

The Future of Table-Top Role-Playing Games

By Anuja Parikh

When the word “table-top role-playing game” is mentioned, the negative stereotype of socially awkward male teens is usually thought of at first. The social stigma alone keeps many people from picking up these types of games, but the benefits and the entertainment value of role-playing games are high. Historically, most table-top role-playing games were created for a niche audience – those who loved fantasy literature, and those who loved war games¹. As time passed, the acceptance of these games increased, and they made their way into mainstream culture. Soon, the old style of table-top role-playing games morphed into highly popular computer and video games like ‘Final Fantasy’ and ‘World of Warcraft’. Although these computer role-playing games are extremely popular today, I believe that players will start to lose interest in these games, just like what has recently been happening to table-top role-playing games like ‘Dungeons and Dragons’². For any role-playing games to survive, especially table-top RPG’s, the next step is revamp how they are designed and marketed.

For role-playing games to become more accessible, the most important change would be to expand and branch out into new subject matters and genres. Today, almost all role-playing games contain very rich fantasy or science fiction worlds. They are full of dragons and warlords seeking vengeance or a quest of some sort. Since role-playing origins do come from war games, many also contain in-depth battles and weaponry. While science fiction and fantasy offer excellent subject material when developing an imaginary world, they are only a small percentage of the range of topics that the general public is interested in. Kristine Kathryn Rusch, a Hugo-award winning science fiction writer, recently wrote an essay about the dying interest in science fiction and fantasy books. She noted that in 2004, the three most popular genres of adult fiction bought were romance novels (39.3%), mysteries and thrillers (29.6%), and general fiction (12.9%). At the very end of the list of books purchased was science fiction/fantasy at 6.4%.³ Perhaps table-top role-playing games could be revived by choosing content parallel to current literary tastes.

Developing this sort of game would be in line with MacKay’s findings of using pop culture to create the content of role-playing games. According to MacKay, this has already been done with popular science fiction and fantasy movies such as ‘Lord of the Rings’, ‘Star Trek’, ‘James Bond’, ‘Star Wars’, and with comic book characters. MacKay calls these types of games ‘Third-Generation Role-Playing Games’¹. He goes on to add, “This is precisely because role-players themselves consume this culture of products. French philosopher Jean Baudrillard once remarked that Americans live in a *semiosphere*, an atmosphere of signs. If this is true, then it can be said that the role-

¹ MacKay, Daniel. (2001). ‘Cultural Structure’. [The Fantasy Role-Playing Game – A New Performing Act.](#)

² Class Notes Based off of Game Design Lecture 9, Slide 8, “Daniel MacKay, The Fantasy Role-Playing Game – A New Performing Art“, Feb 14, 2007

³ Rusch, K.K. (2006). ‘Barbarian Confessions’. From the site ‘Asimov's Science Fiction’.
http://www.asimovs.com/_issue_0612/thoughtexperiments.shtml

playing game breaths the air of this semiosphere, is inspired by the particles of popular culture, and influences, in turn, its expirations.”

Keeping this in mind, a role-playing game that uses genres such as romance, thrillers, and general fiction intermixed with current popular culture could become well accepted by mainstream society. With any of these genres, although the time takes place in present day, there is a lot of potential in creating situations full of fantastical elements that would allow the player to act out a role they would never be able to do in real life, such as being a spy or in a position of high authority. For example, many of the top television shows today, such as ‘24’, ‘CSI’, ‘Lost’, and ‘Heroes’ fit into the category of mystery and thrillers. All of these shows also have a strong, almost fanatical following, and many viewers might be delighted to have a venue where they could learn additional “insider” information about the show, as well as being able to vicariously live through it by acting out and making critical decisions as their favorite characters.

Another issue to keep in mind when trying to broaden the appeal of role-playing games is gender. While there are some females who play table-top role-playing games, they are considered to be a minority among most players. Using the well known list of gender preferences in gaming⁴, it can be seen that role playing games have elements that both genders enjoy, such as some destruction and competition (between NPC’s , or non-playable characters, and the players themselves) for the males, as well as emotion and dialogue for the females. Perhaps by increasing some female preferred characteristics, such as adding more real-world scenarios and less battling may interest more females. When researching content for the live-action role-playing game ‘Click!’, we found that middle school girls preferred realistic characters and stories over the extreme fantasy worlds of games like ‘Dungeons and Dragons’⁵.

Creating a gender-neutral role-playing game may sound difficult, but when examining the game play mechanics a little closer, just changing the content alone can change the experience of a game. For example, dice can be used to make more meaningful choices instead of just using it for battling or weaponry. Just as in ‘Dungeons and Dragons’ where rolling the dice for a magic spell can give the player more information, the same idea can be transferred to more realistic settings as well, such as in a dating game – rolling a high number may help the player perceive the NPC’s emotions better. Similar to a battling game play mechanic, rolling the dice may determine the outcome of how well a first date turns out.

Using pop-culture as a basis, there are plenty of glamorous characters from today’s world to choose from, including pop-stars, movie stars, heiresses, fashion models, and royalty. Interesting and more down to earth themes could include using different status levels, such as being the popular kid at school, figuring out the dating scene, working to overtake a malevolent boss, or a mystery about suburbia – like in the television show “Desperate Housewives”. The MMORG Puzzle Pirates is an excellent example of a role

⁴ Game Design Lecture 4, Slide 14. “Gender Preferences” Jan 26, 2007.

⁵ DiSalvo, B.J., Parikh, A. , & Crowley, K. (2006). Click! 2005: Developing the Ultimate Urban Adventure Game for Middle School Girls.

playing game that is gender neutral, and this is partially because the game uses a series of unrelated mini-games and puzzles to support actions and experiences in the imaginary world. Each player participates in a different activity such as sailing, bilging, or navigating to collaboratively help each other run their pirate ship better in the game, thus improving their level of adventure. Reverting this same mechanic into a table-top game could make for an interesting and novel role-playing game.

Many role-playing games could also benefit from a smaller learning curve and quicker setup time. The first time I played Dungeons and Dragons, it took an enormously long three hours to build my character, and by the time we got the actual role-playing part, I was exhausted. I would have felt very intimidated and slightly put off by the game had I not had an experienced dungeon master guiding me through the multiple pages of text, charts, and equations.

The final and key step to re-popularize role playing games is to market the game in a positive light. MacKay talked briefly in his article about how false rumors and bad press prevented established gaming companies from publishing table-top role-playing games, thus preventing them from being sold in mainstream toy and department stores¹. Nowadays, these types of RPG's are stereotyped as games that adolescent teen nerds play in their basement. Online role-playing games such as 'World of Warcraft' or 'Final Fantasy' don't suffer from the same stigma as table-top role-playing games, because computer games are products that most people are familiar with. I believe changing the name or developing marketing strategies to give role-playing games a more hip image could interest the general public in these types of games again.

A good example of this is with the 'Click! Game' that I helped develop. Rather than marketing the game as a LARP, or as an educational experience, we advertised it as a girls-only secret society, where they trained to become "Click! Secret Agents" in an effort to bring justice to wrong-doers. Girls were required to sign up in teams of four with their friends, and attended "Click! Training" at the library after school. After passing the training period (where role playing was emphasized, and educational content was taught), "Click! Headquarters" would certify them as official "Click! Agents", and they would be assigned to a two day case. This two-day event was the culminating LARP game, where girls traveled around the North Side of Pittsburgh, collecting evidence and gathering information from NPC's (actors playing suspects and witnesses). The role-playing aspect of this game was extremely successful, and it was the critical ingredient in making the educational content fun. Forcing girls to sign up with their friends, developed a strong community, thus creating an almost non-existent attrition rate. Only 1 of the 84 girls was not able to attend the final game day. Almost 2 years later, girls enjoyed themselves so much that they are still calling our office to see if we will be hosting another game like that again. While this game was a live-action role-playing game, and not a table-top role-playing game, the style of play is similar, and this example shows that remarketing the image of a game can change the entire experience.

In summary, role-playing games have a lot of potential, and is still an untapped market. There are numerous benefits to playing, and can be entertaining, educational, and engage

the imagination in ways that many other mediums can not. To increase interest in role-playing games, current role-playing game developers need to change and expand content to reflect current popular culture and current literary tastes, add more realistic content or content that people can relate to, keep in mind gender considerations, develop a quicker set up for game play or a lower learning curve for getting started, and finally consider changing current marketing strategies. If changes don't happen soon, the popularity of table-top role-playing games will continue to decline.