

Conceptual Metaphor and the Linguistics of Game Worlds in Tabletop RPG Rulebooks

This paper examines how conceptual metaphor structures the linguistic representation of game worlds in tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) rulebooks, focusing on *Blades in the Dark* (Harper 2017). TTRPGs are collaborative storytelling systems in which players construct narratives through rule-guided interaction. Within this framework, rulebooks function not only as instructional texts but also as systems that shape how players conceptualize actions, consequences, and narrative progression. The study argues that metaphorical language embedded in game mechanics plays a central role in rendering the game world cognitively accessible and narratively coherent.

Drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson 1980), metaphor is treated as a fundamental mechanism of cognition rather than a stylistic feature. The analysis targets selected mechanics from *Blades in the Dark*, including *Heat*, *Entanglement*, and *Push Yourself*, which encode abstract gameplay processes such as risk, consequence, and effort through metaphorically grounded terminology. These expressions are examined using the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP), enabling systematic comparison between their contextual meanings in the rulebook and their more basic, embodied meanings.

The findings indicate that the rulebook employs a coherent system of conceptual metaphors rooted in embodied experience. For instance, *Heat* conceptualizes danger and institutional attention in terms of temperature (DANGER IS HEAT), framing risk as something that accumulates and intensifies. *Entanglement* represents narrative consequences as complex, persistent situations (COMPLEX SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES ARE ENTANGLED STATES), emphasizing the interconnectedness of events following player actions. Similarly, *Push Yourself* reflects the metaphor EFFORT IS FORCE, construing effort as exertion that can be increased at a cost.

Importantly, these metaphors do more than facilitate comprehension. They provide players with structured cognitive models through which fictional events are interpreted and evaluated. Metaphor thus operates at the level of discourse, shaping understandings of causality, risk, and agency within the narrative. The game world is not merely described through language but actively constructed through metaphorically organized conceptual frameworks that guide interaction.

The paper further argues that metaphor functions as a form of linguistic design. By embedding metaphor in the terminology of core mechanics, the rulebook aligns abstract systems with familiar experiential domains, making them both intuitive and narratively meaningful. This is particularly evident in *Blades in the Dark*, where the “fiction-first” design philosophy relies on players’ ability to interpret mechanics through narrative context. Metaphor therefore enables the integration of rules and storytelling, supporting the emergence of a shared, dynamically constructed game world.

By analysing metaphor in TTRPG rulebooks as both a cognitive and discursive phenomenon, this study contributes to research on metaphor in specialized genres and extends linguistic inquiry into interactive media. It demonstrates that conceptual metaphor is not only a tool for understanding abstract systems but also a key mechanism in the construction of fictional worlds and the organization of narrative experience in games.

References:

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