Examining 'RPG Elements': Systems of Character Progression

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ABSTRACT

Much of the literature on role-playing games (RPGs) focuses on their social, performative, experiential, and/or narrative aspects. The emphasis is on the playing of the roles, as it were, and less so on the game mechanics. Curiously, the phrase 'RPG elements' tends not to refer to the role-playing aspects of the genre, but to the rules, systems, and mechanisms that have been co-opted by other game genres and 'gamification' practitioners. In this article we unpack the term 'RPG elements' by examining a single element: mechanisms and systems for character progression in paper and pencil RPGs. In these open ended games, player-controlled characters' capabilities change. Characters usually get better; though sometimes they get worse. We describe different ways positive and negative character progression systems are implemented and the role they play. We also discuss some differences we observe between paper and pencil RPGs and those played electronically. We conclude with thoughts on the utility of breaking down ambiguous terms, such as 'RPG elements' into smaller, clearer units.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.8.0 [**Computing Millieux**]: Personal Computing – *games.*

General Terms

Design, Human Factors

Keywords

RPG, roleplaying, role playing game, character, progression, regression, persistency, RPG elements, levels, experience, gamification

1. INTRODUCTION

The impact that paper and pencil roleplaying games (pnpRPG) have had on the medium of games and its industry is broad and significant. Their influence, in particular that of *Dungeons & Dragons*, includes inspiring the creators of other games, popularizing themes and settings now commonly adopted, and also introducing game mechanics, rules, and systems that have influenced the design of countless other games [57]. While "[t]here really is no doubt that *D&D* played a vital role in the development of the first CRPG [computer role-playing game]" [5], other genres of games can similarly trace some of their design elements back to RPGs [34].

In his book *Playing at the World*, Jon Peterson meticulously outlines the formative years of *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) [44]. In doing so he draws attention to some of the game mechanisms that were popularized by *Dungeons & Dragons* that, in the eyes of many, came to symbolize what was novel and exciting about the game [44]. One of these mechanisms was a system for character progression – player's characters improve and get better the longer they play. As Gygax describes, "by dint of hard fighting and clever deeds, these adventurers advance in ability to become forces to be reckoned with – high priests or priestesses, lords, wizards and arch-magi, master thieves" [26] While Peterson notes that this innovation had antecedents, he is also unequivocal about the enthusiasm that this particular design element had with its early reviewers [44]. As new role-playing games were invented, this was one of the fundamental elements that most often remained constant. In fact, systems of character progression are often explicitly mentioned when describing what is fundamental about RPGs and/or their digital counterparts: "role-playing games revolve around creating and growing characters" [23], role-playing games generally have "configurable player-characters that improve with experience" [48], "your character evolves [and] gains knowledge and experience" [53].

Today, especially in the popular press, the term 'RPG elements' is used to describe the addition of progression elements to game genres that previously did not have them [e.g. 3, 14]: "virtually every game on the market has upgrades built-in; this year's top FPS contenders […] *Battlefield 4* and *Call of Duty: Ghosts* […] both feature extremely robust RPG-style upgrade/progression systems" [15]. These elements, e.g. levels and progression points, have also made their way into non-game contexts under the moniker of "gamification" [16].

Not all RPGs have systems of progression. This is often the case with live action role-playing games (LARPs). Some games are designed as "one-shots" to be played once (e.g. parlor larps [33]) , are "lightweight" in terms of rules and systems, or their focus might be on specific improvisational, storytelling, or rhetorical elements (e.g. *The Extraordinary Adventures of the Baron Munchausen* [59], *Pantheon* [36] , and *Dog Eat Dog* [7]).

Given the impact that systems of character progression have had in games, it is interesting that little has been written about them. Most literature on role-playing games (and role-playing game studies) focuses on the social, performative, experiential, and/or narrative aspects of these games [e.g. 6, 22, 25, 28, 38]), and less so on their rules, systems, and mechanisms. Thus, we have been prompted to ask, what is it about progression systems that has made them so impactful? What are some of the different ways that they have been implemented over the years? What role do the play in a game's design?

In this article we explore mechanisms for character progression, describing examples from a variety of traditional paper and pencil RPGs. We will also examine the more unusual, but no less interesting, mechanisms for negative progress. Our analysis will use concepts and terms developed for the Game Ontology Project (GOP) [64]. In particular, we will be using the notion of strong and weak examples. Strong examples are ideal, canonical, or prototypical embodiments of concepts. Weak examples describe border cases that illustrate some nuances and subtleties that a particular concept may have. Due to space, our exploration is neither exhaustive nor complete. However, we do believe we are presenting what could be called the 'essence' of these systems and mechanisms.

2. CHARACTER PROGRESSION

"[I]n most role-playing games, players maintain their characters from session to session, using them again and again. Gradually the player characters' skills increase. They become more powerful and better equipped and undertake more difficult tasks to maintain the challenge of the game. [49]" When we speak of systems of character progression we refer to rules and game mechanisms that articulate or define how player's characters improve from one game session to the next. The idea is that the characters themselves are growing, learning from their experiences, maturing, and so on. While others have used the term progression to describe the overall structure of a game [32], we are referring specifically to how a character's intrinsic attributes and capabilities change over time and the trajectory they follow (i.e. Do they become more or less powerful?).

As a rule of thumb, the following questions can be useful to help determine whether or not a game has a system for character progression.

- Do the characters change over the course of the game?
- Are the changes a normal and expected aspect of the game?
- Are changes intrinsic to the character or are they associated to things the character possesses?
- Are the changes irreversible (or generally irreversible)?
- Are the changes cumulative in some way?

2.1 Precursors and Preconditions

In order for characters to change over time (multiple game sessions), it is necessary for the game to allow for persistence. Historically, persistence is not a common feature in multiplayer games. When people gather to play a game the assumption is that they will start from scratch. That does not mean that information of prior games is irrelevant – for example results of prior games might be necessary in a tournament setting to determine a winner. Similarly, the "grudge" or meta-game rivalries in sports reflect the importance of prior history. Peterson describes how in the wargaming community players developed this notion of playing "wargame campaigns" in which the results from tactical battles could influenced later ones (e.g. allow survivors to serve as reinforcements later on) [44]. This notion carried into role-playing games, providing players with a greater sense of shared history and context. However, persistence, while necessary, is not enough. There are games that may have persistence, but not any character progression.

In addition to persistence, Peterson argues that the notion of stratification was also influential in the development of systems for character progression [44]. Stratification is the idea that units or pieces can be hierarchically organized in terms of their power or importance [44]. A common term used for communicating stratification is "level" ("rank" would be another). The combination of persistence and stratification led to modeling mobility between strata. The idea being that, in the context of a wargame, a unit that has survived a battle is better prepared for the next: it has learned from experience and is now more effective.

Peterson calls the combination of stratification and a means for moving upwards a system of stratified progression [44]. While the assertion that "*D&D* pioneered the idea of characters that become more powerful over time [19]" is not true [44], it is not unfair to note that "no small part of [*D&D*'s] appeal derives from this innovation" [44]: not only were the same characters used from session to session, but they got better as well.

Dungeons & Dragons' stratified character progression system is perhaps the most known and influential. In *D&D* players earn experience points (XP) based on their accomplishments. "When a character earns enough XP, he or she attains a new character level. [55]" Earning a new level confers bonuses and options: more hit points, additional spells to cast, etc. Other games with stratified character progression include *Rifts* [50] and *Dark Heresy* [4].

While stratification was a precursor to character progression systems (and historically significant), it is not a necessity [44]. There are games that have character progression without "discernible strata" [44]. In the case of non-stratified character progression, rather than improving in discrete uniform steps (levels or ranks), characters improve in piecemeal fashion. Here players select attributes or abilities to improve or acquire, usually based on a limited amount of points (with those points being awarded at the end of a play session). This option generally allows for greater flexibility for players who can tailor their character's progression to their liking. Limitations might exist. For example, *Call of Cthulhu* limits improvements to skills used by the character [43], while other games might restrict some skills to certain types of characters. Other games with non-stratified character progression include *Burning Wheel* [13] and *Unknown Armies* [54].

These two broad categories for character progression (stratified and non-stratified) are not mutually exclusive. Some games have both systems. This often happens when systems affects different aspects of a character. *D&D's* 3.5 edition, for instance, has the aforementioned character levels (stratified) as well as a non-stratified system for skills [55].

Another characteristic often observed in character progression systems is that continued progression requires increasingly more effort. For instance, the amount of points required to obtain a new level will increase the higher the level. So, while a character may need 100 points to reach 2nd Level, they might need 400 to go from 2nd to 3rd level. In some games this is offset somewhat with characters receiving greater rewards as they become more powerful (e.g. killing a tougher monsters nets more points).

As mentioned earlier, character progression systems were warmly received by players who considered them quite appealing. In the following section we explore some potential reasons for this.

2.2 Appeal

Progression systems are often described as rewarding and pleasurable to participate in. "A great pleasure of role playing is participating in the advancement of [a character] from humble beginnings. [43]" "Because D&D characters can grow, like real people, playing the game becomes a uniquely visceral experience. Participants are more motivated to succeed, since victories are accumulative. [19]" This is one of the reasons that explain the success (or allure) that character progression systems have with players. One of the primary rewards of RPGs is the possibility for a player's characters to get better – "most RPGs have a system for awarding the players some quantified indication of achievement at the end of a session or story [20]." This indication of achievement "represent[s] the ability of the characters to improve themselves and get better at what they do, or perhaps learn new things. Just as you learn and improve over the course of your own life, so should the character of an ongoing story. Without such growth, the characters become stagnant and uninteresting, and the players may become frustrated with no sense of achievement or sign of improvement for their efforts. [20]" In the case of massively multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMOs), it is known that "players build up their commitment to the game as the level of their character increases. [17]" and that "advancement" (gain power, progress rapidly) is one of the primary motivational aspects [61]. What other reasons might help explain why these systems are motivating?

Given the open-ended nature of roleplaying games, character progression systems may also be attractive to players due to the Zeigarnik effect: when actions are interrupted or not completed, people are more motivated to finish them [65]. It is common for a game session to end "in the middle" with characters engaged in combat, on their way some place important, and so on. Thus, there would be greater motivation to continue playing.

There are other cognitive and psychological effects to consider. Character progression systems are obviously goal-based: they provide clearly articulated goals and outcomes for players to achieve (i.e. reach the next level, earn enough points for the next upgrade, etc.). The literature broadly supports the notion that individuals work harder and better than those without goals [37]. Furthermore, the "goal gradient effect [30] states that the closer someone is to his or her goal, the more motivated they become. [41]" In the context of character progression systems, gaining a level is incredibly motivating and the closer a character is to achieving that the more motivated the player becomes. When a character achieves her next goal she also often 'overshoots' it. In other words, characters are often left with an excess of points that can be banked or saved for use later. This might also trigger an endowed progress effect [41]. This is an effect "whereby people provided with artificial advancement towards a goal exhibit greater persistence towards reaching the goal. [41]" In this case, players are more motivated towards reaching the goal because they've already made some progress in that direction. Curiously, the endowed progress effect is intensified when the progress is tallied using an abstraction such as points [41]. Players might be reluctant to 'waste' the time and effort they have invested in a character.

We have described some psychological reasons that could explain why systems for character progression are attractive and appealing. There are potential social and emotional reasons as well: players might become attached to their characters in a similar fashion to what has been observed between people and videogame characters [58]. This might be triggered by a nurturing effect – after all the player's are overseeing and controlling the care and growth of their characters. The appeal of progression systems might also be tied to curiosity and expectation (e.g. I want to know what it would be like to use a certain spell I'll gain access to in the future). Further research is needed to better understand these effects and how they may apply (or not) in these cases.

3. NEGATIVE PROGRESSION

While *D&D* may have popularized "the idea of characters that become more powerful over time" [19], many games also implemented systems where the opposite occurs. We call these systems for negative character progression. The only difference they have with those of character progression outlined earlier is that the effects are detrimental to the character instead of beneficial. So, player characters deteriorate, become weaker, less capable, or more ineffective over time. Such deterioration is a normal part of the game and is expected and/or inevitable. It is important that the negative progression penalize (or handicap) the player characters in some significant way. Finally, such a decline should be permanent or largely irreversible. If reversing the decline is possible, "undoing the damage" should represent a significant and meaningful in-game event rather than a run-of-the-mill occurrence. This helps distinguish a negative progression system from general health systems (characters are routinely wounded and recover), temporary effects, or equipment that is used and replenished.

Given the appeal for progression systems, why would game designers implement systems for negative progression? There are several (non-mutually exclusive) reasons. One is for game balancing. Consider a game in which characters develop powerful abilities that confer enormous benefits. In order to prevent the game from devolving into an arms race, characters might also accumulate penalties or debilitating drawbacks. From the player's perspective, such a negative progression system may be perceived as a cost or penalty that offsets the benefits received. The second rationale for regression systems might come from the thematic or fictive context of the game. Imagine a game set in a post-apocalyptic setting whose inhabitants must deal with radiation and its consequences. Here, a regression system that modeled the effects of long-term exposure to radiation would be central to the game and players would expect their characters to die young. This thematic justification can lend authenticity and realism to a game. A third rationale would be that such a system is included in order to bring depth to the characters. This would encourage players to develop their characters over the course of play and to explore their flaws as well as strengths. A fourth rationale concerns the collaborative storytelling that often happens in pencil and paper RPGs. While progression systems seem naturally suited for narratives whose characters start weak and become strong (e.g. the monomyth), they do not support narratives with weak characters or stories where failure might be the point (e.g. fallen hero, tragic flaw, horror, comedy of errors). We argue that negative progression systems can help broaden the possibility space of narratives that RPG systems can support.

To be clear, most games with negative progression systems also have systems for progression: characters may improve in some ways, while simultaneously becoming weaker in others. In the following sections we will present examples of negative progression systems across three broad categories (see Table 1): those where decline is inevitable, by choice, and by chance. These categories are broad in that they attempt to provide a general idea

of some differences, but they should not be construed as rigid. Rather, they are loose and it is possible for games to have systems that, in different ways, meet criteria for inclusion in all three categories we present.

Table 1. Systems for Negative Character Progression

Inevitable	Player's characters will deteriorate by virtue of playing the game
By Choice	Players have option to engage or not with a system that results in character worsening
By Chance	Game has systems that result in character worsening due to random factors beyond the player's control

3.1 Inevitable Decline

A system in which negative progression is inevitable is one where characters become weaker regardless of their actions and choices. Players will see their characters deteriorate simply by virtue of playing the game. This is often seen when there is an attempt to reflect the natural ways that humans (or other living creatures) worsen in their capabilities over time or under certain circumstances. For example, as humans age it becomes harder for them to do certain things regardless of their knowledge or abilities. Here the inevitability of the decline is tied to the amount of "in-game" time that passes. For instance, *Pendragon* has an aging system in which characters eventually lose points from their core statistics (e.g. strength). As noted in the rulebook, "[a]ging eventually takes even the most gifted character out of play, usually around age 50 or later. [52]" The aging happens during the "winter phase", which is described as the time when characters rest, recuperate, train, and so on. It is also when players update their characters [52]. Other examples include games where characters, by participating in the game world, "accumulate" something negative that results in some form of deterioration. In *Ars Magica* (which also features an aging system), player characters are subject to warping: a "side effect of living in a strong mystical aura, or being subject to mystical effects over a long period of time" [56]. A mundane (non-magical) character "who has been repeatedly healed with powerful magic might gain a stigmatic wound, which neither hurts nor causes damage, but looks and feels real. [56]". This is similar to *Call of Cthulhu*'s insanity rules where "player characters typically start sane and mentally competent. In the course of play, however, they confront knowledge and entities of alien horror and terrifying implication. Such experiences shake and shatter belief in the normal world. [43]". In *Call of Cthulhu*, characters eventually either go insane or retire. The game's rulebook notes how some referees "feel that the notion of relentless, self-improvement [found in most RPGs] conflicts with Lovecraft's dark vision[1]" [43]. *Call of Cthulhu*'s insanity rules aptly model (by design) the "the behavior of protagonists in H.P Lovecraft's fiction, who more than a few times faint or go mad" [43] and, as noted by the game's original designer Sandy Petersen, they were a direct attempt to "incorporate a large portion of the Lovecraft feel into the rules" [42]. Similarly *Dark Heresy* [4] features rules for both insanity and corruption.

The negative progression systems in *Ars Magica* and *Call of Cthulhu* could perhaps be considered as choice-based (see next section) rather than inevitable[2]. After all, *Ars Magica* players can place their characters in situations that are safe from magical warping. However, we argue that players who engage with the game "as intended", should inevitably encounter these situations. As will be discussed in the next section, this is different from players choosing to engage with a system that is optional.

3.2 Negative Progression by Choice

Games that have a choice-based system for negative progression allow players agency: they decide whether or not to participate in the system. These systems are often tied to in-game benefits that may be hard to ignore. In *Cyberpunk 2020* [46], player characters can install technology in their bodies: a cybernetic eye might provide nocturnal vision while sub-dermal body armor would provide better protection. However, cybernetic implants have a 'humanity cost' that lowers one of the characters' main attributes: empathy (EMP). This stat "is a measure of how well the character relates to other people, and is the basis of such skills as leadership, lying, convincing, and romantic relationships" [46]. Characters with low EMP scores are colder, less empathetic, and sociable. They are challenged in succeeding at skill checks such as leadership or persuasion. If the characters' EMP characteristic drops too low (0 or less), the character becomes cyberpsychotic – and is handed over to the referee to control. It is possible to recover through the removal of the cybernetic enhancements and treatment – but there is no guarantee. *Cyberpunk 2020* players decide whether or not to have cybernetic implants. They often do, but it is not required.

In *Vampire: The Masquerade*, player controlled characters, all vampires, have a 'humanity score' that reflects how human (or monster-like) they are [1]. One of the games' central themes is the struggle characters face to "retain their souls and avoid the clutches of the Beast" [1]. Whenever a character acts in a way that is morally questionable, "the character may suffer degeneration – a permanent loss of Humanity [1]." While there are occasions where this may happen without the players consent (e.g. botching some die rolls may cause the character to become frenzied and out of control), it is recommended that the person running the game "always warn a player before she takes an action that may cause degeneration. Players should understand the consequences of their character's actions, and should have the opportunity to enjoy making the decision. [1]"

Finally, consider *Star Wars: The Role Playing Game* [21]. In this game, characters may be awarded dark side points for doing evil things - the more dark side points a character has the greater the risk that they'll turn to the dark side (and become an NPC). Dark side points are rarely awarded. The game recommends players be warned when they are about to do something that might earn them a dark side point. However, this is a weak example of a negative progression system because, in the day to day sense, there is no deterioration or worsening to a player character that has earned dark side points.

3.3 Negative Progression by Chance

The third category we have identified is when negative character progression occurs due to the vagaries of chance. Here we have games where common in-game activities place player characters

[1] The *Call of Cthulhu* game is based on the stories and writings of H.P. Lovecraft.

[2] *Call of Cthulhu* allows for choice-based negative progression. Characters can study occult topics (e.g. read the Necronomicon) to gain knowledge, but lose sanity in the process.

in situations where, through unlucky die rolls, they might become permanently weakened or worsened. This is sometimes seen in games with detailed combat and damage resolution systems. As is common in most roleplaying games, "during the course of the game characters will likely receive damage in the form of injury or death" [9] In *Middle-Earth Role Playing* (*MERP)*, however, the game's rulebook includes a "Stat Deterioration Table" [9] for determining whether or not a character's stats are reduced after they have been killed (but before the character's soul is prevented from returning to the body). Additionally, the game features a variety of ways for characters to suffer wounds with permanent effects – most famously through a series of detailed critical injury tables. A character on the receiving end of an enemy's lucky roll might, amongst other things, see their character lose an eye or hand [9]. Most games tend to abstract how damage affects characters' bodies. Dismemberment, for example, is rarely mentioned and it is assumed that referees will decide at their discretion what sorts of things are possible. In the case of *MERP*, it is the level of detail provided by the rules together with the arbitrary nature of the critical hit tables that helps us understand this system as one of negative progression by chance.

Similarly, *Conspiracy X*'s combat/damage system has special wounds called 'splatter wounds' [18]. When characters heal from these wounds there is a chance (if a healing die roll fails) that permanent damage (e.g. penalties to die rolls or disfigurement) occurs. The details of the permanent damage are left to the discretion of the referee [18]. We consider *Conspiracy X*'s combat system a weak example because the outcomes aren't formally described even though it is made clear that they can occur.

Some examples in earlier sections referred to systems where there are elements of chance. In *Vampire: The Masquerade*, a player might have to roll to see if they can avoid losing a point of humanity or a *Call of Cthulhu* player might have to roll (and pass) a sanity check. Why are these not simply systems of negative progression by chance? In the case of *Call of Cthulhu* we argue that player characters are placed in situations frequently enough that they inevitably feel the decline of their character's sanity. It is a (relatively) common occurrence. Furthermore, losing sanity is often unavoidable (failing a check simply results in a greater loss). In *Vampire*, the choice to carry out an action that may put their character's humanity in jeopardy is central: it is a risk that the player weighs. This is less arbitrary than having a non-player character get a lucky roll that results in someone losing an eye.

Some games have multiple systems of negative progression or intertwined systems that might cover several of the categories we've presented: *Ars Magica* has systems for aging in addition to the warping and both systems influence each other (e.g. using magic to prevent aging). In our categorization we have tried to differentiate arbitrary effects or outcomes that might be influenced by the players from the specific mechanisms for the resolution of the negative progression systems. So, whether or not a player adds points or rolls dice is secondary to the nature of the deterioration. Does the player have any agency in the matter (by choice), is the regression unrelenting (inevitable), or is it arbitrary (by chance)? As mentioned, these categories are not meant to be rigid. Some systems will seem to better fit one category over another but may be argued for several based on how they are implemented or enacted in play. What is important is not the type of system a game has but rather the subtleties and nuances in how it is described, explained, and used in a game.

4. BORDERLINE PROGRESSION

There are other systems that, while arguably about progression, do not quite fit the sense of character progress we have described. These borderline systems are worth considering and describing because they can illustrate new design directions and opportunities to explore.

4.1 Frontloaded Progression

Character progression is sometimes an important (and detailed) part of character creation. Here the progression occurs before players play their characters. In *Traveller* all of the character growth and development takes place when the character is created: "a character's abilities are determined largely by his training and past experience. [27]" During the character creation process players make a few choices (e.g. pick a career to embark on), roll dice to determine outcomes, and decide when to retire or switch careers. Interestingly, the game also features rules for aging and injuries the character may have suffered. This can result in a player character with reduced attributes before play has even begun. Once character creation is finished, "[t]here is no provision for advancing in levels – the adventure is an end in itself, unless one sets a personal goal such as the accumulation of wealth or power [22]." RPG *Living Steel* is similar in that the background of the character, including what skills are learned, is determined prior to play through die rolls that are cross referenced on a variety of charts and tables [40]. Again, important aspects of a character's development are determined as part of the character creation process.

What is interesting about frontloaded progression systems is that, while not formally part of the play experience, they help provide a richer background and context for new characters. We presume that players are more attached to characters that have grown and, in a manner of speaking, been nurtured prior to play.

4.2 Unstable Progression

In *Dream Park: The Roleplaying Game* players control characters that, in turn, are players (participants) of highly-detailed live action role-playing games hosted in a futuristic amusement park [45]. Player-controlled characters prepare by deciding which skills and equipment they will purchase for their upcoming adventure with their "game points". For a futuristic adventure they might purchase a laser pistol, the skill to fire it, and the pilot space ship skill. A primitive jungle setting adventure might require learning wilderness survival and archery instead. By completing adventures characters earn points that can be spent improving basic attributes. These points can also be saved to purchase skills and equipment for use in future games. If a player-character "dies" in an adventure game, they lose half of their total points. "This is one of the things that makes Dream Park unique – you may not lose your character, but after a few kill-outs, you may find him severely reduced in abilities and options [45]". We call this progression unstable because the game has a system for progression (earned game points) that can be spent either on permanent character improvements (attributes) or transient ones (skills and equipment). Furthermore, points earned can also be lost rendering a "strong" character weaker. The progression is unstable because the characters' capabilities fluctuate (based on the adventure the characters are playing). In *James Bond* characters can spend some of their experience points on special (additional) equipment from Q branch [35]. If the equipment is not returned, they forfeit the points. *Toon* allows players to spend their character improvement points (plot points in the game) on

skills that are only available for the duration of an adventure [12]. Again, players obtain improvements that are temporary – but "paid for" via the regular system for character progression.

4.3 Reputation Systems

As characters participate in a game world they should arguably begin to establish reputations for themselves. Their feats are known and a history is established that other characters might know about (and be affected by). Some games include formalized systems for tracking player characters' reputations and rules for how this affects them in the game. We could consider reputation systems as systems of character progression.

Reputation systems reflect the impact of player character's actions in the game world. However, they are not indicative of changes and growth in the characters themselves. Rather, they reflect the perception that others have of a character. A player character may become famous for her adventures and exploits even if her skills and abilities do not change. Furthermore, reputation systems are often "fragile" or require maintenance by the players. Progress that has been made can easily be lost. In *Cyberpunk 2020*, characters need to work hard to maintain their reputations by spending money and time [47]. Failure to do so results in decreases to the character's reputation.

Reputation systems can also be simultaneously positive and negative. Having a high (positive) reputation with a certain in-game social group might imply an equally high (negative) reputation with their rivals. This is often the case in games that have competing factions. So, reputation systems tend to be relative rather than absolute.

The *James Bond 007* roleplaying game has an interesting reputation system: it seems like a progression system but in practice it acts more like one of negative progression. The game's fame system "measures a character's 'visibility' with enemy organizations and indicates how much information an enemy has about him – his habits, build, and abilities [35]." Over the course of multiple assignments characters earn Fame Points for completing assignments, killing enemies, or gaining promotions (e.g. obtaining the '00' rank). Gaining fame is inevitable and having a high fame score can severely undermine a character's ability to complete assignments. "It may happen that [a] character has such a high Fame Point total, he will be recognized by almost everyone he meets. At this point [the] character may have to retire and accept a desk job at MI6. [35]. Here the Fame system, arguably an example of progression, tends to act as a system of negative character progression. This is because the character's notoriety makes it harder for her to do her job. However, as with other reputation systems, the character herself is not deteriorating in their capabilities. Interestingly, players are allowed to spend experience points to decrease their character's fame.

5. PROGRESSION IN DIGITAL RPGs

Since paper and pencil RPGs and digital RPGs[3] (dRPG) are similar in their structures and share many features [57], in what ways are progression systems in dRPGs similar or different from their paper and pencil counterparts?

[3] An umbrella term used here to include the myriad of roleplaying videogames, including but not limited to: computer roleplaying games (CRPGs), single player digital RPGs, multi user dungeons (MUDs), and massively multiplayer online RPGs [29].

Digital RPGs often feature progression systems similar to the ones we have described. A lot of character progression-related terminology such as "leveling up" or "grinding" originate in, or where popularized by, dRPG player communities. While there are similarities with paper and pencil RPGs (e.g. levels, experience points, skill points), there are also differences in design, implementation and player behavior.

For instance, players sometimes reject progression in dRPGs. A player who controls several characters might refuse to "cash in" their experience points (preventing the character's level from increasing) in order to access areas of the game that would otherwise be gated. Players also reject progression for secondary reasons like "creating Level 1 characters for storage or auction house trading purposes (i.e. mules). [17]" Players can also take advantage of their progression to visit game areas that are no longer challenging to feel powerful or engage in risk-free character progression. This happens because character progression is sometimes perceived as a hurdle rather than a reward. This helps explain behavior such as "level grinding" where players engage in repetitive behaviors to gain levels required to access new game content [2]. To be fair, "level grinding" can be by player choice (risk-free progression) or by design (gated access to game areas based on character level). These behaviors are uncommon in paper and pencil RPGs. This is likely because of the existence of a human referee (gamemaster) who can respond more efficiently to her players and the unspoken social contract that exists between players and referee: "The players should trust the [referee] to ensure that no matter what happens and no matter what choices they make, the game will be fair and fun. The [referee] should be able to trust that no one's going to intentionally try to break the game. [10]" Also, people play dRPGs for different reasons than they might a paper and pencil, this also explains differences in behavior.

Negative progression systems are uncommon in the digital realm. Early examples include *Might and Magic* and *Wizardry VI*. In *Might and Magic*, "[a]s a character ages, his/her skills begin to deteriorate as vital statistic ratings drop. After about age 80, a character can die while resting overnight, from old age. [8]" In addition to an aging system, *Wizardry VI* featured a rebirth counter that tracked how many times the character had died. Each rebirth meant losing a point of vitality. Upon reaching zero, a character could no longer be resurrected [24]. Negative progression is also often implemented in ways that are opaque to the player. In *Eternal Darkness*, the player controlled character is slowly going insane – this is reflected via special (unexpected) game effects, rather than decreased statistics that are visible to the player [51].

Reputation systems, on the other hand, are common in dRPGs. These are often presented as "morality" systems where in-game actions are characterized as 'good' or 'evil' and assigned a certain point value [62]. By consistently performing 'evil' or 'good' actions, the player character creates a reputation for herself that affects how other characters in the game will react. *Fable II* has both a morality system (good & evil) and a purity system (purity & corruption) [39]. The morality system evaluates the choices the player makes that affects others while the purity system looks at those choices that affect the character. Player characters gain 'evil' points by committing crimes like theft and 'corruption' points by, amongst other things, eating rancid beef jerky and having unprotected sex [60]. Reversing the trend in any direction

(e.g. towards purity) is as easy as earning points from the opposite direction (towards corruption).

Most varieties of systems for character progression found in paper and pencil RPGs have also appeared in dRPGs. If we stray further from dRPGs into other genres of videogames we can see that character progression systems take an interesting turn. In the realm of online first person shooter games, for example, it is no longer the character that progresses. Rather, it is the player. By virtue of their in-game actions, players earn points, gain levels, and thus obtain access to new items, perks and bonuses (e.g. better weapons, faster movement). Progress gained is maintained from one play session to the next even if the player chooses to control different avatars. This notion of player progression (not character progression) is also evident in "systems where players collect virtual rewards that […] are separated from the rest of the game" [31]. These rewards, colloquially referred to as "achievements" or "trophies", serve as a record of the progress of players over a range of games rather than within a single game. It does not make sense to speak of character progression in this case, just as it seems a stretch to think of these systems as documenting the personal growth of the player. On the surface, however, they seem the same.

'RPG elements' are now being used in contexts that are not related to games. Under the guise of "gamification" – we can recognize the style of these systems of character progression. They are probably successful insofar as they leverage the same reasons that make character progression systems attractive. However, they do not mirror the substance of character progression systems, the character. Thus, the progression is arguably meaningless. These systems of gamification are an accumulation of points and levels that are not grounded in something meaningful. In RPGs, this grounding was a character – someone the players are presumably emotionally invested in. Without a character, however, what is there? While it might make sense to speak of "personal growth" in some cases (e.g. gamified personal fitness exercises), we argue that this is not generally the case.

6. CONCLUSIONS

We have unpacked the term 'RPG elements' by examining a single element: systems and mechanics designed to create progression in characters. We have also discussed the history of these systems including their precursors and necessary conditions and presented a variety of examples from paper and pencil RPGs. Additionally, we have examined their less common counterparts: systems of negative character progression. However, to what end?

In game studies research it is uncommon to focus purely on the systems and mechanics that exist in games. There is value in cataloging and describing what we see in games in hopes that it provides insight. We are also able to get a sense of the design space in which designers are moving and gain appreciation of the subtleties and nuances a particular system may have. While the argument for developing a vocabulary for discussing games is at least 20 years old [11], it is still relevant today. Not only are new games being designed for which we will need new terms and concepts, but it becomes increasingly important to refine and be more precise about those terms we already have. 'RPG elements' is simply not good enough at this point. Imprecision in game design vocabulary not only makes games difficult to talk about, but it impedes design. We hope that this work, as an initial approach to this area, helps illuminate new design directions and ideas. For instance, we perceive an opportunity for further use of systems for negative progression to encourage novel tools for game balancing or providing greater narrative depth and variety to game characters. Perhaps dRPGs could benefit from techniques for frontloading character progression while paper and pencil RPGs might borrow from the sophisticated reputation systems we see in dRPGs.

However, we would like to make an additional argument: understanding the origins and evolutions of these systems allows us to better comprehend, analyze, critique, and contextualize them when we see them appear in other areas and under other guises. For example, we argue that by outlining the trajectory from experience points and levels in *Dungeons & Dragons* all the way to levels and badges in the gamified workplace we can better articulate what seems compelling yet strange about gamification as a phenomenon. Breaking down ambiguous terms like 'RPG elements' makes them clearer and easier to understand. It also makes it easier to challenge their use or misuse. After all, if games have values – then so do their abstracted design elements [63]. A design element removed from its history and context may cease to have meaning or its meaning may shift.

In the future we hope to continue developing these ideas and exploring their broader implications as we examine additional systems and mechanisms that are as 'commonly well known' as they are underexplored and underexamined.

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