

Digital vs. Analog RPGs

Role-play is when someone assumes the role of someone or something they are not and can take various forms, from children playing cops and robbers to professional actors. The most menacing kind of role-play is the kind that isolates a person from reality. Where one is so caught up in the role that they forget about everything around them. [This last is not a complete sentence, and should be separated from the previous sentence by a comma.] This is the insidious danger of current role-playing games. [A very interesting way to frame your analysis, as it sounds truly urgent. But it also feels somewhat alarmist without a more substantive support. Presumably, this support is coming. It should probably be at least hinted at already in this first paragraph.]

When someone thinks of a role-playing game or RPG, the first thing that might come to mind is *Dungeons & Dragons* (abbreviated as *D&D*), the famous RPG that pioneered the genre. However, RPGs have come a long way since 1974 when *D&D* was first published. The original game was very limited by today's standards in terms of the customizability of one's character. Now RPGs allow you to determine the look, personality, and relationships of your character. Perhaps the biggest change is the removal of personal interaction during gameplay. [This last sentence is a bit of a non sequitur, as it is not set up by the previous thoughts. Can you lead into it more effectively, set up the connection between this description of D&D and your distinction between it and current RPGs? Also, D&D allowed significant "customizability," since any feature or

characteristic of one's character could be part of the game. Not only did many players create figurines to represent their characters, but one could always describe any personality or appearance feature, as well as acting out voices and dramatizing other kinds of interactions. These features weren't "official," but in some ways they were more free than current RPGs inasmuch as they were not bound by numerical quantities.]

D&D started out as a group activity, where a handful of friends would get together and embark on fantasy adventures led by the Dungeon Master who narrated the game according to his or her own style. With the introduction of computers into this genre, people have become more disconnected, as RPGs became single player only. The story is no longer told by a person sitting in front of you, but is predetermined by a programmer separated from you physically and temporally. [good] Over the years there have been advancements in the level of complexity in RPGs, both to the plot and the non-player characters (abbreviated NPCs). However, these advancements only work to further drive people away from interpersonal contact. Players will spend hours if not days trying to say and do the right things for NPCs so that these computer-generated phantoms will treat and react to the player in a certain way. The very concept of people trying to appease and forge fictitious relationships with characters that do not exist seems utterly ridiculous. So why has this seclusion activity become so popular? The answer to this question is not in the genre of RPGs; it started out as a social activity. The answer lies with us and our relationship to the medium of modern RPGs, the computer. [I like how you have set this conclusion up by leading into it slowly.]

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We have become so entranced by the speed and [?] ease with which the world of computers works that we find reality unbearable. You can browse and compare prices

from a dozen different stores within an hour as opposed to driving around town all day long. You can send and receive information instantly instead of waiting for the mail carrier. You can perform tedious calculations within seconds without a slide rule or your fingers. [You generally need your fingers to operate the computer.] Technology has always been about making our lives easier and more convenient. Perhaps the most difficult thing in life is building and maintaining relationships with other people. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending how you look at it, technology is here to alleviate our woes. So we just sit down at our computer and avoid face-to-face contact as we navigate through chat rooms, message boards, and email. One could even liken this situation to a real life computer game. [This paragraph doesn't quite deliver on the promise of the opening sentence. How do you show the way in which real life has become unbearable?]

There is even a game for that too, *The Sims*. *The Sims* takes RPGs out of the fantasy realm of sorcerers, demons, and slaying dragons and into the realm of simulating life. This game is all about building a life for your character. You can be a bachelor, or have a family. You can be a lawyer or a rock star. *The Sims* offers a level of control that does not exist in real life. You can make your character a spitting image of yourself or the exact opposite. “You can re-create yourself, your family, and your friends” then “lead your Sims to happiness” or “make a complete mess of things” (*The Sims* website). The game even tries to capture the difficult task of making and maintaining friends by taking them to places around town to hang out while balancing work, sleep, and comfort. However, there is a fundamental flaw in this and all RPGs.

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As much as RPGs try to mimic randomness and unpredictability, these games are governed by a set of predetermined rules and paths that cannot be broken. There are predefined goals and actions that lead to those goals. There is always a correct answer to every question asked by an NPC. There is always a correct action for every puzzle or quest posed by the game. This is perhaps the most appealing aspect of computer RPGs; there is an answer, whereas in real life there may not be one. [very good] This is what makes these games so addictive, the player knows they just have to keep playing long enough and they will figure out how to do what they are trying to do in the game. On the other hand, the player will continue because they want to try to experience every possible scenario in the game just to make sure they picked the best (or worst) one. It gives the player the illusion of control over what they can accomplish in the game. However, they are not the ones in control, the game creators are. [This paragraph has some very strong insights in it, and it would be a good idea to develop them in the revision. My sense is that these insights are not specific to RPGs, however, but apply to every computer game. How might you discover the specificity of the RPG here?]

Players have the ability to live vicariously through their character [Where are you going now?]; they can be as good or bad as they want to be in their interactions with other characters and players. RPGs like *Knights of the Old Republic* and *Fable* are designed to change how computer characters interact with a player depending on their decisions in the game. As the *Fable* mantra says, “For every choice, a consequence.” If you do bad deeds, the NPCs will hold you in contempt and fear you. If you do good deeds, they will praise and honor you. More often than not [evidence?], the choice is to be as bad as possible and do all those sinister deeds that we would never do in real life

like torture animals, steal things, beat people, etc., just to see if we can. It is more fun being the antagonist because the antagonist is not bound by society's rules of conduct.

While being the hero in these RPGs can earn you the adoration of the NPCs it is much more cumbersome, as the game developers spent more time thinking up ways to be bad

than to be good. [\[WoW is widely critiqued for having spent much effort developing quests for alliance than for horde.\]](#) It is often frustrating that you sometimes have to go one way or the other when you do not want to because of a linear story line. [\[Good, this last idea is also worth exploring further: the way in which the computer limits creativity. Perhaps you should continue the explicit comparison between D&D and computer RPGs.\]](#)

Perhaps the greatest innovation in RPGs since *Dungeons & Dragons* is the introduction of Massively Multiplayer Online RPGs (abbreviated MMORPGs). With the spread of broadband internet access, RPGs have achieved a level of reality that is a virtual online community with thousands of other players logged in at the same time. While there are still NPCs, they are of minor significance compared to the other players in the game. MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft* take place in a dynamic world filled with real people, or rather the characters of real people. Players are no longer doomed to explore static virtual environments by themselves. They can form friendships and parties with other players and explore a constantly changing virtual world as they complete quests together. People make friends and adversaries with people who may be thousands of miles away. This is a giant leap forward from the seclusion that technology seemed to be leading us.

But are these relationships real? [This is an interesting theme, but you should try to relate it to your thesis more explicitly.] No matter how much you try to play a role, you are still you and not some level 47 troll who specializes in melee attacks. People form close groups of friends in these MMORPGs that they can't wait to go play with as soon as they get out of school or work. However real these online, game-based relationships may be, they are still no substitute for real face-to-face contact. RPGs of *D&D*'s age and of running around the backyard pretending to fight just intuitively feel more real than computerized make believe. [While your intuition is a valuable guide, and you are certainly right about some aspect of computer-based RPGs, you mostly just assert your claim here without figuring out what it really means or to what extent it is or isn't correct. What sort of reality is missing from computer games, and what sort of reality do they offer? Computers also have some things that real life does not.] There is no doubt that the single-player computer RPGs are a far cry from real human interaction, but can the same be said for online games? The characters in the MMORPGs can emote and show facial expression. Can that possibly substitute a real face with all its idiosyncrasies? I certainly hope not. [This last is also a good question, and might form the basis for a more extended discussion.]

Works Referenced

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<http://thesims.ea.com/us/index.html?menu=about&content=about/index.html>

Dungeons & Dragons. Wikipedia. 9 Nov. 2005

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roleplaying_game

Introduction to World of Warcraft. Blizzard Entertainment. 9 Nov. 2005

<http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/info/beginners/>

Eric,

Your draft examines three kinds of RPGs, comparing the ways in which they each offer a richness of experience. The insights you arrive at in this essay are fantastic, and a more concreted and focused exploration of one or more of these insights could surely constitute a truly excellent revision.

Your self-critique suggests that you have recognized the primary difficulty of this essay. You have lots of ideas, but they don't cohere into a focused essay, especially as your initial intention is not your ultimate result, and your conclusions are often speculative rather than supported by evidence and analysis. But I think that your intuitions (opinions) are legitimate, and should be further explored.

I recommend that you choose just one or two the many great ideas you have in this essay. (I have marked most of them in the text with a comment or two.) Then investigate this idea much more carefully, looking at it from all sides, exploring its implications, challenging it with counterargument, revealing its presuppositions, articulating its subtle distinctions. Once you have done that, take these various paragraphs and reorganize them into a focused essay. It may end up changing your topic somewhat. So you might end up writing about the differences between D&D and MMORPGs. Or you might end up writing about the limitations of computer gaming in general (and not just RPGs). Or you might stick to your current formula, and make your explicit thesis be about the way in which single-player computer-based RPGs fail to capture the richness of either D&D-style games or current MMORPGs, (while each of these earlier and later genres offers different but satisfying pleasures). No matter what you choose, focus will be your main task, as you will have to look more carefully at one aspect of your issue, turning up the critical intensity.

You have a lot to work with here. In fact, you have arrived at many of the most important conclusions in the study of computer gaming. One resource you should check out is a free on-line journal called *Game Studies*. Some of these articles are "theoretical," and might serve as good sources of inspiration and contest for your own thoughts. I look forward to seeing where it goes.