You can do whatever you can imagine

Tabletop vs. Computer Role-playing Games: a paper on openness in RPGs.

Introduction

Most people enjoy a good movie or book; some people enjoy acting while others enjoy writing. And then there are some who enjoy all of the above. Role-playing games combine these elements (entertainment, acting and authoring) allowing the participants to come together co-authoring a story. While there are various reasons for partaking in role-playing one of the central ones is that of being in a story with memories of grand adventures, shared by your fellow players, being immersed in a fantasy world (Fine, 1983).

The basis for this paper was my own puzzlement surrounding RPGs. Having been an avid role-player for around 10 years, I have engaged both in Tabletop Role-playing Games (TRPGs), Live Action Role-playing Games as well as Computer Role-playing Games (CRPGs). I found there were quite different experiences playing RPGs compared to CRPGs. After having tried playing Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games (MMORPGs) and reflecting on the different play styles of the games, I noticed that when on the computer, I never really felt as if the story was the story of my character, nor the world as fantastic as it should have been. Rather the setting often felt hollow and unreal, and the story was that of a stranger, with me as an onlooker. This outlook isn't uncommon among role-players that categorize CRPGs (and MMORPGs) as mere character-builders, where role-playing isn't needed or fun (Dormans, 2006; Barlow, 2007). One player Gilgamesh claims that "*Computer RPG's are Ego Masturbation*" (2007) and focus on self-aggrandizement and the ability to conquer by whatever means necessary. And I am inclined to agree.

My theory is that "Tabletop RPGs usually are more compelling than their digital counterparts, since they in a greater degree allow for openness in the world". In this paper I will delve into my theory and find the key differences between the two game types that make the experiences so different.

Methodology

Aarseth (2003) argues that to acquire knowledge about a game, the best ways to do so is by playing and reinforcing the play with study of the design and rules as well as observing or reading other's experiences. At the same time he also stresses the importance of balancing free play, analytical play and non-play, to get the best results.

To outline the differences between the two genres I'm drawing on experiences with TRPGs, both in a solo player setting as well as in a group setting, study and play of over a dozen different computer games within the RPG genre, as well as drawing on the experiences of others through the literature. While I will be mentioning the *Dungeons & Dragons* rule system, being one the first big mainstream TRPGs and the one I have most experience with, as well as being the one most CRPGs owe their legacy too (Fine, 1983; Carr, Buckingham, Burn, and Schott, 2006), since the rules in the game itself isn't being scrutinized, the game system chosen is largely irrelevant. While there may be specific differences between the different game systems, the basics of player and game master interaction with the game world are the same. For its digital counterpart, I've chosen mainly to compare to and draw examples from computer games based on the

Dungeons & Dragons franchise and rules, such as: *Baldur's Gate*, *Planescape: Torment* and *Neverwinter Nights*. Of course other games will also be referenced, for example *Morrowind* and *Call of Duty 4*.

An important thing to consider is that this is based on a player's point of view rather than that of a game master. Including both would be outside the scope of this paper, as studying the differences from the view of the game master is as vast a task as studying that of the player, even more so when considering his absence in CRPGs.

Due to space constraints, I've chosen not to focus on the players' interactions through their avatars, identification with their character and their personal narrative, nor MMORPGs. These deviate in an even greater degree from the basics of TRPGs, and can be said to include the less compelling features of CRPGs, just on a larger scale with an enhanced level of social interaction and an abundance of tangible goals (Barlow, 2007). While they do offer an immensely open world in regards to travel, their ability to be influence permanently by the players, goes far away from that possible in a TRPG.

Defining RPGs

When looking at RPGs the one thing they all have in common and base their coherency on, are typically the use of ability scores and skills, an experience system to progress your character, the ability to go into the numbers of the game system (be it combat or non-combat) as well as a random element, usually through the use of dice. One might wonder where the role-playing as a common factor has gone, but with the way the genre is portrayed in CRPGs role-playing doesn't seem to be a necessity to play a RPG, as the role often has been predefined by the designers of the game.

Defining what a TRPG is as well as going over the essential elements that form it is important when searching for which differences exists between the tabletop version and the digital one. While there are many varying definitions of what constitutes a TRPG, I've chosen to go with the following, as defined by Hendricks:

> *The goal of such games is the construction of a narrative that is the result of the interactions of the GM, the players, the rules, and the random element. There are no winners or losers among the players, but the game is considered successful if the resulting story is engaging and creative.* [Hendricks 2006:39]

TRPGs differ much from other kinds of games in the fact, that the art of co-authoring a story based on a shared fantasy is different from other game types like board games or computer games. Usually games pit players against each other, but the construction of the narrative happens with the combined efforts of the players and the game master. The players have an almost unlimited freedom of choice to act in the game world. In the case of CRPGs the overall narrative has already been determined by the designers, and it is the goal of the player to move the events along until reaching the finale. While the journey there may differ from session to session, the end will nearly always be the same.

The GM or Game Master is the referee of the TRPG. It is his mental image of the world that sets the scene for the play in the beginning, where after numerous play sessions the world becomes a shared one, as the players familiarize themselves with it. But even so, he still controls the world, with the exception of direct control of the players' actions, and everything which happens in it. With CRPGs, the game master is absent, but has been replaced by the designers through the scripting of the game world. But the game

master is not necessarily needed here, as the world has already been envisioned by the designers, and portrayed through the graphics, non-player characters and story. Neverwinter Nights has the features to circumvent this, as will be covered later.

The players act in the world to further their goals, which usually but not always, are the same in a TRPG. In the name of the narrative and fun (two of the most important elements in a RPG) the players are usually kept together, which allows all the players to react to the current situation, leaving none sitting and waiting their turn. Even so, with a group of players ranging from anywhere between one and ten, the individual's spot in the ramp light can be short-lived, even more so if separated from the main group. Some game systems such as *World of Darkness*, have no specific preference to group or individual play, but actually encourage competition. The majority of CRPGs are meant to be played solo, but most also supports parties of about 6 players and below. The party is rarely separated over several levels or areas and always has the same goals, as a separation of location or events is bound to add an additional workload to the designers.

TRPGs usually are rather rule-heavy, but these can be altered during play, and it's not uncommon for people in certain scenarios to wholly disregard rules (or even the random element), for example in the name of the narrative or fun. When it comes to CRPGs the rules are set in stone (besides the allowed rule changes by the designers) and already here, on one of the basics of games, the rules, we see vast differences between a physical game and its digital counterpart. It's not like converting chess from a physical to a digital version, which is doable without any design issues. As Aarseth (2003) outlines the three dimensions of "games in virtual environments": play, rules and world, he narrows down role-playing to encompass the combination of play and world, further proving that role-playing could indeed be done without rules whatsoever, albeit it would be a tad more difficult. As Fine states it (1983, p 3) then the expressive freedom of fantasy is combined with the structure characteristics of games.

There may not be any winners or losers among the players, this is hard to define. While it's not a battle between the players and the game master in a TRPG, and usually not between the players, it is still possible for the players to overcome whatever obstacle has been put in their path, accomplish personal victories, or fall in battle with no hope of recovery. But even so, the story can still be successful even if the player "doesn't win", for at times, a good story must end with the death of a beloved character. In CRPGs the winner is determined when the player defeats the final villain, while the loser can also only be the player. But even after death and losing the game, or another undesired action, it is possible to revert to a prior saved game, undoing what has been done. The story is successful when the game ends, be it a good or a bad ending. Usually the ending will leave the player alive and victorious to count a win, as death of the player is usually considered a bad thing, with the possible exception of *Planescape: Torment* where death is usually followed by a reawakening at the morgue or even a progression of the plot. Another important difference between TRPGs and CRPGs is that the final destination, the winning conditions in the TRPG, might suddenly take on a different aspects as the players and the narrative evolves.

Subgenres of RPGs

There are several subgenres typically seen within the sphere of RPGs: the TRPG, the CRPG and the action-RPG.

TRPGs (*Dungeons & Dragons, World of Darkness, Generic Universal RolePlaying System*): The players (as there is usually more than one) are the center of the narrative and interact with the game world through

the act of role-playing their characters. As the world continues to move even when the player's aren't present, and it doesn't await the actions of the players (Errant Dreams, 2004), the goal usually isn't to save the world, but rather to thwart the minions of evil in the local area. As the players rise in power the world becomes smaller and larger at the same time, as travel stops being an issue due to mounts and magic, but the players can be presented with the rest of the cosmos, including other worlds.

CRPGs (*Neverwinter Nights, Diablo, Morrowind*): The player is in center, or in the case of multiple players, one of them is the hero destined to save the world etc. while the others serve as companions (as can be seen in games like *Baldur's Gate*, where only one player controls the dialogue). If the player is playing alone, he can typically choose to be followed by non-player characters, instead of other players, under his control. The history is always centered on the player, and generally the world around him doesn't move when he isn't there, as the player is meant to explore and progress the plot when ready (Errant Dreams, 2004). Over TRPGs then CRPGs delivers the images and sounds of the game world, as well as a pre-constructed plot, but especially the graphics are a focus and a draw (Williams, Hendriks and Winkler, 2006). Over the years, games of similar types remain the same, with only an increase in graphics, keeping rules and gameplay largely the same. If you look at *Baldur's Gate* (1998) and *Neverwinter Nights 2* (2006) you have basically the same game play with revised rules, while the graphics have improved immensely. But still, the narrative is as compelling in *Baldur's Gate* as in *Neverwinter Nights 2*, and over the time, with the increase in computer power, the openness of the game worlds have decreased (*Baldur's Gate* offers a vast amount of possible side-areas to explore and quest in, while *Neverwinter Nights 2* is much more linear).

One type of CRPG that stands out from games like *Baldur's Gate* and *Morrowind* is that of the action-RPG. This includes games such as *Diablo* and even older games like *Eye of the Beholder*, and is commonly encountered on consoles as well. These types of games feature a basic storyline and RPG elements like ability scores, character classes and levels. The player is then put into the game world with the goal of hacking and slashing his way through all the foes he encounter (also referred to as a Dungeon Crawl) until the final boss. The adventure is usually followed by the acquisition of magical treasures at every turn, which combined with the gaining of experience serves to empower the player's character. Red2002 (2003) expresses concern about the evolution of the action-RPGs like *Diablo* and *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance* (not to be mistaken with *Baldur's Gate*):

> *The new generation of gamers is starting to believe that RPG is anything in a fantasy setting or where you can equip different equipment on your main character.* [Red2002 2003]

This development is common in such games as console RPGs and MMORPGs, where the main goal is advancement of the player's character. While in TRPG, the motivation may be conflict or indeed greed, in action-RPGs (and the majority of CRPGs, which makes the borders between these blurry) the development of the character can be the cause of pushing the story away. When you're fighting your way through the dragon's lair, the treasure waiting at the end is more prone to become the focus, rather than the information the dragon may have regarding recent events, which is needed to further the plot.

TRPGs and CRPGs are two very different beasts. Trying to combine the TRPG experience with a computerized virtual world has yet to be done with a degree of success that offers the same experience as the TRPG, although some games have attempted it by adding the referee or game master. *Neverwinter Nights* and its sequel *Neverwinter Nights 2*, both based on the *Dungeons & Dragons* rule system, are CRPGs that stands out from the others. The original was designed with four core pillars in mind: single player,

multiplayer, user toolset, and dungeon master mode (Butts, 2002), and the sequel built onto its legacy. The first three is nothing outstanding, although the community has embraced the tools made for custom convent with fervor, resulting in over 5000 different modules or levels for the first game alone.[1] The dungeon master mode is a feature that allows a player to take on the guise of the game master, with close to full control of the game world, as it would be in a TRPG. Still there are differences between the two genres, as recounted by Steele (2005), who created a manifesto based on making the game more immersive prior to engaging with the toolset, with the goal of playing online with his friends, utilizing the dungeon master mode. After several play sessions, it ended with him scrapping his manifesto:

> *"I told the players not to worry about roleplaying and just to have fun. In short, I created every other CRPG out there."* [Steele 2005]

This was caused by several things, such as the players slaughtering everything that wasn't immediately recognized as plot-related to gain experience, gameplay bugs and just plainly making the computer game less fun by trying to mimic TRPGs. As an additional cost, developing a well-scripted adventure in *Neverwinter Nights* that would mimic the TRPG version requires an amount of time that isn't even comparable.

It's important to narrow down the criteria for what constitutes a CRPG, for else there might be claims of other games being CRPGs. Examples include *Half Life 2*, where the player plays the role of Gordon Freeman, or *Call of Duty 4*, where in multiplayer you gain experience after battles than can be used to improve various aspects of the player's avatar. But both games doesn't offer the same customization of the character as is usually present in CRPGs through the selection of such things as class, gender and race, and are keeping the depth of the combat mechanics to a minimum and doing away with choices in dialogue. In CRPGs the player is usually the one designing the character, at least in regards to looks and skills, although some CRPGs deviate from this, for example *Planescape: Torment*, where the player steps into the role of the Nameless One. But having a mainly predefined character also makes it easier for the designers scripting the game world, as some possible player actions disappear, compared to a game like *Neverwinter Nights*, where the player can select a large combination of classes and races that then require more branches in the narrative.

Play styles

The classic TRPG consists of a town where the players are located and a dungeon nearby. While dungeon is used as the classic term due to evil creatures' habits of hiding from the light of day as well as having been used in the tile of the *Dungeons & Dragons* rule system, it can be any locale, such as a large camp, another town, a castle or whatever else can be thought of. The players are situated around a table or similar with their character sheets, dice, rule books and other miscellaneous items. Of course the game can take a multitude of other forms, but this is the standard for new players starting up *Dungeons & Dragons*.

There's two distinct different ways of playing a TRPG: "Kick in the Door" and "Deep Immersion Storytelling" (Cook, Williams and Tweet, 2003, p. 7).

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[1] According to NW2 Vault, a popular NWN and NWN2 content site, modules located at
http://nwvault.ign.com/View.php?view=Modules.List

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Kick in the Door is usually the style used by players new to TRPGs. It embraces the standard dungeons where the heroes (in the form of the players) have to go clear it of evil and treasures. This is sometimes referred to as roll-playing (Mello, 2006), playing with rolls rather than a role, where everything is passed down to be based on dice, the characters are put in the background, and material wealth like gold and magical items and power in the form of character levels is of high importance. This isn't surprising, as new players rely heavily on the rulebooks for inspiration and for what to expect from the game. In *Dungeons & Dragons* for example, little room is left in the rulebooks to the art of role-playing, while the rest of the game mechanics such as character creation, combat and magic takes up most of it. New players usually have a harder time identifying with their characters compared to older, more experienced players (Fine, 1983, p 207). This play style is also the prevailing one used in CRPGs. Not having the ability to offer the same responsive world as that of the TRPG, the focus shifts more to outward character progressions (rather than a mental/story one), with a focus on acquiring power and wealth.

Deep Immersion Storytelling is a style commonly practiced by more experienced players of TRPGs, as it requires the players to know their characters well (or at least have a good idea of how they are going to be), as well as having a grasp on how to role-play and interact with the world in a manner befitting the setting. Dungeons are left in the background and cities or other locations with amble possibilities for social interactions are the basics for the game. The players are more likely to have to talk their way out of a bad spot, rather than relying on the dice to cut their way through. In fact, the dice are often forgotten, which does take away parts of the random factor, but allowed the players and game master to focus on a narrative not necessarily driven by bloodshed.

In his study of TRPGs, Fine also found a difference in the players' ways of playing:

"The gamer plays the game as himself, while the player who wishes to lose himself in the fantasy is the true role-player – he plays the character" [Fine 1983: 207]

This fits well with the two play styles mentioned above, and often players evolve over time going from roll-players to role-players, but from time to time, even role-players find a craving for rolling the dice. It is very common for games to over time develop into a mix between the two styles, with a focus on interesting characters and their troubles, with combat used as a tool in the narrative, or to spice things up. The game becomes more extensive and meaningful for the players (Fine, 1983, p 2).

Openness

The main difference between TRPGs and CRPGs is the amount and nature of openness. This doesn't only relate to the number of areas to explore, but also to the amount of possible actions and paths the player can take, for example when it comes to interactions with non-player characters or the plotline. By not allowing player actions or influence, the designer is restricting the player's agency in the game world:

The concept of agency conventionally refers to the ways in which people make things happen, or influence events, through exercising some element of personal control. … Such actions are performed with the intention that they will lead to desired outcomes, but they can also produce outcomes, that are neither intended nor wanted. [Carr, Buckingham, Burn, and Schott 2006: p 139]

In *Neverwinter Nights 2* it's possible later in the game to select your own traveling companions. Early in the game, the choice is restricted by the designers deciding who will follow you, in order of the narrative. But when the choice comes in the hands of the player, he might decide to have all the female companions follow him, hoping for a chance for romance. His intent might be romance, but this can also lead to side-quests or even party squabbles during dialogue.

Ryan (2001) states that when looking at narrative, there's three components; setting, character and action, where only the two first provide useful design elements, as the third, action, is left to the user (or in the case of games, the player). To maintain the narrative on the right track, the range of player actions must be restricted, so that it will not deviate from the general plot (as an example, see Shamus 2006, where Legolas kills Gollum). So the player of a CRPG has his freedom of choice limited to what can be pre-scripted by the designers, since they will not be able to be present in person to police the game on the fly. But it is impossible to plan for every possible outcome, since there will always be some that the designers didn't think of, and computer power is still limited. Games are about interesting choices, letting only the designer choose what choices are interesting is a flaw, but are a necessity in CRPGs.

Whenever the player encounters something he cannot be allowed to do, he's presented with an invisible wall. Something in the game is keeping him from action. This has the danger of breaking the 4th wall, just as happened to Suzanne Langer when watching Peter Pan as a child (Murray, 1997). When the wall breaks down, the player leaves the magic circle (Saien and Zimmerman, 2003) and becomes acutely attentive to the fact that the game world isn't real, which in turn hurts the creation of the narrative. The invisible walls can take different forms: In *Baldur's Gate* the player is preparing to go on a journey with his foster father Gorion (in which Gorion will be killed by the main villain). Since this is an important part of the plot, for why else would the player then seek out said villain, if the player attacks his foster father, the player will get almost instantly killed by him. So the player is forced to conform and play as the game wishes him to play (Carr, Buckingham, Burn, and Schott, 2006, p 51). In *Neverwinter Nights 2* the player, even though it is possible to choose an evil alignment, is incapable (nothing happens if you try) of hurting children unrelated to the plot, as well as specific other characters. In *Morrowind* it is possible to steal from merchants repeatedly and selling them back their own wares, without any form of suspicion. And *Morrowind* is known for its expansive and open game world, but while it does show openness, the 4th wall is still endangered, since the world doesn't always react as expected to the player's actions. It is too open in this case.

But CRPGs (and games in general) doesn't need to have openness, as long as they at least have the illusion of openness. A good example of this is *Half Life 2*, which while being very linear uses the scenery and locations as well as non-player characters to bring the game world to live. While the player knows that the game needs him to follow a specific path, the surrounding world makes it easier to forget this fact. In a CRPG, while you may have a dialogue with several paths that leads to the same end, this is alright, as long as the player is kept in the belief that he had the choice of doing something different. Players need to feel that they have exerted power or control over events (Carr, Buckingham, Burn, and Schott remarks, 2006, p 134); they need the feeling of agency.

TRPGs have the advantage when it comes to openness, not limiting players' freedom and creating the illusion of choice: They have a human game master to administrate the game, adjusting it when needed and enforcing realism and logic within the world's context (Fine, 1983, pp. 80-84). If a specific non-player character must not be killed, in a CRPG it will be impossible, while the game master would be able to adjust the narrative to ensure that either the non-player character doesn't get killed, or someone else can take his

role. In that way, TRPGs are better at promoting creative thinking and rewarding wit, since everything can be changed on the fly. When entering a fantasy world taking in the images and reading the text isn't enough. Unlike TRPGs which typically have very few restrictions on the player's actions, CRPGs require more effort in order to make the fantasy believable. They require the creation of belief, and not merely the suspension of disbelief, as noted by Murray (1997). The player must actively build on and reinforce the presented reality or notice the cracks in the walls, cracks that cannot be filled by the game master in his absence. They must lose themselves to the game (Fine, 1983, p 4).

Conclusion

Computer RPGs are very different from their source the Tabletop RPGs, as seen even in the basics of the game. Specifically they differ in the creation of the narrative, with the absence of a game master, the players' interactions, and the flexibility of the rules as well as the definition of winning or losing.

In the subgenres of RPGs (TRPGs, CRPGs and action-RPGs) a clear distinction is found as well, especially when looking at the action-RPGs such as *Diablo* or *Eye of the Beholder*. With the lack of a human game master, CRPGs lose one of the defining traits of RPGs, which causes the borders between what is a CRPG and what isn't to become rather vague. Even when adding a human game master, you find that the players' expectations and indeed experience changes when playing on the computer, where the focus is more often attaining power at any cost. Several years of technical improvements haven't changed this.

With the two different play styles, one of them is well suited for the CRPG, Kick in the Door, where you kill foe after foe in search of wealth. Deep Immersion Storytelling requires that the players have agency in the game world, to have the game world respond in a believable manner, or else the immersion is void.

The openness in the game world can take many forms; both in the amount of agency afforded the players as well as the shaping of the game world. Players' actions must be restricted in the name of the narrative, but at the same time this is also hurtful to the narrative. Invisible walls when raised in front of the players, only serves to remind, that this world isn't real. They need to at least have the belief that they have a choice in the game, that the world is real, even if it's only an illusion.

So in conclusion, the single most importance difference between TRPGs and CRPGs is the human live game master with absolute control over the game world. A human game master and a virtual world (CRPG), is not compatible in the same degree as a human game master and a fantasized world (TRPG). That said, if the game master is poor, it might lessen the experience. On the other hand, then it's not all in the hands of the game master, as the players still need to exercise creation of belief, and not work against the game master (more than what is expected). They need to create their own invisible walls. This is still better than having them created for you, because the players decide the terms.

The latest major revision of the *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook* quite well sums up the discussion of TRPGs vs. CRPGs:

> *The game offers endless possibilities and a multitude of choices – more choices than even the most sophisticated computer game, because you can do whatever you can imagine.* [Tweet 2003:4]

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