

Role-Playing Games

References:

Andrew Rollings and Ernest Adams
on Game Design, Chapter 11

Remodeling RPGs for the New Millennium by Warren
Spector

http://www.gamasutra.com/features/game_design/19990115/remodeling_01.htm

Introduction

- Computer role-playing games (which we shall refer to as simply “role-playing games”), like strategy games, are derived from pen-and-paper games.
- Almost all role-playing games (RPGs) have the following two things in common:
 - configurable player-characters that improve with experience; and
 - strong storylines
- For some players, the story is more important. These players are mostly interested in progressing the story. The game is just a vehicle for the story, and every action and interaction is intended to progress the story line.
- For other players, the character-advancement is more important. Such players are not so much interested in the story, except where it is applicable to developing the player’s avatar.

Common Elements of RPGs

- The two main elements of RPGs are:
 - story
 - character development
- In order for the story to progress and the characters to develop, the players need to have something to do such as:
 - adventure
 - exploration
 - combat
- However, adventure, exploration, and combat are secondary features of RPGs. They are ways to achieve the primary features of an RPG, namely story and character development.
- The stories are generally scripted. In the future, we may get dynamic story generation using sophisticated AI.

Themes

- The theme is usually this:
“Only YOU can save the universe/world/city/tribe/whatever.”
- When designing a role-playing game, try to come up with something other than a “save the world” storyline! Be creative!
- Here are some ideas (taken from various games):
 - Find and punish the person responsible for a loved one’s murder.
 - Rescue the kidnapped princess.
 - Try and get back home.
- But if you do decide to stick with a “save the world” storyline, then at least don’t make it obvious to the player — at least, initially.

Setting

- RPGs seem to have two main settings
 - fantasy
 - sci-fi
- RPGs attempt to take the player as far away from real life as possible, while still maintaining a consistent world.
- And so it makes sense to set the game in a fantasy or sci-fi setting.

Story Openings

- Opening a story is tricky.
- Tell the player too little and the player will have no reason to investigate further. He won't know what he's supposed to be doing or why. And he will have little desire to find out.
- Tell the player too much about his initial situation can cause an initial reaction of "So what?".

Story Opening:

Planescape: Torment

You awaken, frigid and confused. Scanning the room, all you see are stone tables like the one you are lying on and a sign that reads “The Mortuary”. You aren’t dead, so why are you here and, more importantly, who are you? Your thoughts are interrupted when a floating skull approaches you and starts talking! He informs you that you had just died again. What does he mean, again?

- This is a great example of minimizing exposition and maximizing mystery.
- From the opening (which also has a cut-scene showing snippets of a woman and some strange supernatural entities), the player can surmise that his avatar once had a normal life, with a love, and that something strange happened to cause him to become a cursed immortal.
- Who wouldn’t want to be an immortal, no matter what the price?
- This is the question that this game poses.
- Eventually the player discovers that sometimes the price of immortality is too much to pay, and the overall goal of the game is to undo the damage that caused the avatar to become immortal in the first place, thus allowing the avatar to finally die.

Story

- Players of RPGs must have some degree of freedom in how they follow the threads of the plot and, in some cases, how the plot resolves itself.
- They can often pick the order in which they accept quests or even which quests they take and which ones they ignore.
- Further, how they conduct themselves during a quest, and how they interact with other characters, can alter the course of the story and its outcome.

Branching vs Linear Stories

- You need to decide whether to use a branching story or a linear one.
- In contrast to linear story, a branching story is one where the story takes different paths depending on the actions of the player.
- Although branching stories can give the player a sense of freedom, they have costs:
 - you will need to sink valuable development resources into the creation of content that many, if not most, players will never see
 - you will need to spend time and money to ensure that the game makes sense regardless of the order in which each player sees each portion of the story.
- In linear stories...
 - you can tell a better story if you don't have to worry about and/or deal with all the ways in which players can mess up your carefully crafted epic narrative
 - you can still give players some freedom by (1) providing some flexibility within episodes/narrative segments/maps/missions; and (2) focusing on character development

Interaction Model

- The interaction model is comprised of three main segments:
 - character management
 - navigation and control
 - inventory

Character Management

- You can find the following character attributes in many RPGs:
 - strength
 - dexterity
 - wisdom
 - stamina
 - intelligence
 - charisma
- Character attributes are generated initially using die rolls and displayed in numeric form. If the player does not like what is rolled, he can ask the game to re-roll the dice.
- Outcomes of various things that happen in the game are based on one or more of these attributes. For example:
 - To break down a door, three six-sided dice are rolled: the door breaks if and only if the sum of the three rolls is lower than the player's strength.

Character Management

- Unfortunately, we still see (computer) RPGs that follow pen-and-paper role-playing games to the letter, even to the point of destroying the atmosphere.
- For example, Baldur's Gate has been known to flash the words "Saving Roll" onscreen if your character had a lucky escape in combat.
- Why expose the player to internal mechanics of the game (e.g., die rolls)?
- Of course, you should still allow the player to see basic information such as attributes and skills.
- Moreover, in case of failure, you will want to give the player some indication of how close he was to success. This can be done without numbers. For example, "Nearly had it there!", "I really messed that one up!", etc.

Character Management

- The **class system** is an arbitrary set of restrictions that prevent characters of a certain class from learning particular skills.
- For example, in the AD&D third edition rules, clerics cannot use bladed or piercing weapons.
- If the cleric were in a threatening situation where the only weapon available was a knife and magic was not an option, he would be defenseless.
- A better method is to allow the player to attempt to learn as many skills as she wants and be restricted only by the time available to her, and her avatar's aptitude in that skill based on her primary attributes.
- In this way, a player doesn't run into arbitrary restrictions, and can choose whether to turn her character into a narrow-but-deep specialist, or a wide-but-shallow jack-of-all trades.
- A player should still have the choice to act out of character, if he is willing to face dire consequences.
- For example, a lawful, good paladin should be restricted from performing evil acts. You could have dire consequences (rather than arbitrary restrictions) for performing these evil actions, such as a loss of patronage and protection from the paladin's god, or worse.

Character Management

- In many cases, the skills system as currently used in computer role playing games has not been adapted well to the computer, and still has its roots firmly in the turn-based nature of the original pen-and-paper rules.
- For example, if we consider a character that has a 10% chance of picking a lock, then we can conceive of a situation where the player is repeatedly clicking on the “Pick Lock” button until he succeeds.
- A better method would be to display a progress bar.
- The speed with which the task progresses depends on the character’s skill in that area (or does not progress at all if the task is too hard).
- If the player needed to interrupt the task because it was taking too long, then he should be able to.
- The progress bar could flash red if there is a chance of being interrupted, such as if a character is within range of the player’s avatar and stands a chance of detecting the activity.
- Give the character a small amount of time — based on their dexterity and intelligence — of stopping before the check, or no chance of avoiding the check if their combined dexterity and intelligence is too low.
- This approach would be more immersive, and would heighten the tension and immediacy of the game.

Navigation and Control

- RPGs usually offer the player a much greater range of actions than any other form of game.
- Consequently, there is a corresponding increase in the complexity of the interface.
- For PC titles, is often handled by a combined mouse/iconic interface.
- Console titles tend to duplicate the functionality of a mouse using analog controllers.

Inventory

- Most, if not all, RPGs support the accumulation and use of items by players. In most, you can pick up anything that isn't specifically nailed down and use it later, possibly even in ways the designers never imagined.
- In the end, problem resolution is what RPGs are all about. The more tools you give the player (useless items notwithstanding), the more solutions are likely to suggest themselves, as long as your simulation is robust enough — or your designers clever enough — to support them.
- In addition to their use in problem solving, objects and weapons can be powerful tools for character differentiation. If you load up your inventory with weapons and I load mine up with keys, lockpicks, and invisio-suits, our characters look, feel, and, of necessity, behave differently from one another.
- The key to making inventory a character differentiation tool is to limit, in some way, the number of items that a character can carry. Here are two ways to do this (which you can use in combination if you like):
 - Give items weight and then tie inventory capacity to strength — how much weight a character can carry therefore becomes the limiting factor.
 - Give each item a size and then limit the number of things a character can lug around.

Lone Adventurer or Party?

- Some RPGs allow a single player to take control of a party of adventurers. However, this can lead to problems:
 - It's harder to identify with a character when you have a whole team of them.
 - AI limitations mean you're inevitably going to be slowed down by teammates who can't think quickly on their feet and, even slowly, can't respond the way real people would.
- Solo play is simpler to implement, speeds up game play and fosters a direct connection between player and character that seems critical to RPG success.

Perspective

- The most common perspectives RPGs are:
 - first-person
 - third person (isometric or top-down)
- What could be more compelling than entering a new world and seeing it through your character's eyes? First-person allows you to reduce the distance between player and character to almost nothing.
- However, first-person perspective puts players at a tactical disadvantage by limiting their awareness of what's going on behind and to the sides of their characters.
- A third-person perspective is better for tactical decision-making.
- The trade-off is that it's tough to care much about NPCs that are obviously nothing more than bunches of pixels an inch high when you're looking at them from a bird's perspective.

Goals

- Players must always have clear goals.
- Players must know what they're supposed to be doing, minute to minute and, if appropriate, mission to mission.
- The fun of the game is in overcoming obstacles and solving problems; the fun is in how you solve a problem, not in guessing what problem you're supposed to solve.

Do RPGs really allow role-playing?

- (computer) RPGs don't really provide role-playing because the player isn't allowed to do absolutely anything, as they would be able to in a pen-and-aper game.
- This isn't a problem that could be solved anytime soon.
- We will continue to have (computer) RPGs with fixed-story games for a while!
- As a designer of (computer) RPGs, it's your job to arrange the smoke and mirrors successfully so that players feel that they are in a living, breathing world with the freedom to do what they want.
- The true (computer) RPG would allow the player to do anything, anytime, anyplace, but we're years, possibly decades, away from that level of technology.