

Tropes in Modern RPG's and how they may be doing more harm than good.

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With the possible exception of First Person Shooters, no other genre of video games has had such a big impact on the industry as has Role Playing Games (RPG). Dungeons and Dragons is perhaps the most well-known table top RPG in the world, and most video game RPG's owe their existence in some way to this early table top game. It wasn't long before RPG's began to be developed for early PC's, with games like *Rogue*, while simple given the technology available in the early 80's, created sub genres that still exist today for RPG's to be categorised as. These games also created a set of standards by which all RPG's have since included and indeed been measured, where the absence of these rules is conspicuous and can supposedly detract from the experience of playing an RPG. Giving the player the option to select a character's gender, race, and class (or subclass) have evolved into the basic foundation of any RPG. And while it's hard to imagine an RPG without the ability to select from some, or all, of these options. There are more modern mechanics in RPG's today, that have developed into commonly recurring themes, or tropes, for many RPG's that are perhaps doing more damage than they are good. Today, almost all RPG's include some kind of experience mechanic, to increase level and thus make the character more powerful as they "level-up". It isn't uncommon to see skill or talent trees, that give the player powerful abilities as they level. And many games today attempt to mesh RPG's with other genres, whether they be First Person Shooters (FPS) or Third Person Shooters (TPS) and others. This has led to mechanics from those genres seeping into more traditional RPG's and indeed, diluting the experience of those games as a result. This article will bring some of these tropes into the limelight, and pose the question, are they doing more harm than good?

A trope, or commonly recurring themes in video games, develop as a mechanic or system becomes popular or makes development or play more efficient. Perhaps there is no better example than the experience system in video games today. It's hard to think of any RPG, both modern or past, that hasn't used an experience system at least in some way. But mostly, these experience systems relate heavily towards the progression of the player's character. The system is a simple one, the players kills an enemy, the player gains experience for that kill, that experience then adds to what has already been gained, and once a milestone is reached, the player will "level up". Levelling up then bestows upon that character new abilities, attributes, or talent points that can then be allocated onto a talent tree. Games that exist within the strictest definition of an RPG, like *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* and *Dungeons and Dragons* all have this system in place. *Diablo: Hellfire* and its successors also use this system primarily to acquire talent points to progress a talent tree to make your character more powerful. It is a system that has proved incredibly useful to game designers for years, decades even, by giving us a clear blueprint for how to make an efficient, easy to understand system for character progression.

Hybrid RPG's, or RPG's that have been developed as a FPS or TPS, or even Action RPG's like *Diablo*, have revealed flaws with this experience system. Games like *The Division*, *Borderlands*, and even *Ori and the Blind Forest* all include an experience system in some way, but the implementation of that system in those games can feel superfluous to the game's design if it isn't implemented correctly. *The Division*, as the most recent RPG like game to be released, is an example of the kind of game that could have been better without a traditional experience system implemented in to it. In *The Division*, you gain experience as you would expect, by killing enemies, completing quests, and crafting items. But the achievement of gaining a new level once an experience milestone has been achieved falls flat because you don't actually have anything to gain at that level. Skills (the games equivalent of talents) are awarded from the completion of the games mission, and are upgraded at the players Base of Operations. The Base of Operations (BoO) is upgraded using resources given as rewards for completing certain side missions and main story missions, and is thus entirely removed from the experience system in the game. The Skills don't require any investment of "talent points" to make them stronger. Instead, the game limits the player to two active skills and one signature (or ultimate) skill. The player begins the game with one skill slot, and after levelling up to a required level, a new skill slot become available. *The Division* does have actual talents, but they too are gained from completing side missions and main story mission, with they to being a positive consequence of spending resources gained from those missions to upgrade your BoO (though it should be clear that there is no other use for resources rewarded from missions, they have one purpose, and that is to upgrade your BoO and acquire new skills, talents, and perks). The player has 4 slots available for these talents, and can choose to use any combination of 4 talents that they wish from the available pool of talents. The talent slots, like the skill slots, become available once a particular level is reached, up to the maximum level of 30.



Figure 1: *The Division*, seen here is the player (foreground) preparing to fight a Boss (background with yellow bar above his head), Skills can be seen to the left of the player.

As a game designer, I look at the system Massive (developers of *The Division*) used and wonder if it could have been implemented better. Indeed, the experience/levelling system as it is implemented into *The Division* feels almost tacked on. As though they felt, by developing a game that falls within the RPG genre, that they needed to have a system like this in the game. The flaws of the system are revealed when the player reaches level 30, as you are still awarded experience from killing enemies

and completing quests, but have nothing left to gain from acquiring that experience. As with the *The Division*, *Ori and the Blind Forest* also includes a kind of experience system used to progress the character along a talent or ability tree to acquire more powerful talents/abilities. But, unlike in *The Division*, there are no experience points to be gained from killing monsters or completing quests. Instead the player collects ability points, which are gathered as the player moves through the game. Each ability point (AP) is gained after the player collects 100 ability orbs. And can spend 1, 2, or 3 AP's on an ability of their choosing. The Ability Tree shows all the available abilities and in what order they must be bought in order to use them. With some abilities not becoming available until the one preceding it has been bought. While this system is closely linked to a more traditional experience system, it's execution feels more intuitive within the game. Whereas *The Division's* system feels out of place compared to the rest of the game.



Figure 2: *Ori and the Blind Forest's* Ability Tree, you begin the game with no abilities and invest in them as the game progresses.

Although the example of *Ori and the Blind Forest* doesn't necessarily provide a definitive alternative to a traditional experience system. It does show that alternatives can work, and for a game like *The Division*, you begin to wonder if it may have been better to explore these alternatives. Given the relative lack of reward from reaching a new level. Perhaps the game could have been better without a levelling system at all, and instead rewarded the player with new skill and talent slots by completing special missions or reaching certain milestones in the main storyline of the game.

As the RPG genre evolved from its early beginning, games within the genre began to borrow heavily from other genres. This "hybridization" of RPG games began with games like *Diablo 2*, which is more accurately defined as an Action RPG (ARPG). *Diablo 2*, and other games in this genre such as *Baldur's Gate*, rather than being a slow turn based RPG in the more traditional mould of games within that genre, were instead an action orientated game where the player actively fights enemies in real time without any breaks or pauses to select which abilities or skills to use. As more developers began experimenting with hybrid RPG's, the lines between what defined an RPG mechanic and what didn't become blurred. The result of this is a trope in AI design known as "bullet sponges". For any RPG to work effectively, the player must be able to improve their character. This improvement is demonstrated in many ways, from the look of the character, to the abilities the player has available

to choose from. But most noticeable, this improvement is seen through the increase in health and damage a player will see as they progress through any RPG. As the character levels up, they will have more health, and do more damage. Thus the AI must have more health and do more damage, in order for the game to remain challenging. In traditional, medieval fantasy RPG's, this was easy to accomplish without compromising the players' suspension of disbelief, as aesthetically, enemies would get harder because they would wear more armour, or wield bigger swords. Visually, it was easy to justify why an enemy could take 5 swings to the head with a sword the size of a small car. But as hybrid RPG's have evolved to borrow from shooter genres in particular (primarily first and third person shooters), and implemented all kinds of gunplay into their designs. This ability to disguise the increasing toughness of enemies has been more difficult to achieve. *Borderlands* and *The Division*, being two examples of First and Third Person Shooter RPG's (FPS/TPS RPG's), best illustrate the failings of hybrid RPG's through their required use of bullet sponge enemies. In those games, without bullet sponges, it would be almost impossible to demonstrate any practical purpose for having any RPG elements in those games what-so-ever. If the player can one-shot (instant kill) every enemy like they would in a regular FPS game with the most basic weapons available, then why have RPG mechanics, or character progression at all? By having bullet sponges, or enemies who can withstand 5 shotgun shots to the face without losing half a health bar in those games, it is difficult to maintain one's suspension of disbelief. But they are necessary to justify the presence of a character progression system.

Borderlands, being a FPSRPG, suffers from this problem more acutely than even *The Division*. Whereas *The Division* requires at least some tactical thinking during enemy encounters, due to its third person, cover based mechanics, *Borderlands* however requires little to no tactical thought. Because of it's grounding as a FPS, the main focus of that game must be fast paced gunplay, this is due to the limitations presented by a first person perspective. There is little room in any first person perspective game for kind of depth present in most RPG's. What mainstream, traditionally set RPG has ever been designed as a FPS, even *Skyrim* doesn't require the player to always be in a first person perspective, though it does encourage it at times. As a result of this adherence to a first person perspective, bullet sponges are present throughout the game. And although the game is set in a sci-fi world with guns that can do all manner of crazy things, the player can find it difficult at times to maintain their suspension of disbelief. When a half-naked midget takes 30 rockets to the face and still isn't dead, can the player really still be asked to believe what this game is asking them to believe? Games must seek to immerse players in their world, as a designer of interactive experiences, immersion must be primary in my thinking when designing any game mechanic. What is it about this mechanic that will pull the player out of that experience? Although the example above might sound silly, it is a very real occurrence in games like *The Division* and *Borderlands*. And when they do happen, the first reaction most players will have is to roll their eyes and dismiss this as a contrivance designed to artificially prolong an encounter or bloat the difficulty of that encounter. This breaks any immersion the player may be experiencing, and is thus a failure in game design, a failure brought on in part by a slavish adherence to tropes that have developed around these kinds of games.

What alternative exists then to remedy this problem? It would seem that the necessary compromise for having any kind of shooter mechanics in your RPG game would be enemies that are bullet sponges. However, a MMO recently released that might offer a solution to the problem. *Wildstar*, an MMORPG, is set in a sci-fi, far future world. The game's perspective is third person (or over the shoulder, the same as *The Division*) and includes classes that the player can pick who use guns as their main weapon of attack and/or support. Enemies to use guns, this then would present a similar problem as *The Division* would, but it avoids this through the clever use of a developing trope known as "telegraphing". Telegraphing, in a video game, is a tool used to clearly communicate with the player what attack an enemy is doing and how to avoid it (Stout M 2015). By telegraphing what attacks the

enemy is doing, and making the method of avoidance movement based, which it is in Wildstar (by dodging or rolling away from the telegraphed attack), then it becomes possible to design enemy encounters that don't require as much enemy health as ones seen in The Division or Borderlands. Because the player must move to avoid attacks, the player spends most of the fight thinking tactically about the space they are in, and where they can move to be safe from the next enemy attack. In The Division, where enemies don't telegraph, and don't provoke the player to move from out of cover much at all, the fights become very static, and the bullet sponginess of the enemy becomes more unavoidable. World of Warcraft was another such game that progressively started to employ more and more telegraphs into its boss design. As they clearly are a more efficient method of communicating what an enemy is doing. And provide the fight itself with more tension as you can telegraph multiple attacks at a time, demanding greater movement and concentration from the players.



Figure 3: An example of Wildstars telegraphing system, The boss (in the middle) is using an ability, the red circles represent areas that ability will effect, and thus must be avoided.

I began by saying that tropes can provide a blueprint for game designers when embarking on the creation of a game that falls within a genre or genres. Hybridization, experience systems, and bullet sponges are all tropes that have had at best, very modest success in the games they have been implemented into. And while this isn't a reason to abandon them, they must be approached with care, or they will do more harm than good in a game. But it is other tropes, such as telegraphing or modified experience systems like ability points in Ori and the Blind Forest, that can balance these harmful tropes out. They represent a new kind of thinking that must be present when trying to break down the more traditional definitions of genres that categorize each game. Hybridization should be encouraged, if for no other reason than it allows designers to experiment with the games they make, while having confidence that the underlying structure of the game, based on its genre, will be sound. But that hybridization, when left unchecked, can be incredibly harmful to the flow of the game. By thinking about new ways of approaching old problems, designers can find all kinds of exciting solutions that can enrich their games.

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