Andrew Borders

An Exploration of Video Games and TTRPG's

A role-playing game is a game in which players assume the roles of characters in a fictional setting(2). This definition encompasses much of the gaming genre, so the question arises: when does a video game fall into the role playing genre? The definition of a role playing video game gets somewhat more precise: a video game where the player controls the actions of a character immersed in some well-defined world(3). However, this definition still encompasses much of the video game genre.

Across video game genres, the player has various levels of character control and immersion. It's tempting to classify role playing video games by setting a threshold of player agency, classifying all games offering sufficient agency as role playing games. It's also tempting to set a threshold for immersion, requiring video games to have sufficient world-building and intractability to be classified as a role playing game. In this analysis, I'll explore how role playing video games cannot be classified by these metrics in a binary manner and that all video games are, to some extent, role playing games.

Before getting into this exploration, I'll define a video game. As with previous definitions, I'll be using the Wikipedia definition as a general consensus: a video game is an electronic game that involves interaction with a user interface or input device to generate visual feedback from a display device(4). The foundations of video games, user input and visual feedback, line up well with the foundations of role playing games, character control and immersion. I'll be examining the relationship between these foundations as a key part of my exploration.

The first requirement for a video game is user input, which provides players control over the game and satisfies the character control requirement, even without a direct in-game character interface. This notion of control extends to emotional connections with inanimate objects, exemplified by the companion cube in Portal (Valve, 2007). Players develop empathy for the cube, illustrating that character control can encompass non-living game elements.

Character control varies across game genres, from direct control in narrative-driven games to overseeing units in strategy games or managing environments in simulation games. Despite these differences, each form achieves character control by allowing players to influence the game's outcome. This spectrum highlights the diverse interactive experiences within gaming, showing that character control is a broad concept that adapts to various gameplay styles.

The second requirement for a video game is visual feedback. By definition, user input offers control over the visual feedback, so the video game "character" must exist in the same context as this feedback. The existence of a controlled character in the same context as visual feedback satisfies the basic requirement for immersion by allowing the player to experience the context through the lens of the character.

The spectrum of immersion varies across mediums, from text-based adventures offering imaginative immersion to 2D and 3D games providing visual and spatial immersion. Whether navigating a game in first-person, experiencing the world directly through the character's eyes,

or in third-person, observing from an external viewpoint, each approach offers a unique level of immersion. Despite these differences, all forms meet the immersion requirement, enabling players to engage deeply with the game world and its narrative.

Classifying video games as role-playing games (RPGs) in a binary manner proves impossible when considering the dynamic nature of modern gaming experiences. Traditional RPG elements, such as character progression and narrative choices, have transcended their original confines and permeated various genres. Games that may not fit the traditional RPG mold, like action-adventure or simulation titles, now incorporate robust role-playing elements, blurring the lines of classification. The evolving nature of video games challenges a rigid binary approach, urging a more nuanced understanding of RPG elements as integral components that can enhance diverse gaming experiences.

In this intricate landscape, attempting to enforce a strict binary classification overlooks the fluidity and innovation within the gaming industry. As developers continually experiment with hybrid genres and mechanics, the boundaries between RPGs and other game types become increasingly porous. Recognizing the nuanced nature of role-playing elements in contemporary games allows for a more accurate and inclusive understanding of the evolving gaming landscape, embracing the diversity that enriches the overall gaming experience.

Understanding video games as role-playing games has profound implications, particularly in their potential as tools for fostering empathy across cultural, racial, and gender boundaries. Fuist's exploration of tabletop role-playing games as cultural tools underscores how these games can serve as vehicles for agentic imagination, allowing players to immerse themselves in diverse perspectives and experiences (Fuist, 2012). Additionally, Garcia's examination of Dungeons & Dragons sheds light on how the systems within role-playing games shape perceptions of privilege, power, and identity, emphasizing the potential for transformative engagement with social issues through gameplay (Garcia, 2017). Acknowledging video games as role-playing experiences opens up avenues for meaningful exploration and dialogue, highlighting their unique capacity to promote empathy and understanding across a spectrum of cultural and social contexts.

Works Cited

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