

# Narrative Progression Traits for Role-Playing Games

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We categorise popular (tabletop) role-playing game (RPG) settings according to the content of their game-theoretic outcome (positive-sum, negative-sum, constant-sum) and the arbitrariness/causality of that outcome (stochastic vs deterministic). Six categories are captured by assuming that all players collectively represent one agent, the prescribed game universe defines the game, and some of the other world entities represent other players. We show how this categorisation of games can inform the design of rules for new games based on the game setting by introducing ‘narrative progression traits’, which offer a method of tracking the progress of player characters.

## 1 Introduction

ROLE-PLAYING GAMES (RPGs) are an eclectic mix of narrative and elements from board games and miniature war games [1]. An imaginary universe is fleshed out in a series of source books that are coupled with rules that allow players to create stories within that universe. One of the players receives a special role, usually called the *game master* (GM), whose purpose is to oversee the correct execution of the mechanics of the game, bring the setting to life and push the story forward. The rest of the players act as *player characters* (PCs), who are individual *agents* with their own goals within the game universe. The archetypal game of this type is Dungeons & Dragons [2].

The GM is responsible for: 1) handling the mechanics of the universe, and 2) acting on behalf of *non-player characters* (NPCs). NPCs are agents who populate the universe and act in conjunction with other characters, and whose roles can be as limited or as extravagant as the game dictates. The *setting* of the game is defined by its narrative combined with its mechanics.

RPGs are usually played on a table but without using a board as such. The typical equipment for each PC includes a character sheet, pencil and set of dice, as shown in Figure 1. The GM equipment typically includes: 1) a rulebook, which is often accessible to the players; 2) a GM screen, with concise reference information for the GM’s eyes only; and 3) some dice, as shown in Figure 2.

Most studies in role playing games have focussed on the nature of PCs, possibly due to the strong influence of the online games community [3]. Other studies exist which look more broadly at the entire RPG experience [4]. In this article, we will focus on the relationships between the game universe, PCs and NPCs.



Figure 1. Typical PC equipment: character sheet, pencil and dice (from Shadowrun [18]).

The rest of the paper is organised as follows: Section 2 describes the relationship between RPG games and multi-agent environments; Section 3 proposes six categories for classifying RPGs with examples; Section 4 proposes a mechanism for including *narrative progression traits* in games based on the categories they belong to and explains why such mechanisms are important; and Section 5 concludes the article with a short discussion.