Role-playing Games: Crash Course Games #18

Crash Course: Games
https://youtube.com/watch?v=qqOQPv2rv_I
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/qqOQPv2rv_I

Hi, I'm Andre Meadows, and this is Crash Course Games.

You and your party are standing outside the decrepit tomb of the demilich acererack. Acererack built this looming temple to an unknown, evil deity, and slayed every worker, excavator, and priest, as it neared completion to consecrate it in evil. It's a horrible place, but it's perfect for you and your team of adventurers to explore and vanquish the evil within. If you survive, and you might not, you get a hefty chest of gold, and the last few XP you need to level up.

Wait, what's a lich? And what's going on here? Well, a lich is a powerful undead wizard who has bound their intellect to an object for the purpose of attaining immortality and a demilich is like twice as bad as your standard lich. And as for what's going on here, today we're exploring this tomb of horrors as as we talk about Role Playing Games, or RPGs. So get the dwarven war axe all polished, ask the wizard to start preparing your spells, and see how much stuff we can cram into that bag of holding. Oh, and don't forget the dice.

[CrashCourse theme plays]

Role Playing Games are not only games, they're also a form of interactive group storytelling. The games have rules, but within the system of rules, players can have a level of control over their persona and their actions that traditional board games and strategy games don't provide.

RPGs are mostly open-ended. The rules of the game loosely manage player choices through a series of consequences. And the game provides an outline of the world in which the games take place. But beyond that structure, players have a lot of control over their character and their fate.

RPGs incorporate every world setting imaginable. You can be a knight in a medieval world filled with magic and hand-to-hand combat, an energized hacker in the future, or even a werewolf in Victorian London. The opportunity for a player to assume an alternate persona and explore fantastic worlds is the primary appeal of a role playing game.

And while all players have the power to change the story and outcomes of the role playing game, not all the players are created equal. Much of the power in an RPG is concentrated in the hands of the game master, or dungeon master. This is the player that runs the game.

The GM creates the basic scenario that the rest of the players will experience and they act as the driving force behind the scenes, helping the game to progress. They decide when enemies will appear, fight as those enemies by rolling dice behind a screen, act out the parts of the non-player characters encountered during the game, and determine who lives and who dies. The other players have to create their characters by choosing the type of hero they'll play, what equipment they'll use, and what goals their character has.

Skills like charisma, dexterity, luck, and strength, among many others, are decided by rolling dice. Players also determine their character's personality and values, and will take those traits into account when the character makes decisions in the game. They may have to fight monsters, avoid traps, negotiate a treaty, or save a captor during each session, otherwise known as as a campaign. Campaigns can be customized to play out in a single evening, or they may be structured to last weeks, or months.

Now acting has been around for thousands of years, and so have games. But this particular combination of drama, gaming, and imagination that constitutes RPGs, are a more recent development. RPGs get part of their inheritance from war gaming. You see this all the time in *Game of Thrones*. War gaming looks a lot like John Snow's plan to take back Winterfell.

A map is unfurled across a table and covered with miniatures that represent the real forces out on the battlefield. It's been used for centuries as a way for commanders to plan their next attack, and anticipate what the enemy will do. Over time, this practice evolved from a serious life-or-death set of choices to a game. One of the earliest sets of war games was created in the now non-existent country of Prussia. Around the start of the nineteenth century, it was named Kriegspiel, literally war game. It used a set of markers to represent real war forces, across a table that acted as a battlefield.

Science fiction author H. G. Wells loved war gaming so much, he wrote the book on it. He published 'Little Wars' in 1915. The book contained a set of rules on how to use miniature figures to represent people on the battlefield, and instilled a sense of immersion and drama. Little Wars became a hit in 1960s America, when war gaming achieved wide popularity, particularly with American youth. These war games focused on historic battles such as Gettysburg, and pretty much anything involving Napoleon.

At the same time, J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* novels were gaining popularity in the United States. And the war gaming landscape shifted from recreations of real-world battles, to fantasy battles. This marriage of strategy war gaming and fantasy story lines would set the stage for the birth of the role playing game. The most successful combination of these elements, and the one that would have the biggest influence on gaming was Dungeons and Dragons. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Dungeons and Dragons, also known as D&D, set the standard for the modern RPG, and brought these games into the mainstream consciousness. It began with two men: Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, members of the Castles and Crusades Society a group of medieval warfare enthusiasts. Gygax and his friend, Jeff Perren, had come together to craft a war game called Chainmail, intended to accurately simulate medieval warfare.

In a slightly stereotypical move, it was unleashed on the world from a basement. Gygax founded a company in his basement and called it Tactical Studies Rules, or TSR, to help distribute their work to players. In the meantime, Arneson was working with fellow gamer Fred Wesley to infuse more excitement and story-telling into the games.

After they played a boring round of a war game, Wesley tried to spice things up by giving each player a personal goal during the next battle, and adding a touch of story. Arneson inadvertently added magic to the game when he was inspired by an episode of Star Trek to give his druid a phaser to blast his opponents away. This would become the old standby spell, the lightning bolt.

Gygax and Arneson eventually combined their ideas. They took Gygax's original Chainmail gaming system, and added Arneson's magic and monsters to run the first ever D&D-like Roleplaying Game around 1971. Members of the society had come over to play a Napoleonic battle, but were surprised when the table had a castle on it. Instead of fighting Napoleon, they found themselves in a dungeon. A new genre of gaming was born.

Gygax and Arneson released the first version of D&D through TSR in 1974, after being rejected by gaming company after gaming company. They had a slow start, but by the end of the decade, TSR was selling seven thousand copies of D&D a month. Thanks Thought Bubble.

But Dungeons and Dragons wasn't the only RPG to emerge in the

1970s. The suspiciously alliterative Tunnels and Trolls was a second modern RPG, released in 1975 by Ken St. Andre. Hey! And was created to be more accessible than D&D. It also had rules for solo game play, in addition to the usual group campaigns.

Then there was Chivalry and Sorcery by Fantasy Games Unlimited, that appeared in 1977 and was intended to be a more realistic alternative to D&D. Chivalry and Sorcery was the first RPG to use the the term Game Master.

Fantasy Games also introduced an RPG based on Richard Adam's beloved novel about rabbits on a dangerous journey, Watership Down. This game was called Bunnies and Burrows. It's not a joke.

Bunnies and Burrows was the first game that allowed players to play as non-humanoid characters, and was the first to include detailed martial arts rules in the game. Martial arts for rabbits. It's like you're Sakio Jimbo.

The success of Dungeons and Dragons, and its ilk, meant the role playing games and companies that produced them sprung up like undead skeletons rising from the ground. The number of players grew rapidly, and as RPGs became more widely known, they also came to be feared. D&D appeared in a time of moral panic in the United States during the 1970s and the 80s, and RPGs received lots of negative media attention. The games were blamed for two suicides and for luring players to satanism.

Dr. David Waldron at the Federation University of Australia put it this way, "Since fantasy typically features activities like magic and witchcraft, D&D was perceived to be in direct opposition to Biblical precepts and established thinking about witchcraft and magic." Carl Raschke, one of the leading thinkers among those who felt America was in the grips of Satan, wrote, "D&D is really an elementary-level home study kit for 'black magic'." There was even a group formed in 1983 called Bothered About Dungeons and Dragons, or BADD, that launched an intense media campaign against the game.

In Harbor City Utah, three hundred concerned citizens appeared at a school board meeting in 1980 to oppose the use of D&D in a school program. One concerned citizen was quoted as saying the game, "is very anti-religious... these books are filled with things that are not fantasy, but are actual in the real demon world and can be very dangerous for anyone involved in the game because it leaves them so open to satanic spirits." In 1982, a TV movie called *Mazes and Monsters* told the chilling tale of college students drawn so deeply into the world of RPGs that one of them, played by Tom Hanks in his first leading role, was driven to suicide. There are a lot of 80s movies getting rebooted, don't do this one.

But RPGs don't actually deliver players into the grips of evil spirits, or drive them into severe mental illness. Actually, in recent years, several studies indicate that role playing games can have many benefits for people who play them.

A case study conducted by Louise Zaya and Bradford Lewis in New York City in 1985, looked at 8 to 9 years old boys who has problems with interpersonal interaction and hyperactivity. Playing D&D actually helped the boys work together and benefit from each other's strength and individual talents. It helped them build social skills, teamwork, and problem solving abilities. And a 1987 study on the emotional stability of RPG players concluded, "increased exposure to D&D is not positively correlated with emotional instability. Indeed, as a whole group, D&D players obtain a healthy psychological profile."

In the end, the consensus seems to be that role playing games aren't much different from other types of games. They tend to foster connection among the players, and improve teamwork and problem solving. As long as you don't have a lame Dungeon Master who always changes the rules on you and injures the mage that you've been leveling up for twenty five years! Hey, I am not advocating paranoia, but maybe just ask that DM to show you the die next time they claim to roll a twenty. Just saying. Thanks for watching everyone! See you next time.

Stan Muller: Crash Course Games is filmed in the Chad and Stacy Emigholz Studio in Indianapolis, Indiana, and is made with the help of all of these nice people. If you'd like to keep Crash Course free for everyone forever, you can support the series at Patreon, a crowdfunding platform that allows you to support the content you love. Speaking of Patreon, we'd like to thank all our patrons in general, and we'd like to specifically our High Chancellor of Knowledge, Morgan Lietzop, and our Vice Principal, Michael Hunt. Thank you for your support.