Hugo Rocha, LESI, 22780

Presentation Report

Role-playing Games

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Introduction

I decided to present a text which I believe to be important in our day and age especially for those taking this degree of Computer and Systems Engineering.

The theme for my presentation is **Role-playing games** and is as *wikipedia* defines it:

 "A type of game in which players assume the roles of characters and collaboratively create narratives."

It all comes down to the time where there was no T.V. or radio and where people relied on storytelling for entertainment. They would sit by the fire telling each other stories of hunt, legends involving gods and tales of great heroes. That tradition is virtually lost today but some shreds of it remain in our society. One of those is Role-playing games.

It brings me great pleasure to present this theme to my fellow colleagues as it is one of my great passions and for that effect I decided to rely on one of BBC's most excellent articles on the subject.

I will start by presenting the introductory article.

"What happened to Dungeons and Dragons?"

by *Darren Waters*

In the 1980s millions of teenagers world-wide would battle dragons armed with just dice, paper and pens. D&D became part of youth sub-culture but as the game celebrates its 30th birthday, is anyone still playing?

In 1974 two men in the US Midwest, Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, created Dungeons and Dragons, the first ever role-playing game.

Developed out of war gaming using table-top miniatures, the paperback rule books were an instant success, a genuine phenomenon which spawned an industry and influenced a generation of film-makers, writers and videogame developers.

An estimated 20 million people worldwide have played D&D since it was created, with more than $1bn spent on game equipment and books.

"I thought we would sell about 50,000 copies," says Gary Gygax.

Co-creator Dave Arneson recalls: "When we started playing we thought we were kind of crazy. It seemed to start quite well and sold better, and better and better."

The game spread by word of mouth and became a cult in schools and in universities across the globe.

It was even a cult at a Wisconsin naval base. "At one time every nuclear submarine had a D&D group," says Arneson.

D&D is a game in which a group of friends create and develop characters by rolling dice which determine skills and abilities.

The characters are taken on adventures which are plotted by a separate player - the Dungeon Master.

You can be a fighter, a thief, or a magic user, perhaps even a bard, a druid or a cleric. But there is no board or counters - just pen, paper and an active imagination.

"I get to be braver, stronger, wiser, smarter, faster, handsomer, and just generally more than I am in real life," says current player, Joshua Turton, 29, from the San Francisco Bay area.

"I can perform miracles, save damsels, slay dragons, cast spells, right wrongs, raid tombs, drink ale, and live dangerously."

Brad King, author of Dungeons and Dreamers, which charts the influence of D&D on early videogames, says D&D should not be confused with board games.

"It was the first really interactive game. If you play board games there is always an objective or goal.

"D&D is the opposite. It's about sitting down and telling stories with your friends."

At the height of its popularity in the 1980s the game became a target for cultural conservatives.

The game was wrongly implicated in a missing persons case, a teen suicide and a number of murders. Some schools banned the game, and many parents refused to let their children play.

The controversy inspired a 1982 TV film, Mazes and Monsters, starring Tom Hanks. A later cartoon series and a more recent film kept the brand name alive among non-players but were derided by D&D fans.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, lawsuits began to fly - Arneson and Gygax sued each other over the development of the game.

Neither man has any current official involvement in D&D - both selling their royalties to publisher Wizards of the Coast in the 1990s.

Arneson says: "We see each other at conventions. He does his thing and I do mine. There's no stabbing each other in the back."

D&D's popularity began to wane in the early 1990s as the videogame boom began.

"D&D never went away," says Liz Schuh, marketing director for Wizards of the Coast. "It was huge in the 1980s and then dropped off the radar screens but it never went away."

"D&D was so successful that it spawned an industry that ate it," says Mr King.

There are now hundreds of different, competing role-playing games which have all taken a bite out of the market dominance D&D once had.

But the game remains - even thrives. Wizards estimates that three million people play in the US each month.

Angus MacDonald, a 45-year-old D&D player, who lives near San Francisco, has been playing on and off since 1975.

"The game is social, it is a form of storytelling, and it has allowed me to develop deep friendships with people over the years."

Delwin Shand, a 47-year-old who has been playing for 30 years, says: "The reason the game has survived is that it allows us the chance to play out a dream of being the classical hero - the slayer of dragons, the hero who saves the land from some terrible foe or danger."

Gygax and Arneson are still actively involved in the industry and are revered by D&D players for their creation.

Gygax says: "There is something in D&D that strikes a chord in many people; the call of adventure.

"I am certainly happy that it has made people happy and brought so many people together. There is a great fellowship among role players."

Ed Stark, special projects manager at Wizards, says imagination is pivotal to the game. "People often say playing D&D is like writing your own movie at a table.

"But of course there are no million dollar special effects - so imagination must fill in the blanks."

In the age of the iPod, mp3s, DVDs and online videogames, it is perhaps remarkable that a game based purely on pen, paper and dice remains so popular.

Role-Playing Games

Although the article goes extensively through history, the concept itself might still be a little fuzzy. Basically, role-playing games are a form of interactive and collaborative storytelling. The simplest form of role-playing exists in children's games such as "cops and robbers" but unlike a child who just wants to feel like a robber for a few minutes, a group of adults will generate specific characters and an ongoing plot. Their goal is to reproduce the enjoyment of a gangster movie or novel. Like a TV show, these episodic games often have weekly sessions that continue for months.

As stated in the article, the first role-playing games derived from fantasy war games where participants used miniature figurines and scaled terrain grids to illustrate action. Whether or not these supplementary materials are still used, this variety of table-top interaction remains a dominant model for role-playing. Participants sit at a table and conduct the game as a social gathering. A story is told in the unfolding of the session and unlike other types of games there is no single winner since the object is not to defeat other players. To win at all you must cooperate and there is no way for one person to claim victory. Even games where player's characters descend down a dark path to destruction are won simply because a good story is told. In fact, most of the times, those are the ones people enjoy the most.

But despite their generally collaborative nature, role-playing games have rules. If we were gaming like children, there would be lots of "BANG, you are dead", "AM NOT" situations. To correct this, strategies are devised and engineered to provide the gaming world with a working set of rules. Using weighted statistics and dice rolls, the GM acts as organizer, moderator and arbitrator of these rules and of the world itself. His task is the most important for on top of everything he also has to play out the part of everyone in the gaming world who isn't a player.

Not everyone is the same though and characters have unequal distributions of basic talents such as strength, agility, and intelligence. Each player can select a set of skills suited to the native talents and personality of his or her player character. These shape the character's choices and capabilities within the game.

One person might be a strong, quick brawler. Another develops into a machine-gun expert. The party doctor learns negotiation and medicine. The rogue lurks in the shadows. A doctor will be better at healing than a gunfighter. Some actions cannot be attempted without special skill. A rogue might try to bandage a wound, but only a doctor could neutralize a poison. The cumulative effects of talent, skill, and experience give a seasoned doctor a very high chance of success. Most games represent these factors with statistical odds that player's record on a piece of paper called a character sheet.

As for the buying of the game, it usually involves acquiring the rule book for the RPG. This contains everything needed to start playing which normally is the set of gaming rules and background information of the setting. A medieval Europe RPG might include information on the continents countries, how different people live their lives, how economy works and how war is waged.

RPG settings

There are as many different RPGs as there are stories that can be told. Genres are usually divided by the fictional setting where they take place:

Fantasy role-playing games draw their inspiration almost exclusively from fantasy literature (ex *J. R. R. Tolkien*). The setting in these games is usually a medieval world with a level of technology similar to that of Europe during the dark ages. Fantasy elements include magic and supernatural creatures. As presented in the article, D&D is part of this genre, and it is the most played role-playing genre.

> **Titles**: Dungeons & Dragons, Lord of the Rings.

SF role-playing games are inspired by science fiction literature. The setting is generally in the future, sometimes near future but also the far future. Common elements involve futuristic technology, contact with alien life forms, experimental societies, and space travel.

> **Titles**: Cyberpunk 2020, Star Wars.

Horror games take their inspiration from horror literature. Horror Roleplaying can be divided into two major groups. The first is inspired by the works of H. P. Lovecraft, focusing on humanity's fight against malevolent, extra-dimensional entities. The second focuses on playing supernatural creatures, mostly preying on humanity, such as the books of Anne Rice.

> **Titles**: Call of Cthulhu, Vampire the masquerade.

Superhero role-playing games are inspired by superhero comic books and graphic novels. Ludicrous science, viable mutants, and space aliens are all common in this genre. The RPG games themselves usually have the players as super heroes, saving the common people from crime and super villains.

> **Titles**: Champions, Marvel Super Heroes

Universal games are based on creating a generic system that can be adapted to any genre. In practice, universal games are typically inclined toward a specific style or genre and adaptable to others.

> **Titles**: GURPS, Fuzion

Several games combine different genres. Ars Magica can be considered a fantasy role-playing game in a historical setting; Shadowrun combines cyberpunk with fantasy elements whereas steam punk games combine elements of science fiction with history.

Example of a role-playing session

Hugo, Pedro, Bruno and Patricia have gathered together for a role-playing. They find a comfortable place in Mike's living room, with enough space for some books, some dice, and a few favorite types of party food.

Hugo starts off the session by proposing the situation and describing the scene. He begins: "The three of you have just entered the city. It's about nine at night, and the dark, windy stone streets are slick with the recent rain and the filth of years of slum living. The weak moonlight casts long shadows as you make your way past street beggars and the occasional thug looking for an easy target.

Bruno has decided to play the role of a tough mercenary adventurer Brut Amonts. He thinks about the type of character he is playing and decides that someone like Brut would be looking for action. He says, "Brut grabs the nearest street thug by the lapels of his cheap outfit and growls, where's the nearest bar?'"

Pedro has decided to play the role of Mary Kinhas, a clever would-be detective and solver of mysteries-the more bizarre the better. Mary's a thinker, not a fighter, so Pedro tries another approach "Mary pulls Brut's hands off the thug's collar and says 'Excuse my friend's enthusiasm. We're just looking for a place with strong drink and some quiet socializing...

Patricia is playing the role of Lara Konft, a cunning master thief with a bit of Robin Hood in her background. As a natural paranoid, she's scanning the locals around the group. "What does Lara see in the crowd?"

As GM Hugo thinks about it. It's night, in a bad section of town, and Brut's just roughed up one of the locals. He says, "Well, Lara sees three large figures moving silently out of the shadows. The moonlight glints off of drawn weapons as they approach you..." "Lara turns to Brut and Mary," says Patricia, catching on fast. "We have a problem coming up...".

This would be the start of a session and although there is a lot of acting involved with keen parallel to theater, it does not mean you have to dress up or something. Although there is a specific style of role-playing game called LARP (or Live Action Role Play) where people do occasionally dress up, normal RP games are played by sitting around a table, imagining the scene described by the GM, and then acting out what they think their character would do in that situation. They don't have to dress in costume, wave around plastic weapons or run around in the steam tunnels at midnight.

Conclusion

In the age of the iPod, mp3s, DVDs and online videogames, it is perhaps remarkable that a game based purely on pen, paper and dice remains so popular.

It is indeed and who is better in a position to apreciate that than those very people whose work is based on technology? I have no doubts that most people know the computer variant of role-playing games but very, very few are familiar with the table-top pen and paper version.

It is not by accident that most corporations use this type of game in their Live-Action variant to train their employees on several situations they might encounter at work. As stated by Market Access Corporation on their Tech-Sales training program:

"All sessions will be highly interactive, will involve role playing, and will build participants' tactical and strategic skills relating to selling technology products and services."

Being a social game with strong generic learning and entertainment values, it might not be surprising that it remains so popular after all and certainly not after you've played it.

It is so that I conclude my presentation with the hope that I have interested at least some of my colleagues into trying out what is really an unique experience in entertainment.

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