

“Paint me a word picture” – the role of ekphrasis in livestreamed tabletop role-playing games

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Abstract

“Actual-play” and “narrative-play” are some of the terms currently used to describe a fledging format of storytelling which has risen to some online prominence through the past decade. To provide a summarized definition, “actual-play” is a serialized, unscripted and collaborative form of storytelling comprised of filmed ‘sessions’ of tabletop role-playing games, in which one participant serves as the Game Master (or Dungeon Master, or Storyteller, depending on the specific game system), functioning as a narrator of sorts, while the other participants – the Players – embody each a character of their own creation. Role-playing games (Dungeons & Dragons being the most famous among them) gained popularity during the 1980’s, and have always involved some measure of storytelling. The emergence of filmed role-playing as a narrative genre streamed to a wide audience, however, has been made possible only through online streaming platforms such as YouTube and Twitch and their decentralized approach to content creation. As a narrative format, actual-play’s collaborative and improvised nature means that pre-prepared text, visual or audio resources may play a part in the weaving of the story, but the lion’s share of settings, objects, and character’s movements and actions in space must be represented verbally. As such, ekphrasis plays an important part in role-playing as a game, and actual-play as a storytelling genre. The expression “theatre of the mind” has been utilized by the RPG community describe game situations where no visual resources are available, and the participants must track the scene in their own minds. Thus, the success of any tabletop role-playing game experience, and of actual-play as a genre is heavily reliant on players and audience members all achieving *enargeia*, and sharing, in their minds, similar images of spaces, objects and movements that have been verbally relayed. In order to reflect on roleplaying games and actual-play storytelling as particularly intermedial formats, I will depart from the modality modes (Elleström) and existing considerations on the medialities of games

(Makai) in order to look into how ekphrasis, as a rhetorical device that stretches back to ancient Greece (Webb, Führer), appears here in a digitally streamed storytelling context.

Keywords

Ekphrasis, intermediality, tabletop role-playing games, actual-play, medialities

Bio

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