Self-Reference and Merged Identities in Roleplaying Games
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Roleplaying Games are played by providing the participants with an avatar in a fictional world. This principle holds whether the game is played with pen and paper or on a PC. This paper sheds light on how the players’ self extends to include these avatars, with particular attention paid to what this can tell us about the nature of reference.

Drawing on the works of Waggoner (2009), I investigate how reference to the character as an extension of the self is affected by the inherent connectedness associated with the type of game being played. Three kinds of games are investigated using natural language data. Table-top roleplaying games, the data for which was collected from two groups of Australian players, require participants to both create and portray a character, giving the highest level of connectedness between player and character. The third-person action video games, from the Tomb Raider and Uncharted franchises, provide examples games where the avatar is predetermined by the game itself and visible on screen, simply being controlled by the player. Finally, the Mass Effect trilogy meets in the middle of the two extremes, where the player creates the avatar and determines their dialogue choices, but still only controls an on-screen avatar rather than portraying the character themselves. Both sets of video game data are taken from Youtube videos. Some are taken from a group of three Canadians playing these games on-camera, showing the viewer both the player and the game screen, and others from a British female Let’s Player who is not seen on screen, only providing commentary as she plays.

In each of these types of games the connection between player and character is manifested linguistically through the use of first-person pronouns to represent both player and character. The cause of a shift from first-person to third-person reference, including character proper names, representing a break in the player-character link, is of particular interest. I use undesirable game events as a variable to measure the amount of shared agency and combined identity between the two entities. The higher the level of connection between the player and character, the more drastic the event must be in order to cause a shift away from first-person reference.

I hope that adaptation of person reference to a projected-entity context shows that self-reference is a distinctly pragmatic process, not only for pronouns, but for proper names as well. As there is little information in the basic sense of a referring expression that can help us interpret them in situations of extended self, there is a
need to investigate just how the referents of these terms are understood by their interlocutors.

This talk is an extended, early form of a presentation to be given at the International Pragmatics Association Conference, so any and all feedback is welcome!

References: