

Spirit Seekers: Examining Affordances of Computer and Tabletop Role Playing Games

Brie Weir

Department of Education, UBC

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Ernesto Peña

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Background

Role-playing games (RPGs) emerged in the 1970s from the worlds of miniature-based wargaming, fantasy literature, and the traditions of rules less role-playing (Porter, 1995). Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) is often considered the first entry in this genre, published in 1974 by Tactical Studies Rules (Hosch, 2024). RPGs exist across a wide range of genres but typically consist of a few key components: players take on the roles of characters, succeed or fail on tasks based on rules, and a player takes on the role of game master (GM) who guides the narrative and interactions. As soon as the D&D ruleset was published, game designers were sneaking into campus computer labs to create and play computer RPGs (CRPGs) – digital versions of tabletop RPGs (TRPGs) that translated RPG mechanics into the digital realm (Daglow, 1988). These CRPGs streamlined many RPG mechanics such as inventory and skill management, and enabled single player RPG experiences without the need for a GM.

The difference between TRPGs and CRPGs lies primarily in flexibility. CRPGs are typically characterized by a detailed and defined story that the player explores through their character. The player's impact on the story largely exists through the selections they make for their character's skills and abilities. TRPGs on the other hand, are typically defined by their openness – the limit of player exploration, decision-making, and impact on story is only defined by the GM's willingness and ability to explore the decisions made by the players.

There is a hybrid space that blends the digital affordances of technology with the flexibility of TRPG systems. Porter (1995) theorized that future versions of role-playing games may include “live role-playing by Net” or “a personal digital assistant” to assist with tracking character status or passing information back and forth between player characters (Porter, 1995, para. 32). Many of his visions have come to life through the many online services that exist to

support hybrid tabletop and computer roleplaying such as Roll20 (Roll20, 2024) or D&D Beyond (Wizards of the Coast, 2024). These hybrid spaces allow for the high levels of player agency and narrative flexibility typical of TRPGs, with the affordances of the CRPG like automatic calculations and tracking of items and statuses.

Bringing the focus to the educational – RPGs and game-playing have been explored in the classroom in many forms to many conclusions. From rudimentary side-scrolling platformers (Jamshidifarsani et al., 2019), to problem solving CRPGs (Chen & Wu, 2023; Zou et al., 2021), interactive digital retellings of classic literature (Kirginias, 2022; Cook et al., 2017) and beyond, many educators have deployed and examined the use of games in their classrooms. Gaming literacy has emerged in the field of multiliteracies, the player understanding of objectives, rules, and gameplay standing distinct from narrative understanding (Apperley & Walsh, 2012). Gaming literacy invites students to “critically and creatively apply their experiences” within the structure of the game, making layered meaning as they move back and forth across “types of text, experiences, and so forth” (York et al., 2019, p. 120; Cook et al., 2017, p.202).

Educators have identified some key components of deploying RPGs in the classroom to include open narrative structure for improvisation and collaboration, game simplicity due to tight timelines and logistics, and the minimization of the role of the GM whenever possible (Campbell & Madsen, 2021; Cook et al., 2017; Zou et al., 2021). When applied thoughtfully and not treated as a pedagogical panacea, tabletop games and TRPGs have been found to support knowledge acquisition, narrative skills, interpersonal skills, and personal development (Chung 2013; Daniau, 2016; Kirginias, 2022; Orr et al., 2020; York et al., 2019).

With this background in mind, I've developed a rules-light one-page Discord RPG heavily inspired by the incredible work of Grant Howitt, John Harper, and Will Jobst. The rules can be found on the following pages.

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