

Role-Playing and Register-Performing

We all play versions of ourselves, and how we say what we say can sometimes index more about us than what we actually say. This is heightened for players of Dungeons & Dragons, who have to act not only as themselves, but also as a player they have created for the campaign, often alternating quickly between the two. This goes double for the dungeon master (DM), who is tasked with not only being a general narrative voice but also playing any non-player characters the players may interact with. *The Seven* is the eleventh season of the Dungeons & Dragons actual-play show *Dimension 20* on *Dropout* released in fall of 2021, with a mix of players that have played extensively and some that have barely played D&D. In the first episode of the season the titular seven maidens are beginning to meet and become acquainted with one another, introducing themselves to each other while also trying to escape from the mouth of a cave where they have been imprisoned. In these interactions, the players and DM perform different gendered registers to index gendered social personae in the narrating (real) world in order to make the characters of the narrated (fantasy) world recognizable to the audience as well as to clearly differentiate between speaking in the narrated world and in the narrating world.

In order to convey a specific type of brash, vaguely Italian-American, and rich femininity, Izzy Roland switches into a register associated with the *Real Housewives* series when speaking as her character.

Transcript 1

Description: All six player characters are six of seven maidens (the seventh is Zelda, played by Brennan) who have been chained at the mouth of a dragon's lair to act as sacrifices. All transcripts come from the beginning of the first episode, when the world/characters are still being explained and characters are interacting with each other for the first time.

BM: Brennan Lee Mulligan (DM), he/him, a straight man who acts as the DM for many of *Dimension 20*'s campaigns

I: Izzy Roland, she/her, a woman, playing Ostentatia Wallace (she/her)

P: Persephone Valentine, she/her, a trans woman, playing Sam Nightingale (she/her)

E: Erika Ishii, she/they, pansexual and genderfluid, playing Danielle Barkstock (she/her)

BS: Becca Scott, she/her, a woman, playing Penny Luckstone (she/her)

R: Rekha Shankar, she/her, a woman, playing Katja Cleaver (she/her)

A: Aabria Iyengar, she/her, a woman, playing Antiope Jones (she/her)

Note on the transcript: The second column indicates which character a player is portraying. If they are speaking as themselves, the utterance is marked with ∅. Some linguistic forms to be discussed later are in bold font for the ease of the reader.

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_LkwjqQ_mo

I ∅ [1] She is a forge cleric, she is stocky and stout, and, um, and fu-

OW[2] and **fucking** fabulous.

BM ∅ [3] Uh, amazing, yes, uh, uh, Ostentatia is a cleric, uh, of the forge god, of the dwarven

[4] forge god Logrin Soul Forger. And also, uh, as you've said, bedecked in jewelry.

[5] You come to with the memory of the, uh, of the arcade, uh, of being at your house

[6] party, of Aelwyn Abernant enclosing you in a gem, in a crystal palimpsest.

I OW[7] **Fuckin bitch.** *Laughter*

BM ∅ [8] Uh, um, Ostentatia, as you awaken, you see, uh, the sort of dire landscape before

[9] you, uh, and see that Yelle and, uh, Zelda are both sort of coming to and conscious.

[10] Uh, what do you do as you awake?

I OW[11] *Gasps* **Fuck!** *Laughter* I'm gonna **fuckin** kill that **bitch**

E DB [12] Yeah, and just, like, absolute power corrupts absolute—oh hey, Ostentatia

I OW[13] Hi

E DB [14] You're awake, how's it goin' **man**?

I OW[15] Um, bad. *Laughter*

E DB [16] Yeah

I OW[17] What's **goin'** on?

E DB [18] Oh, just a whole—I'll catch you up later, prophecy and sacrifice. Yeah, you doin'

[19] okay? There's, uh, a lot of our classmates here, y'know? I guess we should

[20] probably try to figure out a way out of this, huh?

I OW[21] Yeah. Hi

BM ZD [22] Hi, I'm, um, I'm Zelda. I, um. Yelle already said we were friends, but, you don't

[23] have to, **like**, you don't, you don't have to be pressured to **like**

I OW[24] Listen, as **long** as you're not Aelwyn Abernant, we're **fuckin** friends

When Izzy is speaking as Ostentatia, she pronounces the [ŋ] at the end of words like “fucking” as [n], written as “fuckin” in lines 7, 11, and 24. She also exaggerates the [ɔ] vowel in words like “long” that does not exist in many American accents, and adds in numerous expletives into her speech (lines 2, 7, 11, 24)—in fact, when she goes to swear in line 1 she initially begins in her normal register and then switches into Ostentatia's. However, these changing features mean nothing if they are not linked to “stereotypic indexical values,” and are not “recognized by a sociohistorical population” (Agha, 2007). Several sources attribute the [ɔ] vowel to a New Jersey

accent, but she is using a register not simply associated with “people from New Jersey” (Roof_Tinder_Bones, 2017; Dudley, 2024). Instead, the New Jersey features, coupled with her aggressiveness and profanity, serve to index the stereotype of a “north jersey/new york italian-american w[ith] too much money and not any real responsibility” (onearmwonderr, 2021). This register seems to have come about due to the popularity of the Real Housewives series, as posters on Reddit recognize that she is tapping into that particular voice (onearmwonderr, 2021). Through the Real Housewives series, features common in a New Jersey accent, taken in combination with a feminine speaker, aggressiveness, and profanity, were made into a new register: that of “Jersey Mansion Trash”, as Izzy herself puts it. After this enregisterment, people familiar with the show (the “sociohistorical population” in question) could recognize when others attempted to use that register to convey the type of femininity found in the show. Even though the narrated world of *The Seven* does not have the Real Housewives, nor even New Jersey or Italy, by performing the register associated with the Real Housewives in the narrating world, Izzy is able to characterize Ostentatia as a rich, vaguely Italian-American, and brash woman.

Izzy isn't the only one performing a register associated with a gendered social persona of the narrating world to convey her narrated world character's personality. Erika Ishii, playing Danielle (Yelle) Barkstock also changes their voice. When speaking as Yelle, they pitch their voice down from their normal pitch, add some vocal fry, and slow their words. One person on Reddit discusses how whenever they get high, their voice gets lower and gains vocal fry, making it the “stereotypical ‘stoner voice’” (Syd_Barrett_50_Cal, 2022). Despite Erika never mentioning that Yelle smokes or is a stoner, by tapping into the register of the “stoner voice” through lowering their voice and adding vocal fry, the audience in the comments still recognize her as a

“chill stoner” ([deleted], 2021). However, this is not the only function lowering their voice serves. It also serves to distance herself from normative femininity, as sounding “girly” is generally associated with higher pitch (Robbins, 2022). She also avoids using feminine forms, such as “man” in line 13 instead of forms such as “how’s it going, girl?” and uses a less gendered nickname (Yelle as opposed to Danielle) which further detaches her from normative femininity. These two choices—the “stoner” voice and not using feminine forms—may also already be linked in the public consciousness, as one woman speaks of how men she dated would think she was not “ladylike enough” for them after finding out she was a stoner (Dyer, 2015). This only serves to heighten the persona of a stoner girl who is not as “girly” as the other player characters. Marijuana may not even exist in the narrated world of *The Seven*, but through changing their voice quality and avoiding feminine forms, Erika indexes the gendered social persona of a stoner girl who is not as “girly” as the other players.

Brennan also performs a different register when he embodies Zelda, another one of the maidens trapped with the other players. He raises his pitch and adds in more filler words, in particular “like”. Higher pitches are associated with being more feminine, as one guide instructs people to increase the pitch of their voice to sound “girly” (Robbins, 2022). “Like” is a filler word commonly associated with young women and is often criticized for being “a sign of hesitation” (Grant-Hudd, 2021). These are features associated with a register I will call: Awkward Teenage Girl. By using these features, Brennan puts on a performance as a teenage girl so convincing that some say it is “CRAZY” that Zelda is “being played by a nearly 40 year old man”, and another commenting how Zelda “is an almost perfect representation of my first girlfriend in high school” (mtdfs5147, 2024; RachelTension, 2023). These audience members link the personality of Zelda—a satyr who worships the god of wine and ecstasy—to the real-life

personalities of other awkward teenage girls in the narrating world. By using forms associated with the register of an awkward teen girl in the narrating world, Brennan is able to so effectively convey this specific feminine personality in the narrated world that some users think it is “CRAZY”.

Other players also use a different register for their narrated world characters compared to their normal voice. In Transcript 2, Becca (playing Penny) uses a specific register for her character.

Transcript 2

P SN [25]I hate everything about this. I don't know who any of you are. I don't wanna be [26]here. And I want to fucking murder my ex.
 BS PL [27]**He:y**, it's **oka:y**.
 P SN [28]No it's not!
 BS PL [29]No, but, like, we're here together.
 E DB [30]Well, okay, well, hey, first of all, your feelings are valid, okay? You have every [31]right to feel
 P SN [32]Of course my feelings are fucking valid, I was trapped in a fucking crystal!
 E DB [33]**Man**, I've been there.
 BS PL [34]Whoa, yeah.
 R KC [35]Been there, done that, bought the T-shirt.
 E DB [36]I'm Danielle, this is Ostentatia and Penny and Katja and, I don't know if I know [37]her, but, uh, y'know
 P SN [38]We're doing introductions right now?
 E DB [39]Oh yeah, I mean, well
 BS PL [40]We're gonna be here a really long time. It's like a **slumber party** where we're all [41]chained.

Becca pitches her character's voice up compared to her normal voice, which, as previously discussed, makes it sound “girlier”. Becca also uses wide vowels with a smile on her face and discusses typical “girly” things like slumber parties. The mention of slumber parties connects this narrated world with events that we are familiar with in our narrating world, drawing us closer to her and making her character clearer as she references shared experiences of young girls in our world and theirs. She also elongates her vowels in line 26, slowly lowering the pitch

over the course of the vowel. Anecdotally, this indexes not only femininity but also a youthfulness to me. All of these taken together evoke a type of girlish innocence, which is reflected in viewers' comments, with multiple people saying she is "adorable" or "adorbs" (crimsondnd, 2021; Hungover52, 2021). Becca taps into the register of a small, adorable young girl for her character in the narrated world by raising her pitch, elongating vowels, using wide vowels, and adding in references to typical activities for young girls in the narrating world.

While examples of using registers to index only types of femininity have been discussed, Brennan also taps into a different register to convey a type of masculinity, as shown in Transcript 3.

- BM FN [42] We return to the world of Spyre. A world of myth and legend where **dragons**
 [43] **roam** the skies
 Ø [44] with a brand new cast of amazing players! Uh, let's go around the table and
 [45] introduce everybody. Uh, Aabria Iyengar!
 A Ø [46] Hello! *Cheering* I like this little hype moment. Hi, I'm Aabria Iyengar and I'm
 [47] playing Antiope Jones, uh, your ranger danger. Brra! *Cheering and laughter*
 BM Ø [48] Uh, Rekha Shankar! *Cheering*
 R Ø [49] I'm Rekha, I'm playing Katja Cleaver, neigh neigh. *Laughter*
 BM Ø [50] Becca Scott!
 BS Ø [51] Hi:, sto:p. Hi, I'm Becca Scott, but today and for all the days I am
 PL [52] **Penny Lucksto:ne** *Rest of cast "aww"ing*
 BM Ø [53] Erika Ishii! *Cheering*
 E Ø [54] What's up everyone, I am Erika Ishii and I am playing Danielle
 DB [55] **Barkstock, y'know?** *Laughter*
 BM Ø [56] Hell yeah. Izzy Roland! *Cheering*
 I Ø [57] I'm Izzy Roland and I'm
 OW [58] **Ostentatia Wallace** *Laughter*

When speaking as the fantasy narrator (FN), Brennan pitches his voice much lower, and begins to use some features of English accents (specifically Received Pronunciation), rolling his Rs in "dragons" and "roam" and changing his vowels to be more in line with RP. Many audiobook narrations are done by British men, as one user on Reddit pointed out, and there have been

massively successful franchises like the Lord of the Rings in which all the fantasy characters have British accents (CharlotteAria, 2020). Male British voices have become associated with high fantasy, and by tapping into this register of RP while pitching his voice down Brennan conveys that he is discussing a wide-reaching fantasy realm reminiscent of high fantasy titles like the Lord of the Rings.

However, immediately afterwards, he shifts into his normal register to introduce the characters. This exemplifies a vital portion of D&D: being able to discriminate linguistically between events in the narrated world and those in the narrating world. Characters speak and interact, but players also narrate what their characters do, plan amongst themselves, and calculate scores outside of their character registers. In transcript 3, the players are introducing themselves, and in so doing, establishing to the audience what it sounds like when they are in and out of character. For instance, in line 51-52, when Becca introduces her character name she shifts into Penny's register, pitching her voice higher and elongating vowels, as well as adding a sing-song quality to her voice. In lines 54-55, Erika shifts from her higher, energetic voice to her lower, lethargic Yelle register. In lines 57-58, when saying her character's name Izzy transitions into her Real Housewives register with her New Jersey accent. These shifts establish to the audience what each person's "real" voice is compared to their "character" voice. Not everyone does this, as evidenced by Rekha who does not change her voice when introducing her character, but this is partly due to experience. Rekha has not played as much D&D as the other players, and so she may not be as familiar with what is most useful when introducing yourself and your character. The others, however, have played more D&D and take the introduction time to establish the boundary between their narrated world characters and their narrating world "real" voices. When introducing themselves, the players use the distinction between their personal registers and their

character's registers to demonstrate to the audience the line between speaking in the narrated world compared to the narrating world.

The players and DM in *The Seven* use different registers to both establish the line between narrated/narrating world and to make their narrated world characters' personalities recognizable to the audience by indexing gendered social personae in the narrating world. When introducing themselves, by switching between their normal register and their character's register they establish the boundaries of speech in the narrated world compared to the narrating world. Brennan uses a High Fantasy Narrator voice by pitching his voice down and using RP features to characterize the world of Spyre as a vast reaching epic realm on par with fantasy classics like the Lord of the Rings. Becca pitches her voice up, changes her vowels, and adds in a reference to an activity that exists in the narrating world common to young girls to index a girlish innocence. Brennan pitches his voice up and adds "like" as a filler word to convey an awkward teen girl. Erika pitches her voice down, and adds vocal fry to tap into the "stoner" register, while distancing her character from normative femininity by avoiding feminine forms. Izzy performs the Jersey Shore register by using features associated with a New Jersey accent as well as adding expletives and being more aggressive to convey that Ostentatia is a rich, loud, aggressive, Italian-American woman in a world without Italy. By changing how they say what they say, they index gendered personalities in the narrating world to help the audience easily make sense of their characters within the narrated world.

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