

Hold that Broomstick: Quidditch Isn't Just for Nerds

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In this article, Elizabeth Cerullo examines the relatively new sport of quidditch through a CHAT lens. She describes what the sport is and how the communication surrounding the sport relates to the CHAT process of production, distribution, socialization, reception, and ecology.

For those who are not familiar with quidditch, it is a fictional sport created for the Harry Potter book series by the author J. K. Rowling. This book series focuses on the adventures that witches and wizards go through at a magical school called Hogwarts. At this school, the characters play quidditch by flying on brooms. Once I tell people I play this sport, I get a billion questions, and these are the answers to the three most common ones:

1. No, we don't fly.
2. I'll explain how the snitch works, don't worry.
3. Yes, I have seen the skydiving video on Facebook.

As the questions I get demonstrate, most people only associate quidditch with Harry Potter and do not realize that it's a sport people actually play now. But we're working on making it a more common sport. And how do we work on making this a serious sport? Communication! Communication is how we get our message across. It's not just talking to our teammates during the game. It's how we find teams that we want to play against. It's how we become knowledgeable about other teams when getting ready to

play them. It's how the volunteers running media for the game can spread quidditch's message beyond the field. Without communication, this sport would be nothing. It would not have expanded to over 500 teams globally. Quidditch is more than Harry Potter. It is a sport. It is a lifestyle. It is a love. And communication is what makes the sport possible and is the glue that holds it all together.

How Do We Play?

You may be asking yourself, "What is this crazy Harry Potter nerd sport that this author loves so much?" Well, hold on to your hat, and let me give you some insight into how the sport is actually played, then I will use the ISU Writing Program's approach to **CHAT (cultural-historical activity theory)** to explain the communication that makes quidditch possible.

Figure 1 below is a chart created by an ISU quidditch player, Lexi Bedell, that explains the basics of the game. The goal of the game is, first,

RULES OF QUIDDITCH

BREAKDOWN: A mix of basketball, rugby, and dodgeball, Quidditch is a coed, full contact sport .

FAQS

HOW MANY PLAYERS ARE ON THE PITCH AT ONCE?
7 players per team: 1 Keeper, 3 Chasers, 2 Beaters, 1 Seeker. There is a 5 maximum of any gender per team on pitch.

WHAT KIND OF BALLS DO YOU USE?

-  1 Quaffle: Volleyball used to score
-  3 Bludgers: Dodgeballs used to disrupt play

HOW DO YOU SCORE POINTS?
Putting a Quaffle through any of the opposing teams 3 hoops earns 10 points. Catching the snitch is worth 30 points.

HOW LONG DOES THE GAME LAST?
18 minutes until snitch is released then when the snitch is caught the game ends.

WHAT CONTACT IS ALLOWED?
1 arm front wraps and tackles between players of the same positions (ie. Beater/Beater, Quaffle player/Quaffle player)

HOW DOES THE SNITCH WORK?
The Snitch is a third party player wearing shorts with a ball attached. Once that ball is caught the game is over.

PLAYERS

- **KEEPER**
 - Wears Green headband
 - Acts as goalie for hoops
 - Uses Quaffle to score
 - Interacts with: Keepers, Chasers
- **CHASER**
 - Wears White headband
 - Uses Quaffle to score
 - Interacts with: Chasers, Keepers
- **BEATER**
 - Wears Black Headband
 - Uses Bludger to tag players out of play
 - Interacts with: All players
- **SEEKER**
 - Wears Yellow Headband
 - Tries to catch Snitch after 18 minutes
 - Interacts with: Only Snitch

The infographic also features a vertical column of four small photographs on the right side, each showing a player in action: a Keeper in a green headband, a Chaser in a white headband, a Beater in a black headband, and a Seeker in a yellow headband.

Figure 1: The rules of quidditch. Image created by ISU quidditch player Lexi Bedell.

to score points by putting the quaffle (a volleyball) through the hoops (nets at the end of the field), and, second, to catch the snitch, a person with a ball who enters the game after 18 minutes of play. Once a team catches the snitch, the game is over, and whichever team has more points wins. There are seven players on a team: a keeper, who is essentially a goalie guarding the hoops; three chasers, who try to score with the quaffle; two beaters, who try to stop the other team by using bludgers, which are dodgeballs they can throw at the other team; and one seeker, whose job is to find and catch the snitch. Additionally, one of the most unique aspects of the game that the diagram doesn't really touch on is the brooms. The brooms we use are not let's-clean-the-house brooms, but simple PVC pipes that all players must hold, which you can see in video clip links I have provided at the end of this article. So, quidditch is pretty complex, and looking at Figure 1 you can see that there are a lot of different people and tools involved. The players use the tools to engage in what CHAT would call the **activity system** of quidditch. An activity system is really just all of the players, tools, and other objects that interact to achieve a goal, which is playing quidditch in this case. There is also a lot of communication going on as part of this activity system that you can't see in the diagram. All of this constant action, between players on each team, between the two teams, and with the observers could all be considered aspects of the constant **socialization** that is going on during a quidditch game, which refers to all of the constant interaction among people, ideas, beliefs, and so on that make quidditch possible.

The physical environment and the effect it can have on the game is also important; since quidditch games have to be played outdoors, the physical environment could be considered an **actor** in the activity system, just like the players and the tools. Sometimes it can even be the deciding factor in who wins the game. Rain can make it difficult to see, for example. But one of the most important aspects about the sport (in my opinion) is how physical it is for the players. This is a full contact sport where tackling is essential. Males can tackle females and vice versa. There also is a rule called the gender maximum rule where "each team is to have a maximum of four players who identify as the same gender in active play on the field at the same time" according to the United States Quidditch (USQ) organization rule entitled "Title 9 and ¾." This rule works to promote equality between the genders people identify as because it prevents one gender dominating the sport. This rule influences what CHAT would consider to be **reception**, which is how an audience receives, uses, and thinks about a text (or quidditch, in this case), because the multi-gender nature of the sport makes it more interesting and attractive for more players.

How Do We Organize Tournaments?

One of the most complicated aspects of communication involved in playing quidditch doesn't take place on the field. Instead, it takes place through the tools and messages used to organize tournaments. Tournaments are basically the only way for us to play games. Teams travel far and wide to play against each other in various states. Florida, Iowa, Michigan, Wisconsin, Ohio, Kansas, and Missouri are just a few of the places the ISU team travels to. We spend all day outdoors, playing four or five games in one day, in addition to bracket play (finals) if we make it there. Tournaments typically last one day and happen once a month if we are lucky. That is what makes these tournaments so elaborate, but so necessary, since otherwise we wouldn't have a chance to play competitively. And how do we organize these tournaments, you ask? Communication. In particular, the **production** and **distribution** of that communication.

So what is the best way to produce and distribute this communication to hundreds of college students across the country for these tournaments? Technology, right? What kind, though? Social media is ever expanding, and it is difficult to find one platform that people consistently use. That's where Facebook comes into play. Facebook provides a social aspect in uniting teams by something simple, such as "friending" others on the site. Also, it allows for mass communication, such as in the creation of event pages and different group pages for an organized discussion about quidditch matters. However,

it is not enough to just examine where this communication occurs or how it gets distributed; we must also consider the production of the text circulating on Facebook. Production is how we create a text and the tools we use to do so. In other words, production is how those posts on Facebook are formed. So, in this case, someone in the quidditch community has an idea for a tournament. They find a date and a place that works with them, usually months in advance, from the day they are thinking of hosting it on. Then to Facebook they go. The president of the team (whether it be the team hosting or the president of



Figure 2: Image of Facebook event page for Grand Valley State University tournament.

our team) creates an event page where they put any valuable information that would be for the tournament. That valuable information typically is the address of the fields, the time the tournament starts, and the date. Also, it is an excellent place to keep the team updated as the events unfold throughout the day, such as if there are any schedule changes. The fact that it is communicated via Facebook makes it even easier to distribute to everyone because the notifications go right to their phones. With this said, technology is key in producing the information on any tournament page. A phone, computer, or tablet makes life a whole lot easier when trying to get the message out through Facebook.

Once the message has been produced, it also gets distributed via Facebook. Distribution is about who gets these messages, why they're getting these messages, and how they're getting the messages, and how all these things interact to shape that message and affect the meaning of that message. In this case, once the event is created by the host team and shared to the friends of that individual creator of the page, everyone who was invited can see it. The message gets passed along very quickly from person-to-person, team-to-team. The president of a team clicks on the event page and says if the team is interested in participating in that tournament. **BOOM!** Instant feedback on whether the tournament is good to go. By doing it this way, every team can be easily invited through communication over Facebook. So, whether a team from Kansas gets invited or a team from Ohio, everyone can be involved. Once the invite reaches everyone, it's easy to keep track of which teams want to participate and which don't. This feature is of utmost importance to the hosting team because that way the coordinator of the tournament can plan for a certain number of teams to arrive. So, thank you Facebook. Thank you for allowing for these tournaments to happen.

However, the CHAT concept of distribution can also be used in a discussion of exactly who gets these messages . . . and who doesn't. So, in this case, team members all over the country get these messages, and we all use Facebook to send them, so the tools for distribution are all the different aspects of Facebook by which people communicate and that shape the messages sent via Facebook. For example, one of the ways we use Facebook to distribute messages is by creating pages for events and signups for these events to let people know what is going on during the tournament. New people who we want to join the team would not get to see all these events we go to and plan because these pages are private groups for only our team to know about. This may seem like a disadvantage in communicating about our team to prospective players, but it is not because our recruiting strategies involve action. Why just tell someone about quidditch through Facebook when you can actually *show* them? So, we show them videos, the equipment,

and even let them throw the quaffle around. Then, as they join the team, we get them connected with the appropriate Facebook groups.

How Do We Learn More About Teams?

146 teams across the United States of America. 60 teams competing for a national championship. Who will be the victor? That is roughly how large the sport of quidditch is just in the United States, and that doesn't even count unofficial teams (teams that don't play competitively). It is true that there are 146 teams across the country and over 500 teams globally. Despite quidditch not being a sport that is taken seriously, that does not decrease the number of teams that are popping up. So, an important question arises: how do we learn about the other 59 teams when trying to prepare for a national championship?

Quidditch is a sport that constantly connects people together. Take the Facebook example, for instance: each team is linked together through that social media platforms. However, communication between teams also expands from the social media we use as there are numerous websites that exist and discuss all the teams and notable players. In order for those websites to be created, communication between groups is required. This can be considered an aspect of socialization because socialization involves the way that interconnections between human beings can shape the texts they produce. One prime example of a text that impacts the socialization of quidditch teams is the *Quidditch Post*. The *Quidditch Post* is an online

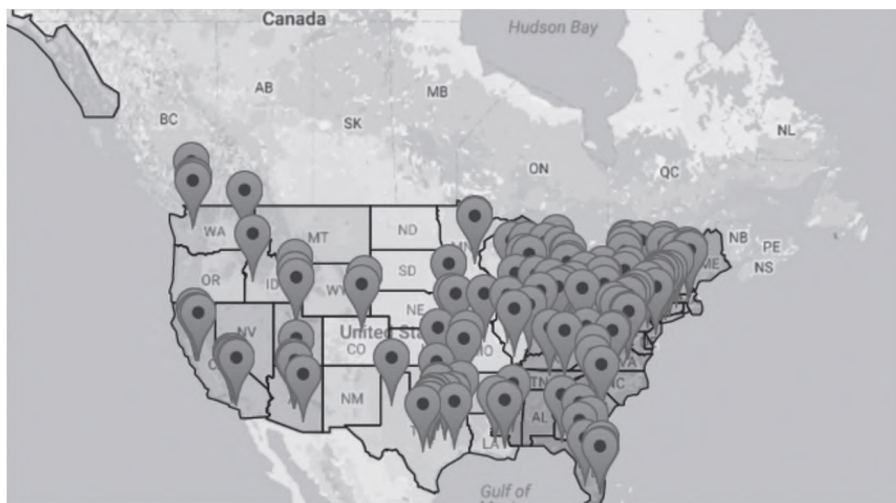


Figure 3: Map of every official quidditch team in the U.S.A.

collection of different recaps about games and tournaments across the entire globe. There are sections for the U.S.A., Europe, Canada, and Australia, just to name a few. In fact, this was the best resource when learning about the competition for World Cup 10, which was the national championship tournament that the Illinois State University Firebirds qualified for and participated in. In compiling all the different information about a team, the author (usually a member of a different quidditch team) would reach out to the team, look at statistics, or get any information needed in order to discuss how that team might do in the tournament. That leads to predictions and to what is essentially expected of the team before they even step foot on the pitch (the pitch is the oval playing field that the game occurs on). In this case, socialization occurs between the author and the team. It can also occur within the team after reading the article and reacting to what was said. All it takes is one article, one podcast, or even one face-to-face conversation to create this interaction. Once this interaction occurs, there is no telling where it might go from there! Maybe the team gets more coverage in the tournament. Maybe the team becomes a fan-favorite. Or maybe the team crashes and burns from all the pressure due to the coverage. The point is that one simple text can create all of this socialization, which is essential to the sport for understanding the competition.

When the team interacts with other sources, their next step is key: what do they do with that information? The CHAT term reception reminds us to think about how audiences take up and use texts. In this case, the reception by a team of all of the information in the *Quidditch Post* can be complicated. It can easily mess with a team's heads. For example, when the Illinois State Firebirds were listening to a podcast on the way to Florida for World Cup 10, they became discouraged at the dismal words that were being spoken about them when learning about the competition. The podcast was created by a group of past and present quidditch players who run a website called the *Eighth Man*. The *Eighth Man* reports scores from all over the country, gives recaps and previews for tournaments, and has standings. During this podcast they were giving a preview of each of the matchups where the purpose was to highlight which matchups would be close or fun to watch. To put it lightly, they predicted the Firebirds would be the laughing stock of nationals. They believed we would not get a single win and barely score any goals. So, our opponents were probably listening to that same podcast and had a certain view about the Firebirds before they even played against us. This shows that a podcast created in one location can be received from teams across the country and make the teams react. However, instead of hearing those dismal words as something that would discourage us, it made us play harder than ever. Our team figured we had nothing to lose, so we went out there and made people rethink doubting us. You see, reception is going to happen

no matter what. People take up texts in different ways. Sometimes they may make snap judgments about either the text, or in this case, the subject of the text (the Firebirds team). But, also in this case, reception may not be simple. A text may cause a reaction (and actions) that the authors might not expect. But that is just one of the many effects reception can bring.

It is also important to see how reception works in the expansion of the sport. As of right now, the reception of quidditch as a “text” is mainly seen in the college world. That is mostly the case because quidditch was created by a few college students at Middlebury College in Vermont. These students had a love for Harry Potter and made the sport of quidditch into a real game that can be played by everyone. These college kids grew up reading Harry Potter, so they have a strong attachment to it. But not everyone grew up reading Harry Potter, so many older adults and younger children do not know about this sport being played in real-life. This results in a small community of dedicated quidditch players where everyone becomes familiar with each other. As we play more and more against other teams, it is not just our opponents that we face, but also our friends that simply go to another college. This creates an atmosphere that is competitive yet fun, which makes this sport even more exciting.

Also, there are quidditch teams that are not from a college. As students graduate, they want to keep playing the sport, so they create their own teams (known as community teams) that still play after college. These teams are usually very good because these are adults that have years playing under the belts, and they chose to keep playing, so they have a deep passion for the sport. Yes, we do play against these teams. Yes, we usually do lose. In fact, Texas Calvary, a community team from Austin, Texas, won World Cup 10. However, even though it may seem like quidditch is expanding outside the college world, these former students did play for a college at some point, so it is just a continuation of a college team. Over the years, the “reception” of quidditch does seem to be spreading out, which means that, in the future, issues of socialization and reception may become even more complicated because college and community teams may have different goals and ways of communicating.

Moving Beyond the Quidditch Pitch

Quidditch is not just contained to the 108x180 sq. ft. oval of the playing area. Yes, the sport does happen on a field, but there are numerous ways that people have to be involved in order to make a game happen successfully. There are the seven refs, as well as the timekeeper, and a score keeper that

are required for every game. Also, there tends to be a field manager who makes sure all the volunteer positions are filled (like timekeeper, scorekeeper, etc.) and tries to keep the schedule on track. With all these people around, it's safe to say that there is socialization indeed. We know that socialization involves the interactions of people and texts. In this case, the text would be the schedule. Not just the game schedule, but the refereeing schedule as well. For example, say there is a game between Marquette and Kansas: Illinois State could be scheduled to be a part of the ref crew to make sure that the game is as fair as possible. So here we have the schedule (which is the text) forcing us to interact with others in order to properly coordinate a game. Part of that schedule is shown in Figure 4. These interactions come in the form of the head ref talking to the assistant refs, assistant refs affirming goals with goal refs, and the timekeeper yelling out the time to the teams. To think these are only scratching the surface of examples! What makes socialization particularly interesting is when it involves members of different teams. For example, usually the head ref is from a different team than the remaining refs to make sure there is no complete bias against one of the competing teams. Personally, when I was timekeeping at World Cup 10, I had frequent interactions with the head ref, who is a renowned player from the Quidditch Club Boston team (so I was totally fangirling). Therefore, socialization happens on all levels due to the simple creation of a schedule.



Figure 4: Poster at World Cup 10 illustrating number of volunteers required.



Figure 5: Officials hanging out under a tent before the finals of World Cup 10.

Looking at my top-notch photography skills in Figure 5, you can see that quidditch does take place outside. From the sky, you can tell that it was a sunny day, and the fact that it was in Florida made it even nicer to play outside. However, it is not all sunshine and rainbows. We've played tournaments in the rain, snow, and 25 mph winds. Weather is a major influence in how the team plays, and it alters the text involved. This is ecology. The weather can be considered part of the ecology term of CHAT, but it's not just the weather. Ecology involves all the different kinds of environmental factors that can influence how texts are produced and used. Ecology really involves thinking about the "big picture" of the physical systems that impact texts. If we think of quidditch as a kind of "text," then it's easy

to see how the weather and the physical environment become part of the activity system of the quidditch game. And it affects non-playing people outside the pitch as much as it does the people on the pitch. For example, the scorekeeper keeps records of the penalties, scores, overtime, etc. on a piece of official documentation as the game rolls on. It is possible, though, to have that paper become damaged or even lost in drastic cases. In the Marquette tournament, there was a terrible storm that passed by and basically drenched the paperwork no matter how hard we tried to cover it up using tents and umbrellas. Even though nothing bad happened (in the form of scores getting incorrectly reported) because of damaged paperwork, weather is still a force to be reckoned with, as people off the pitch try to make our games run as smooth as possible. Another example of the physical environment affecting ecology was the Grand Valley State University tournament, which was played indoors with a turf field, requiring players to adjust to playing in that environment.

However, people that are required to be there aren't the only ones affected by the ecology; the volunteers that are helping out for fun are also affected. These people, who help for the fun of it, engage in all kinds of literate activities, including creating livestream/videotape of games and taking photographs. But, honestly, people who livestream or videotape games appear once in a blue moon. Usually videotaping games is not a priority to most teams (like ours) because it requires an extra person to be responsible

for it, an extra person we usually don't have. Now livestreams do happen with major tournaments, like World Cup 10, because there are 60 teams playing, and viewers at home, like family, friends, and teammates who couldn't go, want to support their team. The physical environment very much impacts these video feeds because one wrong weather pattern could knock out this communication to viewers back home. And not only is livestreaming affected, but also the photographers. Photographs are probably the coolest thing to look at after a tournament. The various photographers from different teams post their action shots of the different teams on Facebook. These photos are pretty darn cool. People set them as profile pictures and are just overall proud of the moment, which makes photographers sought after. When the photographers are surrounding the pitch, the weather affects them pretty significantly, which impacts the quality and message that the picture could convey. The pictures could turn out great or awful given how the photographer prepares themselves for the weather or how the camera is able to handle the environments. It is these pictures, though, that are crucial to the players and to getting the word out about quidditch. Viewers outside the quidditch community may take one look at those pictures and see how intriguing the sport is and may want to learn more about it. So, these pictures aren't just pictures, but rather a way to expand the sport!

The Snitch Is Released

There you have it folks. Quidditch isn't just for Harry Potter nerds. It's a sport. An unusual sport, I will admit, but a sport that exists and is growing in popularity outside the Harry Potter series. It certainly exists here at Illinois State and many other colleges and cities across the country. If you are interested in joining a team, you can explore the USQ website and find the nearest team to you, or type "quidditch" in the search bar on the Illinois State website. Ultimately, though, we can consider quidditch as a kind of "text" or an activity system that involves all kinds of communications and the production of different kinds of texts. And this means that we can use terms like production, distribution, reception, socialization, and ecology to understand how it works. That's the kicker, though. Terms like that can be applied to a sport! Writing and communication don't just exist in a bubble, and that is what is important when looking how texts are used by people as they engage in activities like quidditch. Because quidditch is anything but typical as a sport, it doesn't necessarily make use of the same kinds of texts and communications as other sports do. It doesn't even really fit into the "genre" of sport in some ways, and it certainly doesn't match up with the genre of quidditch that is described in the Harry Potter books and movies.

As people, including me, use and participate in the genre of quidditch as a real-world sport, we change it (and we're changed by it). And texts and writing and communication all play a big part in this evolution.

Some links to games if you're curious . . .

1. World Cup 8 Highlight video of the championship game: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=taDda9ILaEw&t=12s>
2. World Cup 9 Highlight video of the whole tournament: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hTpvSIToD5s>
3. Game between Kansas and Mizzou: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oSiC9jcZB6s>

Works Cited

"Rules." United States Quidditch. Web. 11 Apr. 2017. <https://www.usquidditch.org/about/rules/>.

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