Role-playing games around the world

A brief look at the history of role-playing games and the genres effect on the entertainment industry
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Abstract

Role-playing games have been paramount in the continued evolution of both the video game entertainment industry and computer development. This paper seeks to showcase its importance by tracing the genre’s origin as an alternative to chess, to its mainstream debut in 1974 with *Dungeons & Dragons* and its eventual move onto the computer. Role-playing games generally featured many rules and required a considerable amount of math and pre-planning to play. This made the genre a perfect fit for computers and the public would see the first computer role-playing game release in 1981. Thanks to its computerization, the genre managed to gain popularity in Japan with the release of game called *The Black Onyx* in 1984, resulting in a role-playing game boom across the country. Japan was at the forefront of game development in the 1980s, largely due to Nintendo success with their video game console; the *Famicom*. Thanks to the popularity of the *Famicom*, computer role-playing games managed to cement themselves into Japanese video game culture largely due to three large franchises: *Dragon Quest*, *Final Fantasy* and *Pokémon* which remain popular to this day. *Final Fantasy* and *Pokémon* also managed to garner considerable amount of international appeal, showcasing the genres continued importance in the future of entertainment.
Introduction

Most people have heard of *Dungeons & Dragons* and the role-playing genre before. Since its debut in the 1970s it has been extremely influential and controversial at the same time. It was even branded as a form of Satanism in the early 1980s and looked upon with prejudice (Waldron, 2004). It is, however, an extremely deep and fascinating genre that uses creative thinking and the human imagination more than anything (Wizards, 2014b). Its origin can seemingly be traced back to ancient China and India where some of the first board games are said to have originated from (Peterson, 2012). The role-playing genre continues to shape the evolution of video games and other popular media but, however, it is often viewed with extreme disdain as a genre that is only played by outcasts and socially inept people who like to dress up in costumes and play with needlessly large dice (Ewalt, 2013).

My interest in the genre derives from being a fan of fantasy and science fiction but aside from that I also watch Japanese anime ¹ and have been a video game enthusiast from a young age. In my case the catalyst for my interests in the pen and paper role-playing ² genre started when I first played a Japanese game called *Final fantasy 9* on the PlayStation one console. *Final Fantasy* is a long running series that first started in 1987 and is part of a genre more commonly known as a Japanese role-playing game (Palola, 2016). This was my first experience not only with role-playing games, but also with Japan and their games as well. *Final Fantasy 9* takes place in a fantasy kingdom filled with magic, ancient castles and giant airships. The game is filled with colorful characters, wonderful music and most importantly an amazing story which I had not experience in a video game before. It also featured a turn-based combat system ³ that changed the gameplay flow I was used to. It caused me to think and strategize beforehand which, for me, elevated this game to a whole new level. I was enthralled right from the beginning and it is an experience that still sticks with me to this day. It is what drew me to both fantasy, role-playing and Japanese culture and has had a profound lasting impact on my life.

*Final Fantasy 9* was of course not the first game to implement the common tropes of role-playing into its design. It is a part of the long evolutionary path that role-playing games have taken throughout the years. Throughout their journey role-playing games have had a lasting

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¹ Animation that is drawn and produced in Japan.
² Also known as tabletop role-playing. Mostly takes place on pieces of paper and in the players imagination.
³ Players and enemies each take their turn when during combat.
impact on the video game industry and computer development by introducing a genre that has
pushed the boundaries of computer capabilities and explored the possibilities of virtual
worlds (Bartle, 2003; Barton, 2008). Role-playing games also had a substantial effect on
Japanese pop culture with games such as Dragon Quest, Final Fantasy and Pokémon
(Donovan, 2010).

This essay seeks to showcase the genre’s importance in developing new forms of
entertainment by tracing its inception as an alternative to chess, its mainstream debut in 1974
and the genres eventual move onto the computer. It also looks at the role-playing genre’s
effect on the video game industry and how Japanese video game developers took a niche
genre and turned it into a global phenomenon that remains integrated in Japanese pop culture
to this day. To do so some of the most influential people, companies and games in the genre
are introduced. The hope is to give a broad overview of how the modern pen and paper genre
and its video game counterpart came to be whilst acknowledging that there were many more
events that took place than this paper manages to cover.
1. History of role-playing games

Before descending into the history of the genre and how modern role-playing games came to be, a short explanation of the genre is in order. There are many different types of role-playing games but most of them possess the following core concepts. It is played by a group of 2-6 people generally sitting around a table, it uses a large amount of dice and it takes place almost entirely in the collective imagination of the players involved (Wizards, 2014b). A typical role-playing game is usually heavily influenced by notable fantasy and science fiction works from authors such as J.R.R Tolkien, H.P Lovecraft and Frank Herbert (Ewalt, 2013). Players might explore ancient elven woods, defend a town against an undead army or perhaps decide to get drunk at the local tavern. There are of course a few restrictions of what a player can do in the world in the form of rule books which contain guidelines on how each game is played, but unlike normal board-games and video games players are able to act almost entirely of free will. At the start of a session, players create their character. The players start their character creation by choosing what gender their characters are, then of what race 4 and finally what class 5 they belong to. Subsequently, with the help of the rule books, players make use of dice rolls to determine their characters attributes such as strength and intelligence. Those attributes and statistics then dictate what the player’s characters can do once the game begins. One of the players does not create a character but, instead, takes the role known as a Dungeon master 6. That player is the group’s storyteller and referee, acting as an all-knowing director that guides players through the world. That player also acts as an interpreter of the rules and informs the party what is allowed and what is forbidden. The Dungeon master also takes on the role of every person or monster the players encounter (Wizards, 2014a). A normal scenario would have the Dungeon master explain the current situation to the players, the players then explain their intentions and the Dungeon master narrates the results of their action. Those results are usually gained by rolling dice (Wizards, 2014a). These dice can range from the well-known 6-sided dice to an excessively large 20-sided one (Winters, 2007). A die roll can determine everything from breaking down a door to striking an enemy with a sword. It gives the game world a sense of randomness and ensures that each experience is unique (Wizards, 2014b).

4 Races such as dwarves, orcs, elves and so forth.
5 Character classes, such as Fighter, wizards, monks, define certain statistics and attributes.
6 Also known as a Game master
1.2 Early history and development

Role-playing games owe their existence, in part, to a larger genre called war games. Like the name suggests, war games simulate war on a variety of battlefields by using complex mathematical equations, dice and many devices to measure distance and height (Peterson, 2012). Their origin can be traced back thousands of years to Asia when they were used to strategize during times of war. This would later evolve into the Indian tabletop game *Chaturanga* which was played on a tiled board and featured an array of miniatures including elephants, horse riders, kings and so on (MacDonell, 1898). This is believed to be the ancient ancestor of *chess*, whether that is true remains debated. Most historians do agree that the original idea originated somewhere in ancient Asia (Soltis, 2015).

The original rules of chess have largely stayed the same throughout the ages but however several people have tried to evolve the concept by either creating their own take on the genre or by bringing it back to its war game roots. In 1780 a man named Johann Christian Ludwig Hellwig created a chess game aptly dubbed *war chess*. It featured over 1600 tiled squares and 120 pieces representing foot soldiers, artillery, commanders, boats and cavalry. The tiles were also colored depending on the type of terrain, changing the movement of the units trying to cross over them (Huntemann & Payne 2010). Hellwig’s game also featured a high insurmountable number of rules which were said to be so complex that a normal match required a neutral referee to oversee the match and settle arguments that might arise during the battle (Ewalt, 2013). This extreme difficulty level would later lead a Prussian civil servant named Georg Leopold von Reiswitz to create *Kriegsspiel* in 1812 which featured much simpler rules (Peterson, 2012).

Like Hellwig's *war chess*, *Kriegsspiel* was played on a tiled board and used themed miniatures to represent units. It became incredibly popular among Prussian officers after Otto von Bismarck made it an official training exercise for the Prussian army in the 1860s (Peterson, 2012). After seeing Bismarck's many successes during the Franco-Prussian war other countries quickly started adopting war games into their training regimen. Von Reiswitz game also began to make its way into the mainstream in the 1900s, causing the genre to evolve yet again (“History of War Games,” n.d.).

In 1913 a well-known British author named H.G Wells took the concepts of *war chess* and *Kriegsspiel* and made a simpler war game called *Little Wars* (Wells, 1913). The game used only a child's collection of tin soldiers and a battlefield of your own making. The units
allowed were soldiers, cavalry and artillery guns that fire small paper balls. The rule book explains how to move the soldiers, how and when to fire the artillery, what happens in hand-to-hand combat and what the victory condition are. It is all explained in simple terms and even show photos that show what a match of *Little Wars* might look like (Wells, 1913). Its simplified ruleset made it perfect for the mainstream audience and is said to be the true start of war gaming as a hobby. Thus H.G. Wells is not only known for books like *War of the Worlds* but is also known as the father of war gaming (Ewalt, 2013). Over the next few years war gaming would enjoy extreme popularity but it would still be about 60 years until role-playing games would see the light of day.

### 1.3 Modern role-playing games

The modern role-playing would not be dreamt up until the mid-1970s upon the meeting of two visionaries called David Arneson and Gary Gygax (Peterson, 2012).

Arneson was born in 1947 and became a historical war gaming enthusiast in the 1960s. He was a fan of mythology and fantasy and was quite known to subtly add fantastical elements into the war games he conducted to keep his players interested. He would later introduce his friends to a world of his own creation called *Blackmoor* (Tresca, 2011). Arneson's new setting took place in a castle called *Blackmoor* and featured a multi-leveled dungeon filled with treasure, adventure and danger. The key difference between *Blackmoor* and other war game settings was that players were limited to controlling only one character. It still used common war gaming rules for movement and resolving conflict but this new take enthralled his players and soon spread to other gaming groups as well (Ewalt, 2013). The more Arneson played the more he found that the pre-existing war gaming rules were limiting the experience. This led Arneson to continue working on his concept by adding in new rules such as fighting in plate mail, how characters advanced and even guidelines about the use of magic. Arneson did this mainly by using a book called *Chainmail*, co-written by a man named Gary Gygax (Tresca, 2011). *Chainmail* was a rule book on how to conduct war games in a medieval setting and detailed the rules of conflict in medieval combat. David Arneson would later meet *Chainmail*'s author, Gary Gygax, at a gaming convention which was the first step towards the creation of the modern role-playing game (Peterson, 2012).

Gary Gygax was born in North America in 1938 and, like David Arneson, was a big fan of war games, science fiction and fantasy literature and thoroughly enjoyed writing rules and creating games. Gygax created a custom setting for his friends wherein each player would...
take control of one character in a military occupied town with Gygax as a neutral referee, telling players what they could and could not do. It allowed players a sense of freedom in game which was unheard of before, so much in fact that Gygax was constantly forced to either alter pre-existing rules or author a more comprehensive ruleset (Ewalt, 2013). Gygax was also a prominent figure in both the table top community and its industry. He created several board games, was a co-founder of the International Federation of War gaming, co-wrote the book Chainmail and is one of the founders of the biggest tabletop-game convention in North America, *Gen con*7( Peterson, 2012). It was there where he first met with David Arneson and had his first experience with *Blackmoor* (Parket, 2008).

David Arneson and Gary Gygax teamed up in 1972 and started working on a new game based on Arneson’s *Blackmoor*. Together they took the concepts already in place in *Blackmoor*, rewrote and created rules and added new elements such as player classes and the idea of experience points. Later that year they finished a 150-page rule book called *The Fantasy Game* (Tresca, 2011). Both men proceeded to playtest the game with their own groups and finally in 1974 *The Fantasy Game* was renamed to *Dungeons & Dragons* and released to the public (Edwards, 2003). *Dungeons & Dragons* became incredibly popular in tabletop gaming circles. It was a more polished version of Arneson’s own *Blackmoor* but gave players considerably more freedom like in Gygax’s setting. It solidified the idea of having a Dungeon master as an all-knowing referee, a storyteller who narrated and guided players through the world. Dungeons & Dragons also embraced and encouraged player created content and pioneered the idea of characters getting stronger the longer you played them by using the concept of levels and experience points (Ewalt, 2013). Even though this two-man team would eventually break up; the concept and the world they dreamt up together would revolutionize not only the tabletop genre but would also have tremendous effects on fantasy and more importantly video game development (Donovan, 2010).

7 Originally known as Lake Geneva Wargames Convention
2. Role-playing in video games

Fans of fantasy, science fiction and mythology were immediately attracted to this new form of table top gaming. Among them, providentially for the future of game development, were a large amount of computer programmers. Dungeons & Dragons was played in college campuses across North America and that is where the first ideas arose regarding bringing the genre to a computerized format (Donovan, 2010).

There was a considerable amount of experimentation being done with computers and games in the 1970s. Some of those early experiments would even eventually lead to a golden age of arcade gaming. Leading that charge was Atari, which was one of the big early video game publishing and development companies (Baer, n.d.). They almost single handedly launched the video game industry with the electronic table tennis game Pong (1972) (Hosch & Young, 2013). They were also responsible for importing Space invaders (1978), Pac-man (1979) and Donkey Kong (1981) from Japan, resulting in an almost unprecedented video game boom across North America. Atari would later go on to make the first mainstream home gaming system with a home Pong system in 1974 and a cartridge based console called the Atari 2600 in 1977 (Baer, n.d.). Encouraged by Atari’s success, numerous other programmers decided to try their hand at developing games not only for Arcades and home consoles but for computers as well.

Computer development was still at a quite early stage in the mid-1970s and were generally unavailable to a large majority of the public. Most of them were still room sized pieces of electronics that required special printed out punch cards to operate (Swaine & Freiberger, 2013). They were also incredibly expensive and required a lot of maintenance and training to use, resulting in them being mainly available to the military and certain schools that specialized in technology (Donovan, 2010). That, of course, did not stop gaming enthusiasts in exploring the possibility of making video games for these machines. The earliest games were simple programs that used punch cards to play but as screens became more common the games became more complex (Kushner, 2013). Many of those early computer games are now lost to the ages as the slot cards were usually destroyed either by campus teachers and professors or by the students themselves; the games were looked open as nothing but practice or a proof of concept. Even though those games were short-lived they

8 Mechanical or electric coin operated machines. They had games built into them and were usually found in bars, Arcade establishments or amusement parks.
9 Medium sized cards that were used to store early computer programs.
managed to influence hundreds of gaming enthusiasts throughout the world. Those programmers would go on and try their own hand at creating games which resulted in the creation of the first computer based role-playing games (Donovan, 2010).

The earliest form of role-playing on the computer came in the form of text adventure games. They were simple programs that, like the name suggests, only used text to play (Mee, 2015). The game would describe the environment to the player, the player was able to input simple text commands to tell the program what he wished to do and the program would type out the results, very much like a Dungeon master in a pen and paper role-playing game. One of the earliest example is William Crowther’s *Colossal Cave Adventure* created in 1976 (Mee, 2015). The game took place in a large cave system with several rooms. The main goal was to explore said cave, solve puzzles and find a treasure hidden somewhere inside (Adams, 2007). It fascinated programing enthusiasts and was played in computer labs across North America. *Colossal Cave Adventure* was the start of a new wave of computer based entertainment and would see many imitations and improvements. One such game was the text adventure *Zork* (1980). *Zork* took the genre farther by having much more complex locations, a longer story and many more text options available to the players, giving them even more options on how they wanted to play (Player 4 Stage 1, 2006).

These games and many others would be available to the public when the first home computers arrived in the late 1970s. Gaming on home computers became especially prominent with the release of the Apple II in 1977 (Kushner, 2013). The Apple II was a huge success and is hailed as one of the bestselling home computers of all time, right behind the Commodore 64 (Weyhrich, 2015). Apple managed to gain over 20% of the home computer market by 1981 making them the market leader in home computers. The APPLE II’s BASIC programing language\(^\text{10}\) also allowed aspiring programmers outside of institutions to finally test the waters themselves (Swaine & Freiberger, 2013; Kushner, 2013).

### 2.2 Role-playing games on the computer and Ultima

Role-playing games, by nature, required a lot of time, energy and number crunching to play. Players and Dungeon masters alike had to regularly consult the rule books to see, for example, if the warrior could strike the goblin with his +2 swords while being submerged in water. The same can be said for war games which also required a lot of preparation to play

\(^{10}\text{Stands for Beginner's All-purpose Symbolic Instruction Code. Used to give computers commands and in the creation of software.}\)
The computer's ability to process math and simulate digital worlds made it a perfect place for both role-playing games and war games to evolve. One of the earlier, and arguably most influential, role-playing game creator was a man named Richard Garriott, also known as Lord British (King & Borland, 2014).

Garriott was a Dungeons & Dragons player, a Dungeon master and a computer enthusiast from a young age. He started out programing for an old punch card computer but quickly moved onto the Apple II once his family acquired one. Garriott spent much of his time both acting as a Dungeon Master for his Dungeons & Dragons group and programing in BASIC for the APPLE II (Donovan, 2010). He started out creating simple text adventures inspired by Dungeons & Dragons but later made software that included graphics and sounds (King & Borland, 2014). He spent two years working on his first game which he dubbed Akalabeth: World of Doom which came out in 1979 (Barton, 2008). In the world of Akalabeth players enter the dungeon of Akalabeth and must battle through hordes of monsters and face dangerous traps to survive. Akalabeth featured a first-person perspective, 10 different types of monsters and 3D wireframe graphics. It was revolutionary for its time (Barton, 2008). It used a lot of existing Dungeons & Dragons tropes to give the player a table top experience with the touch of a button. Today it is looked at as quite primitive and it is almost impossible to get into due to its difficulty, but for its time it was the breakthrough Dungeons & Dragons players had been waiting for (Hunter, n.d.).

Garriot did not stop there and after his success with Akalabeth he started creating games professionally. His follow up was Ultima: The First Age of Darkness which was released in 1981 for the Apple II and is widely considered to be one of the most influential role-playing computer game of all time (King & Borland, 2014; Donovan 2010). It was the true start of the Computer Role-playing game genre, also known as CRPG. The scope of Ultima was said to be truly epic. It featured the first-person perspective dungeon crawling from Akalabeth, but it also had a sprawling virtual world where players would control their character through a top down view as they traversed across the map (Barton, 2008). Ultima took everything that worked from the previous game and improved on it. Being more streamlined resulted in it being simple for new players to pick up and Ultima managed to take the Dungeons & Dragons experience and make it appealing not only for hard core pen and paper gamers, but for the mainstream audience as well. Garriot followed this up with Ultima II: The Revenge of the Enchantress which continued the story from the last game. It featured some graphical

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11 Garriot’s Dungeon Master nickname.
12 A collection of white lines when arranged correctly gives of a three dimensional illusion.
improvements but most notably it allowed the main character to interact with other non-
player computer characters in the game world. Garriot would continue to constantly evolve
the CRPG genre with his future games and would eventually help pioneer the massive-
multiplayer online genre in 1997 (Donovan 2010). That brought gaming onto a whole new
level with the help of the Internet. This would eventually pave the way for other games like
Barton, 2008).

2.3 Wizardry: a different take on the genre

Garriot’s Ultima was by no means the only innovation in the recently created CRPG
genre. Another worthy competitor came from a company called Sir-soft where another
Dungeons & Dragons enthusiast named Robert Woodhead was creating his own take on the
genre. His game was called Wizardry: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord and, like
Ultima, came out in 1981 (Barton, 2008). Wizardry featured three-dimensional first-person
dungeon explorations with wireframe graphics like Ultima, but it differed in several
fundamental ways. Instead of controlling a single character like in Ultima, Wizardry offered
players the option to create and control six different adventurers at once (Maher, 2012).
Players could choose between five different races, pick four classes and even customize
the characters statistics before venturing forth in to the dungeon, very much like players do
before starting a Dungeons & Dragons campaign. It also featured larger battles with over six
monsters being able to appear on screen at once which was almost unheard of at that time
(Maher, 2012). Woodhead did this by cutting away to a different screen when combat took
place. This also enabled him to have higher quality art for the monsters because the combat
screen did not use the same wireframe graphics (Derboo, 2014). In Ultima monsters were
constantly roaming around the dungeon, but in Wizardry they would appear at random
13 giving the game a sense of danger. Wizardry was considered a much harder game to play
but managed to garner much attention for its party system, combat and its quality (Derboo,
2014). The inclusion of having a six-character party changed the gameplay completely and
players now had to carefully pre-plan quite a bit before being able to play the game itself

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13 Later became known as Random battle encounters.
It offered a good alternative for players looking for something a bit more complex and a game that was closer to a normal pen and paper campaign (Barton, 2008).

*Wizardry* and *Ultima* would go on to influence countless games in the CRPG genre and would be especially influential among developers in Japan once the genre made its way to the east. That happened in 1984 when a Dutch man named Henk Rogers introduced role-playing games to Japan (Donovan 2010).

### 2.4 The Black Onyx and Japan

Henk Rogers was one of the founders of Bullet-proof software, a little-known video game developing and publishing company based in Japan. He was also an old school *Dungeons & Dragons* player and a fan of both *Wizardry* and *Ultima*. Rogers stands as one of the most influential developers in the early days of the video game industry. He did not speak or read any Japanese when he first came to Japan and relied on the help of translators and friends to conduct business, but not only did he introduce the Japanese people to the concept of role-playing games, both tabletop and computer, in 1984 (Japan’s First RPG, 2008) he was also the man who ended up winning the rights to *Tetris* from its Russian developer and introduced it to the world (Remo, 2009).

Rogers made a CRPG called *The Black Onyx* in 1984 which is widely hailed as the first Japanese role-playing game, or JRPG (Parish, 2014). The Black Onyx was a relatively simple game and was often considered to be an easier version of Woodhead’s *Wizardry* (Donovan 2010). It still featured a similar party creation system, the first-person perspective exploration and combat from Woodhead’s game but in a more simplified and streamlined way. *The Black Onyx* featured less options and was nowhere near to the scale of *Ultima* nor *Wizardry*. What it did do well was focus on introducing players to the concept of role-playing games rather than decimating them with extreme difficulty (Remo, 2009).

The game was considered a commercial success in Japan and even won several awards from Japanese magazines (Parish, 2014). It also sparked a CRPG boom in Japan with players importing and playing other games in the genre. Among them were Japanese game developers Yuji Horii and Hironobu Sakaguchi who would become the creators of a new sub-genre in 1986 (Barton, 2008).

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14 The chance of losing a character early on is a high possibility and it results in the game being nearly unbeatable.
3. Role-playing development in Japan

Before talking about Japanese game development, it would be remiss not to mention the video game *Crash* of 1983 which nearly killed the video game industry (Hunter, n.d. b).

Atari remained the biggest name in the video game industry throughout the mid-1970s and early 1980s. The company’s rise to power showed the world that there was quite an untapped market for digital entertainment out there and new video game focused companies appeared almost daily to capitalize on that (Wolf, 2007). Everyone desired a piece of the fictional video game pie but there was only so much you can take until there is nothing left (Hunter, n.d. b).

The video game industry in the 1980s was notorious for its complete lack of quality control. The market was flooded with an enormous amount of subpar home consoles, broken games

and barely usable accessories which went unsold most of the time (Donovan 2010). This caused retailers to rapidly lower the prices to clear up shelf space and get rid of excess merchandise. They also stopped ordering new products which in turn caused mass closure of video game companies and arcades alike, nearly extinguishing the industry in America (Sheff, D). Video games were thought of nothing more than a short-lived craze which had come and gone. That state of mind would remain until 1985 when the Japanese toy company Nintendo managed to successfully rejuvenate the industry (Wolf, 2007).

Japanese game developers had made their name in the early days of the 1970s Arcade boom with renowned games like *Space Invaders*, *Pacman* and *Donkey Kong*. The Japanese video game industry was also largely unaffected by the *crash* of 1983 largely due to their own healthy domestic market (Sheff, D). New games were constantly being made and Arcades remained as popular as ever, but no one had managed to break into the Japanese home console market. That happened in 1983 when a former toy company called Nintendo came up with an affordable solution (Lonwood, 2011).

Nintendo first broke into the market in 1977 by developing and selling their own home *Pong* machine

. They followed this up in 1980 by releasing a simple hand-held gaming device called the *Game & Watch* which became an almost instant best seller. All of this had

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15 There was also quite an amount of pornographic focused video games.
16 Countless companies tried to capitalize on Pong’s success by making video games that looked and felt like the original.
made Nintendo a prominent player in the Japanese video game industry but, arguably, their biggest success came in the form of a home console system (Harris, 2014, Kent, 2010).

In 1983 Nintendo release the *Family computer*, known *Famicom*, a cheap cartridge based home console. The *Famicom* ended up being one of the first highly profitable home console systems in Japan and dominated the domestic market. Its success in Japan prompted Nintendo to go international and they released the Famicom in both America (1985) and Europe (1986) under the name *Nintendo Entertainment system* (Kent, 2010).

Nintendo had observed what happened last time when the market crashed from the lack of quality and over saturation. They put strict guidelines in place and demanded that all video game developers who desired to make games for the *Nintendo Entertainment system* had to follow (Kent, 2010). The rules detailed what was and what was not allowed and demanded that games had to be thoroughly tested before release. Many viewed the company as tyrannical but Nintendo’s arrival in America is often looked on as the reason why the video game industry still exists in the first place (Donovan 2010). The *Nintendo Entertainment System* ended up being a smash hit, outselling every other gaming console before it and moving the main development of video games to Japan for years to come (Kent, 2010). It is also on that system were the next evolutionary step in role-playing genre took place (Barton, 2008).

### 3.2 A new sub-genre: Dragon Quest

The release of *The Black onyx* in 1983 brought forth a rise of interest in role-playing games across Japan causing Japanese players, who desired to know more about the genre, to import and play games such as *Ultima* and *Wizardry*. Two of those early Japanese fans were the programmers Yuji Horii and Koichi Nakamura (*Japan’s First RPG*, 2008).

Both Nakamura and Horii worked for a game developer company named Chunsoft, which Nakamura had founded in the early 1980s (Parish, 2016). The company mainly made games for another relatively new game publisher called Enix which was constantly looking to expand its video game catalog which it did by hiring promising young programmers. Horii had appeared on the video game scene with his murder mystery adventure the *Portopia Serial Murder case* for the home computer (Donovan 2010). Nakamura would later help Horii in porting *Portopia Serial Murder case* to Nintendo’s *Famicom* but first they had to completely
redesign the games interface, making it easier to play with a controller\textsuperscript{17}. This turned out to be an excellent practice for their next creation (Parish, 2016).

Both Nakamura and Horii had played \textit{The Black Onyx} and were fans of western role-playing games, Horii especially. Horii wanted to create a role-playing game for the \textit{Famicom} system but first he had to think of a way to make it appealing for the console demographic (Bloom, n.d.). Role-playing games in the 1980s were complicated, featured simple primitive graphics and mainly appealed to an older demographic of gamers (Barton, 2008). Nakamura and Horii took what they considered was important to genre such as: random encounters, an open explorable virtual world and the concepts about characters gaining strength with levels and experience points (Parish, 2016). They developed a combat system like the one found in \textit{Wizardry}. Combat encounters occurred randomly and the action itself took place on a separate part of the screen. They used the experience they gained by porting \textit{Portopia Serial Murder case} to the \textit{Famicom} and made the role-playing experience fully playable on a consoles controller without sacrificing the staples of the genre (Bloom, n.d.). The game was also easier and more forgiving, making it a perfect game for beginner role-playing fans (Kalata, 2008). Nakamura and Horii also teamed up with hit manga artist Akira Toriyama who was the creator of the popular \textit{Dragon ball} manga\textsuperscript{18} and musician Koichi Sugiyama who was known for making background music for drama programs and advertisement (Donovan 2010). Together they released \textit{Dragon Quest} in 1986 which not only ended up taking Japan by storm, but created an entirely new sub-genre of role-playing games; The console role-playing game (Bloom, n.d.; Parish, 2016).

Because of the games appealing visuals, triumphant music and streamlined gameplay \textit{Dragon Quest} sold incredibly well in Japan (Kalata, 2008) By its third iteration (1988) it had gotten so popular that children and adults alike skipped school and work to be able to buy the game on the day of its release. It is said that it got so bad that the Japanese government had to put forth a legislation saying that Enix would only be allowed to release future \textit{Dragon Quest} games on a Sunday or a holiday (Donovan 2010). \textit{Dragon Quest} became an icon in Japan and soon stores and arcades were flooded with \textit{Dragon Quest} merchandise (Parish, 2016). It was a system seller and both Enix and Nintendo did everything they could to capitalize on its success with a rapid release of sequels. Despite it being a country wide phenomenon in Japan, \textit{Dragon Quest} seemingly never managed to find a meaningful foothold outside of the

\textsuperscript{17} The original \textit{Famicom} controller featured only two buttons and a directional pad.

\textsuperscript{18} A comic book produced and drawn in Japan.
country’s borders but not for the lack of trying on both Enix’s and Nintendo’s part (Bloom, n.d.).

Enix had no offices in North America during the mid-1980s so Nintendo of America decided to publish *Dragon Quest* themselves in both North America and Europe. Nintendo spent an enormous amount of money on translating and advertising *Dragon Quest*, hoping to replicate its success outside of Japan. The game was renamed to *Dragon Warrior*\(^{19}\), to avoid copyright infringement, and released in 1989 to little fanfare (Barton, 2008; Donovan 2010). The North American version never managed to come close to the sale number in Japan. It is speculated that one of the reasons for its unpopularity its age, which was turning 3 years old when it released in North America. The graphics looked primitive and the interface felt clunky compared to newer games like *The Legend of Zelda* (1987) (Kalata, 2008). The next generation of home consoles were also just around the corner, touting to be everything that the current of consoles generation was not. The early lackluster sale numbers did little to deter Nintendo, causing them to give *Dragon Warrior* away for free as a bonus for subscribing to the gaming magazine *Nintendo power* (Parish, 2016). This caused the numbers to rise significantly for the first game but its sequels, which were released a few years later, never managed to come close in replicating those numbers (Kalata, 2008). One of the reasons was the outdated graphics and interfaces, but another perhaps more significant reason was that *Dragon Quests* was also eclipsed by another role-playing franchise from a small company called Square (Donovan 2010).

### 3.3 International appeal: Final Fantasy

The release of *Dragon Quests* caused a surge of interest both in playing and making role-playing games and Japanese developers and companies alike were eagerly trying to create the next big thing. None managed to develop anything that matched the sheer popularity of *Dragon Quest*, not until the release of Square’s *Final Fantasy* in 1987 (Donovan 2010).

Square was in profound financial troubles in 1986. They had developed several games for Nintendo’s *Famicom* system but had had no real successes and were on the verge of closure (Palola, 2016). A young programmer named Hironobu Sakaguchi had joined the company a few years earlier, sacrificing his university career in order pursue his dreams of creating video games (Palola, 2016). Sakaguchi was said to have been dissatisfied; his dream job was seemingly going nowhere and the idea of resuming his studies did not seem like a bad idea at

\(^{19}\) *Dragon Quest name* was apparently taken in North America.
that point. Square’s higher ups managed to convince him to stay and work on one last project which would likely end up being the Square’s final product. What was supposed to be the company’s swansong ended up being the birth of an international phenomenon called Final Fantasy (Kent 2010).

Sakaguchi was, like a lot of Japanese programmers at the time, fascinated with western CRPGs, especially Ultima, Wizardry and The Black Onyx. For his final project, he decided on creating his take on the genre and he did so by using well known elements from previous games and incorporated them into his own design (Donovan 2010; Kent, 2010). He took the open explorable map from Ultima and combined them with the party based combat system from Wizardry and The Black Onyx (Barton, 2008). Sakaguchi also made use of turn-based random encounters, which Dragon Quest had popularized in Japan, and used the concepts of gaining experience points and leveling up (Palola, 2016). Final Fantasy’s decision to have four playable characters like Wizardry set it apart from the ever-growing Dragon Quest franchise, which only made use of one playable character (Barton, 2008). Final Fantasy allowed players a certain amount of freedom in creating their party of heroes by giving them the ability to choose from a variety of classes, very much like pen and paper role-playing games (Barton, 2008; Ewalt 2013). Among the available classes players could choose from were warriors, white mages, black mages, monks, ninjas and many more which ended up becoming staples of the Final Fantasy franchise (Schreier, 2012) After reaching a certain point in the game’s campaign, players were even offered to upgrade their heroes to more powerful classes, giving the game a sense of progression. Final Fantasy also opted not to use the first person combat popularized in earlier CRPG, but instead it presented its combat from a side view perspective with the playable characters and enemies lined up vertically on opposite side of the screen. This ended up becoming a known genre trope for future Japanese role-playing games. Final Fantasy also managed to do something which Dragon Quest was unable to do previously. It managed to become popular outside of Japan (Barton, 2008; Rojas, 2012).

Final Fantasy seemingly put an end to Square’s financial woes with its release in North America in 1990 and even managed to outdo Enix’s Dragon Quest in both sales and popularity (Palola, 2016). Final Fantasy also changed how video game narratives are viewed today by demonstrating that virtual stories can be something more than the conventional genre tropes such as defeating an evil overlord or saving a princess (Palola, 2016). The story managed to quickly distance itself from those typical story hooks by having the heroes
defeating the evil wizard and rescuing the princess in the first 10 minutes of the game and instead tells a time traveling, multi-continental story in which the world itself is at stake (Rojas, 2012). This often viewed as cliché and outdone story hooks today but in 1987 it seemed to have been a much-needed breath of fresh air and managed to set Final Fantasy apart from its competitors (Donovan 2010; Palola, 2016).

Even though the first Final Fantasy managed to do remarkably well outside of Japan’s domestic market, its sequel Final Fantasy II (1988) is said to have been a travesty. It was apparently plagued by English translation errors and game breaking bugs resulting in Square not releasing it outside of Japan and subsequently, due to Nintendo’s lack of faith in the international appeal of the series, decided not to translate and publish Final Fantasy III (1990) outside of Japan either (Schreier, 2012).

Final Fantasy returned to North America on Nintendo’s Super Nintendo Entertainment System (1990 in Japan, 1991 in NA) with Final Fantasy IV, but due to it being the second internationally released game it was dubbed Final Fantasy II in North America and Europe. This instalment was responsible for introducing countless youths to both the role-playing genre and the Final Fantasy franchise and, due to its popularity, managed to cement Final Fantasy’s foothold in North America (Barton, 2008).

Dragon Quest and Final Fantasy remain as two of the biggest Japanese role-playing games, also known as JRPGs, franchises to this day and are responsible for countless developments both inside and outside of the Japanese video game industry. They have encouraged countless other developers in pursuing their own dreams of making video games and among them was the programmer Satoshi Tajiri who would be responsible in creating one of the world’s most popular franchise; Pokémon (Donovan 2010).

3.4 The Game Boy and Pokémon

With the success of the Nintendo Entertainment System and the Super Nintendo Entertainment System, Japan’s dominance of the video game industry seemed absolute. In the early 1990 Nintendo and its main competitor Sega, another video game company from Japan, went head to head in the console market. Sega had been unable to compete with Nintendo in Japan due to several reasons so they opted to take the fight to Europe and America instead with their home video game console the Sega Genesis. Sega managed, through clever marketing, to gain a considerable percentage of the video game market in America and

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20 Known as the Mega Drive outside of North America.
Europe but this was mainly on the console level; the hand-held gaming scene was a completely different story. It seemed that there was no touching Nintendo’s smash hit; the *Game Boy* (Harris, 2014).

The *Game Boy* launched in 1989 and was the next piece of electronics from Gumpei Yokoi, the creator of the *Game & Watch* (1980) hand held system for Nintendo. The Japanese people had initially fallen in love with the price of the *Game & Watch* but it was its ability to play games on the go that really cemented people’s affection for the system (Donovan 2010). Gumpei decided instead of competing on a technological and graphical level with other hand-held devices, the *Game Boy* should do so on a practical level and capitalize on people’s love for mobile gaming. The *Game Boy* featured two buttons, a monochrome screen and a tin speaker. The hardware was already outdated at the *Game Boy*’s release in 1989, but due to that the price was considerably lower than other hand-held systems. It also touted a 10-hour battery life which, at the time, was unheard before (Kent, 2010). It also launched with Alexey Pajitnov’s puzzle phenomenon *Tetris*, which Henk Rogers had managed to secure the hand-held publishing rights to (Remo, 2009). All this combined made the *Game Boy* an international smash hit and would end up being a considerable factor in Nintendo’s continued survival in the ever-changing video game industry (Wolf, 2007). It would feature countless well received games but, perhaps, the most influential one would be Satoshi Tajiri’s monster capturing game in 1995 (Donovan 2010).

As video games grew more popular it came under scrutiny for its both the public and academics who worried of games were influencing children’s social development in a negative manner (Harris, 2014). Among them was Satoshi Tajiri, a game developer for a Japanese game company called Game Freak. He thought that video games were increasingly isolating children and making them anti-social, thus he wanted to make a game that utilized the *Game Boys* ability to link two systems together by using a special linking cable and, as a result, bring children together in a thriving social environment. Tajiri used his love of bug hunting as a child to create a game concept were players would travel a virtual landscape and hunt and train monsters. He also wanted players to be able to trade those monsters with other real-life friends using the *Game Boys* linking function (Madnani, 2016). Tajiri managed to convince Nintendo to publish his game on their system but, expecting minimal sales, they only manufactured 200,000 cartridges for retailers to sell. Those sold out in mere days as the *Pocket Monster* craze gripped Japan and unbeknownst to Nintendo and Game Freak they had managed to create an entire new industry (Kent, 2010).
Pocket Monsters, better known as Pokémon, was released in 1995 for Nintendo’s Game Boy. It featured 151 different species of capturable monsters and had a cute whimsical art style inspired by Japanese manga and anime art. The players took on the role of a Pokémon trainer and the main goal of the game was to become a Pokémon master (Barbo, 1999). To do so the player had to travel the games virtual world whilst capturing and training their own team of monsters. They then could take their team into battle against other monsters and trainers (Madnani, 2016). The gameplay was a more simplified take on the JRPG genre, as Pokémon was mainly aimed at children. The control scheme was like other JRPG games but featured far less options and a simplified combat system. The combat played out as a complicated game of rock paper scissors as each monster inhabited a certain element. A fire type monster, for example, would be weak against a water type one, while water type monsters are weak against lightning types and so on (Barbo, 1999; Madnani, 2016). It featured 1-on-1 battles, sort of like older games such as Dragon Quest and Ultima, but players could switch out their monsters at will, the battle only ending once either the player or the opponent ran out of monsters to use. This simplified take on the genre was very popular among younger children and within a month of its release Pokémon was one of the biggest names in Japan (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, 2017).

Pokémon would spawn multiple games and a multi series television animation along with several movies, toys and trading cards and in the and by the year 2000 seemingly the whole world knew of Pokémon and its lovable yellow mascot: Pikachu (Donovan 2010). The franchise remains as one of the top grossing franchises in the world and shows no signs of slowing down, as was demonstrated in 2016 with the release of Pokémon GO for mobile smart phones. The game utilized the smart phones camera and GPS functionality to bring the Pokémon experience to the real world. It managed to become the top grossing video game app on both Apple’s App store and Google’s google play store resulting in it being played by millions of people around the world (Marshall, 2015; Osborne, 2016).

Pokémon, along with Final Fantasy managed not only demonstrates the charm of Japanese video games but displays the international appeal of role-playing games. These two franchises remain the finest display of the never ending evolutionary path that the role-playing genre has taken throughout the years and remains as not only a showcase for possibilities for the future of entertainment, but how one small idea can evolve into something much larger.
Conclusion

The role-playing games have been paramount in the continued evolution of both the video game entertainment industry and computer development by pushing the boundaries of what is possible in a thought up virtual world. The genre owes its existence in part to a larger genre called war games, which first originated as an alternative to chess. There have been many different iterations of war games but, arguably the biggest ones are Georg Leopold von Reiswitz game Kriegsspiel (1812) which was used as an official training exercise for the Prussian army and H.G Wells more simplified game Little wars (1913) which introduced the genre to the mainstream.

In the early 1970s two war gaming enthusiasts called David Arneson and Gary Gygax worked together to create the first mainstream role-playing game called Dungeons & Dragons which was based on concepts they had created separately. Dungeons & Dragons allowed six or more players to take on the roles of fantasy characters and act out an adventure taking place almost entirely inside in the collective imaginations of the group involved. The game featured many rules and required a considerable amount of math and pre-planning to play. This made it a perfect fit for computers, as those machines were well versed in solving math problems and crunching numbers.

The video game industry was booming in the mid-1970s largely due to the video game company Atari, which had almost single handedly launched the industry with the virtual tennis game Pong. The company’s success inspired countless other programmers to try their own hand at game making resulting in some of the first role-playing games appearing on computers in the form of text adventures. Those games relied entirely on simple text commands to play but as computer screens and home computer systems became more common the game software got considerably more complex. This led Dungeons & Dragons enthusiasts Richard Garriott and Robert Woodhead to separately create Ultima: The First Age of Darkness and Wizardry: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord in 1981 for the Apple II home computer, resulting in the creation of a new genre called the Computer role-playing games(CRPG). The games were computerized version of the popular pen and paper role-playing game and would eventually inspire Henk Rogers in bringing the genre to Japan with The Black Onyx. The Black Onyx was released in Japan in 1984 and was a more simplified version of both Garriot’s Ultima and Woodhead’s Wizardry, focused more on teaching the players the concepts found in role-playing games CRPGs rather than punishing them with extreme difficulty. It sold well and as a result managed to spark a role-playing game boom
across the country of Japan.

Japan took over as the center of video game development after the North American video game industry crashed in 1983. At the forefront was Nintendo who managed to revitalize the gaming industry with their home console the *Famicom*. The *Famicom* sold incredibly well and inspired Yuji Horii and Koichi Nakamura to create *Dragon Quest* in 1986. *Dragon Quest* was a CRPG specifically made to work with a console controller and managed to become a country wide best seller by presenting itself with an attractive art style and simple gameplay. Due to *Dragon Quest*’s sales, many others tried to imitate it and among them was Hironobu Sakaguchi, a young Japanese programmer. Hironobu Sakaguchi created *Final Fantasy* in 1987 which managed to garner international appeal and introduce thousands to the concepts of role-playing computer games. The next big release from Japan would be the incredibly popular *Pokémon* for Nintendo’s *Game Boy* hand held gaming system. The game focused on capturing and training monsters which you could trade to other players and managed to become incredibly popular, spawning a multi series anime, a trading card game and a throng of merchandise.

*Pokémon* is the result of years of role-playing evolution and shows how one small concept can act as an inspiration for thousands, changing the world of entertainment in the process. From the its inception in the late 1970s the role-playing genre has managed to consistently show the continued appeal of role-playing in any form and, probably, will continue to surprise both enthusiast and newcomers with new exciting takes on the genre in the future.
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