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by Robert Corrina on 03/11/09 01:49:00 am

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What is a Role Playing Game

By Robert Corrina

Edited by Zach Mandeville

What is a Role Playing Game? The purpose of this essay is to examine the history, identify the contents, and project the future of the RPG.

To qualify the following essay, it should be stressed that my motivation for writing this essay is, or was, quite pure. It was originally intended for my own use and perhaps the edification of members of my club. The motivation for posting this essay on various forums, on the other hand, is strictly mercenary. Indeed, this essay is posted with every hope that it will gain attention, the kind of attention that leads to career advancement.

The fact that this method of posting essays is not one of the preagreed upon avenues to success is quite apparent. However, if you wish to utilize your response or lack of response to make this even more apparent I can only thank you in advance.

As with any essay some of the topics, examples and criteria mentioned in the following paragraphs could easily be expanded. My goal will be to explain any one concept just enough to be clearly understood. Some topics may be written up as an interrelated series of essays in the near future.

For many years I have harbored an ambition to design a game, specifically, a computerized role playing game. Understanding what a role playing game was seemed to be a vital and fundamental step in the design process. Thusly I have spent the last eleven years (part time) identifying and defining the components of the RPG.

History

While one may, quite accurately, point to HP Lovecraft, Greek mythology and certain Japanese game designers as strongly influential in the creation of role playing games. It is actually widely accepted that the RPG (pen and paper) began as a fan response to the popularity of the unauthorized U.S. release of "The Lord of the Rings". All this is exoteric, so let's jump ahead to the first videogames. There were many worthwhile efforts on the Amiga. These largely began with group, or party, character creation then turned to a largely text based modes and systems. The Ultima series was perhaps the first to offer full graphical explore mode and battle mode. Newtopia Planning (Nihon) later recreated, reworked and refined "Ultima 3: Exodus" for the 8-bit Nintendo. The commercial success of this release called for several production runs and the first ever U.S. advertising campaign for a computerized role playing game to include television commercials.

Thus far the history section has covered from 1950 to 1990. Sorry to leave off in 1990 but, for the purposes of this essay, the release and success of Exodus is the dividing line between the past and present of the RPG.

Consider the access of the 1988 audience to video games. Access to the arcade required timing, money and possibly transportation. The arcade did not offer RPGs. The Atari offered a home version of a literally retarded arcade experience. The RPG lived only on the personal computer. The gaming audience did not have direct or full time access to a personal computer. At the time personal computers were considered to be neither for communication nor word processing nor even gaming but for 'work'.

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To underline this crucial history: Tolkien, totally unsatisfied with the King Arthur legend becomes obsessed and decides he must invent a neo-mythology himself. Eventually, "LotR", after a modest UK release, is seized upon by publishing pirates and transformed into a torrential downpour of misprinted paperbacks. These paperbacks are widely popular and a huge commercial success. American fans wishing to reexperience "LotR" create a new gaming concept, the pen and paper RPG. American garage programmers inspired by all of the above begin to design and program RPGs for the new personal computers. The prevalence of the 8-bit entertainment system allows some of these computer games to be ported from the PC audience to a wider array of gamers.

Definition of Terms

'System' *n.* For the purpose of this essay a system is a game feature.

'Mode' *n.* For the purpose of this essay a mode is a system in which the player spends the majority of their game hours. The rules and objectives of a mode often change at least once in a game.

RPG *n.* An acronym which stands for Role Playing Game. For the purpose of this essay an RPG is a symbiotic collection of 'systems'.

For the purpose of this essay an RPG is a video game played on a computer or other electronic device.

Minigame *n.* When a symbiotic system is not meaningfully integrated into the RPG it is considered a minigame. Therefore a minigame is an independent non-integrated system.

Grind *v.* When a player deliberately triggers winnable encounters in hopes of gaining enough points to ameliorate the difficulty of future challenging battles.

Grind *n.* The amount of repetitive activity the developer expects from the players.

'RPG elements' *n.* A tag applied to games. Usually indicating that a character customization system has been grafted onto some other game

type.

Biofeedback *n.* For the purpose of this essay biofeedback is used loosely to describe the enjoyment that players, who obtain alpha state (This is the state of brain activity characterized by waves ranging from 8 to 13 cycles per second. Resembling a light trance, it is the condition one experiences during meditation.), derive from simple stimulus (input) response (output).

RPG as Gestalt

This essay proposes that the RPG, like the human animal, is a symbiotic collective.

The possible systems of the symbiote being: Inventory management, story, explore mode, battle mode, character creation and customization, the save game system and the multiplayer system. Through integration the RPG becomes greater than the sum of its parts. Still, as a beginning, one must understand what each system is and why it is essential to the larger symbiote.

Inventory Management is quite old, dating back to pen and paper character sheets. With the advent of the computerized RPG concept of key items (correspond to a specific obstacle) was added to upgraded weapons and armor items. Inventory management, while desirable, is actually a strange little puzzle game unto itself. Where it touches on the character customization feature this system of the symbiote becomes more integrated.

The puzzle of sets is an attempt by the player to complete a matching set. The player is motivated by personal satisfaction or, more rarely, a bonus or key.

The puzzle of completion is the compulsive journey to collect every single item in the game, regardless of the items utility, worth or prestige.

The puzzle of optimization is the players logistical attempt to acquire and equip only the most powerful (and, due to the internet, popular) items for maximum utility in other game modes.

Inventory management is a system unto itself (distinguishable from the character creation and customization system) and necessary to the RPG because of greed. Greed is one of the primary psychological motivators of the RPG player. "Diablo 2" (Blizzard North, PC and Mac, 2001), although not an RPG, utilized greed beyond what had previously been imagined. In "Diablo" there were items of varying rarity that might be dropped upon the defeat of any monster. Also there were items with slots meant for yet more items. Yes, even the items had items.

Now a single system has been covered but what is an RPG? Do the gamers and designers who champion a specific RPG as a 'real' RPG have a basis for their rubric?

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Before listing further examples of agreeable and effective systems from game history the viability of a symbiote or gestalt should be established. For a game to be viable it must function for the gamer. If there is a serious underlying problem in the game programming, hardware and or interface which destroys stability and usability then it is disqualified.

The story system of a game is simply a fictional novel or an anime that unfolds piece by piece every time the player completes a set of tasks. To discuss the story system one must first admit that all games have a story. There is an expectation among players that if a game is labeled an RPG it will have a robust story system. Conversely, players and industry observers expect a game with a strong story system to be an RPG. Unlike inventory management (a minigame that got promoted) the story system was the first true system.

"Time Hollow" for the (Tenky and Konami, DS, 2008) is almost entirely composed of story. I have chosen "Time Hollow" as an example to illustrate the confusion of gamers in distinguishing between the story system and the RPG.

"Time Hollow" is essentially a descendent of "Myst" or what is sometimes labeled "a point and click adventure". In other words, this is a game in which the player clicks on a limited and reoccurring series of background images in order to see the next part of the story. Unfortunately there are inevitable sticking points where the player cannot discern the series in which the objects are supposed to be clicked.

Within the parameters of this essay "Time Hollow" is basically a one system organism. (There is a little bit of a 'find the cat' minigame which does not qualify as an explore system.) The game is an extremely linear story. Is this an RPG?

Certainly, the story is compelling and contains up to date sci-fi themes and sensibilities. Certainly the game is worthwhile as entertainment to the player. It is and well executed and educational for the game designer.

Because of its merits one is sorely tempted to grant this one+ system game RPG status. But is RPG status some sort of generic prize or ribbon? No. The RPG is not a prize it is a genre, a definable genre. "Time Hollow" is not an RPG nor does it even contain 'RPG elements'.

However, if a symbiote is admirable enough can its systems be dissembled and grafted seamlessly into a new symbiote?

Whereas the story system provides motivation through plot devices, exploration provides the freedom to investigate the setting or game world. Here the designer decides who and what the player can interact with. The explore mode is an endangered species. It is the most subtle system and its value to the player is complex. The best way to understand explore mode is to look at "Pokemon". Traditionally (and in the current release) the game begins with the character in his room. One of the players' choices (and likely the players' first impulse) is to leave the room and begin the adventure. There is a second choice, to search the room. In the search one finds a text prompt "Your wii is hooked up to the television" and a dismissal "the TV is off". The main purpose of these is to validate the searchability of the room and the game. Within the storage capacity of the device in the characters room is the explore reward, a potion. This reward has the potential to alter the mindset of the player

"I knew to act with patience and tenacity"

"I have played RPGs before and have become wise in their lore", etc.

Further it establishes early trust between player and designer. The player suspected there was a reward and the designer was thoughtful enough to anticipate this suspicion.

The battle system is the game within the game. It is also the primary interaction that the explore mode delivers. The possible battle systems available to the RPG overlap entirely with the battle system available to any game. The problem is that it is generally considered unwise to be a pioneer. In other words it is advisable to use only battle systems whose RPG integration has been perfected. The chess like battle system and the menu driven battle system qualify. A menu driven/3D platformer hybrid battle system has been tried many times; I would not describe it as perfected. The choice the designer must make in regards to the battle system is what kind of control is most exciting for the player to have.

A character creation and customization system is a method by which the player makes choices about the characters stat bonuses and appearance. This system is widely considered to be the 'Role' in 'Role Playing Game'. To prepare for the battle system the player optimizes and grinds. Grinding is generally rewarded with optimization 'points' which are the currency of the character customization system. But, instead of delving directly into the delightful minutia of the character creation system let us look at the ways in which a player attains a character. Consider the controversial "Final Fantasy Tactics" (Square Soft, PS, 1997). An anathema to some and nostalgic gold to others this contribution to the RPG is that it contained no less than four ways to acquire a character. There were pregenerated or story characters. There were player generated characters, which were presented in the game as mercenaries. There was a monster recruitment option by which non-human enemies could be persuaded to join the team. And there was a sort of monster breeding side effect which was triggered randomly. Some of the monsters had utility or unusual properties

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The save system is a file which allows the game to be initialized at a point other than the default point. This file is created by the designer as part of the play experience thus the save system is not considered cheating. The minutia of character creation needs to be reflected in the save game system. The save game system encapsulates the designers philosophy and understanding of psychological appeal. Furthermore the designer must prioritize which parts of her design necessitate tracking from one gaming session to the next.

Ask any sports video game fan about the importance of tracking statistics and the importance of designer priorities as they relate to regard for the players will become clear. Finally, the designer must decide what information is integral to the game but also hidden from the player.

The Multiplayer System is game designed with multiple inputs so that more than one player can participate in the game simultaneously. There are two distinct types. The first type involves a cooperative mode. The second involves a competitive battle mode. Same site multiplayer systems refer to games played as a group in a gaming venue or in one of the players' homes. The advantage to the designer in this situation is that a group tends to assume the highest enjoyment level of any individual in their group. In other words they gain the best suspension of disbelief. To enjoy any entertainment one must *suspend ones own disbelief*.

To understand the use and abuse, the power and the providence, of the site to site multiplayer system one must remember two facts: Firstly, the system is the newest and the youngest system, the metaphorical baby of the RPG family. Secondly, the system, or more accurately, the technology backing the system has not always functioned properly or reliably. The internet, wireless technology, the networking ability of operating systems themselves did not function circa 1995. A few short years later the system and the underlying technology began working nearly perfectly and remains to this day (2009) a monument to human ingenuity and determination. At the absolute vanguard of the success and reliability of this system was blizzard entertainment. One must remember that, before blizzard, any game company claiming to offer site to site multiplayer capability had been lying. Regardless, gamers returned again and again with dollars in their hands. They were more and more skeptical, bracing themselves for disappointment each time.

So, upon their arrival, it seemed that Blizzard had made the impossible possible. A disc from Blizzard meant that everything was going to work. It was the literal panacea, the puss in boots, of desktop computer gaming. No longer did the gamer have to be some sort of MacGyver to have any hope a multiplayer experience. No wonder that a celebratory attitude prevailed among the gaming audience. One can only hope that the individual specialists who perfected these technologies shared in the companies eventual and well deserved success.

Human achievement tends to involve taking one step forward and two steps backward, so it was with the site to site multiplayer system. The enthusiasm for the new multiplayer system and the concurrent rise of 3D came at the expense of all other systems, integration and design.

The Future

If you are looking for what is wrong with a game simply discover what cheaters are doing to change the experience. This section will begin by covering cheating in a single player context. Fundamentally the cheater disputes the designers implementation of the explore system and/or the save system. The most understandable dispute is a consequence of the designers not including an explore or save system at all. In this case cheating becomes a surrogate system. Consider such a game; assume it contains a 'lightning power up' which is located at the midpoint of the game. The player has played to this midpoint and gained the power up but then had to shut the game off for some reason. Through cheating the player can cause the game to initialize in such a way that he has the 'lightning power up' at the beginning. Notice that the player now has the power up from the starting point, something the designer never intended. The player becomes curious and wishes to compare this enhanced experience with the standard game experience. He begins to experiment, the process of discovery is engaged and a rudimentary explore system is born.

A more complex dispute between cheater and designer occurs when an explore system is included but the cheater has deemed it banal fare. Further, if the cheater is highly technical and the cheating method is undeveloped or underdeveloped then he may seize the opportunity to explore the very code of the game and plumb its secrets. This process may include reading strange arcane languages, sifting thorough vast 'data dumps' for the proverbial needle in a haystack and employing (or even creating) applications to assist him in these tasks. Phase two involves trial and error, input and output, all to determine what type and amount of cheater code the game immune system will accept. Phase three includes actually employing the forbidden powers in the game and spreading the newly discovered dark magic to other cheaters via the internet.

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To create a truly rich RPG experience one must constantly reexamine the promise and disappointments of pen and paper. The weaknesses of the pen and paper RPG are deep and many. I think the following quote from the preface of "D&D Players Companion: Book One" (1984) encapsulates these problems nicely:

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development – and their future has now become our present.

Every pen and paper RPG begins with either this admission of unplayability or a promise that all the readers wildest dreams are about to come true. They then proceed to deliver more of the same. At the end of the day customers are and were paying for permission to engage in pretend time. Here is the great negative of the pen and paper RPG. And yet, what a tantalizing problem this negative is for an enlightened game designer to solve.

For the positives, the first is obvious, the invention of the character creation and customization system. Randomly creating characters is pure fun and a game unto itself. Any time a designer combines gambling with creative user input it is easy to score points. The second positive, has gone unrecognized by most game designers. The RPG architecture implies a game that does not have to end.

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Anyone can create a robust system but all endeavors are for nothing if the system is not integrated. Sadly, the afore mentioned character creation system of "Final Fantasy Tactics" is a prime example of poor system integration. The character generation system was at odds with the battle system, the save system and the story system. The lack of integration caused a destructive chain reaction and any positive effects gained from including a robust system were lost. Specifically, the player was offered four ways to acquire characters and, predictably, began a process of accumulating all four types. To accommodate this influx the save system should have supported a vast amount slots in its character roster but the designers allowed for only 32 slots. There were almost that many story characters and so the player soon found himself forced to dismiss characters he had spent a great deal of time, thought and grind acquiring. There seemed to be some cruel recognition of this dichotomy in the pitiful pleas of the dismissed characters asking if they had done something wrong. But there was no hope, the story characters continued to be foisted onto the player and were undeletable. Similarly the battle system allowed only from three to six characters to be deployed in a battle. Any monster (including a chocobo mount) would be counted towards one of these slots. Because the monsters were vastly weaker then the other types of characters their availability in the game broke the illusion of choice.

Thoughtful refinement and improved integration were needed but never implemented in any future release of "FFT" nor in any other title. Therein lays great opportunity for the future designer.

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Limitation and risk are great friends to both game design and narrative. For example the characters inventory should be limited. Thus gaining an item slot or a storage container is enabled as a medium reward. Further the storage container could begin as a risk as well as a privilege. So there is a chance for the storage to be robbed by an npc. If the designer stops here it is a sign of amateurish understanding of limitation and risk, this will be interpreted as senseless player abuse, which it is. To complete the thought the designer must add hooks to this incident. It must be possible for the player to track down the random burglar and even regain his items. Once the player pursues these events there is every reason to catch the player with a subplot hook or even a plot hook. The point is that limitation and risk lead to incident and to the egalitarian designer incident is an illusion used to draw the player into the game world.

I propose that stringent limitations should govern game narrative. To play a role the role has to be defined. The virtual risk that the player is willing to endure can be matched to this limited narrative. This narrative formula is complex and I will provide an essay on the subject.

...

It is vitally important for the design to contain an availability of viable strategies or multiple and customizable strategies for battle system success. If these paths were properly implemented the designer could arouse the players' suspicions that the character creation and customization system includes these strategic possibilities. Then the player can pursue these possibilities as part of the games process of discovery. Ultimately, as an extension of customization, the battle system would be perennially fascinating instead of a potential for player burn out.

Tic-Tac-Toe is a game with only one path to victory. Although it offers 5 million permutations, chess is also a game with only one path to victory. There is almost no difference between these two games. Except this one difference, the easily mystified human brain tells us that these two games are completely dissimilar. This trick of the mind is the illusion of choice that the enlightened designer must seize upon.

When a player sits at a chess board he eagerly anticipates: taking control of the center, robbing his opponent of material, taking advantage of his opponents' mistakes, checking the enemy king in an attempt to cause panic, promoting his pawns and finally keeping all his pieces protected in a web of his own design etc. To oversimplify matters, and at the danger of being taken literally, all the designer need do is offer three of the above six choices, a limited subset of chess, to the player as strategic options of the games' battle system. Of course, to keep the design subtle, the player should unknowingly make these choices under the guise of other choices. Again, for the sake of simplicity, he could be choosing the first when he chooses his character, the second when he chooses an ally and the third could be tied to some narrative choice.

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