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PROGRESSION AND EMERGENCE: TWO MODES OF PLAY



by RPGmakerweb on September 20, 2014

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When you talk about a RPG, you often describe it as linear or non-linear. These tend to be general descriptions and don't account for the fact that many linear games have non-linear elements and vice versa. It's more useful to describe them as games of progression or games of emergence. Most video games fall somewhere in-between the spectrum of these two types of play. But what is the difference between the two?



(<https://web.archive.org/web/20190324131357/http://blog.rpgmakerweb.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/mass-effect.jpg>)

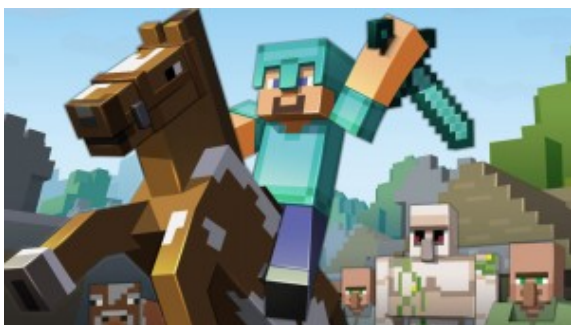
Mass Effect is an example of a progression game

GAMES OF PROGRESSION

Progression games are relatively new and did not appear until the rise of the video game. In progression games, the player has to perform a predefined set of actions set by the designer in order to win or progress. These games offer a controlled experience and are often seen in games with storytelling ambitions such as RPGs (Mass Effect, Final Fantasy) and adventure games (Secret of Monkey Island, King's Quest).

Progression games have walkthroughs instead of strategy guides. Walkthroughs detail all of the player actions required to complete the game.

Since there is not much variation in games of progression they don't have a lot of replay value. They also are usually single player.



Minecraft creative mode is an example of an emergence game

GAMES OF EMERGENCE

Emergence games have a small number of rules that yield a large amount of game variations. These games can be thought of as being larger than the sum of their parts. Emergence is the original game structure and can be found in most games that require strategy. Examples include Chess, Texas Hold-Em and Monopoly.

Video games that focus on emergence can be thought of more as “play spaces” than games. Goals are often set by the player and not the designer. As such, there is no win condition. Simulation games (The Sims, Minecraft) and sandbox games (GTA) have a lot of emergent play.

One way to tell if a game is a game of emergence or progression is whether it has a strategy guide or a walkthrough. Strategy guides offer good strategies for situations encountered during play. If a game allows for strategies that lead to interesting interactions, then the game is typically considered a good game. Games with “dominant strategies” become limited and dull since they narrow the amount of options down to a few. Extreme examples are games like Tic-Tac-Toe and Connect 4 where by using the best strategy the player can ensure they never lose. In this sense, those games have been “solved”.

In game development, emergence is also a term used for player interactions in a game that the designers did not expect. These actions or behaviors can be labeled either as “desirable emergence” or “non-desirable emergence”. Desirable emergence is when the player discovers an interaction that improves the overall experience. If this is found in the testing phase, it is often implemented into the game as a new feature. Non-desirable emergence is when the interaction makes the experience less enjoyable either for the player or other players. These can be referred to as exploits, glitches or cheats and can easily ruin an otherwise good game. There are lots of examples of theses in RPGs which I’ll cover in a future article.

Because of the wide array of options, games of emergence have high replay value. Many emergent games are also multiplayer and competitive.

In the next article in this series, we’ll explore **PROGRESSION AND EMERGENCE IN RPGS** (<https://web.archive.org/web/20190324131357/http://blog.rpgmakerweb.com/design/progression-and-emergence-in-rpgs/>).

Do you prefer games of emergence or games of progression? Post a comment.

For further reading, refer to Jesper Juul’s “The Open and the Closed: Games of Emergence and Games of Progression” (<https://web.archive.org/web/20190324131357/http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/05164.10096.pdf>)“

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