

# The importance of the profile of the RPG gamer community and its influence in the adoption of RPG as a learning tool

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Figure 1: A collection of typical images from Role-Playing Games, portraying characters, dragons, settings and scenery.

## Abstract:

This study presents some aspects of a typological analysis of young RPG players who play the game on a free-will basis—i.e., as a leisure activity—based on the results obtained from internet research. The objective of this study is to investigate issues of compatibility between young RPG players and the diversified student audience. Such issues may be relevant for the assessment of the efficacy and viability of the RPG as a learning tool, given that the validity of ludic strategies in the classroom depends on the degree of interest of the students in the proposed activity.

**Keywords:** Role Playing Game (RPG), genre, education, ludic.

**Resumo:** Este trabalho apresenta alguns aspectos de uma análise tipológica dos jovens que jogam RPG por livre vontade - lazer - a partir dos resultados obtidos em uma pesquisa feita com esse público via Internet. O objetivo é investigar a existência, ou inexistência, de compatibilidade entre os jovens RPGistas e o diversificado público estudantil. Questão essa que pode ser relevante para a determinação da eficácia e viabilidade do uso do RPG como instrumento de

educação, considerando que para se manter as alternativas lúdicas em sala de aula é necessário o interesse dos alunos pela atividade a ser desenvolvida.

**Palavras-chave:** Role Playing Game (RPG), gênero, educação, lúdico

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## 1. Introduction

The word “game” carries a wide range of meaning, evoking different ideas to different people each time it is used. In Portuguese, the words for “game,” “play,” and “gaming” are also used for “gambling,” making the association with addiction possible, that being one of the most frequent associations made by laypersons. It relates the notion of “gaming” with a form of addiction through the idea of games where the elements of material gain and loss are present. The same words may also be used to convey ideas of fun and enjoyment, as in the cheerful

sessions of “Truco,” a popular card game among university students. In Truco, gaming is aimed at socialization and functions as a pastime. Games also have an entertainment aspect which can be presented with technologic sophistication, as in the various types of videogame available. A game can also be thought of as a competition, as well as a means to improve physical capacity (as in sports) or even mental capacity, as in strategy games such as Chess or Checkers, or “Wargames”<sup>1</sup> in general. Furthermore, “game” or “play” in the context of leisure may refer to activities ranging from *gincana* to board games such as “Monopoly”<sup>2</sup> or “Clue!”<sup>3</sup> Those examples are only a part of the possible meanings for the Portuguese term “jogo,” which is used for “game,” “playing,” and “gamble” among other notions.

Besides all the popular interpretations on “gaming,” the lack of a trans-disciplinary academic conception of the term, or even a widely accepted conception of the term, must be dealt with. Authors such as Morchida [1998] understand “game” and “toy” practically as synonyms, associating the word “game” with the idea of childish play. Authors such as Beach [1945, *apud* Bomtempo 1986] construe gaming as a form of play that is eventually abandoned, being characteristic of an immature animal. Nevertheless, for many areas of interest it becomes necessary to distinguish “gaming” from an immature form of play, and that issue will be discussed along this study.

The idea of “gaming,” when taken out of context, encompasses innumerable and varied leisure activities and can be expressed in various fields such as education, drama and psychology.

According to Huizinga [2001], “Games are as ancient as humanity itself. It has been said that gaming is inherent to our culture and, therefore, our species should not only be named *homo sapiens* but also *homo ludens*, because of the ludic character often present in human relations.”

However, specific studies about gaming and its relation to young audiences—which are a subject of this study—are lacking. Therefore, parallel observations are made with the already consolidated knowledge about children: “Observation of a child before several types of toy reveals response patterns in relation to his or her cognitive, social and emotional development.” [Bomtempo, 1986 24.] Taking, as Huizinga proposes, the ludic quality as a trait that accompanies human beings throughout their lives

instead of belonging to their early years only, it seems reasonable that a statement similar to the one from Bomtempo above could also be applied to teenagers and adults in their respective leisure activities.

In this study, the term “game” refers to the result of an evolution of toys in terms of complexity, even though this evolution does not necessarily occur chronologically. Authors such as Brougere [1995] agree with Huizinga [2001] by proposing that all human beings, regardless of age, are able to play. However, “gaming” requires a certain development towards understanding and accordance to game rules. In this way, gaming originates from playing when children present a sufficient development, and from that moment, “gaming” joins “playing” in the number of possible human activities.

For Piaget [1971], children rely in their development mainly on “sensory-motor exercise games” to improve control of the body—which is, in a way, children’s first natural toy, one that may keep them entertained for hours with games such as moving their limbs about, or grabbing their own fingers or the hair of their parents. These games are followed by “symbolic games,” which Piaget estimates to appear between the ages of three and six. Later, the “game of rules” appears between the ages of four and seven, along with most social traits.

According to Piaget, “The Sociodramatic games, or role-playing games, are the highest expression of symbolic games” [Piaget 1964, *apud* Bomtempo 1986, p. 26]. In this case, Piaget refers to the ability to play roles, and it is in this game that children explore not only the possibility to imagine one object as another, but also to imagine themselves as another being.

Role-playing is commonly associated to childish play and, in the case of the Brazilian culture, language plays a role in that association. Nonetheless, the Portuguese term for “play” is not used to refer to an actor playing a role, as in English or French (“jouer”).

The Role-Playing Game, or RPG, can then be construed as a mixture of Piaget’s sociodramatic game and a highly complex game of rules, which includes statistical systems as well as organization and cohesion of the group of players.

There is currently a large variety of RPG<sup>4</sup> available, grouped under specifically named categories such as: CRPG (Computer Role-Playing Games), Adventure Book (games with limited options given through the reading of the book), and the traditional Tabletop RPG (the original format that uses books, character sheet and dice.).

In 1969, in the USA, Ernest Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson adapted a wargame to create the “Chainmail”<sup>5</sup> system. This process of adaptation led to the publication of “Dungeons & Dragons” by TSR in 1974. Dungeons & Dragons is probably the most

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<sup>1</sup> A “wargame” is usually played on a board, and consists of a simulation of military tactics and operations. Wargames can also be called “games of conflict simulation.” Most wargames have a historical setting. However, some games with science fiction or fantasy settings have been published recently. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, wargames were played with miniatures. Nowadays, the possibilities of representation of troops are much more varied.

<sup>2</sup> Monopoly is published by Parker Brothers, an imprint of Hasbro, the version played nowadays is from 1935.

<sup>3</sup> Clue, or Cluedo, is a crime fiction board game originally published by Waddingtons in 1948.

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<sup>4</sup> RPG will be used in this study as both singular and plural.

<sup>5</sup> Chainmail is a system or set of rules, props and orientations for a medieval miniatures wargame. Developed by Jeff Perren and Gary Gygax, and originally published in 1971.

popular RPG, originated from further adaptations in the Chainmail game aimed at allowing individual soldiers to perform solo missions apart from their units. The player was able to assume control of a single character and customize its personality, including in the game the possibilities of role-playing and personal improvement of the character, since by accomplishing missions a character could acquire knowledge and skills that would prove useful in future missions. Dungeons&Dragons was a commercial success, particularly due to its medieval fantasy setting and thematic influence from the works of JRR Tolkien, author of many famous works in the genre, such as *The Lord of the Rings*.

Since then, several RPG rules systems have been developed. In summary, all of those systems have the objective of (1) establishing a setting for the game, or instructing players on how to build such setting. (2) Establishing a statistical system, usually based on dice rolling, that allows for a representation of probability. Several possible outcomes for each action may be supposed to exist, but the system will help decide which one will be realized, thus helping to build a more unpredictable and intriguing storyline. (3) Offering rules for the evolution of game characters, who gain new abilities, capabilities and skills as they complete missions and adventures. In short, the system allows the players to simulate the learning process of their characters.

All RPG systems explore more or less possibilities and are more or less encompassing according to their complexity, offering a large repertoire of additional rules for other situations.

Much has been written lately about the use of the RPG as a learning tool or ludic teaching instrument. Pedagogy increasingly seeks ways to motivate students, since motivation seems to be one of the more representative indicators of success, good performance, and even self-esteem for students. As Silva writes: "The feeling of success, of being able to understand and solve problems, increases the self-esteem of students." [Silva 2004, p. 186].

When we search for a resource that naturally comes from leisure, we desire to capture the interest for occupations to which, according to Dumazedier [1999], "the individual may dedicate him or herself by his or her own free will for rest, entertainment, recreation, distraction, or even to develop his or her own information or formation." [Dumazedier 1999, p. 34]. We desire to engage students in a voluntary activity that offers development, satisfaction, and knowledge acquisition. However, that desire represents a set of simultaneous goals that is not easily achieved.

It would not be profitable to discuss the benefits of the RPG as an activity which, under ideal circumstances, can be very useful to present the contents of a teaching syllabus to students in a ludic, interactive and alternative way, since a lot of effort and research has been realized with that objective. Vidal [2006] suggests that observation reveals the value of symbolic games, applied in RPG form, in the teaching of young college students. In a similar manner, Souza

[2006] fosters the use of the RPG as a complementary teaching technique, pointing out that the RPG mainly develops communication, research, and decision-making skills.

Every classroom activity is, to a certain degree, directed, and the students are invariably aware of that fact. There are several reasons for the students—when they are at school or, more specifically, in the classroom—not to engage personal activities in the committed manner which is usual in a situation of leisure. There are two main factors that lower the entertainment power of games when applied in the classroom: one is the feeling of being evaluated, which comes from the teacher's supervising. The other is the need to assimilate rules, which makes students worry about playing the game right. As Vidal points out: "(...) worried about "getting the game right," students would turn their attention towards game play and not so much towards what could be promoted by the game in terms of findings or new ideas." [Vidal, 2006 127]

In reality, Brazilian schools face conditions that are far from ideal, and a practical question has to be asked: what would be the real interest of students in RPG and its potential as a motivator? It will do the students little good to be presented an innovative activity, if they have no interest in such an activity or cannot identify themselves with it.

## 2. Research on young RPG Players

As a research method, we chose an on-line semi-structured questionnaire. The form for the questionnaire was made available through the internet, and consisted on 16 questions, 11 of those being multiple-choice, and 5 being discursive. The objective was to identify the profile (gender, age, education) of gamers, as well as their motivation, level of satisfaction with the game, and both frequency and length of game sessions.

The questionnaire was distributed among websites oriented towards the tabletop modality of RPG. Nevertheless, a representative response was observed from the on-line RPG player community, which was already expected given the fact that the form with the questionnaire was only made available on-line. The form was published on ProblemFree, a British academic account equipped with IP<sup>6</sup> tracking and filling-out timer devices, to prevent any given user from answering the questionnaire more than once.

Due to the numerous possibilities of analysis, this study will only focus on the profile of the subjects in the sample, leaving for future research the further development of the issues unexplored here.

What follows is a presentation of some characteristics of the audience which is freely attracted

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<sup>6</sup> IP (Internet Protocol) is a policy to establish communication among computer networks. The IP address can be understood as a group of numbers that indicates the location of a specific machine within a public or private network.

to RPG, not for being introduced to the game in a didactic environment but because their personal preferences lead them to identify with and enjoy this specific hobby. The final subject group is composed of 155 young Brazilian RPG gamers who play the tabletop variety of RPG, this being the group of immediate interest considering the financial and technological resources available to schools, where the tabletop RPG would be the most viable for application in the classroom. Even though electronic games may also play a part in that application, more sophisticated technological resources tend to be less affordable.

### 3. Profile of Subject Group

Regarding their age groups, the majority of subjects is 26 or less. Notice that the proportion of players up to 17 years of age, the common age group for "Ensino Médio"<sup>7</sup> students, is 29.7%. This is slightly higher than the 22.6% of players within the age group that favors a college education, i.e., 18 to 21.

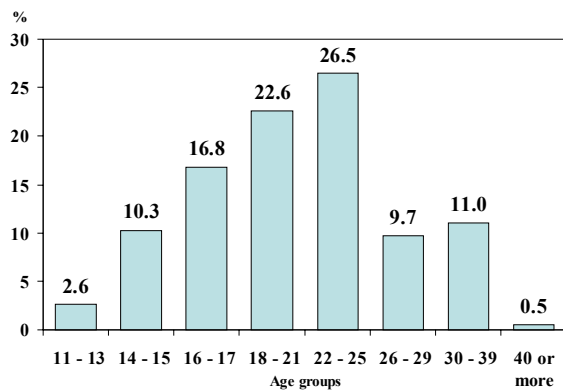


Figure 2: Age group proportion of research subjects

It is known, however, that "Pnad/IBGE and Inep data has shown that we have today 9% of the population in the 18-24 age group receiving a college education (40% of Brazilian college students are over 24, due to the chronic age/school year distortion) which is the usual age group for international comparison." [Araujo, 2007]

Therefore, if the age group corresponding to a college education is considered to be extended to 25 years of age, almost half of the subjects (49.1%) will be in this group.

The following results were obtained regarding the level of education of the subjects.<sup>8</sup>

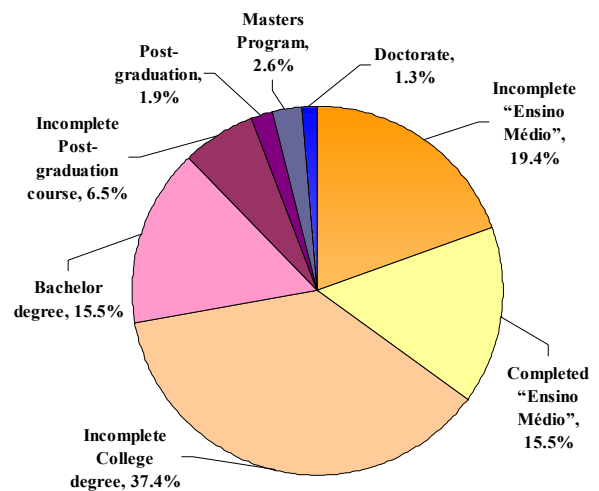


Figure 3: Level of education of research subjects

It can be inferred from the data that most subjects are acquiring a college degree or have already acquired it, while only 34.9% of gamers are at the highschool level. It will be relevant to observe that the RPG, as a complex activity, requires a predisposition to imagination, ability to deal with abstract situations, as well as other skills not always matured in teenagers coursing the "Ensino Médio."

Regarding gender, there is a majority (88.4%) of males, while females have almost inexpressive representation (11.6%) in the group. This does not mean females do not participate actively as RPG players, only that certain leisure activities such as soccer and RPG are more appealing to males.

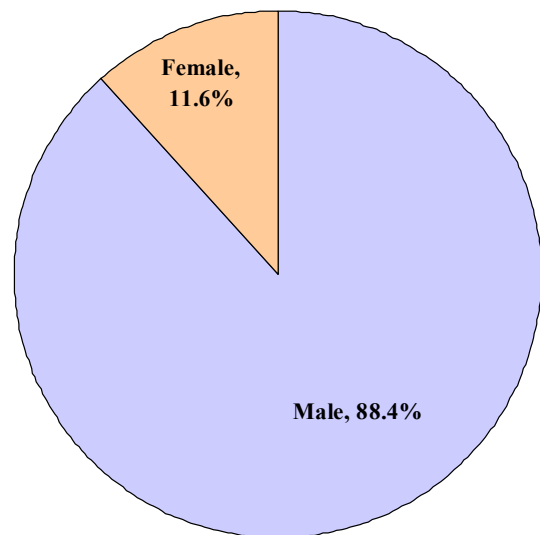


Figure 4: Gender of research subjects

It has been observed, in recent social events gathering enthusiasts of RPG and similar games, a larger rate of participation of males. The statistics of the recent EIRPG, or "Encontro Internacional de Role-Playing Game" (International Role-Playing Game Gathering,) which took place in São Paulo in July of 2007, show a 65-75% rate of participation for males and a 25-35% rate of participation for females.

<sup>7</sup> "Ensino Médio" is roughly equivalent to Highschool.

<sup>8</sup> "Incomplete" here means both "under course" or "dropped course".

The "Simpósio RPG e Educação" (RPG and Education Symposium) shows a different statistic. The event took place in October 2006 in São Paulo, having teachers instead of gamers as the intended audience. At this event there was a more even distribution of gender among participants.

However, those events cannot be taken as exclusive reference, since events like EIRPG may also attract whole families. Furthermore, the "Simpósio RPG e Educação" was directed towards a different audience – mostly teachers interested in RPG as an education tool.

In conclusion, the RPG as it is known today is an activity which is more typically male than female. Participation of women is very limited, and it is possible that research based on personal interviews (instead of an on-line form) would turn out an even lower rate than 11.6%. When questioned about their participation in a fixed RPG group (playing the game with the same persons every time,) 7.1% of subjects answered that they "Only played through the internet." Of those, 3.1% were males, and 4.0% were females.

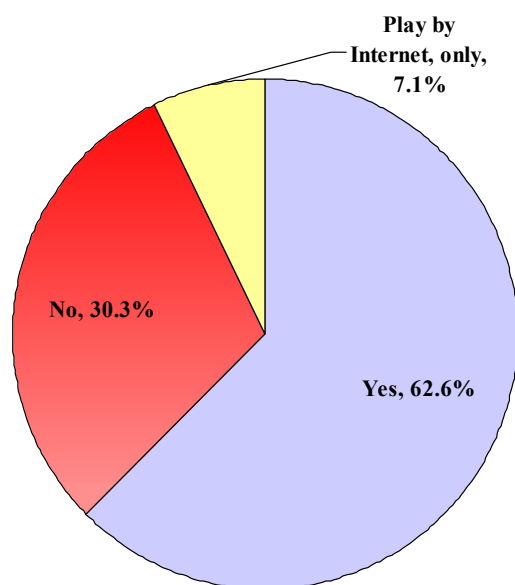


Figure 5: Participation of subjects in fixed RPG groups

#### 4. Final Thoughts

RPG seems to be an atypical activity for students in the age group associated with a highschool education. We can notice some of the highschool players are in an upper age group – or, considering age, should be in college degree. This does not mean that the RPG is impractical for that age group, given the successful experiments in the field. On the other hand, this study—as well as previous research—indicates the possibility of application of RPG at the undergraduate level and above, given the high rate of subjects at the correspondent age group and level of education. College students seem to be the group who would mostly benefit from the application of RPG, considering the higher chances of spontaneous interest as suggested by this study.

The issue of gender weights strongly in the application of RPG as a learning technique. The RPG is, by current standards, a predominantly male activity. We want to stress in this study the importance of considering the issue when planning for the application of RPG in the classroom, or for future research. Especially regarding the application, in a mixed-genre classroom, of a technique that may appeal more strongly to one genre than the other, and thus lead to uneven results among the classmates.

This study is not at all conclusive. Limitations inherent to the methods of research (online form) must be considered, as well as the time available to answer the survey, which may have favored the participation of males. The restriction imposed by the mode of access to the survey—it was available exclusively on-line—must also be considered, since this medium is not available for many young students in Brazil. The results presented here refer to a group of RPG gamers who, due to the method of research, are also internet users. This restriction may have influenced the results obtained as a whole, since it is possible that a part of the subjects are granted access to the internet from their school or college laboratories or libraries, favoring the identification of RPG gamers with the academic environment, even though there may be gamers without access to an educational facility or the internet. This constitutes one of the possible flaws in the present results, deriving from the research methods applied.

Future research on this topic may include an analysis of issues left aside in the present study, for only four of the sixteen questionnaire items were processed here. Furthermore, an application of the same questionnaire in personal interviews would allow the results obtained to be compared and tested.

There are reasons why games, as we know them today, attract more males than females. Actually, many game publishers have put a great deal of effort in the development of games that may cater to the large female audience, desirous of gender-specific games. An example of such effort would be the release by TecToy, in 1994, of the "Master System for Girls" videogame console, which was made in a pink color and accompanied a game about Mônica (a Brazilian comic book character mostly appealing to girls.) Even though this specific project from TecToy did not reach successfully the intended audience, females are in no way disconnected from games and are also *homo ludens*, to paraphrase Huizinga [2001]. Games, not only RPG, can be adapted to fulfill the expectations of a female audience. It is necessary to search for the means to make that happen.

An increasing interest on the part of the female audience can be observed regarding "casual games," which are short in duration and simplified in presentation, although complex in construction. This may indicate a possible line of development. It is necessary to go beyond the development of a market for women gamers and plan for an educational system which does not exclude them due to its methodology.

Because of their natural characteristics, games are viable and interesting learning tools. Being ludic, games capture the attention of students, facilitating the transmission of desired lessons. Games also have a pedagogical quality, which, according to Dumazedier [1999] is compatible with being ludic. Thus, games may help students to internalize a significant quantity of topics and lessons more easily through the pleasure of playing. However, this "recipe" will only work if the activity proposed maintains its quality of entertainment.

Interactive narratives, a label commonly used by educators to refer to RPG, are characteristically very flexible in the format of the game, as well as in the possibility to approach diversified subjects. Hence, the insistence to consider RPG as learning tools is justifiable by the dynamic quality they may bring to the process of teaching and learning.

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