18 Game Design and Role-Playing Games

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This chapter explores role-playing games (RPGs) from a design perspective. While there are many approaches to acquiring knowledge about RPGs, designers of RPGs often consider the structural elements of a game—its rules and the entities on which the rules act—and how they will interact with each other. One complication of game design, and RPG design specifically, is that "games" involve and describe both the artifacts that makes playing possible – the things we buy in stores – and the gameplay artifacts enable and encourage. While game designers can exert control over the artifact (e.g. a rulebook or software), their ultimate goal is to encourage a certain kind of gameplay. Thus, gameplay, which primarily depends on the player's behavior, is out of their direct control. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) refer to this as "second-order design" and stress the importance of playtesting to see if the game artifacts generate the desired game activities when used by the intended target group. However, they also stress the importance of game designers having a structural understanding of games as systems so they can anticipate how specific design configurations will work.

First publications on tabletop RPGs (TRPGs) **(see chapter 4)** and their design

reach back to the early 1980s (Schuessler & Jackson 1981). Over the years,

design knowledge has been shared via columns in magazines and books (e.g.

Schick 1991, Spector 1993, Spector 1994, Appelcline 2014), interviews, events,

and online venues. Still, most RPG design knowledge resides in the heads of the

professionals in the field. As game designer Sandy Petersen (1991, 241) put it:

"[s]tandard practice is to more-or-less tacitly agree that role-playing games

spring, full-grown, from their designers' heads, like Athena from Zeus."

Costikyan (1994) early on stressed the need of having a vocabulary when

designing, which Masters (1994) responded to with a vocabulary of common RPG

terms. In addition to these calls for documented design knowledge and language,

people began exploring more abstract ways of describing different kinds of RPGs

such as the Gamism-Narrativism-Simulationism model (Edwards 2001) **(see**

chapter 10) and Bartle's (2016) detailed overview of multi-user dungeons

(MUDs) and multi-player online RPGs (MORPGs) and design perspectives on

them **(see chapter 7)**. The Nordic Larp community maintains a wiki[1] to describe

concepts and design techniques for live-action RPGs (larps) **(see chapter 5)**, as

well as meta-design theories like the "mixing desk" (Stenros et al. 216). Still,

there is little common language to discuss and share knowledge on RPG design

across forms. To address this issue, this chapter will first tease out a number of

RPG design challenges across forms, and then three general design questions or domains most RPG designers have to address.

Design Challenges of RPG Design

Familiar versus Novel

A challenge in nearly every design is to balance creating something novel while providing familiarity. In the case of RPGs, this means providing a new type of gaming experience while still making it feel like other role-playing games (and often specific genres). Familiarity and novelty may come from the ruleset (e.g. different games using the same or similar rules), the fictional elements (e.g. it's a fantasy game with orcs and elves), or some combination of both. In the case of TRPGs, this challenge was partly responsible for the development of "house systems" where publishers use the same set of rules and game mechanics for different games (Appelcline 2014). This reduced production costs and made it easier for players to pick up new games since they wouldn't have to learn a new set of rules. The next evolution of this idea was the universal or generic system that could be used in multiple settings. For example, GURPS (the "Generic Universal Roleplaying System") allows players to learn only one set of rules and play games in highly varied settings including science fiction, super heroes, horror, fantasy, and more. Moreover, GURPS "is designed to be as compatible as possible with supplements written for different games" (Jackson *et al.* 2008, 5).

Licensed versus Original Content

It is common for RPGs pay for the use of pre-existing intellectual property, e.g. *Call of Cthulhu* (Petersen 1981) is based on H.P. Lovecraft's horror stories and *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game* (Costikyan 1987) was based on George Lucas' Star Wars movie and its sequels. The benefits can be varied, name or brand recognition might mean there is an audience ready for a game. It can also reduce the amount of effort and cost to develop a game (Hallford and Hallford 2001). On the other hand, using an existing license also creates constraints in a game's design and it can complicate the design process because of additional stakeholders who must vet or approve of a game's design. One of the lead designers of the computer RPG (CRPG) *Baldur's Gate*, Ray Muzyka, noted how "one of the first hurdles we encountered with developing in the *AD&D* [*Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*] universe was complying with [the publisher's] strict code of ethics – and this did limit the design somewhat" (Muzyka as quoted in Saltzman 1999, 64). Because they chose to make the game run in real-time (as opposed to having a turn-based system), "one of the largest hurdles was figuring out how to actually implement the *AD&D* rule system on a computer" (Muzyka as quoted in Saltzman 1999, 64). This example shows how it is not only fictional universes (e.g. the Star Wars universe) that are licensed, but also rules systems, and that licensing across

different forms of RPGs also occurs (e.g. a TRPG is licensed for a CRPG or vice versa).

Rules versus Setting

The practice of licensing, together with the tension between the familiar and novel also highlights another design challenge: balancing the needs of a ruleset with those of a setting. Unless making a generic system like GURPS (Jackson 1986) or the Hero system (Long 1989), the common wisdom is that rules should be designed for the specific experiences a game's themes make players expect (Hallford and Hallford 2001). As such, the rules should hopefully in some way capture and enhance something special about the game's setting. For example, players would expect an RPG set in the Star Wars setting to have rules of some sort about "the force". Similarly, TRPG *Call of Cthulhu*'s rules for insanity model (by design) "the behavior of protagonists in H.P Lovecraft's fiction, who more than a few times faint or go mad" (Petersen and Willis 2001, 69) and, as noted by the game's original designer Sandy Petersen, they were a direct attempt to "incorporate a large portion of the Lovecraft feel into the rules" (Petersen 1982). However, rules that are too closely interwoven with a setting can suffer in terms of how applicable they are to a wide range of potential settings. Figuring out the right balance is a significant design challenge.

Rules Heavy versus Rules Light

The number of rules and how detailed these should be are another challenge for designers of RPGs. Few rules can allow for focusing on storytelling and role-playing but lead to unrealistic events and depend on the decisions of those running the games. Many rules can allow for specialized handling on various situations but require step learning curves and spending times looking up rules while playing. For example, the fourth edition of GURPS is described by its creators as "a single, unified system that allows for great diversity without losing its coherence. This Fourth Edition incorporates dozens of rules that originally appeared in supplements published for the Third Edition." (Jackson *et al.* 2008, 5). In contrast, the creator of *Everway* states "The point of *Everway* is to make role-playing easier and more attractive" (Tweet, 1995b). This is not to say that large rule sets and complexity are seen to be a goal in itself: "In GURPS, most of the detailed calculations are done before you start play . . . they are entered on the character sheet, and saved until you need them. Once play actually begins, it should not be complex. I've tried to make GURPS as fast-moving yet realistic as possible. It's up to you to decide whether I succeeded." (Jackson *et al*. 2008, 5).

In the context of larps, one of the distinguishing characteristics of Nordic larp is that they tend to eschew long, written, and complicated formal rules. This is in contrast to, for example, the rulebook for the American action larp *Dystopia*

Rising whose rulebook has over 450 pages roughly half of which are dedicated to character creation and skills (Pucci 2016). The medium of the RPG plays a role; RPGs on computers can have complex sets of rules. For some, this is a benefit of CRPGs and MORPGs because they can easily implement complicated rule systems. In fact, rules in these games are often opaque – and players spend significant effort attempting to reverse engineer rules (e.g. trying to figure out what kind of treasure a monster will have when killed and how often it may have super rare treasure items). This practice is also called theorycrafting **(see chapter 10)**.

Support for Specific or Varied Play Styles

The rules of an RPG often direct players on how to approach playing it, e.g. seriously, competitively, or humorously. However, a challenge for designers is how inclusive or restrictive that style, or styles, of play should be. This can have an impact on the number and complexity of rules, since RPGs that direct towards a narrower style can support them better. However, they may alienate players that want to play other ways. RPGs that offer more ways instead run the risk of not supporting any clearly and requiring players to themselves find a style of play that works for them. To further complicate this issue, different players have different playing styles depending on the role they wish to have in a playing group. RPGs often need to provide multiple such roles – if for nothing else to make players

roles' distinguishable from each other – and providing rules that do this is fairly is not easy. For example, MORPG designers often work with what is known as "the holy trinity": tank, healer, and damager. These are meta-roles that reflect how combat should be approached strategically by players: healers protect and support the team, tanks draw enemy fire and take damage, and damagers focus on damaging and killing the enemy. While a game might have many different classes for players to choose from, when it comes to combat most characters have probably been designed to perform as either a tank, healer, or damage dealer.

The idea of player styles, or preferences on how to play a certain game is closely related to the notion of "player types". Richard Bartle, one of the creators of the first MORPG, first described four categories of players based on what was "fun" for them in MUD2 (Bartle 2003). His player types consisted of achievers (those who like to progress and achieve defined goals), socializers (those who like to interact socially with others), explorers (those who like to discover and increase their knowledge of the game), and killers (those who want to dominate others) (Bartle 2003). Bartle's types, while somewhat simplistic, are interested from a design perspective because they are defined by what activities players wish to perform during gameplay. Thus, when designing a game, designers may wish to identify types of activities that can interest and captivate their intended players, and decide whether or not to support them via their rules. For example, perhaps a

fantasy game might include detailed rules for diplomacy and negotiation in addition to combat and magic in order to more broadly support potential player interest.

Ongoing Playability

The open-enededness that most RPGs have poses an additional challenge in their design: how to encourage players to continue playing and how to support them. Brad McQuaid, producer for MORPG *Everquest*, describes how "MMORPGs change and evolve, both due to new content being added and also because the game's player base is constantly changing and advancing. This means constant tweaks must be made both before and after commercial launch." (McQuaid as quoted in Saltzman 2000, 70). This lack of an ending common in many RPGs (except, perhaps in CRPGs) necessitates thinking, in terms of design, of how a game can continue to grow and expand even while it's being designed. In TRPGs this is often accomplished by designing for greater specificity (e.g. a rulebook with special rules for elves) and also breadth (e.g. a sourcebook detailing a newly discovered continent in a game world). In the case of software-based RPGs, this new way of design-thinking is sometimes referred to as "software as a service" rather than "software as a product". The former implies an ongoing relationship with the players (who are provided a service). These design discussions have even made their way into RPGs designed to be played once. For example, in some larp

communities there are discussions on how to design a larp so that it can be run, or

staged, multiple times and how to best maintain the designers' goals and

intentions across these runs while still letting players enact their own agency in

the experience (Harviainen 2009).

Design Areas of RPGs

Having described broadly some of the challenges faced by RPG designers, we

focus on three broad areas in the design space of RPGs through the lens of design

patterns. Originally introduced in architecture by Christopher Alexander and

others (1977), design patterns capture common, reoccurring solutions to common,

reoccurring problems in a design domain – for instance using two corner doors to

allow people to cross a room without having to walk through its middle.

Design patterns: Semi-formalized descriptions of design features in a design

field. In other words, they describe commonly used design solutions. The

relations between patterns is an important part of describing how design

choices influence each other.

Call-out 18.1: Design Patterns

Building on the work of Alexander, Björk and Holopainen (2004) developed the

concept of gameplay design patterns and described nearly 300 of these commonly

reoccurring parts of the design of a game that concern gameplay. Their initial

collection already contained many common design elements of RPGs, e.g.

COMBAT, SKILLS, and STORYTELLING and ROLE-PLAYING (in written text, a

pattern is denoted through the use of SMALL CAPS). Here, we will explore patterns

in three key design areas of RPGs: characterization, action resolution and combat,

and character development. These were chosen since they are relevant for all

types of RPGs and can be illustrative of different design solutions possible.

Naturally, many other rule areas exist. It should also be pointed out that while this

chapter deals with gameplay rules, there are of course many other design areas

vital to RPG design, e.g. graphical design, visual design, script writing, and prop

construction (for other examples of structural analysis, **see chapter 14**). We chose

not to examine them here since they are more media dependent and not all types

of RPGs are concerned with all these areas. Due to the large number of patterns,

none will be described in full detail and only the most important will be defined

through call-outs. However, the patterns are named after common RPG concepts

and should in most cases be understandable by their name. Readers who wish to

explore specific patterns can refer to the public collection.[2]

Characterization of Player Characters

The fictional game world or diegetic world of an RPG is populated by AGENTS

that pursue some goals in the game world: monsters trying to eat village people,

knights wanting to fend off monsters, etc. Players in an RPG typically take on the role of some agents – their goals and characteristics – and control some or all of their actions in the game world. Such player-enacted and controlled game world agents are called PLAYER CHARACTERS (PCs). For instance, a player might control one of the knights fighting off monsters.

Player characters: Agents in the game world that are controlled and enacted by players.

Call-out 18.2: Player characters

Many RPGs support PLAYER-CREATED CHARACTERS, that is, players create the CHARACTERS they play and can make some choices regarding their ATTRIBUTES and SKILLS, their EQUIPMENT and in-game world features such as the CHARACTERS' name.

Attributes: Basic and more or less stable aspects of agents that affect what they can do. For instance, a CHARACTER with a low "speed" attribute may not be allowed to move as fast or act as often as characters with a higher "speed".

Call-out 18.3: Attributes

Skills: Statistics that represent how likely agents are to succeed at a type of activity. They are learned capacities that can be improved through experience. For instance, a character can increase their "jumping" skill through in-game learning, which makes it more likely that they jumps over a chasm successfully.
Call-out 18.4: Skills

Quite often players can choose different FUNCTIONAL ROLES – for example through "classes" like mage or thief in *Dungeons and Dragons* (Gygax & Arneson 1974; hereafter *D&D*) or FACTIONS in *Vampire – The Masquerade*. These FUNCTIONAL ROLES ease character creation in giving players ready templates or archetypes to work from: everybody has a rough idea of what a "hard-boiled detective" is and what they should roughly able to do. Also, it coordinates character creation and play between multiple players in a group. In MORPGs like *World of Warcraft*, it is common knowledge that an effective player group needs CHARACTERS in three main FUNCTIONAL ROLES: tanks that can draw and take damage from enemies, healers than can heal the tanks and others, and damage dealers that can deal damage to enemies. Hence, players are likely to compose groups of CHARACTERS that include all three.

Functional roles: Gameplay where responsibility for different types of game actions can be divided between participants.

Call-out 18.5: Functional Roles

FUNCTIONAL ROLES often open up specific choices or PRIVILEGED ABILITIES that

are only available to specific types of agents, e.g. only the "mage" can cast spells,

only the thief can pick pockets.

Privileged abilities: Abilities that let agents perform actions not readily

available to others.

Call-out 18.6: Privileged Abilities

The possibility of easily storing details about the PCs allow CRPGs to have more

complex rule sets and more variety in ATTRIBUTES, SKILLS and EQUIPMENT.

Examples of the latter include formal rules regarding INVENTORIES and

EQUIPMENT SLOTS as well as the DETERIORATION of EQUIPMENT based on damage

or wear and tear (the *Fallout series* being an example of this). While rules for this

existed in earlier games (*D&D* for the former, *GURPS* for the latter), CRPGs can

have the extra detail this provides without burdening the GM or players.

While providing a wide variety of ATTRIBUTES, SKILL, etc. allows players to have

detailed characterizations of their PCs which are supported by the game rules,

some RPGs avoid this. For example, *Everway* describes PCs in relation to the

four elements, the four humors, and what virtues and flaws they have. These are purposefully vague and require interpretation by both players and game masters. The intention with this design choice was to encourage players' creative freedom: "[...] you can play characters that I never would have thought of. You're limited by your imagination, not mine." (Tweet, 1995b, 87). This can be seen as a design intent to support STORYTELLING. One effect of focusing character creation towards STORYTELLING between players is that the concept of having one's own PC can be questioned. Players of *Fiasco* do have their own PCs but other players often get to decide the outcome of their SCENES. In *Nobilis* (Moran 1999) players pick abstract concepts such as Time, Hesitation, etc. to champion, and then play personifications of these concepts, making players simultaneously roleplay PCs and represent perspectives of the GAME WORLD. *Universalis* (Mazza & Holmes 2002) does not assign PCs in any sense to players, instead letting them create CHARACTERS fitting specific SCENES but not necessarily role-playing them. The trend of removing the presence of PCs can be said to have been taken the furthest in *Once upon a Time* (Lambert *et al.* 1994). In this card-based storytelling game the concept of having one's own CHARACTER is completely removed. Arguably, this shows how rules focusing upon supporting STORYTELLING in games can impact the possibility of ROLEPLAYING and blur the borders of what constitutes RPGs.

Character creation for larps typically differ substantially from other RPGs. The difficulty of handling complex rules in a practical way limits the use of lots of ATTRIBUTES and SKILLS. EQUIPMENT also becomes more important and requires more effort in the sense that they may have to be functional (e.g. clothing, tents, and cooking equipment). Further, in larps that are single events, i.e. not connected to other larp events, relations between characters often need to be prepared before gameplay begins. This can be done well in advance through detailed dossiers, directly in conjunction with the actual event, or a combination of both. In Nordic larps (see Stenros & Montola 2010 for examples), workshop techniques with all the players are often used prior to gameplay to finalize CHARACTERS and to emotionally and psychologically prepare players. For example, the Ball of Yarn technique[3] is used to establish relationships between characters. As a workshop technique, it requires that all the players sit in a circle with one holding the end of a thread from a ball of yarn. The player holding the ball then throws it to another player while stating something about the relationship between both characters (e.g. "We are cousins and you don't approve of my fashion sense"). As the ball is thrown around, players see how the relations between CHARACTERS are created together. This technique also highlights which CHARACTERS need more relations.

Larps often feature WARMING-UP ROLEPLAY EXERCISES to serve as icebreakers and help players overcome social inhibitions or become more energized before a larp begins (Munthe-Kaas *et al.* 2009).

Warming-Up Roleplay Exercises: Exercises before gameplay begins that help players prepare for enactment and roleplaying
Call-out 18.7: Warming-Up Roleplay Exercises

Kluddermor for instance consists of creating an entangled chain of hands while keeping one's eyes closed and then opening ones' eyes and collaboratively untangling everyone without letting go of each other's hands. *Flamingos and Penguins* is a form of tag requiring different types of silly walking styles. Generally, these exercises have similar designs as the games created and promoted by the New Games Movement (see Fluegelman 1976).

Action Resolution, Combat, and Handling Death
Apart from describing a PLAYER CHARACTER, ATTRIBUTES, SKILLS, PRIVILEGED ABILITIES usually have 'hard' consequences in terms of what the characters can do in the game world and how likely they are to succeed – that is, they affect action resolution.

Action resolution: The rules and processes by which the outcome of an in-game agent's attempted action is determined.

Call-out 18.8: Action resolution

For instance, a character's speed attribute and jumping skill can affect whether the character manages to jump over a very wide chasm or not. As Peterson (2012) has shown, *D&D* and other early RPGs inherited many rules from wargames, **(see chapter 3)**. Unsurprisingly, the majority of their gameplay and therefore required rules for action resolution revolved around COMBAT against ENEMIES. For this reason, we will here discuss action resolution exemplarily around COMBAT. While the EQUIPMENT, ARMOR, SKILLS, PRIVILEGED ABILITIES (e.g. spells), and ATTRIBUTES (e.g. Strength, Dexterity, and HIT POINTS in *D&D*) of CHARACTERS affect the COMBAT outcome, various types of DICE are typically used to introduce RANDOMNESS to the outcome (Mogensen 2016). The complex combination of the two – character STATISTICS and dice – result in COMBAT often taking significant play time to resolve. Most early tabletop RPGs model COMBAT similarly, although specific features differed. For instance, *Tunnels and Trolls* (St. Andre 1975) and *GURPS* (Jackson 1986) use ARMOR that absorbs DAMAGE rather than make wearer harder to hit (as in the case of *D&D*). Most CRPGs like the *Diablo series* (*various* 1996-) and Roguelikes like *Moria* (Koeneke & Todd 1983) have COMBAT rules very similar to TRPGs[4], but often more complex since the

computer can keep track of all the rules and calculations. This is also the case for

MUDs such as BatMUD (*various* 1990) and MORPGs such as *World of Warcraft*

(Pardo *et al.* 2004-).

However, some RPGs differ significantly in their approaches to COMBAT. As its

name suggests, *Amber Diceless Roleplaying Game* (Wujcik 1991; hereafter

Amber) removes DICE and guarantees eventual victory to those with higher

STATISTICS in fair struggles. *Everway* (Tweet 1995a) functions similarly although

it provides an optional "Fortune Deck" for RANDOMNESS. By their design, these

games deemphasize the detailed accounting for individual attacks and defenses

(i.e. simulating "real" combat) in COMBAT to instead encourage narration, drama,

and intrigue from players and game master (GM). *Fiasco* (Morningstar 2009)

goes even further by not having any STATISTICS and letting a particular

CHARACTER of a SCENE either decide the premise or outcome of that SCENE, thus

letting players narrate how COMBAT plays out while knowing the outcome

beforehand.

Larps mirror these different design approaches: the *NERO system* (Valenti 2014)

for example has detailed COMBAT rules while *Monitor Celestra* (*various* 2013)

had weapon type determine victory and *College of Wizardry* (various 2014) let

targets of spells decide their effects. While the two latter examples can be seen as

design structures to promote collaborative storytelling, they also help strive for

DIEGETIC CONSISTENCY in the games through supporting the design goal of a

"360° Illusion" (Koljonen 2007).

Death occurs easily in some tabletop RPGs: a single blow from a sword can kill a

novice *D&D* magic-user while a bullet from a rifle can kill most CHARACTERS in

GURPS. While more experienced and prosperous player groups may afford

EXTRA LIVES through resurrection spells and other means, players without these

possibilities only have limited DEATH CONSEQUENCES in that they can simply

create new CHARACTERS to replace the ones that have been killed. In one way this

is not a problem in most RPGs because they are often UNWINNABLE GAMES; there

is no way of winning them and the closest equivalent is to succeed in an

adventure or campaign after which the GM stops running the game.

Death Consequences: Gameplay consequences of avatars or characters dying.
Call-out 18.9: Death Consequences

However, CHARACTER deaths can be disappointments in that they can represent

substantial emotional investments as well as being important to the developing

narrative of the game. Some tabletop RPGs that focus upon storytelling, e.g. like

Amber and *Everway*, deemphasize COMBAT rules so dying becomes unlikely

unless the GM or players want to enforce it for dramatic purposes. *Paranoia*
(Costikyan *et al.* 1984) and *Toon* (Costikyan & Spector 1984) in contrast take two
radically different views to death. Trying to balance having player characters
(PCs) die often with making it possible to complete adventures and their
associated narration, PCs in *Paranoia* have EXTRA LIVES through being part of
clone families where one clone replaces another as PCs as they die. In *Toon*,
dying means that the PC is out of the SCENE but can return in the next one. The
deaths of CHARACTERS in Larps with campaign structures are handled more or
less like in other types of RPGs; players can create new CHARACTERS and start
playing again without disrupting the overall gameplay. However, this is not the
case for Larps set up as single productions where the CHARACTERS are
dramatically important making it harder to quickly introduce new ones. This
results in rules for how PCs can die that are often tied to dramatic structures. For
example, in in *Monitor Celestra* the players could only be killed in the final
SCENE while *College of Wizardry* states that players cannot kill any other
CHARACTERS but they can themselves choose to die (*various* 2014).

PC deaths are typically handled differently in CRPGs compared to tabletop RPGs
and Larps. This is due to CRPGs such as e.g. the *Ultima* series, the *Fallout series*,
the *Dragon Age* series (*various* 2009-), and the *Mass Effect series* (*various* 2007-)
being SINGLE-PLAYER GAMES where players can continue playing from a

previously created SAVE FILE when their CHARACTERS die. Through this, players can create SAVE-LOAD CYCLES which diminish DEATH CONSEQUENCES. Thus, death often represents a failed attempt and a minor setback. Roguelikes such as *Rogue* and *Moria* counter this by implementing PERMADEATH: the death of the PC ends the game and players need to start a new game instance if they want to continue playing. This design solution can also be found in the initial games in the *X-COM* series (*various* 1994b-) as well as in "hardcore" or "ironman" option for some CRPGs, e.g. later installments in the *Fallout series*.

Deaths in MUDs and MORPGs are handled differently that in CRPGs. First, few MUDs support PERMADEATH. *Hardcore BatMUD* (*various* 2000) is a version of *BatMUD* where players CHARACTERS are gone as soon as they die once, but this is one of few exceptions. Wanting to have some DEATH CONSEQUENCES without killing PCs permanently, MORPGs instead punish players with other penalties such as loss of EXPERIENCE POINTS or DAMAGE to EQUIPMENT. In *Ultima Online*, the EQUIPMENT of a dead CHARACTER becomes LOOT which might be accessible to anyone. In *World of Warcraft*, death forces players to choose between waiting to be resurrected by others, spawning as a spirit at the nearest graveyard only resurrecting when they rejoin their corpse, or being resurrected by a spirit healer at a graveyard.

Character Development

As Zagal and Altizer (2014) report, it was not only enthusiastically praised in early *D&D* reviews but has since often been referenced as a fundamental appeal and aspect of RPGs. CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT can happen in one-off game sessions, but also over the course of many years. This can lead to players having strong emotional bonds for their characters as well as developing important aspects of the overall narrative created in CAMPAIGNS.

Character Development: Changes in characters' abilities, skills, or powers as part of gameplay.
Call-out 18.10: Character Development

While part of CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT can be primarily in diegetic, in-game world terms (getting married, becoming a knight, etc.), it is also structurally accomplished in RPGs like *D&D* through gaining EXPERIENCE POINTS for accomplishing certain in-game activities like killing certain monsters or solving a puzzle.

Experience Points: Points used to measure a character's progress towards a state where abilities or characteristics related to gameplay are improved.
Call-out 18.11: Experience Points

Once CHARACTERS collect a certain threshold amount of EXPERIENCE POINTS, they are allowed to progress in CHARACTER LEVELS which allow access to IMPROVED ATTRIBUTES, IMPROVED SKILLS or NEW ABILITIES (which are also often PRIVILEGED ABILITIES).

Levels: An enumeration of states characters can progress through, gaining and improving abilities as they are reached.

Call-out 18.12: Levels

Another form of CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT occurs in *D&D* through PCs acquiring LOOT from defeated ENEMIES; this provides EQUIPMENT and RESOURCES (most commonly in the form of money or valuable items). The RPGs that followed *D&D* in many cases provided more granular CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT; for example specific SKILLS could be improved between game sessions rather than having improvements stratified through linking them to advancements in a relatively limited scale of CHARACTER LEVELS (Zagal and Altizer, 2014). Having computational powers to handle frequent and minute changes, CRPGs can handle CHARACTER PROGRESSION with even greater detail than most other types of RPGs. EXPERIENCE POINTS can for example be given continuously during gameplay (as done in the *Diablo* and *Dragon Age* series) as

ENEMIES are killed and SKILLS can be increased based upon actual use as done in the *Elder Scrolls* series (*various* 1994a-). This can of course lessen the impact of each numerical increase as well as give rise to GRINDING. However, simplified versions of these are used in some tabletop RPGs, e.g. *Call of Cthulhu* (Petersen 1981) and *Pendragon* (Stafford 1985).

While one might think of CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT as improvement over time, it can also take the form of CHARACTER DECLINE. Examples of this can be found the tabletop RPGs *Call of Cthulhu* and *Pendragon* where PCs can lose STATISTICS values through insanity and aging respectively. *Vampire - The Masquerade* uses "humanity points" to measure how alienated a vampire character is from humankind. Similarly, *Cyberpunk* (Pondsmith 1988) uses an empathy score to show how dissociated and unfeeling PCs have become due to acquiring cybernetic implants. Fitting its setting, the *Star Wars RPG* (Costikyan 1987) gives "dark force points" to those PCs that gave in to evil temptations. While these may not necessary be development players (or their PCs) strive for, they can both function as PENALTIES and as starting points for personal goals. While these rules for CHARACTER DECLINE can help emphasize story creation, Mackay notes a paradox regarding this: inexperienced players and GMs may be supported by these rules but experienced ones may find such rules restrictive since they do not "allow for less formulaic stories" (2001, 47-48).

Progression in MUDs and MORPGs can function similarly to both tabletop RPGs and CRPGs. However, they differ from TRPGs in how they support gameplay for players that have reached the maximum CHARACTER LEVEL with their PCs. In this ENDGAME, games such as *World of Warcraft* encourage players to collect specific rare EQUIPMENT. The higher focus on EQUIPMENT in MORPGs makes the division of LOOT more important. While *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* already had rules suggesting how players can divide LOOT (Gygax 1978, p. 122), MORPGs can enforce these systems. *World of Warcraft* has a system where the leader of the group can set five different loot parameters: free-for-all, master looter, round-robin, group loot, and need before greed. Rules that control who can take what loot can promote fairness, it can also enable behavior that is primarily seen as selfish; NINJA LOOTING is the act of taking LOOT they are supposedly not entitled to (e.g. it was dropped by an enemy they did not defeat, but rather swooped in at the last minute and took the loot).

Larps, especially campaign ones with recurring characters, also often have rules regarding CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT similar to other RPGs. Vampire campaigns using the *Mind's Eye Theatre* rules (Rein-Hagen *et al.* 1993) and the *Knight Realms* game (for a description of the later, see Stark 2012, p. 56) are prime examples of this. However, many larps are one-off events so this becomes less

relevant. While Zagal and Altizer (2014) mention negative progression through choice, the Nordic larp tradition has a technique called PLAYING TO LOSE where players volunteer to make their characters fail in their goals in order to create more interesting stories.

Playing to Lose: Gameplay directed at making one's own character lose to provide an interesting or enjoyable experience for oneself and others.
Call-out 18.12: Playing to Lose

Concluding Observations

The above are just some of the areas that need to be considered when designing a RPG. Further, we have not been exhaustive in the examples presented nor have we traced influences or design intentions of individual designers, e.g. seeing how the rules of *Call of Cthulhu* support the claim that the RPG "suggested a whole new sort of adventure, where players investigated mysteries rather than just blindly hacking and slashing their way through dungeons" (Appelcline 2014, 259). We have also ignored how design principles transferred from one RPG form to another. For example, *D&D*'s character progression system or rules for generating dungeons had a significant influence on early CRPGs (Dahlskog *et al.* 2015). Similarly, we have not examined how RPG design has evolved and changed over the years, even for the same game. For example, newer RPGs have

influenced remakes of old ones, e.g. *Paranoia* can nowadays be played with player influence on DICE rolls and FUNCTIONAL ROLES in MORPGs are echoed in the 4th edition of *D&D*.

What we have done is show how specific re-occurring design features can be identified for RPGs to show both difference and similarities, be it between genres or over time. This provides the basis for exploring the issues mentioned above. Being able to put words to the possible and existing design elements of RPG allows an artifact-centered perspective that is useful for questions linked to issues like the ones above and to designers who wish to be reflective.

The commonality of shared patterns or structural elements that can be found between different forms of RPGs show that they not only have vague similarities to each other on a general level but also share specific rules or game elements. These specific design solutions point towards a way of tracing the development of RPGs over time as well as how different player preferences have developed and been given form through the designs of new RPGs, especially when using a design language which supports identifying relations between the elements and feasible contexts of use. It is the hope that this chapter provides an initial step on how this can be done and support further work in the same style.

Summary

This chapter examined RPGs from a design perspective. It highlighted common challenges and tensions that RPG designers face, namely including the need to balance the novel with the familiar, whether to license someone else's intellectual property or develop one's own, balancing the needs of a ruleset with those of the setting, figuring out how many rules to articulate and how detailed they should be, whether to support broad or narrow styles of play, and how to design for open-ended play that can last years or more. It then used design patterns, semi-formalized descriptions of design features, to more closely examine the salient design features of three important areas in the design space of RPGs: action resolution, combat and handling of character death, characterization of player characters, and progression. We wrapped up by pointing out a few of the things we opted to leave out such as how RPG design has evolved and how the different forms have influenced each other over the years.

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Key terms

Design patterns

Player characters

Attributes

Skills

Functional roles

Privileged abilities

Action resolution

Death consequences

Warming-Up Roleplay Exercises

Character Development

Experience points

Levels

Playing to Lose

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[1] https://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Main_Page

[2] http://gameplaydesignpatterns.org/.

[3] http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Ball_of_Yarn

[4] This is especially easy to see in early CRPGs, e.g. *Dungeon*, *dnd*, and *DND* (see Barton 2008).