Chapter X
The Use of Role-Playing in Learning

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ABSTRACT

The use of Role-Playing is becoming prominent in Serious Games due to its positive effects on learning. In this chapter the author will provide a comprehensive definition of role-playing games, drawing inspiration from the many different definitions provided in the existing literature. Then, will propose a five-dimension taxonomy for Serious Role Playing Games, applying it to a small selection of successful Serious Games in five different domains. An overview of the literature will help the reader understand when Role-Playing should be used, and when it might be useless or detrimental. Finally, a brief analysis will be performed on the reviewed games, in order to point out the correlations among the taxonomy dimensions and the domains of application.

INTRODUCTION

Many different definitions have been proposed in the last forty years for “Role–Playing” (RP). In a role–play, the participants take on a “role” in a specific situation or scenario. They can play their own part or someone else’s in a safe environment where they can act, experiment, learn and teach without risking irreversible consequences. The emotional freedom from the risk of experiencing personal consequences from their behaviour, that is consequently less cautious, inhibited and risk averse, can mean a more positive attitude towards learning.

Starting from three different definitions, I’ll provide one brief but comprehensive definition of Role-Playing Games (RPGs). Then, I’ll propose a five-dimensional taxonomy, which will include three key characteristics of RP that have been identified in the literature (the level of involvement, the role being played, and the degree of response specificity) and two additional ones (the com-
petitiveness and the didactic purpose). Through a review of several papers, I will provide some evidence that can be useful to game developers, concerning the situations when RP has proven to be effective as a didactic instrument. However, even though there aren’t any papers explicitly critical of the use of RP in Serious Games (SG), I will cite the contributions of several authors suggesting when RP might be useless or detrimental. In the last part of the chapter, a selection of sixteen SG from five different domains will be classified with the proposed taxonomy. Even if the sample group is really small, some meaningful correlations will be highlighted in the conclusions, leaving plenty of space for future developments.

DEFINITIONS OF ROLE PLAYING GAMES

In a role–play, the participants play a “role” in a specific situation or scenario. They can play their own part or someone else’s in a safe environment where they can act, experiment, learn and teach with no risks of irreversible consequences (Ladousse, 1987). Since people won’t fear the personal consequences of their behaviour, they are less cautious, inhibited and risk averse. Such emotional states might encourage them to learn. Some scholars (Bolter & Grusin, 1999; King & Krzywinska, 2002, as cited in Apperley, 2006) state that RPGs simply re-mediate the writer Tolkien, assuming that they need to be considered closely tied to the literary genre of fantasy. Apperley (2006) considers their description an “oversight” (p. 17). He reckons the pencil-and-paper RPGs are the precursors of the genre, of which the most widely known is Dungeons & Dragons©. He is led to this conclusion because pencil-and-paper RPGs differ from fantasy literature in that they include a set of rules for interaction between players and the fantasy environment. Anyway, the origin of RPGs can be also found in Moreno’s “Psychodrama” (1946): a technique designed for the treatment of disturbed patients and used in the group therapy setting.

Greco (2007) suggests that, in spite of official formalization, role–play had already existed long before, in the genuine form of children’s games, where most of the times everyone plays a role (e.g. say a girl playing with a doll, pretending to be her mother). A similar concept had been expressed in (Graham & Gray, 1969, p. 18): “In one sense all gaming involves role playing since the individual participants are asked to assume the situation assigned”.

Since many different definitions have been proposed in the last forty years for “Role Playing”, I will cite those three which contribute best to provide a wide comprehension of the genre.

Aronson & Carlsmith (1968, p. 26) described “Role Playing Study” as “an as-if experiment in which the subject is asked to behave as if he [or she] were a particular person in a particular situation”. This definition clearly doesn’t consider the amusement, which is a formidible motivational lever: it is an interesting snapshot of the didactic approach in that historic period.

Recently, Tychsen et al. provided a clear definition of Role Playing Game, which is reported below:

1. The core of the game is role playing guided by rules. Each player takes control of one or more (although typically only one) character. A character is a fictional figure that the player tries to act (as role play).
2. The player will usually have full control of decision making at the character level. There is no author-audience relationship: each player has a hand in developing a personal, perceived story.
3. The game is usually set in a fictional reality, which is communicated via the fictional contract. The contract is the shared understanding among the game participants of the game setting/world.
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