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Spyfall: Information Games and Scholarly Conversation

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Nancy Foasberg

Spyfall

Information games and scholarly conversation

One of the aspects of the Framework for Information Literacy that many librarians have found problematic is its abstractness. It relies on us as instructors to help students think about how concepts like Scholarship as a Conversation may play out in particular rhetorical contexts. Games can be useful teaching tools for concepts because they model situations in which these concepts are necessary, making them a little more concrete. Conveniently, many games model concepts having to do with information and rhetoric. I call these *information games*.

Information games and Burkean parlors

In an information game, important information is hidden from some or all players and must be discovered over the course of the game. The processes these games model depend both on the nature of the information and the means by which it becomes available to players. Information games include exploration games, deduction or induction games, and social deduction games like *Spyfall*, in which players are on different teams, but their allegiance is a secret.

Social deduction games, like scholarship itself, are conversations. The scholarly conversation is not just about having the right information, but also about making arguments in the right way. Kenneth Burke famously described the scholarly conversation with the *parlor* metaphor:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. ... You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar.¹

This parlor metaphor—scholarship as a conversation—helps students to understand the social life of information resources. Much like the Burkean parlor, *Spyfall* introduces a naïve player into a social situation in which important contextual information is not readily available, and must be gained from others.

Playing in the parlor

In information games, rhetoric is a tool for players to wield. Many such games involve hiding information or gaining some advantage from having more information than others. Players must exercise caution when giving information and interpreting messages they receive.

In *Spyfall*, the importance of information is very clear. The rules are simple: all players are together in an imaginary location. Each player receives a card with the name of this location, except for the spy, whose card reads

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only “Spy.” The spy’s mission is to correctly identify the location. The other players’ goal is to identify the spy. Players accomplish these goals by asking each other questions and giving (often noncommittal) answers, until the non-spy players can unanimously name the spy, or until the spy can name the location.

The spy is in a Burkean parlor, and must listen to the other players well enough to participate in a conversation until gaining a better understanding of the context in which the spy finds him or herself. This is a useful metaphor for the slow process of building expertise. The other players drop hints to one another in order to prove they are “in the know,” much as scholarly authors often use language or citations to show that they are members of a particular scholarly community or school of thought. Non-spy players practice establishing their expertise without explicitly setting themselves up as experts. The spy, of course, can try to read between these lines.

Students will need all these strategies as they begin to engage with scholarly writing. They will find that many assumptions are not made explicit, and that authors build up their authority by subtly signaling their expertise. Like a spy in a Burkean parlor, students will not immediately understand all the implications of the interactions among other participants in the scholarly conversation.

Spyfall is much more adversarial than actual scholarly discourse, since players are intentionally obscure because they want to hide information from the uninitiated. In the real-life scholarly conversation, obscurity may be unintentional, but students often experience it as a barrier. *Spyfall* offers a way to conceptualize scholarly language as meaningful.

Spyfall in a class?

I used *Spyfall* in a three-credit course on research and writing, to help students understand the Burkean parlor. Because the game is very short, accommodates a large number of players, and encourages students to engage with each other, I was able to use it without modification.

I used the game as part of a discussion about how information circulates within communities. We discussed the establishment of expertise, the social aspects of information use, and the Burkean parlor before I introduced the game. Students played through the game twice, and then we discussed the skills that help someone to be good at being a spy, or not being a spy. I hoped they would pick up on several aspects of the game: the rhetorical, self-presentational aspects of their language; the care with which they choose their words when they need to impress fellow experts; the skills they need to join a conversation to which they are newcomers; and the importance of occasionally taking a risk.

Students appreciated the game but struggled a little with the metaphor. They noticed immediately that selecting useful questions is difficult in this novel and complex rhetorical situation, and commented on how hard they had to think about how others would interpret their questions, and how carefully they had to interpret the answers they received. They were very interested in the game’s potential for bluffing, with its attention to self-presentation and the potential for duplicity. However, they had more difficulty drawing a solid connection to the Burkean parlor and the needs of scholarly rhetoric.

Next time I use this game in class, I plan to strengthen the connection by associating the game with a specific reading, so we can point to places in the text where the author makes moves reminiscent of a *Spyfall* player. The game effectively models an unfamiliar rhetorical situation. My next step in the class should be to show how its lessons apply to more traditional kinds of texts.²

Notes

1. Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press), 110.

2. This article was partially based on a presentation given by the author at City University of New York Games Fest, January 22, 2016. ¶¶