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6

SINGLE-PLAYER COMPUTER
ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

Douglas Schules, Jon Peterson, and Martin Picard

When *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)* came out in early 1974, personal computers (PCs) were almost unknown. However, many of the early adopters of tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) were of an age to attend college or join the military, and these institutions had access to computers. It was in this context that experiments with computer role-playing games (CRPGs) began. Thus, CRPGs began as soon as the tabletop genre emerged, and the gradual adoption of computing technologies into everyday life ensured that CRPGs would have a place in the digital domain as well.

This chapter discusses the origins of CRPGs, traces their expansion across platforms and cultures, and examines their contributions to the development of hybrid and new genres. These themes are influenced by advancements in technological capabilities because they have impacted how CRPGs have evolved. This chapter draws from a variety of academic, industry, and fan sources in order to present a more fully informed picture of the form and its importance.

CRPGs and Related Subgenres

Defining CRPGs

Early scholarship on CRPGs often defines them from the perspective of gameplay mechanics (often in relation to computer games or video games more broadly). Thus, CRPGs were defined by the existence of elements such as a formal levelling system (i.e. character progression), randomness, and quantification of characters (e.g. Wolf 2002; Barton 2008). These features reflected attention to the way the computer redefined the role-playing experience by automating many of the more mechanical aspects of TRPGs. As CRPGs matured, the emphasis on mechanics receded as other elements, such as story, rose to prominence.

Early gaming magazines were enraptured by the feats performed by computing technologies and their ability to immerse players into gaming worlds. Nevertheless, computer and gaming magazines also reflected upon how the computer medium was an unforgiving arbiter of rules when compared to their human dungeon or game master counterparts. This conversation