J. & Sykes, J. (2012). Conceptualizing digital game-mediated L2 learning and pedagogy: Game-enhanced and game-based research and practice. In Reinders, H. (Ed.), *Digital games in language learning and teaching,* (pp. 32-49). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Sheldon, L. (2012). *The multiplayer classroom: Designing coursework as a game*. Boston, MA: Cengage.

Sullivan, S. (2010). *Players in control: Narrative, new media, and Dungeons and Dragons* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Missouri, Columbia MO.

Swain, M. (2005). The output hypothesis: theory and research. In E. Hinkel (Eds.). *Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning,* (pp. 471-483). Mahwa, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

The New London Group (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social future. *Harvard Educational Review, 66*(1), 60-92.

Van Lier, L. (2000). From input to affordance: Social-interactive learning from an ecological perspective. In *Sociocultural theory and second language learning*, (pp. 155-177). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Whitton, N. (2010). *Learning with digital games: A practical guide to engaging students in Higher Education*. New York, NY: Routledge.