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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

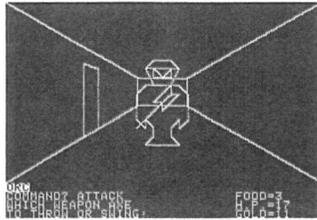


FIGURE 6.1 Garriott, Richard. 1979. Akalabeth, Apple II. NA.

reflected a broader concern over how the medium impacted the character-enactment of role-playing (see Tem 1982; Card 1988). Regardless, these early attempts helped define the CRPG experience, at least until the development of networking technologies (both on- and offline), as a mediation between player and program rather than between players or between players and their dungeon master.

The earliest CRPGs consisted of little more than stick figure graphical dungeon crawls that pushed the limits of the systems they operated on (Figure 6.1). In these early games, survival and combat management usually formed the core gaming experience, and the inclusion of an extensive and compelling narrative was generally not considered necessary. Even by 1992, the editors of *Computer Gaming World* argued that CRPG “game design must be such that the possibility of winning or losing adjusts to the player characters as they improve. If sections of the game are too far out of balance, the game is frustrating rather than fun” (1992b, 54). Although discussing game mechanics was still important to any well-rounded review, their importance had lessened by the end of the 1990s. Popular videogame website IGN’s review of *Baldur’s Gate* (BioWare 1998), for example, begins by discussing how the game is an improvement from the mechanics of SSI Gold Box classics because “it [the game mechanics] all goes on behind the scenes where it belongs” (Ward 1999). The reviewer quickly shifts gears to mention that

even with the best engine in the world though, *Baldur’s Gate* couldn’t have gotten far without a terrific storyline. I mean, how do you go about writing a tale that can be achieved by (while still providing challenge for) 16 different character classes (more if you count multi-classes) who could be of any race or alignment?

(Ward 1999)

Likewise, IGN’s review of *Gothic* (Piranha Bytes 2001) simply recommends the game to players who want a good story (Krause 2002), despite the harsh criticism other sites gave the game in terms of its punishing gameplay (e.g. Park 2001; Nguyen 2002).

Because mechanics merely scratch the surface of a game’s experience, the video gaming website Extra Credits argues that we should instead focus on the motivations players have to play games as a benchmark for classification. For CRPGs, narrative engagement is what currently comprises the core gameplay experience.

Beyond story and behind-the-scenes game mechanics, CRPGs share other common features. Game historian Matt Barton (2007), in a lengthy reflection on the subject on the website Armchair Arcade, discusses narrative and aesthetic tropes found across games in the genre

across time. He notes that most CRPGs offer the player direct or indirect control of other characters. This element has been around since the genesis of CRPGs, with classics like *Wizardry: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord* (Sir-Tech Software 1981), *The Bard’s Tale* (Interplay Productions 1985), and *The Magic Candle* (Mindcraft 1989), allowing players to create and/or control a party of characters.

### Box 6.1 Common CRPG Terms

**Clone:** A game that mimics the gameplay, mechanics, and/or aesthetics of another, often popular or innovative, title.

**Grind/grinding:** Repetitively performing the same task, such as killing enemies, to improve character development or acquire items. When applied to item acquisition, it is interchangeable with the term “farming.”

**Paper Doll:** A 2-D or 3-D representation of player characters and their equipment.

**Permadeath (“permanent death”):** A term derived from the fact that once the character or party dies, any relevant save data is deleted, and the game must be started from the beginning. Sometimes referred to as “ironman mode.”

**Save Scumming:** The process of making backup copies of a game’s save files to hedge against permadeath.

One other key feature of CRPGs is that they have some sort of combat system, one that scales in difficulty as the player gains levels or progresses in the game. A classic example of this is *Dragon Quest* (Chunsoft 1986; localized in North American markets as *Dragon Warrior* in 1989). In this game, there are no real restrictions on where players can wander, and areas of the world are connected by bridges. Crossing a bridge serves as a visual marker of increasing enemy difficulty. The bridges in *Dragon Quest* ostensibly connect new areas of the game world, but, by scaling the difficulty of enemies in these new areas, they also serve to guide players along a narrative path. Nowadays, players intuitively recognize that when entering a new area, they will most likely encounter new, more difficult enemies. Alternate systems, such as the one used in *Final Fantasy VIII* (Square 1999), consist of adjusting (scaling) enemy difficulty to the average level of the player’s party.

Experimentation with mechanics continues to be important to CRPGs to this day. CRPGs have been influential in the evolution of video games via the appearance of CRPG design features, often called “RPG Elements,” in non-CRPG video games (Zagal and Altizer 2014). Within the form, this evolution has led to the appearance of multiple CRPG sub-types, which we discuss below.

### Sub-types

CRPGs are comprised of a seemingly endless variety of sub-types or categories that blend the mechanical elements of CRPGs listed earlier with those of other video game genres. While Mark J.P. Wolf (2002) offers a taxonomy of game genres, the reality is that there are no agreed upon formal definitions of what constitutes the various sub-types of CRPGs as they vary from community to community, culture to culture, and market to market.

This does not mean, however, that it is impossible to provide a framework for them. We consider the sub-types we will discuss to be “stable” in that they have been in use for several years in the gaming press and colloquially by players. Generally speaking, the sub-types are distinguished by game mechanics and the overall player experience.

### *Tactical or Simulation RPGs (SRPGs)*

Tactical role-playing games, known as simulation role-playing games (SRPGs) in Japan, focus heavily on pre-planned combat encounters<sup>1</sup>. They are distinguished by their emphasis on strategic planning, length of combat encounters, and reduced opportunities to “grind” or otherwise level characters.

Strategic planning in SRPGs can range from complex to simple, but it generally requires players to consider both the battle properties of units on the map and how terrain impacts these. In terms of unit properties, many SRPGs appearing on console systems adopted a paper-rock-scissors approach to combat, with categories of weapons or magic being strong against or weak to other forms of attack. The strategic gameplay of the Japanese series *Langrisser* (Masaya Games 1991; localized as *Warsong* in North America), for example, is centered on a complex system of purchasable units whose attacks are significantly effective against specific unit types and virtually ineffective against others: archers in the game are strong against flying enemies, such as wyverns and gryphons, but weak against soldiers; these soldiers are, in turn, massacred by mounted units and some monsters; such mounted units are decimated by pikemen. The types of units that are available depends on the class of the general leading them, and certain classes have access to special units that add further depth to this system of checks and balances. Monks, mermen, and guardsmen are special units available for purchase, and part of the challenge of the game is discovering which units are effective against the monster hordes the player may face, which include undead, slimes, werewolves, and dragons. While this system creates a rough balance of power between units, terrain plays a significant role in strategy. Units may encounter bonuses or penalties to movement based on the types of terrain they try to cross and, in some instances, may receive advantages to attack or defense for occupying certain terrain types. In *Langrisser*, players must also consider the location of their units relative to their general as their effectiveness is limited to a small area surrounding the general who owns them. Outside this “sphere of influence,” their combat capabilities are greatly reduced.

The importance of strategy in SRPGs may be seen in part as a response to the way the sub-type handles combat encounters (often referred to as maps). While combat in many CRPGs includes both set and random encounters that are resolved quickly, encounters in SRPGs tend to be scripted, less frequent, and take longer to complete. Because of this, there are few opportunities to “grind” levels. Consider examples such as *Fire Emblem: The Sword of Flame* (Nintendo 2003), *Shining Force* (Climax Entertainment 1993), or *Shadowrun Returns* (Harebrained Schemes 2013), in which the number of maps hovers around two dozen. As a practical consequence, the finite number of enemies limits the amount of experience that can be earned and, hence, invests the levelling processes – who to level and how high – with a strategic dimension of its own. This is not to suggest that random encounters do not appear in SRPGs – *Final Fantasy Tactics* (Square 1998), *Tactics Ogre* (Quest 1998), or *Front Mission 3* (Square 2000), to name a few games, include random battles – but the difference between these and other CRPGs lies in how quickly these battles are resolved: in general, encounters in CRPGs are over in a few seconds to a few minutes, while those in SRPGs can require half an hour or more. The hidden

dungeon of *Tactics Ogre*, Hell’s Gate, requires players to travel to the bottom of a hundred-floor dungeon in one sitting, a feat that can take upwards of 20 hours – and all without saving.

### *Action RPGs (ARPGs)*

ARPGs are generally defined by two characteristics: real-time combat and a simplified character development system. Rather than emphasizing the tactical planning and decision-making witnessed in SRPGs, ARPGs introduced a measure of player skill into the CRPG form by integrating dexterity and reflexes into gameplay. The simplified character development made the game more accessible to players put off by the complexities of more traditional CRPGs.

Probably the best known ARPG is Blizzard Entertainment’s *Diablo* (1996), although console developers in the 1980s and early 1990s produced a number of RPGs with action elements. *Hydlide* (T&E Soft 1984), *Ys* (Nihon Falcom 1987), and *Secret of Mana* (Square 1993) are prototypical examples of the genre from Japan, and they share with *Diablo* a real-time combat system wherein player reflexes combine with character stats to determine combat prowess.

Compared to more traditional CRPGs, customization of characters in ARPGs is limited. While characters’ attributes are still quantified, the number of ability scores and the extent to which players have control over developing them varies. In *Secret of Mana* and the *Ys* series, for example, level ups increase character stats automatically; the player’s ability to influence a character’s ability scores rests with the types of weapon and armor equipped. Character skills and magic are also awarded, based on level rather than player choice. Compared to this, *Diablo* is more customizable as each level-up grants players points that can be used to increase one of four attribute scores and an ability point that can be allocated to one of three ability trees specific to the chosen class.

While ARPGs have a long history, it was not until *Diablo* that the sub-type gained significant traction. The impact of *Diablo* on ARPG as a genre is succinctly summarized in GameSpot’s review of the time: “If you like PC games, you should go out right now and experience what is likely to be the clone maker for the next two years” (Ward 1997). The game would become the progenitor of a number of other games made in its image, from the relatively successful *Dungeon Siege* (Gas Powered Games 2002) and *Nox* (Westwood Studios 2000) to the poorly received *Gothic 3* (Piranha Bytes 2006). In retrospect, GameSpot’s review appears prophetic as, like *Rogue* (Toy, Wichman, and Arnold 1980) before it, the “Diablo clone” has become a something of a sub-type in and of itself.

**Hybrid Games** Historically, CRPGs have pushed the boundaries of both the computer medium and the role-playing game genre. It should be no surprise, then, that there are also a number of games that do not easily fit into the sub-types outlined in this section. These games blend CRPG mechanics with those of other video game genres to produce “hybrid” games whose generic status is often contested.

**Spellforce: The Order of Dawn** (Phenomic 2003) alternated between an ARPG interface similar to *Diablo*, where the player directly controlled the main character and explored the world, and a strategy game interface, like *Warcraft* or *Starcraft*, in which the player acted as a general who ordered units to build structures, collect resources, and attack opponents. As a result, the game had two clearly distinct gameplay experiences that make it difficult to definitively classify.

### Box 6.2 Emergent Sub-Type: Puzzle RPGs (PRPGs)

Although puzzles have long appeared in CRPGs, they have traditionally been used as mini-games that add flavor to the gaming experience. The PRPG, however, foregrounds the puzzle as a core gaming element. Popularized on mobile platforms, this genre combines short “battles,” which involve solving puzzles, with a levelling system that incrementally decreases the challenges players face in solving them. One of the more successful examples of this type of game, from both user and commercial perspectives, is GungHo Online Entertainment’s *Puzzle & Dragons* (Insel 2012), in which players attempt to match orbs of similar colors to defeat monsters and progress through various dungeons. Completion of dungeons rewards players with experience, which can be used to recruit stronger monsters to help them tackle the challenges of more advanced dungeons, and these recruited monsters can also be levelled up and fused with other monsters to produce skills useful in dungeon progression.

### Roguelike

The roguelike sub-type derives its name from the 1980 game *Rogue*: a cult classic in university campus computer systems. In *Rogue*, players controlled a character exploring a dungeon, fighting monsters, collecting treasure, and getting progressively more powerful as they venture deeper in search of the Amulet of Yendor. The game’s primary challenge lay in the fact that it did not allow players to save their game, and, upon restarting, the dungeon was newly generated. This prevented players from learning the layout of the dungeon as well as the location of treasures and other items of interest.

The roguelike sub-type is generally seen as implementing at least one of the following features: procedural generation of dungeons, turn-based gameplay, and permanent death. In terms of gameplay, they share overlaps with both SRPGs and ARPGs.

Roguelike games generate maps randomly through an algorithmic process known as procedural generation. The process of procedural generation allows for replay value and also saves space. As maps are generated by a computer program, the size of the gaming program is reduced – which was a significant breakthrough in the era *Rogue* was developed. (To be fair, *Rogue* was not the first game with procedurally generated dungeons, but it became the name-sake for this sub-type due to its popularity.) Procedural generation has influenced other CRPGs as well. Bethesda Softwork’s *Daggerfall* (Bethesda Softworks 1996) leveraged procedural generation to create random dungeons and dynamically link them to quests (Figure 6.2). *Diablo* applied procedural generation to maps but also extended it to the generation of equipment.

The second feature of the roguelike sub-type is that it is turn-based. Each action the player performs – movement, swinging a sword, using an item – generally takes one turn to complete, although some games have introduced multiple-turn delays for high-level actions, such as spells. Players act first, with enemies and environmental hazards taking their turns after the player. Many roguelikes also link the management of resources, such as food and weapon durability, to the progression of turns. In other words, the player is in control of the progression of time in roguelikes, which lends itself to the type of tactical planning commonly seen in SRPGs as players consider how to balance resource management against combat and exploration.

The effective management of resources is necessary to avoid the third common feature of roguelikes: permanent death or permadeath. This means that once a character dies, the game must be started from the beginning; this can be avoided by making backup copies of the game’s



FIGURE 6.2 Bethesda Softworks. 1996. *The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall*, PC. NA: Bethesda Softworks.

save files – an act known as “save scumming” that is generally viewed as cheating in many communities. While the levels produced in these new games are unique, *NetHack* (Stephenson 1987) saves the levels in which characters have died, as well as the items these characters possessed, to a “bones file.” Using this file, in future game sessions, players may encounter the remains of their less successful treks into the procedurally generated world and have the opportunity to salvage equipment that would be of more use to their current incarnations’ needs.

The roguelike sub-type has seen a recent resurgence in the West and remains popular in Japan, with the *Mystery Dungeon* series spanning over 20 years of roguelike action, involving characters across popular culture. The first game, *Torneko's Great Adventure: Mystery Dungeon* (Chunsoft 1993), followed Torneko, the popular merchant character from *Dragon Quest IV*, as he explored dungeons to gather items and gold to expand his budding business. Later games in the series included properties from the *Pokémon* and *Final Fantasy* franchises as well as a set of games involving all original characters: the *Shiren the Wanderer* series.

Recent imaginings of the roguelike sub-type include crowdsourced *One Way Heroics* (Smoking WOLF 2013) and *Dragon Fin Soup* (Grimm Bros 2015), both described as containing Japanese role-playing games (JRPG) elements. The accuracy of this categorization – particularly the JRPG aspect – is the subject of the next section.

### Box 6.3 Emergent Sub-Type: Hunter RPGs

A subset of ARPGs, the “hunter” genre is a relatively recent term, used in fan communities to describe games focusing on the collection of materials and harvesting of resources to upgrade player equipment, weapons, and armor. As the number, type, and rarity of materials needed to improve gear increases as they are upgraded, games in this genre require players to repeatedly grind levels in order to secure the requisite resources to craft top-notch end-game gear. Games such as the *Monster Hunter* series, *God Eater* series, and *Freedom Wars* (SCE Japan Studio 2014) are considered to be archetypal of the genre.

TABLE 6.1 Commonly cited differences between JRPGs and WRPGs from fans and industry

JRPG Trait	WRPG Trait
Confinement to world	Sandbox exploration
Defined characters	Character customization
Anime/cartoon style art	"Realistic" art
Limited narrative choice, singular story	Narrative plurality, multiple story paths/endings
Fantasy world	Medieval world

Sources: doady (2012), Extra Credits (2012), JLF1 (2008), Joynt (2006).

### JRPGs

Perhaps one of the more interesting approaches to classifying CRPGs has been the development of the labels WRPGs, or Western role-playing games, and JRPGs. Unlike the ARPG, SRPG, and roguelike, whose borders are largely defined in terms of their implementation of gaming mechanics, JRPGs tend to be defined in terms of their gameplay and narrative structures.

This was not always the case, however. JRPGs were heavily influenced by early CRPGs, such as *Wizardry: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord* and *Ultima* (Garriott 1981) as well as the tabletop *D&D* game (Kawakami 2015). While the first use of the term "JRPG" is difficult to locate precisely, fans, not game developers or marketers, are generally credited with coining the term to describe the differences they noticed between games produced by Western developers (which tended to be on PC) and those coming from Japan (which gravitated towards console systems). Specifically, players noticed that games from Japanese developers afforded less player customizability, often forcing players along pre-determined paths, but provided engaging character development and narrative arcs. Table 6.1 identifies elements commonly perceived by fan and industry players to belong to JRPGs and WRPGs.

The gaming site Extra Credits (Extra Credits 20 May 2012) claims that the core element that distinguishes JRPGs from WRPGs is that of narrative engagement – what role the player occupies within the gaming world. JRPGs tell a story, while WRPGs place players in a story.

This approach to defining JRPGs is useful because aesthetic styles are easily copied. *Septerra Core: Legacy of the Creator* (Valkyrie Studios 1999), for example, mimics the visual character style and combat interface of JRPGs of the time, while Capcom's *Dragon's Dogma* (2012) deviates from many of the standard JRPG tropes in favor of a more "Western" aesthetic. Given that the distinctive anime-style aesthetic that initially helped to define JRPGs in the late 1980s and early 1990s is readily identifiable and reproduced across the creative industries globally, many fans have turned to evaluating the genre in terms of its location of production – an ironic choice, given the multinational reality of contemporary global gaming production (Consalvo 2006).

## The Evolution of CRPGs: Cultural, Technological, and Economic

### Origins and Beginnings: 1970s and 1980s

*D&D* came out after the first boom in video games, triggered by the 1972 release of seminal arcade titles like *Computer Space* and *Pong* as well as the first home entertainment console system, the Magnavox *Odyssey*. Players understandably speculated about a video game version of *D&D*, though even most home systems lacked the real-time interactive graphical capability required.

One place where those graphical facilities could be found was the PLATO network, based out of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, which had connected a number of universities and military bases in the United States. The PLATO system was designed to provide an intuitive, graphics-heavy user interface for the purposes of delivering computerized lessons. By 1973, PLATO had been widely repurposed for games, including a variety of pioneering graphical games. Because games were discouraged by the system's administrators, early games lacked clear titles or attributions to authors, which has led to some controversy over who did what and when. However, a summer 1975 account by a Cornell student on the PLATO network clearly describes a sophisticated graphical game based on *D&D* at that time.

The unnamed game supported a single player character who explored a 30-by-30 dungeon, though, as the account reports, "all you ever get to see on screen is that part of the room/corridor that is 1 orthogonal step away from you." The game dispenses with any concept of character class; all characters start with one magic spell and gain more hit points and spells with experience. The game's sixteen spells and thirty-six varieties of monster were drawn from *D&D*, but it had a very clear victory condition: to accumulate twenty thousand experience points. The game was exceptionally popular on the PLATO system: only fifteen slots for saved characters were available to all PLATO users, and, as the account reports, "the roster never has an empty space on it for more than a minute."

Because of the ease of development of PLATO "lessons" and their advanced graphics capability, PLATO became a hotbed of computer role-playing. While we know most of these titles only through much later revisions of their source code, games such as *Orthanx*, *Oubliette*, and *Avatar* provided further innovations, including wire-frame, first-person perspective graphics.

Prior to the release of *D&D*, computer hobbyists had circulated a number of text games that experimented with the concept of navigating rooms in a small virtual environment by posing a multiple-choice question to the player each turn. Distributed as source code written in the BASIC programming language through periodicals like the *People's Computer Company*, these games included *Caves* (1972) and *Hunt the Wumpus* (Yob 1972). As with *Caves*, in *Wumpus*, rooms are numbered, and each time a player enters a new room, they are greeted with a textual description, indicating the exits and the proximity of bats, deadly pits, and the wandering eponymous monster, which must be shot from an adjacent chamber.

Players in the *Mirkwood Tales* campaign in Cambridge, Massachusetts – a local, Tolkien-based *D&D* variant – applied emerging principles of rudimentary textual adventures to role-playing games. Most famously, a computer engineer named Willie Crowther devised a cavern exploration game, *Adventure*, that was widely distributed across the early Internet. Rather than settling for the primitive instructions issued in a game like *Wumpus*, *Adventure* let players input simple natural language commands then parsed by the computer, such as "go west" and "take rod." This form of interaction resembled a dialog between a player and the computer, highly reminiscent of the dialog between the player and referee in *D&D*. The object of Crowther's game was to overcome adversaries and puzzles in order to escape the cave system with treasure.

Another of the players in the *Mirkwood Tales* campaign was Dave Lebling. Lebling, along with Tim Anderson and others at MIT, produced the game *Zork*<sup>2</sup>. The producers of *Zork* would go on in 1979 to found Infocom, which pioneered a game-authoring paradigm focused on a virtual machine that could be implemented on multiple architectures, which influenced many subsequent computer systems. This aided the transition of *Zork* to microcomputers, sparking a number of sequels and a franchise of early text adventure games.

The lessons of both the graphical tradition pioneered on the PLATO network and the textual tradition of *Adventure* and *Zork* informed the earliest commercial computer role-playing

games. Automated Simulations (later, Epyx) sold some of the earliest commercial wargames for the PC market in 1978, and by 1979, they made an initial foray into the role-playing game market with the *Temple of Apschai* (Automated Solutions 1979). Like a PLATO game, *Apschai* showed a top-down view of the dungeon maze, though *Apschai* reveals more of the environment than early PLATO titles.

But the top-down view of *Apschai* would soon seem anachronistic. *Akalabeth* (Garriott 1979) sported two modes: a large-scale, top-down overworld view and a first-person perspective for dungeon crawls. Designer Richard Garriott stated that he drew inspiration for the first-person view of *Akalabeth* from the Silas Warner game *Escape* (1978), which required players to navigate a three-dimensional wireframe maze. Although *Akalabeth* was coded entirely in basic, Garriott's follow-up title, *Ultima*, used faster assembly language code, which made the title run more smoothly on early microcomputers. *Ultima* entered the market in competition with *Wizardry: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord*, which drew directly on the PLATO tradition of games like *Oubliette*.

The success of *Ultima*, *Wizardry*, and other titles led to numerous sequels as well as competitors in the early CRPG industry. As the first CRPGs appeared on microcomputers in the West, the genre did not take a long time to find a niche in Japan in the early 1980s. *Ultima* and *Wizardry* are the ones who obviously have had the greatest influence on the emergence of role-playing games in Japan. While the most well-known historical accounts of JRPGs often start with *Dragon Quest* (see Kohler 2004; Barton 2008), in actuality, the first CRPGs designed there appeared a few years prior on Japanese PCs. Some scholars cite Henk Rogers' *The Black Onyx* (1984) as "Japan's first RPG" (Edge 2008; Barnholt 2011), but there were several releases even before that.

One of the first documented Japanese CRPGs is Koei's *Dragon and Princess* (1982), distributed in December 1982 on the NEC PC-88 and the Fujitsu FM-7 (Derboo 2011, 2014; GameSide, 2014). The same year, Fugen Denshi released *Dragon Lair* on PC-8001 and FM-7, a title developed exclusively for the Japanese market by the American couple John and Patty Bell (Derboo 2015). From 1982 to the release of *The Black Onyx* in January 1984, roughly fifteen CRPGs (or, at least, games with role-playing game elements as the form was still in its development phase) appeared on Japanese PCs (see Table 6.2).

TABLE 6.2 List of JRPGs up until January 1984

12/1982	<i>Dragon &amp; Princess</i>	ドラゴンアンドプリンセス	(PC-80, PC-88, FM-7)
3/1983	<i>Genna Taisen</i>	幻魔大戦	(PC-6001, PC-88, PC-98, FM-7)
5/1983	<i>Kufu-Ou no Himitsu</i>	クフ王の秘密	(PC-80, FM-7)
5?/1983	<i>Tokugawa Ieyasu 1. Shounen-hen</i>	徳川家康 1.少年編	(FM-7, MZ-700)
7/1983	<i>Danchi Zuma no Yuuwaku</i>	団地妻の誘惑	(PC-88, FM-7)
8/1983	<i>Ken to Mahou</i>	剣と魔法	(PC-80, PC-88, FM-7)
11/1983	<i>Poibos Part 1</i>	ポイボス Part 1	(PC-88, FM-7, X1)
11/1983	<i>Seiken Densetsu</i>	聖剣伝説	(PC-80, unrelated to <i>Secret of Mana</i> )
11?/1983	<i>Parallel World</i>	パラレルワールド	(X1, PC-88)
12/1983	<i>Dungeon</i>	ダンジョン	(PC-80, PC-88, FM-7)
12/1983	<i>Bounded</i>	バウンドフト	(PC-88)
12/1983	<i>Panorama Toh</i>	ぼのらま島	(PC-88)
1/1984	<i>Telegard</i>	テレングード	(localization)
1/1984	<i>Voyager</i>	ボイジャー1号	(localization)
1/1984	<i>Fortress of the Witch King</i>	ウィッチキング	(localization)
1/1984	<i>The Black Onyx</i>	ザ・ブラックオニキス	

Note: Dates are for the oldest known versions (most are according to the PC88 Game Library).

Source: Derboo (2011).

In the intervening two and a half years between the release of *The Black Onyx* in 1984 and *Dragon Quest* in 1986, the CRPG genre exploded, with more than fifty titles produced. Of these, a few have had historical significance, such as Nihon Falcom's *Dragon Slayer* (1984) and T&E Soft's *Hyllide* as the first successful ARPGs; *Bokosuka Wars* (Sumii 1983), one of the first SRPGs; and *Cruise Chaser Blassty* (1986), the first role-playing game developed by Square, which became a cult classic for Japanese PC gamers (GameSide 2014).

During the first half of the 1980s, CRPGs were bountiful on Japanese computers. However, the games that remained the most well known were imports from the West, especially *Ultima* and *Wizardry*. These were officially localized in 1985, but their existence was already well known in Japan because of imports, for example, on the Apple II, or because someone discovered them while traveling abroad. For example, *Dragon Quest*'s creator, Yuji Horii, mentioned that he discovered the first *Wizardry* at a Macworld Conference & Expo, and that is what gave him and director Koichi Nakamura the desire to create their own CRPG (IUP 2011).

With the phenomenal success of Nintendo's Family Computer (Famicom) during the mid-1980s, it was only a matter of time before the first role-playing games appeared on home consoles. The first was a port of a computer game, *Hyllide Special* (1986), but the second was *Dragon Quest*, a game designed for younger console players (although it was also released on PC-98 and MSX the same year, underlining the importance of the PC market at that time). The game merged *Ultima*'s bird's-eye view with *Wizardry*'s combat, among others, but also used a visual style that appealed to young consumers fond of manga and anime. Yuji Horii asked his colleague and manga artist Akira Toriyama (already recognized through his successful manga *Dr. Slump* [1980] and *Dragon Ball* [1984]) to take care of the artwork and character design. Cross promotion with popular manga magazine *Shonen Jump* also contributed greatly to the success of the game and facilitated the popularity of the CRPGs in Japan.

After the positive reception of *Dragon Quest*, which sold 1.5 million copies, nearly thirty role-playing games came out on the console in the next year, including *Dragon Quest*'s follow-up in January 1987 and Square's first *Final Fantasy* at the end of the year but also ports such as *Ultima: Exodus* and *Wizardry: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord* as well as Nihon Falcom's *Dragon Slayer IV* and *Faxanadu* (1987) or *Miracle Warriors: Seal of the Dark Lord* (Kogado Software 1986), the first Japanese CRPG released in North America on the Sega Master System in 1988.

In the end, a little over 140 role-playing games appeared for the Famicom, representing approximately 11.5% of the console's ludography (behind only the all-encompassing action game genre with its 33%). Aside from the *Super Mario Bros.* series, the *Dragon Quest* games were also the biggest sellers on the console, with respectively 1.5, 2.4, 3.8, and 3.1 million copies sold for opus one to four, while *Final Fantasy III* (Square 1990) sold 1.4 million copies.

### The Golden Age of CRPGs and the Rise of Console Gaming: 1990s

The 1990s is generally viewed by academics and fans as a golden age for CRPGs due to the explosion of games that were developed and the quality of games released. During this period, a number of highly influential games whose impact can still be felt today appeared on the market: Bethesda Softwork's *Daggerfall*, Bioware's *Baldur's Gate*, and Blizzard's *Diablo* all fundamentally re-conceptualized CRPGs through innovative gameplay mechanics and narrative engagement. These were made possible through a willingness on the part of developers to push the boundaries of computer and console media by experimenting with the rapidly developing technologies of the period and integrating them into their games.

The middle of the 1990s saw the popularization of CD-ROM technologies into the consumer market. Due in part to the significantly larger amount of data CD-ROMs could hold when compared to their floppy disk cousins, video game developers across all genres began experimenting with incorporating actors and other real-world visual and audio elements into video games in this period. Aspects of these attempts found their way into CRPGs, albeit briefly, through the inclusion of live-action characters in games such as Interplay Entertainment's *Stonekeep* (1995) and Westwood Studio's *Lands of Lore: Guardians of Destiny* (1997). Japanese developers during this period also explored the limits of CD-ROM technology; NEC/Hudson Soft's PC Engine (Nintendo's main competitor at the time in Japan), for example, developed what were termed "cinematic RPGs" – games, such as the *Cosmic Fantasy* series, that integrated anime cut scenes into gameplay to develop narrative.

#### Box 6.4 Company Profile: SSI

Strategic Simulations Incorporated, better known as SSI, is best known as the developer of a series of highly influential and critically acclaimed D&D-licensed computer games created in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Founded in 1979 by Joel Billings, in September 1988, the company sought affiliated label distribution with Electronic Arts and was purchased in 1993 by Mindscape. In 2001, it was folded into Ubisoft.

The company defined the industry of wargaming and was highly productive, producing over 100 games for platforms as varied as the Atari, Apple II, and TRS-80. Although it developed a number of sci-fi and fantasy CRPG titles, the company is best known for its licensing partnership with TSR, which resulted in a number of highly influential games. Starting with *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: Heroes of the Lance* in 1988, the company would release, on average, one title a year associated with TSR (and D&D) for a little under a decade across a variety of TSR's licensed properties and CRPG subgenres.

With *Pool of Radiance* (1988), SSI created a game engine (referred to as the Gold Box engine) that combined D&D's rules with a tactical map interface seen in wargaming. It was also one of the first companies to experiment with online gaming with the development of *Neverwinter Nights* for America Online (AOL). Finally, it also released software tools for budding CRPG designers and TRPG referees. Unless otherwise noted, games were developed internally by SSI.

#### Notable Action Role-Playing Games

*Heroes of the Lance* (US Gold 1988), *Hillstar* (Westwood Associates 1989), *Dragonstrike* (Westwood Associates 1990)

#### Notable Gold Box Games

*Pool of Radiance* (1988), *Curse of the Azure Bonds* (1989), *Secret of the Silver Blades* (1990), *Pools of Darkness* (1991), *Neverwinter Nights* (Stormfront Studios 1991)

#### Design/Tabletop Support Tools

*Dungeon Master's Assistant Volume I* (1988), *Dungeon Master's Assistant Volume II* (1989), *Forgotten Realms: Unlimited Adventures* (1993)

Sources: Editor (1988), Proctor (1988), Olafson (1994)

While the Japanese experiment with injecting anime cut scenes into RPGs was largely successful, the replacement of sprites with real actors ended less fortuitously. Voice acting, however, did take off, and games such as *Baldur's Gate* allowed players to customize their characters by adding their own voice files. It should be noted that the inclusion of voice during this period was not necessarily isolated to American developers: in 1995, Namco successfully added voice elements to the *Tales of Phantasia* (Wolf Team 1995) Super Famicom cartridge. It was able to do so through creative compression techniques that caused the ROM-translation community of the time many problems (DeJap Translations 2003; SuperFamicom.org n.d.).

In addition to experimentation with new advances in hardware technologies, companies began to explore the viability of online gaming. *Neverwinter Nights* (Stormfront Studios 1991), published by SSI, was also one of the first CRPG experiments into online gaming. While it is true that multi-user dungeons (MUDs) in their various styles and implementations (e.g. MUSHes, and MOOs) were emerging during the early 1990s (→ Chapter 7), these platforms only offered a text-based interface. *Neverwinter Nights*, however, drew from the visual interface of the Gold Box engine and offered an experience familiar to many of its users. Accessed through AOL through an hourly fee, the game pushed the connectivity limits of dial-up. Due to its player vs. player elements and guild system, it is often identified as a proto-massively multiplayer online RPG (MMORPG). The game was unceremoniously shut down in 1997 due to a dispute over the future of the game: SSI and TSR wanted to expand access to the game, while AOL wanted to continue offering it as a pay-for-play title available only through them (Lucard 2011). Blizzard Entertainment would try something similar in the late 1990s for *Diablo*, using its Battle.net server, although the effort would be plagued by cheating (Barton 2008).

Despite the experimentation with new hardware technologies, however, the first half of the 1990s saw little innovation in terms of game engines; rather, developers in this period focused on refining gaming engines that were already successful. In its coverage of the 1992 Computer Electronics Show, *Computer Gaming World* (1992a) noted a trend to create tools that allowed for a similar experience or better integration across games by the same developer. Origin's *Ultima VII Part 2: Serpent Isle* (Origin Systems 1993) and New World Computing's *Might and Magic V: Darkside of Xeen* (New World Computing 1993) serve as examples of this trend as each developer focused on creating additional content that would integrate with existing worlds and gaming engines they utilized, while Square's *Final Fantasy* and Enix's *Dragon Quest* releases of the time maintained the familiar combat engines that defined their respective series.

The lack of innovation in CRPGs appears to have been temporary as the latter half of the 1990s witnessed developers taking risks in advancing the genre from both gameplay and narrative perspectives. In terms of narrative, a number of Japanese titles began experimenting with multiple endings based on the narrative choices players made throughout the game. Games such as *Suikoden* (Konami Computer Entertainment Tokyo 1996) and *Star Ocean* (tri-Ace 1996) were seen as holding immense replay value because of the different possible endings. While some Western developers also implemented multiple endings, their approach was slightly different in that these endings were used to determine the starting point of the next game in the series. *Wizardry VI: Bane of the Cosmic Forge* (Sir-Tech Software 1990), for example, contained three different endings based solely on what the player does with a certain item at one specific part of the game. Compare this to the Super Famicom *Shin Megami Tensei* (Atlus 1992) game, whose three endings are the product of a series of choices the player makes throughout the course of the game – choices that also influence the direction of the narrative.

**Box 6.5 Company Profile: Bethesda Softworks/Bethesda Game Studios**

Best known for *The Elder Scrolls* games and its revival of the *Fallout* series, Bethesda Softworks was founded in 1986 by Christopher Weaver and takes its name from the location of its headquarters in Bethesda, Maryland. In 2001, Bethesda Softworks assumed the role of game publisher, with game development being given to Bethesda Game Studios. Both companies are subsidiaries of ZeniMax Media, which Weaver co-founded with Robert Altman in 1999; the parent company currently owns a number of game publishers and developers, including id Software, Arkane Studios, and Tango Gameworks.

Bethesda Softworks's CRPG contributions lie in its use of immersive gameplay and world exploration that have come to define the sandbox element that contemporary fans see as the hallmark of Western role-playing games. While many games prior to *Daggerfall* featured first-person perspectives and/or complete worlds to explore (e.g. Sir-Tech's *Wizardry VII: Crusaders of the Dark Savant* (1992), Origin Systems' *Ultima VII: The Black Gate* (1992), and New World Computing's *Might and Magic: Clouds of Xeen* (1992) or *Might and Magic V: Darkside of Xeen* (1993)), *Daggerfall* introduced a totally new exploration element to the CRPG genre through the creation of random dungeons that players could explore. While the random dungeon design was admittedly limited to a few patterns that astute players could recognize with enough experience, the feature offered a new reason to play the game outside of the main storyline – exploration. This would be refined over Bethesda's product lines, with exploration becoming a significant gameplay experience for players of *Fallout* and later *Elder Scrolls* titles.

Source: ZeniMax Media (2014).

In terms of gameplay, a few console games began to integrate action elements into games as a means of differentiation. In an era dominated by the aesthetic combat archetype pioneered by the *Final Fantasy* franchise, with enemies on the left and player characters on the right, *Tales of Phantasia* developed a system known as the Linear Motion Battle System (LMBS), where real-time combat encounters took place on a 2-D stage reminiscent of platform games. The player could only directly control one character of the party at a time, although commands could be given through the menu or shortcuts. Real-time elements were also incorporated into SRPGs such as *Ogre Battle* (Quest 1995) and *Growlanser* (Career Soft 1999). Unlike PC developer forays into integrating action mechanics into CRPGs, these attempts by console game developers did not ripple significantly beyond the series these games founded and influence other titles.

**CRPGs: The New Millennium On**

This period witnessed an explosion of game development, although not all of the games developed were entirely new. Being around for a little over two decades, CRPGs had a history, and a newer generation of players did not have access to the “classic” titles – or did not wish to play them due to their rudimentary graphics. As a result, many publishers began dusting off previously profitable games, giving them a graphical facelift, and offering these updated versions for play on contemporary consoles and operating systems. These efforts were not

always successful, and many developers struggled to keep up with the rapid changes in global workflow brought about by emerging portable and handheld ecologies.

By the 2000s, some developers had fallen on hard times. Despite their huge successes in the 1990s, the Japanese gaming industry began to increasingly fend off charges of stagnation in their gameplay. In a 2005 article on the top ten video game clichés by EGM, the JRPG narrative structure is described as one of the staler tropes in need of revision (2005). Japanese gaming companies also saw this affect their revenues, and many companies tried to shore up their bottom lines by merging with or acquiring other game publishers. The Square–Enix merger in 2002 was emblematic of this problem. One the one hand, it was welcomed by fan communities but, on the other, viewed with skepticism by some in the industry and business sectors. An article in the *Economist* notes that while both companies individually owned flagship series (*Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest*), both titles suffered from ennui of innovation (2002). This viewpoint was given more credence as the newly made mega-company proceeded to raid its gaming archives to port previously popular titles to multiple platforms.

Part of the reason for this strategy was economic. In general, the Japanese gaming industry had been losing money steadily as Western game developers produced increasingly competitive and innovative games at the end of the 1990s. In addition, Square made an expensive gamble, trying to diversify its entertainment portfolios with the production of the movie *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*, a commercial flop from which it never really recovered. Bringing popular series like *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy* to portable and mobile devices was a low-cost way to generate revenue. Due to the general success engendered by this strategy, during the latter half of the decade, other Japanese developers began a strategy aimed at rereleasing older games on contemporary platforms, particularly handheld. These updated games frequently contained altered graphics (e.g. 3-D versions of games in the *Final Fantasy* franchise) and occasionally boasted additional content. Such strategy was twofold: it attracted older players through nostalgia value and the promise of additional content but also served to introduce a newer generation of players to the so-called classics. Table 6.3 outlines some of the more well-known titles Japanese developers have remade for later generation systems.

This strategy would become prolific in the Japanese gaming industry over the next few years, prompting fans and industry insiders, at least in the West, to proselytize a narrative of the Japanese gaming empire's decline.

In addition to struggling to develop innovative games that met the needs of Western markets (Electronic Gaming Monthly 2004), Japanese developers also struggled to keep up with the evolving technologies used to create games. From a development standpoint, Japanese developers' unfamiliarity with engines such as Unity and Unreal, which are increasingly used to develop games, has also decentralized the game-making process, compelling many studios to outsource aspects of development to overseas programmers (Electronic Gaming Monthly 2007). In the past, the localization process for JRPGs was largely unidirectional and occurred after a title's Japanese release. Even popular titles whose localization for Western markets was not in doubt, like SNES or PlayStation installments of *Final Fantasy*, could take a year until their debut on Western shores. Workflow during this period, however, began to change. Increased global synergy between subsidiaries of the same company meant that localization increasingly began operating simultaneously with game development. However, this process was still unidirectional in the sense that localization choices made to make the narrative more palatable to the target audience did not alter the Japanese narrative. Currently, localization is often folded into the development process of RPGs developed in Japan and used as a way to produce a uniform narrative cross-culturally.

TABLE 6.3 Short list of JRPGs ported to other systems

Game title	Initial platform and year	Alternate platform and year	Alternate platform and year	Alternate platform and year
<i>Valkyrie Profile</i>	PSX 1999 (JP) 2000 (NA)	PSP 2006 (JP) 2006 (NA)		
<i>Final Fantasy</i>	Famicom NES 1987 (JP) 1990 (NA)	GBA 2004 (JP, NA)	PSP 2007 (JP, NA)	iOS 2015 (JP)
<i>Final Fantasy III</i>	Famicom 1990 (JP)	Nintendo DS 2006 (JP, NA)	iOS 2011	Ouya 2013
<i>Final Fantasy IV</i>	Super Famicom SNES 1991 (JP) 1991 (NA)	GBA 2005 (JP, NA)	PSP 2011 (JP, NA)	iOS 2012 (JP)
<i>Final Fantasy VII</i>	SNES 1997 (JP, NA)	Windows 1998 (NA)	iOS 2015 (JP)	iOS 2014 (NA)
<i>Tales of Phantasia</i>	Super Famicom 1995 (JP)	GBA 2003 (JP) 2006 (NA)	PSP 2006 (JP)	iOS 2013 (JP)
<i>Dragon Quest (JP)</i>	Famicom NES 1986 (JP) 1989 (NA)	GBC 2000 (NA)	Wii 2011 (JP)	
<i>Dragon Quest VI</i>	Super Famicom 1995 (JP)	Nintendo DS 2010 (JP)	iOS 2015 (JP)	
<i>Tactics Ogre: Let Us Cling Together</i>	SNES 1995 (JP)	PSX 1997 (JP)	PSP 2010 (JP)	
		1998 (NA)		2011 (NA)

In contrast to the woes of Japanese console developers, developers of PC games began flexing their digital muscles through the production of a number of well-received games. Many of these titles drew from established gaming engines but offered intriguing narratives or gameplay mechanics. Troika Games' *Arcanum: of Steamworks and Magick Obscura* (Troika Games 2001) offers one example. Drawing from an engine reminiscent of the tactical, grid-based combat interface of *Fallout*, *Arcanum* positions the player in a world where both magic and science unstably coexist. Characters cannot become masters of both: the more proficient a character becomes in one, the more dangerous the other becomes to use. The game was well received critically but also produced a dedicated following who created numerous patches and add-ons to keep the game updated for current operating systems. Another game released the same year, *Gothic*, was known for its punishing learning curve and non-player character (NPC) faction system. Players found that, unlike in many CRPGs, entering houses unbidden and randomly looting chests caused NPCs to alter their behavior towards the character. While this feature was not necessarily new to CRPGs, it was one of the first to do this in a 3-D environment. Also, players did not start with a selected class; this was chosen based on decisions made in the game.

This is not to suggest that remakes of older games did not appear on the PC; to the contrary, there were a number of games drawing on the traditions of the PC classics of the 1980s. The games produced in this fashion, however, bore resemblance to their classic predecessors in name only. The Ubisoft reimagining of *Pool of Radiance* (Stormfront Studios 2001), for example, significantly altered the story from the SSI Gold Box classic, locating the fabled pool from which the game derives its name in the ruins of Myth Drannor (where it appeared in the sequel to the original, *Curse of the Azure Bonds*). InXile Entertainment's *The Bard's Tale* (InXile Entertainment 2004) follows a similar pattern, although connection to the original 1985 classic is only alluded to as the copyright to the series was still held by Electronic Arts.

In large part due to increasing competition from MMORPGs, however, the mid-2000s were fertile ground for gaming and industry oracles portending the demise of the single-player CRPG. As the next section describes, however, technological shifts in the production and consumption of games ensured that rumors of the genre's demise were greatly exaggerated.

### Current Sketch

The CRPG genre is currently undergoing a period of expansion. Aided by the democratization of gaming tools and the penetration of digital technologies into everyday life, CRPGs developed by independent developers and individuals can increasingly be found on smartphones and other portable technologies. As the market for CRPGs has broadened, so too have concerns among players over the status of the genre and the marketing tactics used to sell them.

The increasing penetration of smartphones and other portable technologies has offered a space for market expansion by targeting the so-called casual gamer. In Japan, the prevalence of mobile devices, especially smartphones, has influenced the direction of the market. Game publishers such as Gree, GungHo, and DeNA have played an increasing role in Japanese gaming on these platforms, frequently collaborating with established developers like Square-Enix. The importance of these new players in gaming can be seen in the fact that these companies have steadily increased their presence at trade shows, particularly the Tokyo Game Show (TGS), over the past few years.

While industry analysts and cultural critics have claimed that continued viability of the gaming industry, including the role-playing game genre, lies in appealing to a broader demographic, the emphasis on mobile platforms and the casual gamer market has ruffled the feathers of many players. While rarely articulated expressly, part of the resistance may have roots in the very premise of role-playing games as immersive worlds and skepticism that mobile games can provide this experience. What tends to be overlooked is the fact that the casual gamers, who make up the majority of the mobile market, are comprised of different demographics and look for different things than traditional gamers. The Computer Entertainment Supplier's Association's (CESA) survey of Japanese gaming trends (2014), for example, notes that while men tend to play video games more often, females across all age demographics are more likely to do so through smartphones or tablets and only continue playing games they find interesting. Recognition of this demographic shift may explain why the more popular games in Japan are casual games with role-playing game elements, like the PRPG *Puzzle & Dragons*. As of March 2015, the game had 35 million total downloads in Japan (GungHo Online Entertainment 2016) and over six million in North America (GungHo Online Entertainment 2015).

*Puzzle & Dragons*, like many games for smartphones, adopts what is known as the "freemium model," a marketing strategy pioneered in Japan, which offers users the game for free but allows for the purchase of additional content. As testament to the impact of this model, consider that in Japan in 2014, mobile games generated revenue in excess of 930.8 billion yen, or 8 billion USD in fiscal year (FY)2014<sup>3</sup>, up 11% from 2013 (Gueed 2015). *Puzzle & Dragons* has successfully utilized this model to become the first game to generate more than 1 billion USD in revenue (Jordan 2014).

### Box 6.6 Company Profile: Square-Enix

Square-Enix (SQEX) is arguably one of the most influential game publishers in console gaming. Best known for the *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest* (localized early on as *Dragon Warrior* in North America and Europe) series, the company has produced a number of other titles that have shaped CRPGs.

SQEX is really the product of a 2003 merger between two of Japan's biggest console publishers: Square, which was founded in 1983 by Masafumi Miyamoto, and Enix Corporation, renamed in 1982 from the original company name "Eidansha Boshu Service Center," founded in 1975 by Yasuhiro Fukushima. Since the merger, SQEX has expanded its global presence by opening subsidiaries in emerging markets or through acquisitions. In 2005, SQEX Holdings established a subsidiary in China and acquired Japanese developer Taito Corporation. In 2009, it acquired London-based Eidos PLC.

While the company continues to shape gaming, its main contributions to the CRPG form can be found in the 1990s, prior to the merger between Square and Enix. During this period, the companies produced a number of games that pushed the narrative boundaries of the form, and they experimented with a number of gameplay mechanics that have become industry standard. The active time battle system (ATB) pioneered in the *Final Fantasy* franchise is but one of these contributions.

Sources: Enix Corporation and Square (2002), Square Enix Japan (2016)

The prevalence of the freemium model in mobile games could be seen as a response to the democratization of game development technologies and distribution platforms. Through these, it is possible for small teams or even individuals to produce games that can theoretically compete with established developers and publishers. In an increasingly saturated market, the freemium model becomes one way developers can attempt to carve a user base.

Strictly speaking, the opportunity for average players to design games is not unique to this period. After all, the creation of modules or add-ons for games by fans has a long history in CRPGs. SSI's *Unlimited Adventures* (MicroMagic 1993) gave players the tools of the Gold Box engine to create their own games, a practice followed by BioWare in their version of *Neverwinter Nights* (BioWare 2002). The Elder Scrolls Construction Set, which worked with the game engines of *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* and *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, allowed fans similar resources, which enabled them to create entirely new worlds. These programs, however, merely provided users with the tools to build upon the existing scaffold of their respective games' engines; they did not allow for the substantive introduction of new interfaces or mechanics.

It should be noted that the impact of these programs is greatly dependent on the evolution of distribution technologies. While ASCII Corporation's *RPG Maker*, a tile-based construction set first released in Japan in 1992, enabled users to develop their own CRPGs, distribution technologies were vastly limited, both in terms of speed and scope, compared to today. The development of Web1.0 technologies certainly facilitated the spread of mods and indie games, but such user-developed content remained largely isolated to specific modding communities. It would not be until the development of Web2.0 technologies that increasingly diverse methods of distribution would become available. The creation of platforms such as Steam, PSN, and Xbox Live for gaming and Apple's App Store or Google Play for mobile devices broadens the ability of independent developers to distribute products outside the traditional publisher networks.

### Summary

One of the defining features of modern CRPGs is the importance of story to play. Unlike larps or TRPGs, however, CRPG stories unfold through interaction between the player and computer rather than between players. This is important because, at first glance, CRPGs appear to be less interactive than their other analog cousins, especially if interactivity is defined as social engagement. The fact that these conversations, albeit in a different form, took place in computing magazines and fan venues at the same time the genre emerged should not be overlooked.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of CRPGs to role-playing games as a whole is their willingness to experiment with the gaming mechanics that comprise them. In the 1970s, CRPGs were in their infancy and due to the limited processing power of PCs' efforts, focused on translating TRPG rules into viable programs. This process continued in the 1980s, and while this period witnessed the expansion of gaming consoles such as the Atari 2600 and Nintendo Entertainment System in the market, PCs remained the avant-garde of innovation due to their better processing and display capabilities. This would mostly hold true for the next decade, although the increasing popularity of console systems would help them drive innovations of their own.

Interestingly, the 1990s temporarily produced a regional schism in developers' preferred platforms, with Western developers largely favoring PCs and Japanese developers pushing consoles – the major players of which (Nintendo, Sega, and, later, Sony) originated in Japan. Despite this apparent fragmentation, similar experimentation with narrative appeared

cross-culturally. Multiple narrative starting points and endings, for example, appeared in both PC and console games around the same time, and these innovations continue to resonate today in series such as *Dragon's Age* and *The Witcher*.

While the gaming industry continued to grow during the new millennium, developers initially faced challenges adapting to new technologies. Japanese developers, in particular, focused on updating older, gaming "classics" for portable systems. However, while this generated revenue among industry and fan communities, it fueled a narrative of decline and stagnation from which the Japanese gaming industry has not fully recovered. Instead, advances in game development resources and distribution technologies that emerged in the latter half of the decade enabled independent developers to create games. The ability of these developers to distribute their games broadly was aided by the release of mobile technologies such as Google Play and Apple's App Store; distribution potential would further increase with the decision by Sony and Microsoft to invite indie developers to list games on their proprietary stores.

All in all, the CRPG form has grown immensely in its nearly 40-year history. Aided by developers willing to experiment with the limits of technological possibility, the form has influenced other computer gaming genres and had a lasting impact on the gaming industry, both culturally and economically.

### Acknowledgements

All screenshots in this chapter were created by the CRPG Book project available at <https://crpgbook.wordpress.com/>.

### Notes

- 1 This chapter will use the abbreviation SRPG to refer to both tactical and strategy role-playing games; this is to avoid confusion with tabletop role-playing games, abbreviated elsewhere in this volume as TRPGs.
- 2 Zork's creators briefly changed the name to Dungeon (which was the name used in the FORTRAN version of the game) to make it more saleable. When they got a letter from D&D publisher TSR, rather than fight in court, they changed it back. Source: <http://infodoc.plover.net/nzt/NZT4.2.pdf>.
- 3 Estimate based on an average exchange rate of 110.101 yen to the dollar, listed on the IRS website: [www.irs.gov/Individuals/International-Taxpayers/Yearly-Average-Currency-Exchange-Rates](http://www.irs.gov/Individuals/International-Taxpayers/Yearly-Average-Currency-Exchange-Rates).

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