

Media Convergence of Role-playing Games (1974-2024): From Participation to Commodification and Back Again¹

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of media convergences on the evolution of role-playing games (RPGs) from the early 1970s to the present day. The analytical focus of this research is directed at the dynamics between player community participation and the process of commodification within this genre. In this context, specific phases in the development of RPGs are highlighted, including tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs), classic computer role-playing games (CRPGs), massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), live-action role-playing (LARP), and actual play (AP). This study highlights the similarities and differences between these forms, their mutual convergence, and their convergence with other analog and digital media (such as books, comics, television, film, and podcasts). Special attention is given to the phenomenon of prosumerism within the RPG subculture; that is, the specific interaction between the content offered by the entertainment industry and the efforts of RPG communities to maintain the participative and creative aspects of the genre. This research is based on a diachronic comparison of specific phases in the development of the RPG genre, as well as a secondary analysis of the dominant media content on current trends in the RPG subculture.

Keywords: *RPG, media convergence, Critical role, World of Warcraft, commodification*

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Introduction

The transformation of role-playing games over the past half-century has been intricately linked to the convergence of various media platforms and the evolving

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dynamics between content creators and player communities. From the humble beginnings of tabletop role-playing games in the 1970s to the immersive virtual worlds of massively multiplayer online role-playing games and the rise of live-action role-playing and actual play formats, the RPG genre has undergone a remarkable evolution, reflecting broader shifts in the entertainment industry and changing patterns of audience engagement (Brunette, 2015).

As RPG games gained popularity, the industry began to commodify the RPG experience by introducing a range of supplementary materials, including rulebooks, adventure modules, and an array of physical game components. However, this process of commodification was not a one-way street, as RPG communities actively engaged in shaping the genre, contributing to the development of new mechanics, narrative elements, and even subgenres.

The advent of computer-based role-playing games, or CRPGs, has further expanded the reach of the RPG genre, allowing players to immerse themselves in virtual worlds and experience narrative and gameplay in new, interactive ways (Cragoe, 2016). The development of these games was informed by the participatory culture of the tabletop RPG community, as designers sought to capture the essence of collaborative storytelling and character progression in digital media (Maravić, 2022).

One of the most significant developments in the RPG industry has been the emergence of massively multiplayer online role-playing games, which have revolutionized the genre by offering vast, persistent virtual worlds in which players can interact, collaborate, and compete with thousands of others simultaneously (Brunette, 2015; Maravić, 2022). World of Warcraft is the most popular, even if it was not the first MMORPG ever released, with more than eight million active players in the first year of release (Vukojević and Španović, 2023).

The concept of prosumerism, whereby consumers actively participate in the production and shaping of the content they consume, is particularly relevant to the RPG genre. RPG communities have long been known for their active engagement in creating fan-made content and organizing community events and conventions (Chalk, 2022). This dynamic interplay between the industry's efforts to commodify the RPG experience and players' desires to maintain the participatory and creative aspects of the genre has been a driving force in its evolution.

The research presented in this study examined the impact of media convergence on the evolution of role-playing games from the early 1970s to the present. The analysis focused on the dynamics between player community participation and the process of commodification within the RPG genre, highlighting specific phases in its development, including tabletop role-playing games, classic computer role-playing games, massively multiplayer online role-playing games, live-action role-playing, and actual play.

Method

The main objective of the paper is to explore how the dynamics between commodification and participation within the RPG genre influence its evolution and diversification. The methodological framework of the research is based on two approaches: diachronic comparison and secondary data analysis. Diachronic comparison focuses on identifying similarities and differences between various phases in the development of the RPG genre and its subgenres. This approach serves as a foundation for determining their specificities and it aims at positioning them on a continuum from participatory to commodification practices. Secondary data analysis, primarily of expert literature and specialized online content, provided the basis for two case studies: the MMORPG “World of Warcraft” and the AP “Critical Role.” These cases were chosen as the most popular examples of RPG content that, through the context of media convergence, have managed to transcend the tension between lucrative interests and community-driven creativity, starting from different initial positions (as outliers) —the first as a commercial project and the second as a participatory project.

Media Convergence Theory and Theory of prosumerism and commodification

Media convergence has emerged as a prominent field of study in the digital age as the boundaries between traditional and new media continue to blur. At its core, media convergence refers to the integration of various media platforms, technologies, and content driven by the increased adoption of digital technologies and the Internet (Lawson-Borders, 2003).

One of the foundational perspectives on media convergence is the “Seven Observations of Convergence” proposed by Everett Rogers’ diffusion of innovations theory. This framework suggests that successful media convergence strategies involve the integration of new and old media, leveraging the respective advantages of each platform to enhance the overall user experience and operational efficiency. Additionally, bibliometric analysis of media convergence research in China has revealed a similar pattern, with an initial focus on theoretical underpinnings and technical support, followed by a broader exploration of content integration, industry-specific applications, and case studies (Xuerui, 2022; Feng et al., 2020). It is also important to understand that convergence encompasses three interconnected processes: transmediation, adaptation, and remediation (Booth, 2015). All three of these processes are significant for the RPG genre, as there is no linear convergence process with clear rules: sometimes it involves adaptation to new media (such as short formats on YouTube), and sometimes it involves creating a series featuring characters from the RPG community (like Critical Role and their series *The Legend of Vox Machina*), or it can be a process of remediation when a new medium successfully enhances an ‘old’ medium (a book bringing the focus back to TRPG).

The rise of digital technologies has significantly transformed the image of consumption, giving rise to new phenomena, such as commodification and prosumerism. Commodification refers to the process by which products or services are transformed into commodities, with their value determined by the market rather than their intrinsic worth (Leparoux et al., 2019). This shift has been driven, in part, by the increasing digitalization of consumer behavior, as consumers rely more on online platforms and social media to inform their purchasing decisions (Leparoux et al., 2019). Prosumerism has emerged as a significant trend in tandem with the commodification of consumption. Prosumerism refers to the blurring of the lines between producers and consumers, as individuals actively participate in the creation and customization of the products and services they consume (Jansom & Pongsakornrungsilp, 2021; Leparoux et al., 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021; Stankevich, 2017).

The growth of digital technologies has enabled prosumers to play a more active role in the value-creation process, collaborating with brands and other consumers to shape the products and services they consume. This transformation of consumption has had a profound impact on how value is perceived and communicated. In the past, the value of a product or service was often determined by its physical attributes or the expertise of the producer, and the digital economy shifted the locus of value creation to consumers (Morewedge et al., 2020).

A Brief History of RPGs: Between Community and Commodity

The inception of tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) dates to the 1974 release of *Dungeons & Dragons* by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, which introduced key elements like character creation, storytelling, and rule-based gameplay (Gygax & Arneson, 1974). The 1980s and 1990s saw the genre expand with titles like *Call of Cthulhu* and *Shadowrun*, incorporating horror and cyberpunk themes (White et al., 2018). TRPGs foster community through local groups and conventions like Gen Con and PAX, offering opportunities for networking and game participation (Orr et al., 2018; Chalk, 2022).

Key publishers include Wizards of the Coast, Paizo Publishing, and Chaosium, producing rulebooks, adventure modules, and supplementary materials (Chalk, 2022). Crowdfunding platforms like Kickstarter have empowered independent creators, and TRPG-related merchandise (e.g., miniatures, dice) has become popular (Byers & Crocco, 2016). The rise of Actual Play (AP) content, such as *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone*, has broadened the TRPG audience, driving sales and cultural interest (Orr et al., 2018).

Development of computer role-playing games (CRPGs) began in the late 1970s with *Akalabeth* and *Ultima*, adapting TRPG mechanics to digital formats (Barton & Stacks, 2019). Multiplayer modes in games like *Diablo* and *Baldur's Gate* foster community through online play, and modding allows players to create and share custom content (Barton & Stacks, 2019). Platforms like Twitch and YouTube have further enhanced CRPG engagement by offering gameplay streams, tutorials,

and reviews, attracting new players and maintaining interest in older titles (Byers & Crocco, 2016).

MMORPGs emerged in the 1990s with *Ultima Online* and *EverQuest*, allowing thousands of players to interact in persistent online worlds. The genre saw mainstream success with *World of Warcraft* in 2004, which set new standards with its expansive world and community (Deterding & Zagal, 2018). Many MMORPGs initially used subscription models but later adopted free-to-play systems that generate revenue through microtransactions (Deterding & Zagal, 2018).

Live-action role-playing (LARP) emerged in the 1980s and it emphasizes improvisation and social interaction. It has since formalized into structured events like *Nordic LARP*, gaining international recognition (Hitchens & Drucken, 2007). LARP communities organize local events and larger conventions that foster global collaboration (Bowman, 2010; Mochocki, 2021).

The popularity of Actual Play (AP) content in the 2010s brought RPGs to wider audiences, with shows like *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone* influencing both game design and culture (Orr et al., 2018). AP content fosters live audience interaction through platforms like Twitch, building strong fan communities on social media and forums (Chalk, 2022; Jones, 2021).

Main characteristics of different forms of role-playing games (RPGs) and related media, including Tabletop RPGs (TRPGs), Computer RPGs (CRPGs), Massively Multiplayer Online RPGs (MMORPGs), Live Action Role-Playing (LARP), and Actual Play (AP) are:

- **Primary Media:** TRPGs use analog objects (tables, rulebooks, dice, figurines). CRPGs use computers and consoles. MMORPGs operate on online platforms. LARP involves physical performance using props and costumes. AP uses digital platforms (YouTube, Twitch, and podcasts).
- **Participation:** TRPGs involve direct player interactions. CRPGs typically pit players against computers. MMORPGs facilitate player interaction in the online world. LARP features physical participant interactions. AP focuses on audience observations.
- **Role of Narrative:** TRPGs emphasize collective storytelling. The CRPGs have predetermined narratives. MMORPGs blend player-created and predetermined stories. LARP narratives develop through physical interactions. AP shares narratives directly with the audience.
- **Commodification:** TRPGs andLARPs have low to moderate commodification. CRPGs are moderately commodified. MMORPGs are highly commodified (subscriptions and micro-transactions). AP commodification varies but often involves content monetization.
- **Examples:** TRPGs: “*Dungeons & Dragons*,” “*Pathfinder*.” CRPGs: “*Baldur’s Gate*,” “*Fallout*.” MMORPG: “*World of Warcraft*.” LARP: “*Vampire: The Masquerade*,” “*NERO*.” AP: “*Critical Role*,” “*The Adventure Zone*.”
- **Community Engagement:** TRPGs involve local groups. CRPGs have online communities. MMORPGs feature guilds and clans. LARP

communities organize local events. APs engage in online fanbases.

- **Main Goals:** TRPGs: fun, creativity, and social interaction. CRPGs: Entertainment and task completion. MMORPGs: Social interaction and in-game achievements. LARPs: fun, physical interaction, and performance. APs: entertainment, audience engagement, and storytelling.
- **Interaction with Other Media:** All RPG forms interact with literature, comics, and movies. Additionally, CRPGs, MMORPGs, LARP, and AP are connected to TRPGs, whereas MMORPGs are also related to CRPGs.

Commodification of RPGs

Over the decades, the industry has grown in size and diversity, encompassing tabletop RPGs, live-action role-playing (LARP), and digital RPGs.

Overview of the RPG Industry's worth (Picard, 2008; Chalk, 2022)

- **1970s to 1980s:** The RPG industry began with a modest market primarily driven by the success of D&D. By the late 1980s, the industry was estimated to be worth approximately US\$ 100 million. This period witnessed a boom in RPG popularity, with the emergence of many new systems and expansions.
- **1990s:** The market continued to grow, reaching approximately \$200 million at the end of the decade. This era introduced diverse genres and systems, including Vampire, Masquerade, and GURPS.
- **2000s:** The RPG industry faced challenges with the rise of video games but still managed to grow, with estimates placing the market value at around \$300 million. The introduction of the d20 System and the Open Game License (OGL) has allowed for greater creativity and expansion within the industry.
- **The 2010s:** The market saw a resurgence, particularly with the release of the 5th Edition of D&D in 2014, which attracted a new generation of players. By the end of the decade, the RPG industry was valued at approximately \$700 million, with tabletop RPGs gaining popularity through streaming platforms and social media.
- **The 2020s:** Recent estimates suggest that the RPG industry is worth more than US\$ 1 billion. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of digital platforms for RPG, thereby further expanding the market. The success of related media such as films and video games based on RPGs has also contributed to this growth.

Even though there are examples of dozens of RPGs and their commodifications, here is a short list of the most popular:

1. **Dungeons & Dragons** is a tabletop RPG with various connected media, including movies such as *Dungeons & Dragons* (2000) and *Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves* (2023), and TV shows such as the animated *Dungeons & Dragons* series (1983-1985) and *The Legend of*

Vox Machina (2022-present). The franchise also includes numerous novels, such as the *Dragonlance* series, various comics published by IDW Publishing, and a wide range of merchandise, such as miniatures, dice, and tabletop accessories.

2. **Final Fantasy** is a video game series that has expanded into other media. This includes movies such as *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (2001), *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children* (2005), and the TV show *Final Fantasy: Unlimited* (2001-2002). The series also includes novels such as *Final Fantasy VII: On the Way to a Smile*, manga adaptations such as *Final Fantasy VII*, and a variety of merchandise, including action figures, clothing, and collectibles.
3. **The Witcher** originated as a book series and later became a series of video games. Its connected media include *The Witcher* Netflix series (2019-present), board games like *The Witcher: The Board Game* and *The Witcher: Card Game*, and the original books by Andrzej Sapkowski, including *The Last Wish* and *Sword of Destiny*. Additionally, there are graphic novels and comic adaptations, along with a range of merchandise, such as collectibles, clothing, and themed board games.
4. **World of Warcraft** is an MMORPG with several media outlets. This includes the movie *Warcraft* (2016) and board and card games such as *World of Warcraft: The Board Game* (2005) with its expansions, *World of Warcraft TCG*, *World of Warcraft Adventure Game*, *Wrath of the Lich King Board Game*, and *Small World of Warcraft*. The franchise also features numerous novels, such as *Warcraft: The Last Guardian* and the *World of Warcraft: Chronicle* series, as well as graphic novels like *the World of Warcraft: Curse of the Worgen* and *The Sunwell Trilogy*. Merchandise includes action figures, apparel, collectibles, and themed accessories.

Critical Role: Actual Play phenomena

Critical Role is a highly popular actual play (AP) stream that features a cast of experienced voice actors engaging in weekly *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) gameplay sessions, overseen by Matthew Mercer as the Dungeon Master. The show has gained immense popularity because of its intricate storytelling, compelling characteristics, and actors' skillful improvisation and acting abilities. Critical Role has successfully completed two long-running campaigns and has embarked on a third, all set within the richly detailed fictional world of Exandria created by Mercer. The series airs weekly, with occasional breaks, and each stream typically lasts between three and four hours (Chalk, 2022).

The success of Critical Role extends beyond engaging with content. The show has a massive following, with approximately 33,000 active Twitch subscriptions showing its significant cultural impact within the actual play genre. The series has also leveraged the popularity and talent of its performers, including well-known voice and TV actors, to deliver charismatic and entertaining gameplay productions.

The influence of its Critical Role is further highlighted by its integration into an economy of geek celebrities, with Matthew Mercer emerging as a prominent figure in the Dungeons & Dragons community, serving as an unofficial spokesperson for the game and garnering mainstream press coverage (Marsham, 2020).

Critical Role's engagement with its audience is a key aspect of its success. While episodes are pre-recorded, they are broadcast "live" during the show's scheduled streaming slot, allowing for real-time interaction with thousands of fans, known as "Critters." The show's participatory nature includes chat rooms alongside the stream where viewers can react to and discuss the action as it unfolds. Professional moderators are employed to maintain a positive environment, manage viewer interactions, enhance the overall viewer experience, and foster a sense of community among fans (Chalk, 2022). Critical Role stands out as a giant in the actual play space, setting a high standard for other AP series to aspire to. Its blend of captivating storytelling, talented performers, and interactive engagement with fans has solidified its position as a leading force in the actual play genre, influencing both the TRPG industry and the broader geek cultural landscape (Burton, 2021).

In Burton's (2021) PhD thesis on "Identity Negotiation and Resistance in Dungeons and Dragons Liveshow Critical Role," the concept of performer identity is explored within the context of the Critical Role play series. In this thesis, performer identity refers to the unique role that individuals, particularly players and cast members of the show, adopt when engaging in live-streamed tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs), such as Dungeons and Dragons. In the context of Critical Role, performers take on multiple roles simultaneously. They not only embody their in-game characters (personas), but also actively engage with the audience, consider narrative arcs, and make decisions that impact the overall storytelling experience. Performer identity encompasses the creative and interactive aspects of playing TTRPGs in a live-streamed format, in which the actions and choices of players have immediate consequences and feedback from the audience (Burton, 2021).

Scholars have explored the complex relationship between fans and the media industry, highlighting the ways in which convergence has blurred the lines between producers and consumers (McNutt, 2018). In the case of Critical Role, producers have actively encouraged fan engagement by leveraging social media platforms and fan events to foster a sense of community and shared investment in the narrative (McNutt, 2018). This strategy aligns with the experience economy, where branded experiences and their mediation on social media become central to consumption, as fans are invited to immerse themselves in a world of Critical Role (Kohnen, 2020).

While Critical Role, a popular Dungeons & Dragons livestream, may initially appear to be grassroots, an amateur production, a closer examination reveals that it is, in fact, a highly professional, commodified enterprise (Chalk, 2022). Two key characteristics of the Critical Role that exemplify this are the involvement of professional voice actors as the main performers and the deliberate, structured nature of production.

Contrary to the perception of a Critical Role as the work of a group of casual players, the cast is composed of experienced, accomplished voice actors, many of

whom have extensive credits in the voice acting industry. This professional pedigree underscores the show's commercial aspirations and position as a commodified media product rather than a purely amateur endeavor. The cast's status as a professional performer also shapes the audience's engagement with the show, as they are not merely watching a group of friends playing a game, but rather a carefully crafted performance. On the other hand, a recent interview with Critical role cast members discovers that „scripting“ of AP depends on its definition: on one side, TRPG is a fully scripted experience because of the Dungeon Master who prepares an adventure for players; on the other side, Critical role has a crew for production of the show.

Furthermore, a Critical Role is not simply a spontaneous gameplay session, but a meticulously planned, edited, and produced performance (Chalk, 2022). As Burton (2021) notes, Critical Role is a performative act that is planned, edited, and produced. This level of production value and intentionality behind the show's creation further distances it from the realm of amateur, grassroots gameplay and firmly positions it as a commodified media product. The combination of professional performers and a deliberate, structured production process demonstrates that Critical Role is not merely an amateur game session, but rather a carefully crafted, commodified entertainment product. They have podcasts, live events, books, adventure scenarios, set of dice, t-shirts, the tv show „Legends of Vox Machina“ on Amazon Prime, and their own channels on Youtube, Twitch, etc. Also, as Chalk (2022) stated, Critical role has other content creators in the audience which produces their opinions, theories and „what if“ analysis of every episode.

The net worth of a Critical Role as a brand and company has grown significantly from 2015 to 2024. In 2014, Critical Role began as a web series with voice actors playing Dungeons and Dragons, initially functioning as a passion project with little financial backing (Sorbello, 2024). The creation of Critical Role Productions LLC in 2015 marked its transition into a business, with early revenue coming mainly from Twitch and small sponsorships. By 2018, launching their own Twitch and YouTube channels had significantly boosted visibility and revenue, with substantial income from ads and subscriptions. A pivotal moment came in 2019 with the Kickstarter campaign for The Legend of Vox Machina, which raised over \$11.3 million, highlighting the brand's financial potential and community support. In 2021, a leak revealed that Critical Role earned around \$9.6 million from Twitch between September 2019 and September 2021, not including merchandise sales or sponsorships, indicating much higher total earnings (Sorbello, 2024). Following the success of The Legend of Vox Machina on Amazon Prime Video, the brand continued to expand between 2022 and 2024, with a new animated series signaling ongoing growth and profitability.

World of Warcraft: A networked imagination

World of Warcraft, a massive multiplayer online role-playing game developed by Blizzard Entertainment, has not only captivated millions of players worldwide with its expansive and immersive gameplay, but has also transcended the boundaries of the digital space, converging with various other media products (Ong et al., 2015;

Bainbridge, 2010; Thomas & Brown, 2009; Qian, 2011). This section explores the ways in which World of Warcraft intersects with and influences different forms of media, showcasing its ability to create a networked imagination and shared cultural experience that extends beyond the confines of the game.

One of the primary ways in which World of Warcraft has converged with other media is through strong social components. The game has been described as a “third place” for informal sociability, providing a virtual space for players to engage in social interaction, form relationships, and build communities beyond their physical workplaces and homes (Vukojević & Španović, 2023). The collaborative nature of the game, in which players must exchange information and work together in real time to progress, has fostered a sense of camaraderie and belonging to the player base. These social connections and shared experiences have led to the emergence of a “networked imagination,” where physically disconnected players can collectively create and participate in a mutually constituted reality (Thomas & Brown, 2009).

This networked imagination has manifested in various forms, such as the tradition of players gathering around a slain boss monster to pose for a group photograph and capture a moment of triumph that transcends the digital world. Furthermore, players often speak of their guilds, or in-game social groups, as a “home” or “family,” even though they may have never met their guildmates in person (Vukojević & Španović, 2023).

The convergence of World of Warcraft with other media is also evident in the manner in which the game inspired and influenced various forms of content creation. The vast and richly detailed world of Warcraft has become a source of inspiration for writers, artists, and filmmakers, who have adapted and expanded upon the game’s lore and characters in the form of novels, comic books, and even feature films. Moreover, the economic systems, social structures, and communication challenges of games have been the subject of academic study, with researchers examining how virtual worlds can serve as cultural models for understanding larger societal and cultural phenomena (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006; Thomas & Brown, 2009).

The main conclusion of the paper “Interplay Between Media and Player Engagement: A Study of Media’s Effect on World of Warcraft Gaming Experience” is that the specific version of World of Warcraft (WoW) significantly influences the development of the gaming experience, particularly in terms of communication and problem-solving among players (Vukojević & Španović, 2023). Classic WoW directed players towards more interaction and collaboration, fostering a sense of community regardless of personal preferences and state of play. In contrast, Modern WoW offers a more flexible approach, allowing players to choose when and how they engage in communication, thus reflecting the evolving nature of in-game social dynamics over time.

World of Warcraft’s massive success has significantly impacted the gaming industry, proving the commercial viability of the MMORPG genre and inspiring other developers (Brown, 2017; Qian, 2011). However, its popularity has raised concerns about the negative effects of excessive gameplay, such as addiction and strained relationships (Brown, 2017), prompting discussions on gaming’s impact on mental

health, especially among adolescents (Kuss, 2013; Scott & Porter-Armstrong, 2013).

From 2004 to 2010, WoW grew rapidly, reaching over 10 million subscribers by 2008 and peaking at 12 million in 2010. By 2017, it had generated \$9.23 billion in revenue, significantly boosting Blizzard's earnings (Statista, 2023). Although subscriber numbers declined to 5.6 million by 2015, WoW remained the most-subscribed MMORPG. In 2018 and 2019, Blizzard reported revenues of \$1.73 billion and \$1.74 billion, with WoW contributing substantially through expansions and in-game purchases.

The COVID-19 pandemic renewed interest in gaming, increasing WoW subscriptions by the end of 2020. In 2022, Blizzard's revenue reached \$2.01 billion, with WoW playing a major role, particularly after the launch of Dragonflight. In the first half of 2023, WoW contributed an estimated \$450-675 million to Blizzard's \$1.5 billion revenue (Statista, 2023).

Conclusion

The development of RPGs from the 1970s to the present has been significantly shaped by media convergence, resulting in a dynamic interplay between commodification and community participation. This process has led to the diversification of RPG forms, including tabletop RPGs (TRPGs), Computer RPGs (CRPGs), massive multiplayer online RPGs (MMORPGs), Live Action Role-Playing (LARP), and Actual Play (AP). Each form has unique characteristics in terms of the primary media, participation, narrative focus, and levels of commodification.

While the commercialization of RPGs has increased through these convergences, the RPG subculture has simultaneously fostered prosumerism, striving to preserve the participative and creative aspects of the genre. This is evident in the way communities engage with and shape their gaming experiences, from modding in CRPGs to the creation of fan content on AP shows.

Case studies of Critical Role and World of Warcraft illustrate how different RPG forms have leveraged media convergence to expand their reach and impact. Critical Role, for instance, has transformed from a simple gameplay stream into a multi-media franchise, while maintaining a strong connection with its community. World of Warcraft demonstrates how MMORPGs can foster a "networked imagination" that extends beyond the game itself, influencing various forms of media and cultural productions.

However, the increasing commodification of RPGs, particularly in digital formats such as MMORPGs, has led to tensions between commercial interests and community-driven aspects of gaming. This is exemplified by the evolution of World of Warcraft, where newer versions have intensified in-game commodification at the expense of community-building.

The evolution of RPGs reflects broader trends in media convergence and the digital culture. As commodification has increased, the participatory nature of RPG communities continues to play a crucial role in shaping genre development.

The future of RPGs will likely continue to be characterized by a balance between commercial interests and community-driven creativity, as the genre adapts to new technologies and changes player expectations.

This hypothesis is largely supported by the evolution of RPGs over the past five decades. Indeed, this genre has been significantly influenced by media convergence, resulting in a diverse array of RPG forms that span from traditional tabletop games to digital platforms and live performances. Each of these forms - TRPGs, CRPGs, MMORPGs, LARP, and AP - demonstrates unique characteristics in terms of media use, participation, narrative focus, and levels of commodification, yet they all share core elements of role-playing and storytelling.

The interplay between commodification and community participation was evident across all RPG forms. As RPGs have become more commercialized, particularly in digital formats such as MMORPGs and streaming content such as Actual Play shows, there has been a simultaneous increase in prosumer activities. Communities have been actively engaged in creating content, modifying games, and shaping narratives, thereby preserving the participatory essence of RPGs.

Finally, based on the experience of authors and the results of this study, there are some possible future directions for RPG development.

Increased integration of immersive technologies: As virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies continue to advance, RPGs may incorporate these elements to create more immersive gaming experiences. This could lead to a new form of RPG that blends the physicality of LARP with the digital aspects of MMORPGs.

AI-driven storytelling and NPCs: Artificial intelligence can be used to create more dynamic and responsive non-player characters (NPCs) and storylines, allowing for truly personalized gaming experiences that adapt to individual player choices and preferences.

Cross-platform convergence: Future RPGs may seamlessly integrate different forms of play, allowing players to transition between tabletop, digital, and live-action elements within the same game world or campaign.

Enhanced social features: Building on the success of the community-driven aspects of current RPGs, future games may incorporate more sophisticated social features that facilitate deeper player interactions and collaborative storytelling.

Expansion of Actual Play content: The popularity of AP shows may lead to more professional, high-production-value content that blurs the lines between gaming and traditional entertainment.

Adaptive learning systems: RPGs can incorporate machine learning to tailor game difficulty, pacing, and content to individual players' skills and preferences, thereby ensuring a more engaging experience at all skill levels.

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Medijske konvergencije igara igranja uloga (1974-2024): od participacije ka komodifikaciji i nazad

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Apstrakt

U radu se razmatra uticaj medijskih konvergencija na evoluciju igara igranja uloga (eng. Role-playing Games - RPG) u periodu od početka 1970-ih do danas. Analitički fokus istraživanja usmjeren je na dinamiku između participacije (zajednica) igrača i procesa komodifikacije pomenutog žanra. U tom kontekstu, izdvajaju se specifične faze u razvoju RPG-a, od stonih igara igranja uloga (eng. tabletop role-playing games – TRPGs), klasičnih video igara igranja uloga (eng. computer role-playing games - CRPGs), masivnih onlajn igara igranja uloga za više igrača (eng. massively multiplayer online role-playing games - MMORPGs), do akcionog igranja uloga uživo (live action role-playing- LARP) i stvarne igre (eng. actual play – AP). Pri tome se ukazuje na sličnosti i razlike između pomenutih formi, njihove međusobne konvergencije, kao i konvergencije sa drugim analognim i digitalnim medijima (poput knjige, stripa, televizije, filma i podkasta). Posebno se razmatra fenomen prozumerizma u RPG potkulturi, tj. specifična interakcija između sadržaja koje nudi industrija zabave i težnji RPG zajednica da održe participative i kreativne aspekte žanra. Istraživanje je zasnovano na dijahronijskom poređenju specifičnih faza u razvoju RPG žanra, odnosno analizi dominantnih medijskih narativa o aktuelnim trendovima u RPG potkulturi. Rezultati istraživanja ukazuju da su medijske konvergencije unutar RPG žanra često vodile ka komodifikaciji, ali da unutar RPG potkulture i dalje postoji potencijal za očuvanje i dalji razvoj participativnih formi igara uloga. Rad završava sa pregledom mogućih pravaca razvoja RPG žanra i zaključcima o važnosti očuvanja participativnih elemenata u digitalnom medijskom ekosistemu.

Ključne riječi: RPG, medijske konvergencije, Critical role, World of Warcraft, komodifikacija

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