The Legacy of Tabletop Role-Playing Games: Shaping Contemporary Game Design

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INTRODUCTION

In this research, we highlight the profound influence that early Tabletop Role-Playing Games (TRPGs) have had, and continue to have on contemporary game design. Interestingly, this continuing influence extends beyond the realm of RPGs and into different genres of video games, from The Elder Scrolls (Bethesda Softworks 1994) to Overwatch (Blizzard Entertainment 2016), and many more. In this project, we have particularly examined some prominent 21st century game franchises including Fallout (Interplay Entertainment 1997), Red Dead Redemption 2 (Rockstar Games 2018), and World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) as our case studies. These games are well known for their immersive gameplay experience, facilitated through simulation systems and design elements. The groundwork for these titles, however, has been laid in by TRPGs popularised between 1970s and 1990s, particularly Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) (Gygax et al. 1981). Through a genealogical lens, we characterise these systems and design precedents that are transplanted through means of influence from one game to another (Wainwright 2021; Ho 2014).

In Fallout (Interplay Entertainment 1997), we have looked into how the trace of the Generic Universal Role-Playing System (GURPS) (Apthorp 1997) derived from TRPG tradition can still be observed in a new form in its game design. This includes aspects such as the character creation process, as well as the attribute, and stats system. S.P.E.C.I.A.L. system, in particular, resembles the original GURPS framework in many ways. Both systems employ a waterfall method for generating initial character skill and attribute values (Wainwright 2021). On the other hand, the idea of "perks" represents another design inheritance that we have observed, related to the design of characters' special abilities in Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) (Gygax et al. 1981).

In the action-adventure game - Red Dead Redemption 2 (Rockstar Games 2018), we have examined its "honor/morality system" through which the character's moral standing is moved between "good"(lawful) and "evil"(unlawful). This system can be

traced back to Dungeons and Dragons' (D&D) "alignment system" (Gygax et al. 1981). In this system, the terms "lawful" and "unlawful" represent the polar positions of a character's alignment. Red Dead Redemption 2's (Rockstar Games 2018) system, to some extent, is a simplified iteration of this concept, and therefore its design approach of player-character morality can still be linked to early TRPG traditions.

Finally, in World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), we have investigated the "party system", "character roles", and "equipping system" to discuss how these design elements draw from early TRPG traditions. The party system, along with the character roles such as race, class, and skills, facilitate the social dynamics among players, encouraging the aesthetic of "fellowship" (Hunicke et al. 2004) within the game. This concept of "fellowship" is also evident in Dungeons and Dragons' (D&D) (Gygax et al. 1981) design as one of the core aesthetics through which the gameplay is stimulated by character roles and the players who perform these roles through interactions (Wainwright 2021). Furthermore, the functionality of the equipping system in World of Warcraft is reminiscent of how game items work in Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) (Gygax et al. 1981), which have to be written on the player's character sheet to indicate a player's "equipped" status (Ho 2007).

In this study, we have delved into game design elements in certain modern games and argue that traditional tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs), such as Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) (Gygax et al. 1981), and their design legacies continue to shape and influence modern game design (Wainwright 2021; Ho 2014). These contemporary games themselves serve as sources of inspiration for many other modern games, in turn, acting as a bridge between traditional TRPGs and the digital realm of CRPGs and other genres (Wainwright 2021). This symbiotic relationship, therefore, indeed demonstrates the profound and enduring impact of TRPGs on the gaming industry as a whole, a legacy likely to persist for generations to come.

BIO

Marc Wainwright is a games researcher and practitioner, currently working as a QA analyst at game design studio Wicked Workshop, situated in Melbourne. He received his Masters in Creative Industries in 2021 from SAE Institute. He is interested in how RPG systems are used as systems of immersion and simulation, especially within the context of fictional worlds. Wainwright is the author of *A Quest From Then To Now: How Early Tabletop Role-Playing Games Have Influenced Contemporary Game Design* (2021). He is currently working on a solo design project influenced by his research into Tabletop RPGs and the various sub-genres thereof.

Dr Ping-I (Adam) Ho is a Senior Lecturer at SAE Sydney in the Department of Games and Technology. He previously obtained his PhD in Digital Cultures at the University of Sydney. He is interested in the interplay between digital technologies and everyday life, and the cultural impact derived from this interaction. His research primarily focuses on critical game studies, media studies, and cyberculture studies. Adam's work: *Value in Play: Games Items in Digital Environments* (Ho 2014) centres on virtual economies and explores the various ways in which in-game items acquire commercial value within the culturally situated contexts of gameplay.

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