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Hey, you. Yeah, you. The one with the bleary eyes, sitting in front of that 17" monitor. What is that, Dungeon Hack? How long have you been playing that? Six days? Six days!? You've been playing that game non-stop for six days!? What are you, some kind of freak?

Some of you, gentle readers, are well aware of the roots of RPG's on computers. The whole sordid Gary Gygax tale of fantasy miniature wargame rules ("Chainmail") transforming like some kind of B-movie vampire into something almost completely different ("Dungeons & Dragons") is a tale unto itself.

What is a role-playing game?

Cops and Robbers, Imperialist Land Grabbers and Noble Native-Americans, and many other childhood pastimes are actually informal role-playing games. Informal because they don't have written rules. Then came D&D, the game in which players adopted the imaginary role of magic-user, thief, fighter, or cleric (later editions would add other "character classes") in a medieval fantasy realm described in a store-bought product or made up by the "Dungeon Master." The DM was called that because most adventures, in the wee early days of the hobby, went like this:

Players: "We buy our stuff, go to the inn and get directions to the dungeon, then go to the dungeon, find monsters, kill monsters, take the monster's stuff, and go home."

DM: "OK, you get lots of money and your characters get tougher."

Players: "Tougher? Cool! That means we can go deeper in the dungeon next time, where the monsters have more stuff to steal!"

OK, so I'm exaggerating just a tad, but you get the idea. D&D was a formal role-playing game: it had lots of charts and tables and details you had to learn to play.

So that's the five-cent definition. Feel better? Role-playing games were the kind of game you got together with your pals to play, either in the basement, on the kitchen table, or hidden away in your bedroom. Mainly a boyish activity, these were addicting (and still are, in case you're curious) for a number of reasons.

The Books

The books were full of fantasy art that just screamed of stories caught in mid-stride--at least the later books. The books were also full of charts and tables and complicated descriptions that challenged a player by being the essence of Mysterious Knowledge. Like junior Rosicrucians, we flipped through those old tomes as if memorizing every word were vital to our survival. Well, in an abstract sense, it was: vital to our imaginary character's survival, anyway.

Back then, please remember, kids didn't generally have big bucks to toss around. I don't know what it is about today's youth, but it seems like many more of them have fifty bucks to drop on games than in "my" time during the mid 70's to early 80's. That meant that it was hard to get a complete set of the rules: there was always more mysterious knowledge out there that you didn't have. And if you could keep up to date on the new rulebooks that kept coming out, there was always the knowledge gap because of the dusty old tomes, of which there were perhaps ten printed back in the early 70's, that you hadn't had a chance to memorize cover to cover.

Detail, Detail, Detail!

In addition to the detail found in the books (and after a few years, there were other games, too, each with their own rulebooks!) there was the detail necessary to keep track of all the imaginary details of the imaginary person whose role you played in the game. How strong was this imaginary person? How smart? How cute? How tall? How heavy? What symbol appeared on their shield? What color hair? What languages spoken? If that weren't enough for the fellow who had the pleasure of "running" the game, the DM or the "Referee" or the "Game-Master," there were even more details to be mastered. Charts and maps had to be drawn, imaginary foes detailed, imaginary loot listed, imaginary traps primed and placed. In retrospect, it seems amazing that the game worked at all!

Gameplay

Sitting around and playing the game was its own reward, however. Once the logistics of getting together were worked out, four, six, eight, or even more hours could be killed playing the game. Kids, young adults, college students: the lure was equally strong and the time spent enormous. Interaction between the imaginary characters was fun, certainly. It was rather like being in a improvisational theater troupe, but with foes to defeat, puzzles to solve, and career advancement to pursue. Interaction between the actual players was also...fun, at least some of the time. Imagine a room full of over-intellectual kids, boys mostly if not entirely, engaged in debates about...the rules. About what had been said minutes before. About how to solve the problems at hand in the imaginary setting.

About anything and everything, really. You'd almost think it was part of the game, if you watched from outside and didn't know any better. In a way, it was an excellent training in rhetoric and logic. And despite the fact that the feuds were often bitter and mean, it was all part of the role-playing experience.

So What's All This Got to do With Computer Games?

[The Early Days](#)

Now we're into the territory of Zork and other text-based computer adventure games. I hesitate to call them "role-playing computer games" because there wasn't a whole lot of role-playing involved. You didn't get to decide who you were in the imaginary world refereed by the computer, for example, and there wasn't much chance to interact with anyone--very little "role-playing," if any. But the technical elements were the same. Zork was heavily puzzle-oriented: killing the troll wasn't a matter of chance, it was knowing to get the Elvish sword out of the cabinet up in the house and then remembering to use it when you met the troll downstairs. There were other computer games, games you played in the early years on a mainframe or a mini-computer (NOT to be confused with "micro-computer"). Some even had a graphical interface, using ASCII characters to draw hallways and rooms--a dungeon--through which a player moved his or her character. These games had relatively little role-playing in them. Even those early versions of networked adventure games, you could meet other people's characters (remember, there's a live person and then one (or sometimes more) imaginary character's in a role-playing game). For one thing, you weren't often in the same physical space--as people, not characters--which severely limited your interactive possibilities.

[Wizardry and Ultima Days](#)

Once micro-computers actually evolved enough to display color, and the storage and processing capacity to utilize it, better games began appearing. Oh, there had been Zork-like text games for micro-computers for years before Wizardry, but they were more puzzle-oriented than RPG-oriented. Put a Babel fish in your ear and take my word for it, OK? Wizardry was a conceptual breakthrough. We're talking the old, old Wizardry here. Not the one that runs on the Mac but the one that originally ran on the Apple II. In Wizardry, you could generate characters much like in a D&D game. There were character classes to choose from, each with special abilities to help with plundering the dungeon. The dungeon itself was rendered in 3D line graphics. There were four directions you could face, and all joints and corners were therefore perfect right angles. For the first time, the playing elements of a computer game were the same, essentially, as the elements of a paper and pencil and pals role-playing game. One significant difference was the Dungeon Master: in Wizardry, the computer handled all those chores. It knew what the dungeon looked like, where the monsters hid, what treasure they carried, and what the puzzles and traps were.

Ultima was an outgrowth of the text-adventure games, as it presented a player with a single point of view, but it was much more open-ended than the old text games and the interface was more graphically oriented.

[But were these role-playing games?](#)

Not really. They were compelling to play, however. I minored in Wizardry during my college years. I was so rabid to play the game, I once conned the college security guy into letting me into the mailroom after hours to pick up one of the games when it arrived on a Friday (I think I told him the software would "go bad" if left by itself over the weekend). These games did supply all the pulse-pounding action you could wish for; however, and they did possess that all-important detail factor (hey, I can still Mahalito and Lahalito with the best of 'em!) It was difficult, however, to have a group of people play the imaginary characters: at best, two people were practical.

[Nowadays](#)

Nowadays, the technology and the software are pretty darn good. Computer role-playing games have continued to evolve from ye olde Wizardry days (in fact, those Sir-Tech boys are still at it), and the best games look like updated versions of Wizardry in format and interface. Some games even allow network play, which is a pretty exciting step forward, as it allows an individual to "play" full time, without having to swap seats and whatnot.

The things the imaginary characters can do are still relatively limited, when compared to the interactivity of live people in a room playing a role-playing game. In addition, the stories told by computer games are predetermined, unlike a live role-playing game, where a person is in charge of quarterbacking the storyline.

Fun to play? Oh, yes. The many hours that can be dumped into a game of Dungeon Hack or any of the many, many wonderful games out there is testament enough to that fact.

Are they really role-playing games? Not quite. But close, very close. How Close? New technologies are on the horizon that could help computer games make that last step into real role-playing. Online games, such as MUDs, are farther along in this regard than their commercial software counterparts. These games allow you to create your character, describe your character, and interact in a created environment with other characters who have people pulling their strings. Since these games are still text-based, micro-computer games still have a leg up in that regard, but merging the two technologies, what with the advent of Java, shouldn't be too far down the road.

Once that happens, the question will be: can enough emotion be passed online to sufficiently mimic the in-person role-playing experience? Given enough years, the answer to that question is "yep." Already, network Marathon provides for the transfer of voice messages between players, not to mention fully rendered three-d human figures. It's not too far of a leap to imagine a game in which four to six of these figures, each an imaginary character with unique attributes being "run" by a live person somewhere on the network, partaking in a role-playing game.

Isn't This Article Done Yet?

Yep, this is it, the end. So now you see why computer role-playing games look and feel the way they do. The role-playing game industry has for years had an oddball relationship with various media: there's a Star Wars role-playing game for that little touch of the movies, there are media tie-in novels galore, and TV has even appropriated some RPG concepts and thoughts. Computer role-playing games, however, can be said to be a very different kind of computer entertainment, perhaps role-playing game's only child to date.