

Virtual Cultures and Races in RPG as Educational Means of Multicultural and Multiracial Social Relations

Winton Afric
Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb
Savska Cesta 77, 10 000 Zagreb, Croatia
winton.afric@ufzg.hr

Summary

In this article the focus lies on the educational character of RPG treatment in different virtual cultures and races. In any RPG system the structure is being made out of elements none of which can undergo a change without effecting changes in other elements.

This is of great importance for this study as it represents the way cultures and races behave when interacting in social and cultural relations. We can safely say that when facing any virtual culture or race we will be facing a sheet of unique characteristics consisting of cultural and racial attributes and traits commonly ranging from physical, mental, social and cultural groups. In the concept of RPG so far, the difference between race and culture is in fact blurred because virtual cultures are commonly created as virtual races of a specific cultural type.

The form on which virtual cultures and races are most commonly made seems to be stemming from a widely accepted view that culture presupposes society. In this paper the "four level approach" is used to the study of human beings based on body, psyche, society and culture. The creation of virtual races and cultures is therefore directly reliant on the idea that the biological and psychological are setting constraints or limits on culture, as well as culture being understood as humanity's unique form of adaptation to meet needs that are simultaneously social and biological. All the changes that make any virtual race or culture into a truly unique element are in fact based on changing the human potential norm. Changes can be in any of the aforementioned four level fields or all of them. The starting point of creating a virtual culture is therefore most commonly a modification of human standards of physical, mental and social attributes and traits.

From any specific cultural or racial point of view any other type of behaviour may well seem abnormal but as elements of a system they are all in fact behaving in the same manner. This type of creativity, regardless of being the creator or merely the student of a virtual structure of cultures and races educates all agents about the characteristics of cultures and races in general. Trough the in-

sight given by the transparency of the model the main focus of the education naturally becomes the understanding of racial and cultural differences, but in this case it becomes uniquely transparent that despite their differences in attributes traits and constellations of characteristics, they are all in fact the same, seeing as they exhibit the same kinds of behaviour.

Dealing with RPG systems at any level of immersion from creator to participant all agents are therefore educated in understanding and dealing with racial and cultural differences as characteristics of equal value but different apparel, and in such understanding given the chance to understand cultural and racial respect and equality learning the nature of their differences resulting in acquiring racial and cultural tolerance and understanding.

Key words: Role Playing Game, Race, Culture, Identity, Multiculturalism, Education

In modern history games have wrongfully fallen into the category of violence instillers and generally tools of bad influence. As it is with all games RPG (pencil and paper and computer ones alike) had also been branded in the same bad manner. This is however due to general misinformation and prejudice towards gaming as a way of spending time. Games however have from the early human days had a vital educational role, firstly to note in non formal education and later on in all forms of education. RPG being in its base a simulation model is a powerful educational tool but sadly it has not been harnessed in that manner, not even close to its full potential. As a multi agent virtual reality system RPG in fact develops social communication and intelligence, as well as the competence of living together. Becoming a part of a virtual environment and learning to live there participants learn to understand and accept the new and strange through various forms of social interaction. Thus RPG is a potent tool which educates its participants in accepting multiculturalism and racial tolerance. One of the strong components of RPG as an educational tool in learning tolerance and virtue of living in general is the literary "story element". People used to listen to stories as hot media and learn from them how to lead a virtuous life, how to make good, socially acceptable decisions and generally behave in an honoured manner. Today, playing RPG puts us in the same educational environment where people were when listening to those stories but from a much more immersed cold media point of view. It is safe to say that the best education on how to live can be given through a simulation of life, and RPG is a tool which does just that. It enables us to transmit instructions, using the system and its rules on how to live, behave as a part of a social community and in giving its participants the freedom of choice of behaviour gives first hand experience on social interaction in specific situations. The very obvious difference between interaction in an RPG system and real life comes however from the Game part of the name. In understanding that as it is with every game we know the rules of

the game to start with, but in real life we have to discover the rules as we grow as members of a society and culture. Being modelled as a simulation or rather virtualisation of the real world much of these rules and roles in social interaction remain the same, thus it is very transparent and easy to apply the “preparation for life” we gain from RPG into our everyday living. In any standard RPG environment agents are bound to come across many different virtual cultures and races. All of those regardless of how well or poorly known share basic attributes and traits as they are all made based on different types of cultural forms depending on the system they are a part of. Seeing as they are a part of a virtual environment (world) the logic they must abide by as a part of a network of corresponding elements is always drawn according to rules and standards acquired from real cultures and races and their cultural and social relations. Any virtual culture we can encounter is therefore as an element a part of the structure of the RPG system. When looking at social and cultural relations between virtual cultures we are drawn to the question, what kind of requirements should the model meet for it to be called a structure? As a question of methodology of science in general we can refer to Claude Levi-Strauss when saying that in order for virtual cultures and races to be applicable in an RPG system we are in fact looking at a structure that consists of a model that must exhibit the characteristics of a system. The structure is therefore being made out of elements none of which can undergo a change without effecting changes in other elements. This is of great importance for this study as it represents the way cultures and races behave when interacting in social and cultural relations.

When dealing with virtual worlds built using a RPG system any virtual culture, race, ethnic group or nationality will inside the system be an element of the model structure we are facing. Each of those elements will likewise be comprised of elements we see as specific attributes traits and characteristics. Each of those micro elements will stand out as a unique part of a whole due to its specific constellation of characteristics which will define it corresponding to any other element within the model structure. The first question that comes to mind is how to define virtual cultures in relations to virtual races, virtual ethnic and virtual nations. If we want to define any of the aforementioned elements we need in turn to look at their real life counterparts and how they are defined and understood over the course of history. “Cultures have been traditionally conceived as encompassing and firm spiritual boundaries, which define how their members view the world and other cultures. They have been introduced as social formations with unique structures (constellations of elements) and specific beliefs. They have been first and foremost defined by the way specific communities claim certain territory and how they follow the forms of social communication in their everyday life. The constitutive elements of culture are in tradition social forms like, language, myth, tradition, ceremonies, customs and self comprehension of a community. Members of a culture do not view their duty solely in terms of preservation of specific practices and symbols. They also feel inter-

connected and are guided by solidarity. The uniqueness of a culture is best shown when comparing it to a different culture“(Mesić 2006). Such understanding of a culture comes from looking at small communities. That is of vital importance when looking at virtual cultures because of the practice that a lot of the cultures we commonly meet in RPG systems are in fact either small communities or are modelled after them. We can safely say that when facing any virtual culture or race we will be facing a sheet of unique characteristics consisting of cultural and racial attributes and traits commonly ranging from physical, mental, social and cultural groups. In the concept of RPG so far, the difference between race and culture is in fact blurred because virtual cultures are commonly created as virtual races of a specific cultural type. Examples of the Dwarven and Elven race/culture come to mind as most common ones. The form on which virtual cultures and races are most commonly made seems to be stemming from a widely accepted view that culture presupposes society, society is based on individuals and individuals have both minds and bodies (Kroeber, 2006, 36).

If we look at Tylors (1909) definition of culture specific interest falls on the two different understandings of his definitions. Firstly there is a definition of culture as one of the defining attributes of any ethnic group or ethnic collective. It is viewed upon as a union of common belief, custom, value, and constructions of meaning, as well as the way of being shared by the members of such a collective. Therefore culture is understood as a vital ingredient of ethnic identification. A different approach is given by Clifford Geertz (2006, 236). According to him culture is a union of common knowledge, beliefs and values which form the basis for social, economic, political and religious institutions. By Geertz “culture is a historically transmitted form of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions realised in symbolic forms used for communication, renewal and development of knowledge of living as well as their view of life” (Geertz, 2006, 236). This approach is of specific interest to us because it points out the unifying elements of culture and virtual culture alike instead of what sets them apart. It is of course an inherited human ability to exist as a cultural being. Every human being has a culture as well as a language and that connects them in their essence as humans. Likewise every virtual being following the same pattern will have a culture as well as a language regardless of how it is determined biologically. The “four level approach” to the study of human beings based on body, psyche, society and culture is directly applicable to the manner that races and cultures are generated and treated in any RPG system. The creation of virtual races and cultures is therefore directly reliant on the idea that the biological and psychological are setting constraints or limits on culture (Steward, 2006, 100; White, 2006, 107), as well as culture being understood as humanity's unique form of adaptation to meet needs that are simultaneously social and biological (Kroeber, 2006, 36; Malinowski, 2006, 88). Therefore we can deduce that any virtual culture is in its basic potential or norm

starting out as human. All the changes that make any virtual race or culture into a truly unique element are in fact based on changing the human potential norm. Changes can be in any of the aforementioned four level fields or all of them. The starting point of creating a virtual culture is therefore most commonly a modification of human standards of physical, mental and social attributes and traits. The resulting constellation of characteristics gives us a unique virtual culture/race which in turn exhibits its own standards.

It is safe to say that when generating a virtual culture as a part of an RPG system we are in fact offered a choice between various points of view and cultural understandings. If we should want a virtual culture modelled after small communities it is justifiable to look at it stemming from that specific point of view. The basis of generating any virtual culture is to follow a form which is unique to all the cultures and sets that specific culture apart from any other by its specific constellation of elements, like attributes and traits. Therefore it is transparent that all cultures even though each of them is unique in their own right are always of equal value. When facing any kind of cultural or racial interaction between virtual cultures it is very transparent, because of the transparency of the racial / cultural model itself that each culture will act according to their own standards as a result of its unique constellation of characteristics. From any specific cultural or racial point of view any other type of behaviour may well seem abnormal but as elements of a system they are all in fact behaving in the same manner. This is also true for real cultures, where naturally Benedict (2006, 77) comes to mind in observing that when the Kwakuti exhibit a constellation of elements which appears abnormal by western standards, this judgment is in fact invalid since the behaviour is normal by Kwakuti standards.

When looking at the terms virtual race and virtual ethnicity it is vital to ask ourselves of their specific meanings and definitions. The term race when viewed from an anthropological or sociological view is always tied closely to biological determinism. The problem being biological determinism states that social, economical and behavioural differences in human groups are defined by race and only afterwards class or sex. Therefore it states that their differences are defined by their biological heritage. The term race is falling largely out of practice of use due to biological determinism, and the way that term has been polluted in modern history. Therefore the term ethnicity is being largely used in races stead. If we look at this problem from inside a RPG system virtual reality we stand at a different ground completely. When looking at virtual races, cultures and ethnicity in any virtual world we can safely say that biological determinism has a rightful place of its own when defining all the elements (virtual cultures, races, ethnies and nations) in question of the RPG system.

At this point I would like to refer to J. R. R. Tolkiens Middle Earth setting. If we look at some of its denizens in terms of virtual race, virtual culture, virtual ethnies and nations and single out the very apparent ones we may as well focus on Elves, Dwarves, Orcs and Humans. Each and every one of these elements

(races) has a specific constellation of traits defining them as unique when compared to others. Each of them has undisputed biological heritage, and as being biologically determined it is safe to dub them virtual races in their own right. The thing to note here however is, that biological determinism even though in service here does not imply superiority or inferiority of any race in comparison to any other race, but instead it clarifies their differences in their equality. This is such due to the nature of the RPG system. If we look at any RPG system as a structure of elements any virtual race will follow the same form of elements it is comprised of. RPG systems, being in their nature models, are all about balance in any specific state. It is therefore a common practice to make controls of value using point systems (or similar) to ensure none of the elements (in this case virtual races) fall out of scheme, thus violating the system. Differences between races can be vast but for instance if a virtual race claims physical superiority over others they will be "lacking" in another field keeping them in check as a balanced part of the system. It all in fact comes down to uniqueness in difference and preference in liking. Although some may say that relying on biological determinism is in fact an act of approval of racism in its core, the approach we take at using biological differences as a means of diversification in fact teaches us the very opposite. We have to be able to accept a virtual setting where racism as a term is being purified from its polluted historical "real life use" and is used in an entirely different context: the context of acknowledging difference, and at the same time, the understanding of equal value. I would like to turn our attention to the racist myth of giving value to individuals or groups by measurement of intelligence as a value. In every RPG system to date in one form or another, Intelligence is represented as an attribute of every being. Intelligence is measured within the system and is in fact separating the daft from the acute the more capable from less capable. There are systems and books where we may encounter suggestions or examples of virtual races of inferior or superior intelligence in comparison to the "human" standard. As stated before though, the difference will always be kept in check balancing it out by adding another superior or inferior trait or value in accordance to any specific case. I have to pause here to notice that in most such systems like GURPS, DnD and similar Intelligence is most commonly treated as an equal attribute with many others. In this case I beg to differ in saying the RPG needs to reconstitute the value of intelligence as an attribute and model it accordingly for it to be kept in check and be proportionate to other attributes. In this manner I believe that intelligence as an attribute in RPG is mostly underrated and should be of greater value in comparison to other attributes. Some good examples have been made not to treat Intelligence as a single attribute in value but in fact dismember it into several ones. For example the D20 system institutes Wisdom as a separate attribute and others like White Wolf systems deal with Perception, Intelligence and Wits as mental attributes of a being. The reason why I take specific note of intelligence in regard to the racist question is not only due to the fact of physical anthropology and its

craniometry but also the psychological tests used to prove inferiority of other races or sex in comparison to the “great white male”. Intelligence when measured (as value) for example in animals constitutes a boundary of understanding, a checkpoint for action and ability. It is vital to use such a scale in RPG for instance, for the sake of programming behavioural patterns in artificial intelligence. When looking at virtual race or culture intelligence however an important attribute is nothing more than an attribute, and if kept in proportion with other attributes and traits it by no means defines any superior or inferior choices but is again used solely as an element in generating a unique structure of elements. Therefore biological determinism in RPG is a school of thought which teaches us to understand and respect differences in a system of equal value. When talking about biological determinism we should mention the two main currents of scientific racism: the one which follows the idea of mono-genesis, and the other which follows the poly-genesis idea. Mono-genesis as such is very rarely present in RPGs as systems mostly due to the fact most virtual worlds are generated with a Poly-genesis structure in mind. When looking at Tolkiens Middle Earth, Dwarves and Elves are biologically completely different species. The fact remains that each school of thought is nothing more than a choice in an artistic approach when conceiving a virtual reality setting, and that each of them will work. In any case the system itself could support generating superior and inferior races (under the idea of artistic freedom, as well as what it can offer in terms of choices that exist), as such a model could suggest, but then it would no longer be a valid RPG structure or a model, and would lose its use as a system being more of a literary concept based around guidelines, than a true RPG.

From an educational point of view we are facing a situation where when making choices in creating a virtual reality we can conceive any possible setting but the truth remains, we learn to understand the concept of diverse elements of equal value, thus generating a valid RPG system. In the same manner a concept of diverse elements which can be graded into superior and inferior ones could exist in theory, then however it would lose one of RPGs defining characteristics. One of the main defining characteristics of RPG is the fact that it from its very beginning instituted measure and scale to represent power, ability, superiority and inferiority. The idea behind this system of measure is such that in order to advance in the system gaining power one must be facing the challenges suited for their own level. Since the first appearance of levels, they represented a measure in growth. In early games levels grew harder as the agent progressed, to measure the agent’s skill at playing a game as it developed. RPG took that concept and turned it into a system measuring agents characters as well as every other aspect of the virtual reality surrounding them, doing so in proportion. So the very nature of RPG is to understand superiority and inferiority but to value equality and diversity, as there is no progress in personal (character / avatar) growth when dealing with only inferior elements. Progress in RPG is achieved most commonly through the agent gathering experience by dealing with other

elements of the system (surpassing challenges) which are most commonly of proportional power to that of the agent. With this in mind I have to reflect on my mentioning Tolkiens Middle Earth, that is literary work and not an RPG system. It does however share the same basic principle as RPG. That principle is diversity equality, measure, proportion and it in fact behaves as a complex system of corresponding elements. For instance, the race of Hobbits although not as strong as Humans or Dwarves, or as wise as the Elves has the greatest strength of character, and thus a Hobbit is chosen to be the ring bearer. Another aspect of note is the fact that RPG systems establish a scale of proportions between elements according to the "human model". In a virtual reality looking firstly from a biological point of view, a calculated model of the most average human judging by its attributes, characteristics and traits is given as a starting point according to which any other being is measured. Likewise when generating rules for virtual race creation we are in general speaking of the most average representative of that race. To look back at the problem of what is virtual race in comparison to virtual ethnicity or virtual ethnic group, the answer is simple. If we look again at Tolkiens Middle Earth, Orcs are said to have been Elves who abandoned virtue (actually abandoning Elven culture) and as a result have "fallen" (changed the way they looked and acted according to their surroundings) and given artistic freedom have changed physically as well. So they were of same ethnic background but over the course of history they have biologically and culturally (de)evolved into a different virtual race.

So when defining virtual ethnicity the best approach would be to look at Kivisto (2002) when saying it is an "umbrella term". In that respect virtual ethnicity describes social boundaries which are constructed under the assumption of a common genealogy, cultural forms such as language (tongue of Mordor being described as some form of elvish), religion, customs, tradition, common history, folklore and common geographical history (according to Mesić,2006). The only problem in this understanding lies that we have to allow for biological diversity to exist under ethnicity as an "umbrella term" for this definition to be valid. Therefore race as a marker is understood as one of the attributes of ethnicity, such as religion. Virtual culture in that manner is a different thing.

This type of creativity, regardless of being the creator or merely the student of a virtual structure of cultures and races educates all agents about the characteristics of cultures and races in general. Trough the insight given by the transparency of the model the main focus of the education naturally becomes the understanding of racial and cultural differences, but in this case it becomes uniquely transparent that despite their differences in attributes traits and constellations of characteristics, they are all in fact the same, seeing as they exhibit the same kinds of behaviour. Dealing with RPG systems at any level of immersion from creator to participant all agents are therefore educated in understanding and dealing with racial and cultural differences as characteristics of equal value but different apparel, and in such understanding given the chance to understand

cultural and racial respect and equality learning the nature of their differences resulting in acquiring racial and cultural tolerance and understanding.

Conclusion

RPG as any game has been viewed from many different standpoints as a harmful and generally bad companion to spend people's time on. This is however almost exclusively due to prejudice connected with games and violence in the first place. As a simulation model RPG is an excellent tool to be used in education. In both non formal and formal way RPG teaches that as a simulation of life RPG is preparing its participants educating them how to live. RPG develops social intelligence and ones competence of living together. Trough going trough countless social interaction situations and due to the nature of RPG being a model structure it teaches us multiculturalism, and racial tolerance. By participating in an RPG on any level we gain knowledge's on social structures, cultures, races, ethnies and nations and their interaction. This unique insight which we act within as participating in a cold medium situation, is teaching us the understanding of social and cultural diversification in viewing the different as specific constellations that form unique elements of equal value. Therefore RPG is a modern educational technology for promoting multiculturalism and racial tolerance.

This research was a part of main Scientific research named "Analytical Model for Monitoring of New Education Technologies for Long life Learning" conducted by Ministry of Science, Education and Sports of the Republic of Croatia (Registered Number 227-2271694-1699).

References

- Benedict, Ruth. *The Individual and the Pattern of Culture*, edited in *Anthropology in theory, issues in epistemology* by Moore, Henrietta L. and Sanders Todd, Blackwell Publishing, 2006
- Geertz, Clifford. *Thick description: Toward an interpretative theory of culture*, edited in *Anthropology in theory, issues in epistemology* by Moore, Henrietta L. and Sanders Todd, Blackwell Publishing, 2006
- Goffman, Erving. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on Organization of Experience*, 1974
- Hakkarainen, Henri. *Stenros, Jaako, Thoughts on Role Playing*, 2003
- Kivisto, Peter. *Multiculturalism in a Global Society*, 2002
- Kroeber, Alfred L. *The Concept of Culture in Science*, edited in *Anthropology in theory, issues in epistemology* by Moore, Henrietta L. and Sanders Todd, Blackwell Publishing, 2006
- Lortz, Stephen L. *Role Playing, Different Worlds*, 1979
- Malinowski, Bronislaw. *The Group and the Individual in Function Analysis*, edited in *Anthropology in theory, issues in epistemology* by Moore, Henrietta L. and Sanders Todd, Blackwell Publishing, 2006
- Mesić, Milan. *Multi Kulturalizam*, Školska Knjiga Zagreb, 2006
- Montola, Markus. *Role Playing as Interactive Construction of Subjective Diegeses*, 2003
- Padol, Lisa. *Playing Stories, Telling Games. Collaborative Storytelling in Role Playing Games*, 1996
- Park, Robert. *Race and culture*, 1950
- Stenros, Jaako. *Genre, Style, Method and Focus. Typologies for Role Playing games*, 2006

- Steward, Julian H. The Concept and Method of cultural Ecology, edited in Anthropology in theory, issues in epistemology by Moore, Henrietta L. and Sanders Todd, Blackwell Publishing, 2006
- Tolkien, J. R. R. History of Middle Earth, volumes 1-5, 1992-2003
- Tylor, Edward B. Anthropology: An Introduction to the study of Man and Civilization. New York: D Appleton
- White, Leslie A. Energy and the Evolution of Culture, edited in Anthropology in theory, issues in epistemology by Moore, Henrietta L. and Sanders Todd, Blackwell Publishing, 2006