

The Narrowing Experience of "Experience" in Video Role-Playing Games

Brian Cowlshaw

The stereotype for video role-playing gamers couldn't be more culturally innocuous: a few lonely, pale, chubby, parents'-basement-dwelling nerds hyperventilating over "+2 Bastard Swords of Slaying" and fantasizing about marrying an elfin princess. The stereotyped video RPGer, one assumes, has very little to do with mainstream American culture, huddled alone over his PlayStation 2 or PC, toiling perpetually in obscurity against virtual villains.

But this assumption would be dead wrong. Video RPGers are, in fact, surprisingly numerous and mainstream nowadays; video role-playing games are now an immensely powerful force upon American culture at large. This is true in both general and specific ways.

Generally speaking, video RPGs are important because games in general signify. As Johan Huizinga writes in his classic study *Homo Ludens*, all play "is a significant function -- that is to say, there is some sense to it. . . . All play means something." [1] Play predates and even produces culture: "[C]ulture arises in the form of play ... [Culture] is played from the very beginning ... It is through this playing that society expresses its interpretation of life and the world." [2] As Clifford Geertz said of religion, games function both as a model for reality and a model of reality. [3] To study a culture's games is to learn much about its understanding of reality, its values, its ways of thinking, its goals.

And these particular games, video RPGs, are becoming widely popular. They are not just for geeks any more. Americans spent more money in calendar 2002, 2003, and 2004 on video games than even on movies. That is very big business. Furthermore, not only were "straight" or "hardcore" RPGs such as the *Final Fantasy* series and *EverQuest* among the very best sellers, but all video game genres are RPG-ifying significantly. That is, all video game genres -- sports, fighting, racing, shooters, platform games, puzzle games -- are adopting the essence of the RPG, which is "leveling up." "Leveling up" refers to what RPGers spend most of their play time doing: seeking out and defeating virtual enemies to gain "experience points" ("XP"). When characters have accumulated enough XP, they gain a level ("level up"), which means they also gain statistical improvements, new abilities, and improved equipment. A level 5 warrior, for example, might be significantly stronger in battle and harder to defeat than a level 2 warrior. A level 10 cleric might have significantly greater power to heal party members than a level 6 cleric would. This key concept, leveling

up, is spreading to all gaming genres. In the multimillion-selling racing game *Gran Turismo 3*, for example, players race in order to earn money for better car parts; then, with faster cars, they return to the tracks for higher-paying races against tougher opponents, so they can buy even better parts; and so on. Sports games now generally offer a "Dynasty Mode," in which players can use high revenues from good seasons to buy even better players for next year's season. Even platformers such as the *Jak and Daxter* series, and first-person shooters such as *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, now incorporate the concept of leveling up.

And leveling up is unbelievably rewarding. It sounds repetitive and idiotic when broken down: players kill enemies to become stronger, so they can kill stronger enemies, so they can become stronger, so they can kill stronger enemies, and so on. Nevertheless, Skinnerian principles make the process incredibly addictive. Random reinforcement, in the form of rare items dropped by foes, or of characters' skill improvements over time, makes it as hard to put the game controller down as it is to walk away from a one-armed bandit in Las Vegas. The principle is the same: when

...leveling up is unbelievably rewarding. It sounds repetitive and idiotic when broken down: players kill enemies to become stronger, so they can kill stronger enemies, so they can become stronger, so they can kill stronger enemies, and so on. Nevertheless, Skinnerian principles make the process incredibly addictive.

playing an RPG, as when playing a slot machine, any individual iteration might be the one that pays off. "[E]very second of time [is] the strait gate through which the Messiah may enter." [4] Additionally, one is always rewarded somewhat in RPGs for simply clocking play hours. In other words, a certain steady level of continual reinforcement obtains. Whereas in real life we must often suspect that we are wasting our efforts or losing ground, in RPG worlds one always feels a sense of progress, of "getting somewhere": players rack up XP and virtual riches over time, every time. A

character rises to level 5, then to level 10, then to level 20; the character's equipment improves from rags to well-tooled leather to gleaming armor. Constant, measurable progress provides regular fixes of pleasure and self-satisfaction.

So, for a very large and still-growing segment of our population, the leveling-up mode of thinking is a key part of everyday life, of everyday thought. This is troubling, in part because the concept fits all too neatly into the firmly established American myth that any and all competition is good for us. In 1954, for example, the U.S. Educational Policies Commission reported glowingly that competing in organized games teaches personality traits such as "emotional maturity," "social competence," "learning to win and lose," "obeying rules," "fair play," "competitiveness" [which in practice must frequently clash with "obeying rules" and "fair play," right?], "health and happiness," "moral values," "building character," "sportsmanship," and "teamwork." [5]

But the reality is not so happy. The myth of sanative competition gleefully ignores the fundamental fact of competition: there must be a winner and a loser. As Allen Guttmann puts it, "Capitalist society is essentially achievement-oriented and competitive[,] and [games] present to us the purest model of that society -- and that is just what is wrong with [them]." [6] As Huizinga points out, "the primary thing is the desire to excel others, to be the first and to be honoured for that. ... The main thing is to have won." "Winning . . . presupposes an opponent" [7], a dehumanized foe one enjoys grinding to dust under one's heel. The foe must be dehumanized because in games as in capitalism, we practice the "friend-foe principle":

Any other group [or individual] is always either your friend or your enemy. Enemy, of course, is not to be understood as inimicus or echthros, i.e., a person you hate, let alone a wicked person, but purely and simply as hostis or polemios, i.e., the stranger or foreigner who is in your ... way. The theory refuses to regard the enemy even as a rival or adversary. He is merely in your way and is thus to be made away with. [8]

As James Paul Gee shows in his book *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy* (reviewed in *Intelligent Agent*, Vol. 4 No. 2), video games require and develop particular kinds of strategic, critical thinking. [9] Because RPGs push players constantly to seek and to impersonally conquer "enemies" in order to level up, they develop and reinforce a specific mode of thinking: "I must destroy everyone I encounter, so that I myself may become stronger."

Video RPGs develop this thinking over staggeringly big stretches of time. Game makers decline to release statistics, but RPGs must surely be the genre gamers play for the most total hours. A typical offline video

RPG such as *Knights of the Old Republic*, *Icwind Dale*, or the *hack* series takes 40 to 60 hours to complete. (Compare this to the typical action game such as *Devil May Cry* or *Prince of Persia*, which takes 10 to 25 hours to finish.) Many offline games such as the *Baldur's Gate* or *Final Fantasy* series take 80 to 100 hours to complete. And that is nothing compared to the time players lavish upon online RPGs. *Ultima Online* and *EverQuest*, which have been monopolizing gamers' lives for over six years, have delivered their subscribers multiple hundreds of days of play time. That is not in-game days, which might pass in an hour or two; that is multiple hundreds of twenty-four real-world days. 24 X (say) 500 = 12,000 hours! *Final Fantasy XI*, released in summer 2003, achieved comparable numbers, and surely *World of Warcraft*, due to be released about the time of this writing, will as well. Rhetorical question: where is the player -- let alone the vast throng of players -- who has spent 12,000 hours playing racer *Midnight Club*? Platformer *Super Mario Sunshine*? Shooter *Metroid Prime*? There is no such player, no such throng. Nothing beats RPGs at sucking up gamers' hours. Thus, as practice makes perfect, over the hours, over the days, over the years, players learn in their very bones the "kill-to-grow" mindset.

This powerful lesson sinks in more surely and deeply every day, as the in-game definition of what constitutes "experience" narrows farther and farther. That is, the word "experience" in video RPGs continues to grow more and more strictly synonymous with "killing." Compare video RPGs with their direct ancestors, classic pencil-and-paper RPGs such as *Dungeons and Dragons* and *Call of Cthulhu*, and the ongoing process of narrowing becomes more apparent. The paper-based games support multiple ways to gain experience: killing bad guys, yes, but additionally, solving problems of all kinds posed by the ongoing game narrative, or, as the generic name "role-playing games" suggests, "pure role-playing" -- that is, truly attempting to assume the role of one's character, making choices the character would make regardless of their strategic inconvenience to the player. For example, "paladin" is a common RPG character "class" or "job." Paladins are sworn to battle what they consider evil, even to the death. So imagine that a paladin's adventure party is exploring a dungeon. The party kicks down a door and discovers, to their horror, twice as many villains in the room as there are party members. Each individual enemy is clearly more than a match for any individual party member. Any smart player facing that situation would run away, run away. But the paladin would likely feel honor-bound to rush in against all odds, perhaps even against sane judgment. This may get the character killed, but the "pure role-player" would feel obliged to remain "true to the character," both in dramatic situations like this example and in ordinary in-game interaction. Game masters tend to reward such role-playing with XP, quite often with more XP than killing enemies provides.

Just try to find opportunities for earning pure-role-playing XP in any video RPG. The only notable XP to be gained outside combat comes through what players derisively call "FedEx" quests: a non-player character (NPC) sends the player character (PC) off to fetch an item and return it, for which the PC is awarded minimal XP. Acting the part of a FedEx delivery person hardly merits the term "pure role-playing." In video RPGs as opposed to paper-based RPGs, almost all XP -- and unquestionably, the most engaging XP -- remains to be earned through combat.

Technologically speaking, perhaps it is inevitable that things should develop thus. After all, the computer programming required by RPGs inherently supports combat much better than it does storytelling. Imagine the complexities involved in writing a computer program that would, like a flesh-and-blood game master, account for: each character's background, beliefs, and personality quirks; all PCs' likely verbal and emotional responses to all other PCs and to all NPCs; and what would provide the most fitting / interesting / productive continuation of the game's open-ended story. And people say it's hard to write chess programs! In contrast to the complexities involved in programming a good story, consider the simple calculations involved in video combat: calculating the odds of a given attacker's striking its target, considering both entities' statistical properties; and determining collision detection. Even the very earliest computer game, *Spacewar!* (circa 1970), instantaneously calculated whether ships' virtual missiles hit home. *Pong*, the video craze of the early and mid-1970s, was nothing but collision detection: did the on-screen paddle hit and return the on-screen ball, or not? *Pong* consoles faithfully spat out

***Pong* consoles faithfully spat out the answer with no lag or stuttering. The calculations at the heart of video RPGs -- statistical probabilities, polygonal collisions, and physics models, or more prosaically, "who hit whom for how much damage?" -- are arguably what computers and consoles were created to do.**

the answer with no lag or stuttering. The calculations at the heart of video RPGs -- statistical probabilities, polygonal collisions, and physics models, or more prosaically, "who hit whom for how much damage?" -- are arguably what computers and consoles were created to do. It was true in the earliest video games, and it's at least as true still. No wonder RPGs rely so exclusively on these easy problems rather than on messy diegetic ones. And no wonder that as video games in general grow more popular, so do RPGs in particular, based as heavily as they are on the operations computers arguably do best.

Intelligent Agent 4.4.1

Still, despite video RPGs' technical difficulties in incorporating story as opposed to simple-minded combat, some role-playing games do manage to craft complex, moving, branching storylines -- for example, the *Final Fantasy* series, *Knights of the Old Republic*, and *Tales of Symphonia*. But even in games such as these with strong diegetic elements, story must always be subordinated to leveling up. This is so because video RPGs tend to share a standard structure: level up, fight "boss" (a special enemy significantly stronger than those ordinarily encountered); level up, fight boss; level up, fight boss; etc., until the game ends with a final boss battle as a grand finale. In between boss battles, players level up in preparation for the next landmark fight. The story is told through this structure: each boss battle marks a new "chapter" in the game's story. In most cases, parts of the game world are not even accessible until certain requirements such as winning a particular boss battle have been met. Thus, even players who would prefer to focus less on leveling up and more on story cannot make that choice. The story will not progress until sufficient leveling up has happened; one can't move on until one's characters have enough levels, enough XP, to defeat the boss blocking the way to the next chapter.

Story takes an even more subordinate place to leveling up in video RPGs that include a significant online component, such as *Champions of Norrath* or the *Diablo* series, and most subordinate of all in online-only titles such as *EverQuest*, *Ultima Online*, and *Final Fantasy XI*. In the case of *Diablo II*, one could easily work through the (overwrought, predictable) story in a week of casual play. To unlock "Nightmare" difficulty, and the ability to play a "Hardcore" character online (one which is actually deleted from the server once it dies in-game), one must play all the way through the game more than once. Additionally, most *Diablo II* players try playing through as different classes, just to experience the differences in killing strategies and abilities. Clearly, then, the appeal of *Diablo II* is not its story; it was frankly pretty stale to begin

with and does not change or improve after multiple playthroughs. And yet tens of thousands still play *Diablo II* daily online -- about five years after its release, which is eons in video game time. Why? Because leveling up is always compelling. The story can never matter as much.

In the case of online-only games, game makers generally attempt to inject some backstory, some history and mythology of the game world, but most players don't really care much about it. No one, comparatively, wants to read the history of *EverQuest's* mascot

gaming.cowlishaw.03

Firiona Vie; everyone wants to know where to find the phattest lewt, the XP that r0xx0rz ur b0xx0rz (i.e., the best battle rewards, the most impressive experience). Only a paltry few seldom-visited fan fiction websites even exist; sites minutely discussing the best ways to level up run into the thousands. Diegesis barely exists in online-only games, and insofar as it does exist, it remains ignored by the vast majority of players. Only leveling up really matters.

As much as I love video RPGs, it must be acknowledged: through the narrowing experience of "experience," in both senses of the phrase, video RPGs express and contribute significantly to our popular culture's nasty Darwinian competitive spirit..

Consider the facts enumerated so far: video games are now fully in the mainstream of American popular culture; RPGs and the thinking they teach and demand are central to this medium as a whole; and diegetic elements always take second place to the all-important consideration of leveling up. Taken together, these facts show that the very concept of "experience" is changing in American popular culture. Whereas the word has historically meant all experience, all-inclusive, everything that has happened, the whole of a multifaceted life, it is now gaining a specialized, increasingly narrow definition, for many, many people over many, many hours. "The narrowing experience of 'experience'" in this article's title refers to two related phenomena. First, the word "experience" is growing narrower in meaning; it is coming to mean "XP," or "that which is earned through combat for the purpose of leveling up." Second, the XP / leveling up / "kill-to-grow" mentality is narrowing our experience. Constant focus on competition, to the exclusion of all other parts of life, and for the purpose of advancing our own self-interest at others' cost, becomes a habit of mind that subtly but surely creeps out from RPGs' virtual worlds and into our own real lives.

Walter Benjamin uses the term "attenuation of experience" to describe the way that modern life experience (in the broad, traditional sense of the word) "thins out" -- that is, the way modernity constantly, inexorably makes being-in-the-world less multi-dimensional, life-sustaining, and soul-satisfying. Video RPGs are quite satisfying, even notably addictive, on competitive, strategic, and (always secondarily) diegetic levels. They provide virtually unlimited numbers of exciting gameplay hours, surely more so than any other video game genre --especially in the case of online-only RPGs. And they are played by vast numbers of non-nerdy, mainstream, otherwise normal people --more of them all the time, over more hours all the time. There is, then, much to celebrate in video RPGs. But, like all **Intelligent Agent 4.4.1**

popular culture, like all games valued and enjoyed by a society, they express and signify something. As much as I love video RPGs, it must be acknowledged: through the narrowing experience of "experience," in both senses of the phrase, video RPGs express and contribute significantly to our popular culture's nasty Darwinian competitive spirit, and to the general Benjaminian "attenuation of experience."

References:

- [1] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, 1938 (Repr.: J. and J. Harper: New York, 1970), p.
- [2] Huizinga, p. 66
- [3] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books: New York, 1973)
- [4] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, Hannah Arendt (ed.). transl. By Harry Zohn (Schocken Books: New York, 1968), p. 264
- [5] Stephen K. Figler and Gail Whitaker, *Sport and Play in American Life: A Textbook in the Sociology of Sport*, 2nd ed. (William C. Brown: Dubuque, IA, 1991), p. 138
- [6] Allen Guttman, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (Columbia UP: New York, 1978), p. 69
- [7] Huizinga, p. 70
- [8] Huizinga, p. 236
- [9] James Paul Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2003)

