

The Reality of Virtual 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 the people around them; where one is so caught up in the role that they forget about human contact. This is the insidious danger of role-playing games. Computer-based role-

playing games emit a Siren's call for players looking for immersion in the world of imagination that ends up distracting them from the real-world human interaction. [I like the imagistic phrasing of this thesis statement. It could be even more effective if it were signaled more effectively, that is, if you indicated more clearly to the reader that this is the thesis. It comes so abruptly here that it doesn't immediately make sense as a thesis.]

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When someone thinks of role-playing games or RPGs, 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 only limited by the imaginations of the players. How the game played out, the quests, and characters were completely at the players' discretion. They could do and say anything they wanted within the rules of the game world, which could even be fudged if it suited them. [The malleability of rules is pretty interesting. Just how stretchy could D&D get?] The characters were infinitely customizable in their demeanor or appearance and could change on a whim if the player

decides to do so. Today's computer based RPGs are very limited by comparison and only approximate the freedom players once enjoyed. While current RPGs allow players to choose the look, personality, and relationships of a character, the player does not determine what the choices are. [I understand what you mean, but this last sentence could be clarified.] What current RPGs offer that *D&D* did not is a rich visual and audio experience of an immersive game environment due to the introduction of computers.

Computers have caused a dramatic change in the experience of RPGs beyond the added visual aid. The human aspects of *D&D* that have been integrated into the environment within computer RPGs are the storytelling and the non-player character (abbreviated NPC). *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 and played NPC roles 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. Over the years, there have been advancements in the level of complexity in RPGs, both to the plot and the NPCs. However, these advancements only work to further drive people away from interpersonal contact and toward these single-player games. 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 activity of seclusion 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 what you are setting up in this paragraph. I wonder whether it would work better to go a bit more slowly, as this paragraph feels somewhat scattered and covers a lot of ground.]

We have become so entranced by the speed and ease with which the world of computers works that we find reality boring and tedious. [A good theory: do you have any evidence?] Computers have increased the speed at which we perform everyday tasks. You can browse and compare prices from a dozen different stores within an hour as opposed to driving around town all day long and haggling with store clerks. 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 sifting through charts. 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. Why bother to take a shower, get dressed, call up some friends, arrange a place to meet, and then get there when you can go to an online chat room and talk with dozens of people simultaneously? Granted this does not solve all our social needs and people occasionally want to get outside and do something, but we do not always have the time. Technology is even here to help us manage our lives better so we can make the time for social recreation. [This is a good paragraph, very evocative and instantly understandable as a description of our modern lives. It would be even more effective to relate it more

explicitly to its role in the overall essay. You are describing something about the way that we relate to computers, so maybe ending the paragraph with a summary statement along these lines would bring it into its context.]

There is even a game with that specific theme in mind, *The Sims*. *The Sims* takes RPGs out of the fantasy realm of magic, demons/aliens, and slaying monsters and into the realm of simulating life. This game is all about building and managing 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 antithesis. “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 NPCs to places around town to hang out while balancing work, sleep, and comfort, which is ironically the exact opposite of its effect on the player. [unclear] While *The Sims* has a large focus on character interaction, it completely does away with conversation. This is the complete opposite of *D&D*, which would not work without conversations between players to move the game along. *The Sims* replaces conversation with gibberish and cartoon talk bubbles. [very good piece of evidence] The idea is it “encourages the players to project their thoughts” into the game by “[filling] in the gaps” according to the game’s designer, Will Wright (Frasca, “The Sims: Grandmothers are cooler than trolls”). This idea of having players project themselves into the game harks back to *D&D* where all the meaning of the game came from the people playing the game. It also frees the player being bogged down with

talking to a limited NPC so they can focus on trying to give their character a balanced and happy life.

While *The Sims* focuses on balancing the different elements of life, fantasy RPGs still have an emphasis on character interaction. In order to add some depth to the game experience, RPGs like *Knights of the Old Republic* and *Fable* are designed to adjust 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 despise and fear you. If you do good deeds, they will praise and honor you. It can be quite fun playing the antagonist because you are not bound by society’s rules of conduct in the game and can do some of those devious things you wish you could to relieve stress. On the other hand, who hasn’t dreamed of themselves as being the hero who comes to save the day and is showered with praises? However, there is an intrinsic flaw that limits the actions of the player. The freedom to choose what actions you wish to take is limited by the game’s design. When you are trying to be evil, sometimes the game will force you to do something good for the sake of the story. The same is true when you try to be good: the game will force you to do something evil. In games that hype the player’s autonomy in the game, it is often frustrating when your actions are limited in order to progress a predetermined story line. [I would go even further: the whole idea of dividing actions into good and evil is already limiting. Placing actions along a simple binary scale reduces their meaning and value, which is often far more complex than this dualism can convey. In D&D, your actions were not always evaluated on some scale of good and bad.] This shortcoming of computer RPGs did not exist in *D&D*. Since a person, the Dungeon Master or DM, was present during gameplay to tell

the story in *D&D*, they could adapt the story to fit whatever action the players decided to take. If there was an essential quest goal that the players decided not to complete, the DM could just invent a loophole around the goal or make up a new narrative to follow the players' decision. The DM can also throw in obstacles so that the players have to adapt making for very dynamic gameplay.

As much as computer 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. This is what makes these games so addictive, the player knows they just have to keep playing long enough and eventually they will figure out how to accomplish their goals in the game. If you work diligently at a problem in real life, there is often a reward, but there is uncertainty as to what the outcome will be. Avid, players will repeat a completed task in order to try to experience every possible scenario in the game just to make sure they picked the best (or worst) one. Then add in whether the character is good or evil and the outcome of the game changes, even if the overall story remains the same. Unlike real life, if a decision does not work out, you can just revert to a previous save of the game and try again. It is easy to imagine how much time it might take to rummage through various character alignments, skills, stats, and player choices to explore different scenarios. The obsession with retrying a portion of the game until one gets it right is what draws people into RPGs as well as separates them from the real world. The

inclusion of different ending scenarios in RPGs is often a key selling point as it offers replay value and brings them closer to the *D&D* benchmark for unlimited replayability. However, when a player explores the different dimensions of an NPC character or scenario, they are only getting the illusion of interacting with a dynamic intelligence. In fact, they are exploring a stagnant environment with hollow characters that has been predetermined by a programmer. [Is the illusion possibly good enough?]

Perhaps the greatest innovation in RPGs since *Dungeons & Dragons* is the introduction of online RPGs and more specifically, 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] [what does this have to do with the “level of reality”?] 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. [It isn't clear that MMORPG NPCs are so insignificant. One can play much of WoW without dealing with other human players, but one can't get anywhere without dealing with NPCs.] The environment itself is also less static, as game administrators get feedback from the players and can modify the game experience in a similar fashion to the Dungeon Master in *D&D*. 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 meet new people who may be thousands of miles away. This is a giant leap forward from the seclusion that technology seemed to be leading RPGs.

But are these relationships real? Some will claim that they can form meaningful relationships in chat rooms, so why not MMORPGs? MMORPGs have all the same capabilities as a chat room; there is a virtual space where people can hang out and emote which is similar to chat rooms. Additionally, there are also fun filled friendship building activities for players to enjoy. People form close groups of friends in these MMORPGs that they cannot wait to play with as soon as they have free time. There is no doubt that the single-player computer RPGs are a far cry from real human interaction with static NPCs, but can the same be said for online games with real players? However real these online game-based relationships may be, they are still no substitute for real face-to-face contact despite the ability to emote and show facial expression. [\[more detail here would be nice\]](#) There is a lot to be desired in an environment without smell, touch, and body language. Perhaps in the future we will have the ability to ‘jack in’ to a virtual environment with all the sensations and idiosyncrasies of the real world feeding directly to our brains so that the player actually becomes the character. In that case, the physical experience of the real world and virtual world would be indistinguishable. However, all of these modifications to the virtual experience in order to improve interpersonal interaction only work to isolate people from real life. With complete [immersion](#) in such a rich, diverse, and fully interactive environment that caters to all the senses who would want to bother with real life?

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Self-Critique

I think I did a better job of having each paragraph lead into the next as well as relate to my thesis. My thesis is, “Computer-based role-playing games emit a Siren’s call for players looking for emersion in the world of imagination that ends up distracting them from the real-world human interaction.” I originally included the part about RPGs isolating people from the real world itself, but my paper hardly mentions it and focuses mostly on the loss of personal interaction. I changed the direction of the paper to praising the dynamics of human interaction in *D&D* and how the progression of games approaches it, whereas before, I used *D&D* as the lowest rung in the evolution in RPGs. I also changed the attitude to celebrate how after a short break RPGs went back to being about real people and not NPCs, especially at the end. I think concluding with a look to what might be coming down the road to extend the progression of the paper. I wasn’t quite sure how to end the conclusion, so it feels as though I just tacked on that bit about losing touch with reality. I just felt like it still should have been in the paper to acknowledge that I at least considered this negative effect of RPGs.

Eric,

Your revision analyzes computer-based RPGs, comparing them to D&D to show how they offer a significantly less rich experience. This revision is now focused and coherent, sticking consistently to its central line of analysis. By maintaining this focus, you are able to draw out complex and profound aspects of your subject matter, showing the subtle, various, and related ways in which RPGs are impoverished relative to the variety of richer experiences we might have, including D&D. Your conclusion provocatively points in a further direction, suggesting that MMORPGs add a dimension that might significantly enhance the gaming experience, and leaving open the question of just how far this enhancement could go. Overall, this is a very good revision, with strong original critical thinking.

Further improvement could be made most readily by some additional editing. In particular, it isn't clear that the thesis statement at the beginning of the essay is really the subject matter of this essay. In fact, you really spend only one paragraph commenting directly on the way in which computers isolate people from real-world interaction, and your true thesis is more about the relatively weak or limited experience that RPGs offer. While I understand that these ideas are closely related, it is nevertheless distracting to read a thesis statement and then read an essay that develops a related but different theme. I kept waiting for the main idea to return, until at some point I realized that it wasn't going to be the main idea.

As such, your third paragraph, which addresses your stated thesis, is also somewhat out of place here, and begins to advance an argument that turns out not to relate very much to your central line of inquiry. This essay would be stronger were you to leave out this third paragraph and rewrite the first paragraph to put forth a thesis statement that is closer to what the essay goes on to do.

One small organizational point: this essay now flows quite well, and it is clear how most of the paragraphs follow one from the previous. By adding a bit more orienting, you could make this even more clear for your readers. That is, by putting in a line every once in a while telling your reader how a given paragraph relates to the central thesis, the whole essay would become clearer.

My guess is that with an even clearer focus, you would have the opportunity to dig still deeper into the various interesting points that you make. Your individual points are very strong, and left me wanting to know even more. For instance, what else do you make of the thought bubbles in *The Sims*? What does this form of interaction say about the nature of interpersonal relationships in this supposedly social game? What is being included and what "left out" of this simulation? Similarly, I'd love to hear more about how the choices of good or evil deeds are limiting, and what this axis of choice says to players who play these games. Your comments on these subjects are already very interesting, but you could go even more deeply into these things, showing even greater complexity.

In any case, this is strong work, and demonstrates the potential for even stronger work to come. Give yourself the chance to edit your ideas in multiple stages, and keep your focus as tight as possible, and you will continue to produce great writing.