

Role-playing video game

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(Redirected from Computer role-playing game)

Role-playing video games (RPGs) form a loosely defined genre of computer and video games with origins in pen-and-paper role-playing games^[1] such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, borrowing much of their terminology, settings and game mechanics. The player in RPGs controls one or several adventuring party members fulfilling one or many quests. The major similarities with pen-and-paper games involve developed story-telling and narrative elements, player character development, complexity, as well as replayability and immersion. Electronic medium removes the necessity for a gamemaster and increases combat resolution speed. RPGs have evolved from simple text-based console-window games into visually rich 3D experiences.

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Characteristics

Generally, the player controls a small number of game characters, usually called a party, and achieves victory by completing a series of quests. Players explore a game world, while solving puzzles and engaging in tactical combat. A key feature of the genre is that characters grow in power and abilities, and characters are typically designed by the player.^[1] RPGs rarely challenge a player's physical coordination, with the exception of action role-playing games.^[2]

These games usually have a highly developed story and setting,^[3] which is divided into a number of quests. Players control one or several characters by issuing commands, which is performed by the character at an effectiveness determined by that character's numeric attributes. These attributes increase each time a character gains a level, and a character's level goes up each time the player accumulates a certain amount of experience.^[4]

Role-playing video games borrow their genre terminology, settings and game mechanics found in early role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*.^[5] However, at least as of 2010, computers do not yet have the power to simulate nonplayer characters with the skill of a human game master. The behavior of these characters is instead hand-coded using scripts.^{[6][7]} Thus, role-playing video games borrow more of the core mechanics from early role-playing games without as much of the role-playing activity and character freedom.^[citation needed]

When compared to other gaming genres, role-playing games have a tendency to become more in-depth and complicated because of their levelling and skill systems. For example, the Pokémon series of games has a vast economy of users who actually use mathematical calculations and various other obscure, hidden methods to give their Pokémon team an advantage over others. This likely was originally used by the game creators to support the shallower levelling. This behavior is most commonly seen in online battle veterans.^[citation needed]

Story and setting

The premise of most-roleplaying games tasks the player with saving the world, or whichever level of society is threatened. There are often twists and turns as the story progresses, such as the surprise appearance of estranged relatives, or enemies who become friends or vice versa.^[2] The game world tends to be set in a fantasy or science fiction universe,^[8] which allows players to do things they cannot do in real life and helps players suspend their disbelief about the rapid character growth. To a lesser extent, settings closer to the present day or near future are possible.^[2]



Part of a series on:
RPG video games

Sub-genres

- Action RPG
- Competitive online RPG
- Massively multiplayer online RPG
- MUD
- Roguelike
- Tactical RPG
- Adventure RPG
- Shooter RPG

Topics

- History of RPG video games
 - History of MMORPGs
- Social interaction in MMORPGs
- Character creation
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Lists

- Chronology of computer RPGs
- Chronology of console RPGs
- Chronology of MUDs
- Chronology of roguelikes
- Chronology of tactical RPGs
- Comparison of MMORPGs
- List of free MMOGs
- List of MMORPGs
- List of text-based MMORPGs

A strong story often provides half the entertainment in the game.^[2] Because these games have strong storylines, they can often make effective use of recorded dialog and voiceover narration.^[2] Players of these games tend to appreciate long cut scenes more than players of faster action games.^[2] While most games advance the plot when the player defeats an enemy or completes a level, role-playing games often progress the plot based on other important decisions. For example, a player may make the decision to join a guild, thus triggering a progression in the storyline that is usually irreversible.^[2] New elements in the story may also be triggered by mere arrival in an area, rather than completing a specific challenge.^[2] The plot is usually divided so that each game location is an opportunity to reveal a new chapter in the story.^[2]

Whereas non-electronic role-playing games have a human gamemaster who can dynamically react to a player's choices, role-playing video games are confined to a smaller set of actions and do not yet have the power to simulate nonplayer characters with the skill of a human game master. Thus, role-playing video games borrow more of the core mechanics from such games without as much of the role-playing activity. Characterization in video games is limited to conversations with non-player characters using a dialog tree, although multiplayer online role-playing games are a notable exception where more role-play is possible.^[2] Saying the right things to the right non-player characters will elicit useful information for the player, and may even result in other rewards such as experience.^[2]

Exploration and quests

Exploring the world is an important aspect of all RPGs.^[2] Players will walk through, talking to non-player characters, picking up objects, and avoiding traps.^[2] Some games such as *NetHack* or *Diablo* randomize the structure of individual levels, increasing the game's variety and replayability.^[2] Role-playing games where players complete quests by exploring randomly-generated dungeons are sometimes called roguelikes, named after the 1980 computer game *Rogue*.^[9]

The game's story is often mapped onto exploration, where each chapter of the story is mapped onto a different location. Unlike other linear games, RPGs usually allow players to return to previously visited locations. Usually, there is nothing left to do there, although some locations change throughout the story and offer the player new things to do in response. Players must acquire enough power to overcome a major challenge in order to progress to the next area, and this structure can be compared to the boss characters at the end of levels in action games.^[2]

Whereas the player must complete a linear sequence of specific quests to complete the game, RPGs often allow the player to seek out optional side-quests. These quests are typically found by talking to a non-player character, and there is no penalty for abandoning or ignoring these quests other than a missed opportunity.^[2] There is usually a reward for completing a side-quest, although quests in some games such as *Arcanum* or *Geneforge* can limit or enable certain choices later in the game.^[citation needed] Quests may involve defeating one or many enemies, rescuing a non-player character, item fetch quests, or locational puzzles such as mysteriously locked doors.^[citation needed]

Items and inventory

Players can find loot throughout the game world and collect it, such as clothing, weapons, and armor.^[2] Players can trade items for currency and better equipment. Trade takes place while interacting with certain friendly non-player characters, such as shopkeepers, and often uses a specialized trading screen. Purchased items go into the player's inventory. Some games turn inventory management into a logistical challenge by limiting the size of the player's inventory, thus forcing the player to decide what they must carry at the time.^[10] This can be done by limiting the maximum weight that a player can carry, by employing a system of arranging items in a virtual space, or by simply limiting the number of items that can be held.^[2]

Character actions and abilities

Most of the actions in an RPG are performed indirectly, with the player selecting an action and the character performing it by their own accord.^[2] Success at that action depends on the character's numeric attributes. Role-playing video games often simulate die-rolling mechanics from non-electronic role-playing games, to determine success or failure. As a character's attributes improve, their chances of succeeding at a particular action will increase.^[2]

Many role-playing games allow players to play as an evil character. Although robbing and murdering indiscriminately may make it easier to get money, there are usually consequences in that other characters will become uncooperative or even hostile towards the player. Thus, these games allow players to make moral choices, but force players to live with the consequences of their actions.^[2] Games often let the player control an entire party of characters. However, if winning is contingent upon the survival of a single character, then that character effectively becomes the player's avatar.^[2]

Although some single-player role-playing games give the player an avatar that is largely predefined for the sake of telling a specific story, many role-playing games make use of a character creation screen. This allows players to choose their character's sex, their race or species, and their character class. Although many of these traits are cosmetic, there are functional aspects as well. Character classes will have different abilities and strengths. Common classes include fighters, spellcasters, thieves with stealth abilities, and clerics with healing abilities, or a mixed class, such as a fighter who can cast simple spells. Characters will also have a range of physical attributes such as dexterity and strength, which affect a player's performance in combat. Mental attributes such as intelligence may affect a player's ability to perform and learn spells, while social attributes such as charisma may limit the player's choices while conversing with non-player characters. These attributes usually borrow heavily the *Dungeons & Dragons* ruleset.^{[2][11]}

Role-playing games frequently make use of magical powers, or equivalents such as psychic powers or advanced technology. These abilities are confined to specific characters such as mages, spellcasters, or magic-users. In games where the player controls multiple characters, these magic-users usually complement the physical strength of other classes. Magic can be used as an attack or defense, or to temporarily change an enemy or ally's attributes. While some games allow players to gradually consume a spell, as ammunition is consumed by a gun, most games offer players a finite amount of mana which can be spent on any spell. Mana is restored by resting, or by consuming potions. Characters can also gain other non-magical skills, which stay with the character as long as he lives.^[2]



RPGs often feature overworld conversations in the form of cut scenes. Shown here is a sequence in *Pokémon XD: Gale of Darkness* for the Nintendo GameCube, in which the player has to rescue his sister from an angry man. The characters resemble those of Japanese anime, common in Japanese RPGs.

Experience and levels

Although the characterization of the game's avatar will develop through storytelling, characters may also become more functionally powerful by gaining new skills, weapons, and magic. This creates a positive-feedback cycle that is central to most role-playing games: The player grows in power, allowing them to overcome more difficult challenges, and gain even more power.^[2] This is part of the appeal of the genre, where players experience growing from an ordinary person into a superhero with amazing powers. Whereas other games give the player these powers immediately, the player in a role-playing game will choose their powers and skills as they gain experience.^[2]

Role-playing games usually measure progress by counting experience points and character levels. Experience is usually earned by defeating enemies in combat, with some games offering experience for completing certain quests or conversations. Experience becomes a form of score, and accumulating a certain amount of experience will cause the character's level to go up. This is called "levelling up", and gives the player an opportunity to raise one or more of his character's attributes. Many RPGs allow players to choose how to improve their character, by allocating a finite number of points into the attributes of their choice.^[2] Gaining experience will also unlock new magic spells for characters that use magic.^[2]

Some role-playing games also give the player specific skill points, which can be used to unlock a new skill or improve an existing one. This may sometimes be implemented as a skill tree. As with the technology trees seen in strategy video games, learning a particular skill in the tree will unlock more powerful skills deeper in the tree.^[2]

Three different systems of rewarding the player characters for solving the tasks in the game can be set apart: the *experience system* (also known as the "level-based" system), the *training system* (also known as the "skill-based" system) and the *skill-point system* (also known as "level-free" system)

- The experience system, by far the most common, was inherited from traditional role-playing games and emphasizes receiving "experience points" (often abbreviated "XP" or "exp") by winning battles, performing class-specific activities, and completing quests. Once a certain amount of experience is gained, the character advances a level. In some games, level-up occurs automatically when the required amount of experience is reached; in others, the player can choose when and where to advance a level. Likewise, abilities and attributes may increase automatically or manually.^[citation needed]
- The training system is similar to the way the Basic Role-Playing system works. The first computer game to use this was *Dungeon Master*, and emphasizes developing the character's skills by using them—meaning that if a character wields a sword for some time, he or she will become proficient with it. This system was later used in the *The Elder Scrolls* series, as well as the *Dungeon Siege* series.
- Finally, in the skill-point system (as used in *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* for example) the character is rewarded with "skill points" for completing quests, which then can be directly used to "buy" skills and/or attributes, without having to wait until the next "level up".

Combat

Further information: Time-keeping systems in games

Older games often separated combat into its own mode of gameplay, distinct from exploring the game world. More recent games tend to maintain a consistent perspective for exploration and combat.^[2] Some games, especially earlier console games, generate battles from random encounters; more modern RPGs are more likely to have persistent wandering monsters that move about the game world independently of the player. Most RPGs also use stationary boss monsters in key positions, and automatically trigger battles with them when the PCs enter these locations or perform certain actions.^[citation needed] Combat options typically involve positioning characters, selecting which enemy to attack, and exercising special skills such as casting spells.^[2]

In a classical turn-based system, only one character may act at a time; all other characters remain still, with a few exceptions that may involve the use of special abilities. The order in which the characters act is usually dependent on their attributes, such as speed or agility. This system rewards strategic planning more than quickness. It also points to the fact that realism in games is a means to the end of immersion in the game world, not an end in itself. A turn-based system makes it possible, for example, to run within range of an opponent and kill him before he gets a chance to act, or duck out from behind hard cover, fire, and retreat back without an opponent being able to fire, which are of course both impossibilities. However, tactical possibilities have been created by this unreality that did not exist before; the player determines whether the loss of immersion in the reality of the game is worth the satisfaction gained from the development of the tactic and its successful execution. *Fallout* has been praised as being "the shining example of a good turn-based Combat System [*sic*]".^[12]

Real-time combat can import features from action games, creating a hybrid action RPG game genre. But other RPG battle systems such as the Final Fantasy battle systems have imported real-time choices without emphasizing coordination or reflexes. Other systems combine real-time combat with the ability to pause the game and issue orders to all characters under his/her control; when the game is unpaused, all characters follow the orders they were given. This "real-time with pause" system (*RTwP*) has been particularly popular in games designed by BioWare. The most famous RTwP engine is the Infinity Engine. Other names for "real-time with pause" include "active pause", "semi real-time"^[12] and "smart pause".^[citation needed]

Early *Ultima* games featured a RTwP system: they were strictly turn-based, but if the player waited more than a second or so to issue a command, the game would automatically issue a pass command, allowing the monsters to take a turn while the PCs did nothing. *Fallout Tactics: Brotherhood of Steel* is another game which used this system.^[12]

There is a further subdivision by the structure of the battle system; in many early games, such as *Wizardry*, monsters and the party are arrayed into ranks, and can only attack enemies in the front rank with melee weapons. Other games, such as most of the *Ultima* series, employed duplicates of the miniatures combat system traditionally used in the early role-playing games. Representations of the player characters and monsters would move around an arena modeled after the surrounding terrain, attacking any enemies that are sufficiently near.^[citation needed]



Role-playing video games typically make available many kinds of magic and several characters, often in a full 3D world. Shown here is a battle in *Final Fantasy III* for the Nintendo DS.

Interface and graphics

Players typically navigate the game world from a first or third-person perspective in 3D RPGs. However, an isometric or aerial top-down perspective is common in party-based RPGs, in order to give the player a clear view of their entire party and their surroundings.^[13] Role-playing games require the player to manage a large amount of information, and frequently make use of a windowed interface. For example, spell-casting characters will often have a menu of spells they can use. On the PC, players typically use the mouse to click on icons and menu options, while console games duplicate this functionality with the game controller. Older games often revealed calculations of the game as seen in *Dungeons and Dragons* games, although more recent games have removed this information to improve immersion.^[2]

History and classification

For more details on this topic, see History of role-playing video games.

The role-playing video game genre began in the mid-1970s on mainframe computers, inspired by pen-and-paper role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*. After the success of console role-playing games such as *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy*, the role-playing genre eventually diverged into two distinct sub-genres, *Japanese role-playing games* and *Western role-playing games*, due to cultural differences. Finally, while the first RPGs offered strictly a single player experience, the popularity of multiplayer modes in these games rose sharply during the early to mid 1990s, with games such as *Secret of Mana* and *Diablo*.^[citation needed] With the advent of the Internet, multiplayer games have grown into massively multiplayer online role-playing games such as *Final Fantasy XI* and *World of Warcraft*.^[citation needed] RPGs of all types have continued to be influenced by *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Mainframe computers

The role-playing video game genre began in the mid-1970s, as an offshoot of early university mainframe text-based RPGs on PDP-10 and Unix-based computers, such as *Dungeon*, *pedit5* and *dnd*. In 1980, a very popular dungeon crawler, *Rogue* was released. Featuring ASCII graphics where the setting, monsters and items were represented by letters and a deep system of gameplay, it inspired a whole genre of similar clones on mainframe and home computers called "roguelikes".

Home computers

See also: Chronology of computer role-playing games

Two of the earliest CRPGs on microcomputers are Temple of Apshai and Akalabeth: World of Doom, the precursor to Ultima. Some early microcomputer RPGs (such as Telengard or Sword of Fargoal) were based on their mainframe counterparts, while others (such as Ultima or Wizardry, the most successful of the early CRPGs) were direct adaptations of D&D. They also included both first-person displays and overhead views, sometimes in the same game (Akalabeth, for example, used both perspectives). Most of the key features of RPGs were developed in this early period, prior to the release of Ultima III, one of the prime influences on both computer and console RPG development. For example, Wizardry featured menu-driven combat, Tunnels of Doom featured tactical combat on a special "combat screen", and Dungeons of Daggorath featured real-time combat which took place on the main dungeon map.^[14]

Starting in 1984 with *Questron* and *50 Mission Crush*, SSI produced many series of CRPGs. Their 1985 game *Phantasie* is notable for introducing automapping and in-game scrolls providing hints and background information. They also released *Pool of Radiance* in 1988, the first of several "Gold Box" CRPGs based on the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* rules. These games featured a first-person display for movement, combined with an overhead tactical display for combat. One common feature of RPGs from this era, which Matt Barton calls the "Golden Age" of computer RPGs, is the use of numbered "paragraphs" printed in the manual or adjunct booklets, containing the game's lengthier texts; the player could be directed to read a certain paragraph, instead of being shown the text on screen. The ultimate exemplar of this approach was Sirtech's *Star Saga* trilogy (of which only two games were released); the first game contained 888 "textlets" (usually much longer than a single paragraph) spread across 13 booklets, while the second contained 50,000 paragraphs spread across 14 booklets. Most of the games from this era were turn-based, although *Dungeon Master* and its imitators had real-time combat. Other classic titles from this era include *The Bard's Tale*, *Wasteland*, the start of the *Might and Magic* series and the continuing *Ultima* series.^[15]

Later, in the middle to late 1990s, isometric, sprite-based RPGs became commonplace, with video game publishers Interplay Entertainment and Blizzard North playing a lead role with such titles as *Fallout*, the *Baldur's Gate* and *Icwind Dale* series and *Diablo*. This era also saw a move toward 3D game engines, with such games as *Might and Magic VI: The Mandate of Heaven* and *The Elder Scrolls I: Arena*. TSR, dissatisfied with SSI's later products, such as *Dark Sun: Wake of the Ravager* and *Menzoberranzan*, transferred the AD&D license through several different developers, and eventually gave it to BioWare, which used it in *Baldur's Gate* (1998) and several later games. By the 2000s, 3D engines had become dominant.^[16]

Video game consoles

See also: Chronology of console role-playing games

The earliest RPG on a console was *Dragonstomper* on the Atari 2600 in 1982.^[17] In 1986, Chunsoft created the NES title *Dragon Quest* (called *Dragon Warrior* in North America until the eighth game), regarded as the template for most console role-playing games released since then.^[18] In 1987, the genre came into its own with the release of several highly influential console RPGs distinguishing themselves from computer RPGs. Shigeru Miyamoto's *Zelda II: The Adventure of Link* for the Famicom Disk System was one of the earliest action role-playing games, combining the action-adventure game framework of its predecessor *The Legend of Zelda* with the statistical elements of turn-based RPGs.^[19] *Faxanadu* was another early action RPG for the NES, released as a side-story to the computer action RPG *Dragon Slayer II: Xanadu*.^[20] Square's *Final Fantasy* for the NES introduced side-view battles, with the player characters on the right and the enemies on the left, which soon became the norm for numerous console RPGs.^[21] In 1988, *Dragon Quest III* introduced a character progression system allowing the player to change the party's character classes during the course of the game.^[22] Another "major innovation was the introduction of day/night cycles; certain items, characters, and quests are only accessible at certain times of day."^[23] In 1989, *Phantasy Star II* for the Genesis established many conventions of the genre, including an epic, dramatic, character-driven storyline dealing with serious themes and subject matter, and a

strategy-based battle system.^[24] The console RPG genre distinguished itself from computer RPGs to a much greater degree in the 1990s, considered the 'golden age' of console RPGs.^[25]

Relationship to other genres

Unlike action games, RPGs seldom test a player's physical skill. Combat is typically a tactical challenge rather than a physical one, and games involve other non-action gameplay such as choosing dialog options, inventory management, or buying and selling items.^[2]

Although RPGs share some combat rules with wargames, RPGs are about a small group of individual characters. Wargames tend to have large groups of identical units, as well as non-humanoid units such as tanks and airplanes. Role-playing games do not normally allow the player to produce more units. However, the *Heroes of Might and Magic* series crosses these genres by combining individual heroes with large amounts of troops in large battles.^[2]

RPGs rival adventure games in terms of their rich storylines, in contrast to genres that do not rely upon storytelling such as sports games or puzzle games.^[2] Both genres also feature highly detailed characters, and a great deal of exploration. However, adventure games usually have a well-defined character, whereas while RPGs may do so, many allow the player to design their characters. Adventure games usually focus on one character, whereas RPGs often feature an entire party. RPGs also feature a combat system, which adventure games usually lack. Whereas both adventure games and RPGs may focus on the personal or psychological growth of characters, RPGs tend to emphasize a complex eternal economy where characters are defined by increasing numerical attributes.

Gameplay elements strongly associated with this genre, such as statistical character development, have been widely adapted to other video game genres. For example, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, an action game, uses resource statistics (abbreviated as "stats") to define a wide range of attributes including stamina, weapon proficiency, driving, lung capacity, and muscle tone, and uses numerous cutscenes and quests to advance the story. *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos*, a real-time strategy game, features heroes that can complete quests, obtain new equipment, and "learn" new abilities as they advance in level.

Sub-genres

Role-playing video games are also classified into sub-genres based on differences in gameplay:

- Tactical role-playing games
- Action role-playing games
- Competitive online role-playing games
- Massively multiplayer online role-playing games
- MUDs
- Roguelikes
- Adventure role-playing games
- **Role-playing shooters** (often abbreviated RPS) are sometimes considered a sub-genre, featuring elements of both a first-person shooters and RPGs. Recent RPSs include *Fallout 3*, *Borderlands* and *Mass Effect*.

Cultural differences

Due to cultural differences between game developers, historically different inspirations, origins and distinct target audiences, two main trends of video game role-playing video games exist: the **Western RPG** (WRPG) and the **Japanese RPG** (JRPG) or Eastern RPG;^[26] the latter of which was heavily influenced by the *Dragon Quest*^[27] and *Final Fantasy* games.^[28]

JRPGs usually tend to place a greater emphasis on tightly orchestrated, linear narratives, whereas Western RPGs usually tend to focus more on open-ended, non-linear gameplay.^[29] Most JRPG plots tend to use linear storylines and reuse similar formulas and archetypes,^{[26][Turner]} and they focus more on scripted cut scenes and dialog.^[29] However, they are not considered to be true role-playing games as there is generally not branching outcomes and instead the term is used because they are derived from the more open-ended role-playing games.^[26] In contrast, most WRPGs have more non-linear exploration and story development as well as greater control of the player characters' development,^{[26][Turner][29]} both of which come at the price of more generic dialogue and less focus on essential gameplay, specifically the battle system.^{[26][Natt]} Another difference prominent in JRPGs is *kawaisa*. While WRPGs tend to be more serious and gritty in tone, JRPGs tend to feature cute (and even comic-relief type) characters often juxtaposed (or clashing) with more mature themes and situations. Finally, the characters are usually depicted in anime-style in JRPGs.^[29]

Japanese views on religion tend to use Christian themes for suitably exotic religious tones. Nintendo made efforts to cleanse these references when translating them for the North American market.^[30] Also, due to Japan's lack of a Christian majority, it is not unusual for a game to feature God as the final enemy, such as in *Xenogears* or *Final Fantasy Tactics*.^[31]

JRPGs have been criticized by Western role-playing fans for not allowing as much player freedom to role-play, and it has even suggested that referring to them as "role-playing games" is a misnomer. They have also been criticized for simplified battle systems where players can win by "hitting the same button until all of the enemies are dead". However, newer JRPGs such as *Final Fantasy X* and *Xenosaga* have complex systems requiring advanced strategies and timing. In contrast, WRPGs seem to be more concerned with the underlying rules governing the battle system rather than the experience itself.^{[26][Natt]}

Notes

1. [^] ^a ^b Adams, Rollings 2003, p. 347

2. [^] ^a ^b ^c ^d ^e ^f ^g ^h ⁱ ^j ^k ^l ^m ⁿ ^o ^p ^q ^r ^s ^t ^u ^v ^w ^x ^y ^z ^{aa} ^{ab} ^{ac} ^{ad} ^{ae} ^{af} ^{ag} ^{ah} ^{ai} Rollings, Andrew; Ernest Adams (2006). *Fundamentals of Game Design* (https://web.archive.org/web/20100819005654/http://wps.prenhall.com/bp_gam

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