

ROLEPLAYING AS A CREATION FORM AND A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION IN RPG VIRTUAL WORLDS

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Abstract:

Online roleplaying games, also called MMORPGs, are the most popular virtual worlds. A recurrent criticism about them is that they would offer only a succession of repetitive tasks. Exceptionally rich and complex player creations, challenge these comments. In this paper, we will study a specific aspect of these worlds: the “roleplay”, that is at the same time a creation form and a source of inspiration. We will begin by explaining what roleplaying means, in what way this practice is different in virtual worlds than in tabletop and live action roleplaying games. We will then examine player creations, divided in three parts: rule systems and events, writings and visual creations, as well as their motivations and creation process.

1. Introduction

The term “virtual world” is used to name digital environments that are generally multi users and accessible through the Internet. The most popular of these worlds are 3D online role-playing games, usually called MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games). There is actually more than ten million regular players in the world (Le Fou, 2011).

These worlds are above all entertainment places: contrary to non-ludic virtual worlds like Second Life, it is not about trading with real money, advertising for political organizations or corporations. It is about playing with other gamers in a fictional setting. Because of their success and ludic aspect, online roleplaying games have been the target of strong criticism. Particularly, they have been considered sterile on the aspect of players' development, leading to addiction and even psychiatric problems.

These radical positions, revealing both fear and ignorance from the media, tend to rarify today. A lot of recent studies show instead that these games can be useful to players: they have a positive impact on their sociability, their management and organizing skills (McGonigal, 2011) and even their understanding of economics (Castronova, 2005).

During our research, we have discovered another interesting element. These games are the driving force of a large number of player creations: machinima films (made using in-game footage), comics, novels, events, etc.

Comparisons with other virtual worlds and traditional video games, show that online role-playing games encourage more players to be creative, as well in-game as outside the game. This prolific creation has several inspirational sources. “Roleplay” is one of those, particularly unknown and original. For this reason, we found it useful to go in depth on that subject. In this paper, we will describe what “roleplaying” is and what it offers as a creation form. We will then study the variety of creation inspired and motivated by roleplay in online role-playing games.

2. “Roleplaying”, a creation form

2.1. Playing a role, embodying a character

Online role-playing games come from tabletop role-playing games. The first of them, Dungeons & Dragons (Gygax, 1974), still has a large influence on ludic virtual worlds today. Roleplaying includes several aspects from tabletop role-playing games: fighting simulation and strategy, progression of the player's avatar, interactive exploration of the fictional world, trade and craft and, finally, “roleplay”.

“Roleplaying” is about embodying a character the same way an actor does. It also implies creating a character coherent enough with the fictional universe of the game and to make it live. Intensity and roleplaying style vary a lot according to players, communities and games. A well-known contemporary writer, George R. R. Martin, explains in the book Second Person his reaction toward his first sessions of tabletop role-playing games, allowing us to understand better the intensity and the creativity inherent to roleplaying:

“Playing Walter's game was like stepping into the pages of an H. P. Lovecraft story, except that the characters were more fully realized than Lovecraft's ever were. There was triumph and tragedy, heroism and cowardice, love affairs and betrayals, and every now and again a Shuggoth, too. Our weekly sessions were part communal storytelling and part improv theater, part group therapy and part mass psychosis, part adventure and part soap opera. We created some wonderful characters and lived inside them, and many a night never rolled those funny twenty-sided dice at all.” (Martin, 2010).

Roleplaying, as described by Martin can be found in every role-playing game type, but there are variations related to the support, that we will see in the next chapter.

It is important to acknowledge that not every user of online role-playing games is interested in roleplaying. This practice is not marginal either, as shown by the survey “The ideal MMORPG” where 71% of players declared they wished to have the possibility to roleplay in online role-playing games (Lelièvre, 2010).

As in tabletop role-playing games, online role-playing games give the opportunity to write about and to impersonate characters:

“With the MMO, I have found an excellent support for writing: interesting, abounding worlds, rich stories. Then I began to put a lot of myself into roleplaying communities and in my own characters” (explanations given by Charlotte Vidal, a roleplayer, during an email exchange about her roleplay writings).

Thus, roleplaying, that is half way between writing and acting, could be considered as a creation form.

2.2. Supports of roleplay in the game

In tabletop role-playing games, roleplaying comes mainly through voice. Players don't mime their characters' actions; they describe them and talk for them. However, during live-action role-playing games, roleplaying implies the whole body and players are disguised.

By contrast, in online role-playing games, roleplaying comes essentially through writing and puppeteering the character's actions. Writing allows the player not only to express what the character says, but also to describe subtle actions that cannot be simulated by the game, using asterisks: "Ulvenn: *rolled his eyes*". Using asterisks to describe character actions is an informal convention employed by players to compensate for the lack of possible actions with their characters.

In some games, though, it is possible to animate the character's face and express its emotions in a very precise manner, like a puppet. To trigger one of these animations, the player types in the chat window the action he wants his character to execute like a scripting command: "/smile" or "/bow". The game then launches an animation of the character and indicates in the chat window what action has just been made.



Figure 1. Screenshots of Star Wars Galaxies. Facial animations of a character.

Supporting tools offered for roleplay in online role-playing games make it different from tabletop role-playing games and live-action role-playing games. Embodying the character is less natural and requires a superior investment from players.

2.3. Shared culture and conventions

Roleplaying is a collective practice. Being able to communicate and stay in the role implies there are no breaks in the shared fantasy universe. As noted by Gary Alan Fine in his book *Shared Fantasy*, this requires shared culture and conventions:

"Because gaming fantasy is based in shared experiences, it must be constructed through communication. This communication is possible only when a shared set of references exist for which actions are legitimate." (Fine, 2002)

If this shared culture and conventions are easy enough to get in a tabletop role-playing game setting, generally organized among a group of friends meeting on a regular basis to play, there are more issues in an online role-playing game gathering thousands of players not knowing each other with different interests.

To solve this issue and allow players interested in roleplaying to practice, there are two strategies. The first one comes from the developers, who designate some servers as roleplay,

through a subtitle. Thus, all players registered on this server know roleplaying is the norm on this server, though it is not mandatory.

The other option comes from players. They group together around the practice of roleplay: roleplaying guilds, roleplaying communities, etc. They gather outside the game and decide together to join a game or a specific server to roleplay together. In this way, they are assured to find other players sharing the same gaming style and same references. For instance, when Star Wars Galaxies launched, there was no European server, no roleplay server either, so French roleplaying players decided unilaterally to massively go on U.S. server “Kauri” to have a chance to meet other French-speaking roleplayers.

The proportion of roleplayers varies a lot from a game to another. Some games offer a universe and tools well-suited for this practice. Star Wars Galaxies, for instance, with its various facial animations and its well-known universe had a large community of roleplayers. On the other side, World of Warcraft, with its very competitive orientation and its varying audience – not sharing the same references – didn't welcome a lot of players interested in roleplaying.

There is another major difference between tabletop and online role-playing games: there is no game master online. In table top, the game master creates the story, guarantees its coherence by giving players the limits of the fantasy universe and handles non-playing characters. This missing, players had to find solutions to replace it. It has been solved through creation.

3. Creation forms motivated by roleplay

3.1. Player-created rule systems and roleplay events

The first type of player's creation for roleplay we will study here is the organizing of events which are player-created scenarios.

Online role-playing games have very complex rule systems, but they rarely are about roleplay. To fill this lack, players create additional rules that are placed above the real rules of the game. These new rules are only conventional: they are not written in the game code.

Using self-made rules is way more common in online role-playing games than any other media, but as James Newman notes, it also exists in video games in general:

“The gamer may even impose their own ludus upon the play and create their own bespoke minigame that may even be shared with other gamers as we will note below.” (Newman, 2008)

The creation of new game system is particularly common in commercial online role-playing games that are less open and don't offer many tools for players to roleplay. Players interested in roleplaying then have to show infinite inventiveness to set up their idea of playing. One system used by players in this way is the creation of roleplay events.

There are two types of roleplay events. First type contains no scenario based events. It is called circumstantial roleplay: the event is in this case the occasion for the player to meet and to embody their character with other roleplayers. There is no pre-written scenario. It could be a duel tournament, shows created by the players, tombola organized around a specific theme.



Figure 2. Screenshot of Vanguard: Saga of Heroes. Non-scenario based event created by players: duel tournament.

Second type of player created event concerns narrative roleplay. To write these scenarios use classic techniques, often learned in game. For instance, it is common to base the story on one character's background. Once the narrative framework has been found, players need to design and set up the planning of the event: initial set-up, non-player characters, puzzles, resolution of the plot, etc.

When it is possible to organize various roleplay events in online role-playing games, we see that it requires an significant time investment from players.

This investment is mainly motivated by the community interest and feedback on those. According to a survey made in 2010, 76% of players want to see game-master created events and even more players (82%) said they want tools to create their own roleplay events. (Lelièvre, 2010). More than the need for tools, this result reveals the players' desire to see events created by them or their peers in online role-playing games.

3.2. Stories outside the game

Through roleplay, players create characters and their story, by playing them and participating in events.

Some players want to write a background for their character so they have a coherent behavior when playing them. Others wish to keep track of what they lived in game and want to share it. For this, players write texts of various forms, from simple reports of a few lines posted on a forum to the sequel of novels published on a dedicated website.

One of these types of text is the roleplay by forum. This type of story has the characteristics of its medium: written and asynchronous. Discussion forums don't work in real time: a text posted by a user will be visible as long as the forum remains online, unlike online chat, so that other players can answer it later. It is an extension of in-game roleplay, the purpose for players, is to write together in a dialog between stories answering each other. Charlotte Vidal, roleplayer and author of the "Fille des sables" website, explains the interest she has in roleplay by forum:

"I discovered forum roleplay, that I also like very much, because for me the roleplay only in game cannot be enough: it is also necessary to have a development roleplay and outside

roleplay on a medium more “stable” than the game: the forum gives the possibility for everyone to interact (the game, however, requires to be there at a specific time).”

This collective writing is sometimes an introduction to a roleplay scenario, a romanticized rewriting of previous events that happened in game, or even sometimes an exchange between characters considered by the players as if they have happened in game.

Background writing is a more solitary writing practice, without ever being completely solitary. This is a very common form of text in online role-playing games, directly inherited from tabletop games, though most background writers in MMORPG never played tabletop. In this type of relatively short story – from a few lines to a dozen pages – the player tells the past of his character, before the game begins. Motivation to write these vary, but there are common points.

First background writing allows creating more dense and interesting characters, because narrative elements related to characters given by the game are generally pretty poor, as explained by Charlotte Vidal:

“Before a game, I like to create characters with heavy and/or rich stories. I do complete chronologies, summaries, more descriptive texts about their past, enclosing them in the lore or the game: it is very important for me to be coherent with the MMO universe I play on. The texts on Filles des Sables are only a small preview of all I create for each character, and even if after, in game, I don't develop this all, it is not very important. My great pleasure is to see how my characters, with such a heavy past, pull through, move one and liberate themselves from their stories.”

Secondly, it allows players to react in a more coherent manner in game, as they have a complete setting as stated by Jérémy Derrien, another roleplayer who wrote more than a hundred backgrounds:

“Of course, for me a background is a thing to do before all in order to better define the character you want to play. First, you have a solid basis that contains the past, the life of the character so you can roleplay with more confidence with the certitude to know where you are going. Not having a background while roleplaying unsettles me because I have to improvise fast his past, his life and I don't like it.” These explanations were given during an interview about his roleplay writings.

Most players also explain, these are also written for the pure pleasure of writing. These comments also show that player-writers have an opinion about their practice of writing.

More than just an interesting creation process, these stories in themselves are interesting because of their inherent qualities. They are often rich, complex, well written and the result of regular practice. For instance, here is a short background story by Charlotte Vidal

“A l'orée d'une conscience autre, l'âme prisonnière d'un cœur trop tendre et l'esprit entravé par des pensées trop élémentaires, la Première avait lutté des siècles durant pour rester éveillée.

La mort d'une la projetait dans le vide spectral, en stase, dans le chaos perpétuel de l'autre monde. La naissance de la suivante l'absorbait avec violence, comme une arme lancée avec fureur au front de l'ennemi. Leurs esprits se mêlaient, puis s'entrechoquaient, souvent indéfiniment, parfois finissaient par s'accorder.

Elle avait patienté, depuis la naissance de l'Originelle jusqu'à la délivrance de l'Ultime. Le chant guerrier et fédérateur des Rusées ne se ferait plus jamais entendre. Délivrée de sa malédiction, de ses entraves de chairs et de pensées autres, enfin.

Revenue d'entre les spectres, libérée de la surveillance des Parques, jamais morte mais privée de vie, La Malsonge porte de nouveau son regard sur le monde.” (Vidal, 2010) We decided not to translate this text to avoid losing its aesthetic qualities.

Writing these stories requires a large amount of work from players: research on the universe of the game, discussion with connected players, writing, proof-reading, etc. Another important source of motivation that is crucial in this complex work is the feedback given by other players. These texts are read and criticized, often in a positive and constructive way, by their peers. These exchanges have two purposes: on one hand, allowing the player to improve, on the other to bind the community together by encouraging efforts of creation and sharing.

For players, getting to know another player's background allows richer interactions with him/her as these texts give information that is not given by the game. For instance, Aymeric Martin described in the background of his character Agatreion several physical traits of his character to help other players react accordingly:
“To begin this story properly, it would be tasteful to describe the one we will now speak of in the following paragraphs, and so will I proceed:
Agatreion is big. It is what is the most striking when you see him. Well, the word is not enough itself to understand what it really means. Imagine a small mountain walking to you and that his only shadow includes you completely. (...)
This is what everyone can see of him, but only at first sight.
Behind this colossal aspect and this look of coarse brute, we can see a face similar to one of a child expressing gentleness, naivety and innocence of him.”

Most online role-playing game players don't stay all their life on the same game and often have several characters. Thus, they have to write a new background for each new character, according to each gaming world. This regular work of writing associated with other player's feedback allows a fun and collective learning of fictional writing.

In addition to writing backgrounds, players also write text about the lore of the game's universe. For instance, it is sometimes made to create useful elements for the roleplaying community; they can rely on, like a description of the religions in the fictional universe.

We can see here how role-playing games and their extension in virtual communities can be a very strong inspiration source for players, giving them both a reason to write and a base to write from.

Writing as a medium has an extra important place in 3D persistent role-playing games: players write a lot, whether it is in game, to communicate or roleplay, or outside the game, to write various stories intimately linked to their gaming practice.

3.3. Visual creations

As for writings, online role-playing game players are the origin of a prolific production of roleplay-related graphical material distributed outside the game.

In addition to comics, popular but rarely related to roleplay, there is a massive production of images made to describe a moment lived in game or illustrate writing.

Some of these images are made with traditional drawing and painting techniques. For instance, this drawing of Hazel's (pseudonym) represents her favorite character she played in AION and Tera Online.

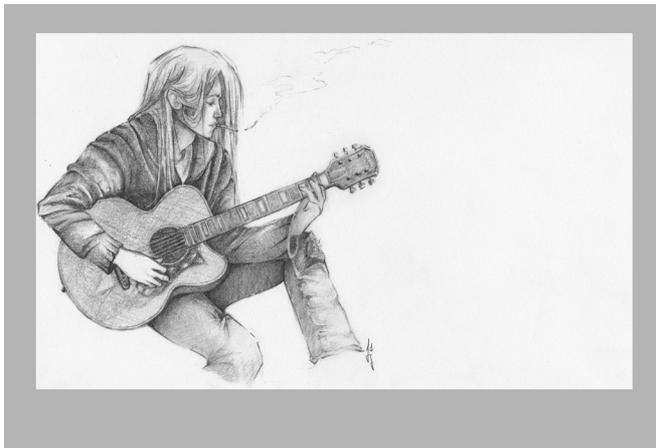


Figure 3. Drawing made by Hazel (pseudonym) of her main character, <http://hazvisual.worthprods.com/2012/01/ecoute/>.

Other images are made using infography software, or mixing several techniques.

For instance, the illustration below, made to illustrate the story of the character Azurielle (Azurielle, 2008), is a mix between a screenshot of Everquest 2 for the environment and an image of the character made with Poser, a software used to create 3D characters.



Figure 4. Graphic creation made by Azurielle (pseudonym) of her main character.

Using materials from the game and mixing them with player creations is a way of expression almost only found in online role-playing games.

Players also create films using game footage. These films made using footage from real-time 3D engines are called machinimas. These films are broadcasted through video networks: Youtube, Dailymotion and Vimeo, mainly. They are defined by their realization technic more than by their content. It is actually particularly diverse: machinimas are sometimes about player prowess, are tutorials about some complex game actions, tell stories or simply have fun

with a specific aspect of an online role-playing game community. Thus, some players use this medium to tell their characters' story, other to keep track of a roleplay event.

4. Conclusion

As we have seen, roleplay is not only a creative form in itself but also a motivation and inspiration source for online role-playing game players. These diverse creations seriously question the assumption stating that the practice of these games is sterile, consisting only of repetitive and mind-numbing tasks.

To follow this research, it would be interesting to first study the nature of these creations: are those Fanarts (art created by fans following the standard set by the game), a new form of art or creation of a hybrid kind.

The subject of these creations is another important question that should be studied. It seems indeed that their raw material would be the interactions of players with the game, between gamers and the shared culture of online role-playing games whatever the media of these creations are.

If we take the metaphor of painting to describe these creations, the paintings made would have role-playing games and their communities as a theme. The pigments used would be the experiences lived by players in game and the culture of this micro-society. The canvas would be of various forms and materials, like these various media. Galleries and museums presenting these pieces would be the websites, social networks and the games themselves. Finally, the art connoisseurs and critics would be the gaming community.

Couldn't we then consider that some kind of creation ecosystem is appearing in online role-playing games, which, if distinct from the world of contemporary art, would function in a similar way? The eventuality of such an ecosystem should be studied in depth in further works of research.

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