Characters in Roleplaying Games

A study of the bond created between player and character

Dan Kallin
Abstract

The bond between player and character as perceived by many, in pen-and-paper roleplaying games, is unrivalled in its emotional strength. This is an opinion shared by many hardcore enthusiasts across the globe. Personally I have never achieved a connection to any digital character that even closely resembles the intense affection I have felt for my pen-and-paper characters, and this baffles me. The goal with this thesis is to try and find exactly what pen-and-paper roleplaying games do differently.

The method used is qualitative interviews with students at Gotland University. The participants are experienced roleplayers in both the analogue and digital form. With their help I try to identify the reasons to why players get attached to pen-and-paper characters more than digital ones. The literature revolves around roleplaying and how we identify with characters in other media as well. The result shows that there are four distinct reasons to why players get attached to characters.

Keywords: roleplaying, character, digital roleplaying game/RPG, pen-and-paper roleplaying game/RPG.
# Table of Contents

1 Introduction ........................................................................................................... 1  
   1.1 Background ......................................................................................................... 1  
   1.2 Terms and abbreviations ..................................................................................... 2  
   1.3 Hypothesis .......................................................................................................... 3  
   1.4 Purpose and aims ............................................................................................... 3  
   1.5 Method ................................................................................................................. 4  
       1.5.1 The interview ............................................................................................... 4  
       1.5.2 Selection ...................................................................................................... 5  
       1.5.3 Limitations .................................................................................................. 5  
       1.5.4 Method discussion ....................................................................................... 6  
       1.5.5 Ethical Considerations ............................................................................... 6  
   1.6 Previous Research ............................................................................................. 7  

2 Result ..................................................................................................................... 9  
   2.1 Interview 1 ......................................................................................................... 9  
       2.1.1 Summary of the interview .......................................................................... 10  
   2.2 Interview 2 ......................................................................................................... 10  
       2.2.1 Summary of the Interview .......................................................................... 13  
   2.3 Interview 3 ......................................................................................................... 13  
       2.3.1 Summary of the Interview .......................................................................... 16  

3 Analysis and Discussion ....................................................................................... 17  
   3.1 Exposure over time ............................................................................................. 18  
   3.2 Choices with consequence .................................................................................. 18  
   3.3 Finality ............................................................................................................... 19  
   3.4 Fellowship ......................................................................................................... 19  
   3.5 Playing your character ....................................................................................... 20  

4 Conclusion ............................................................................................................. 22  
   4.1 My Actions with My Consequences ................................................................... 22  

5 Continued Research ............................................................................................ 24  

Literature and references ....................................................................................... 25  
   5.1 Verbal sources .................................................................................................... 26  
   5.2 Appendixes ........................................................................................................ 26
1 Introduction

This scientific paper is my degree project in game design and programming. The idea was at first to conduct a study regarding how narratives are conveyed in roleplaying games through different media using analysis of pen-and-paper roleplaying and computer roleplaying games. Shortly the field of study was narrowed down to how players form emotional bonds towards their characters in roleplaying games, instead of delving into the abyss of the narrative in games discussion.

When this bond between characters is discussed in this thesis it is the relation between a player and her character the writer refers to. However, this relation is a bit fuzzy to say the least and there are a lot of definitions to it. Ernest Adams (2010) talks about this relationship in his book *Fundamentals of Game design* and describes vast amount of ways this relationship could be influenced or altered; the relationship is game specific. Adams proceeds with describing what should be in the designers mind while designing characters to help the player identify with the character or create a deep/round character (Adams 2010:129-149).

My personal definition of this bond would be that it is what makes us connect to a character and feel their pain, joy or suffering. It is that black, sucking feeling in the pit of your stomach when your favourite character dies; or that feeling of true awesomeness and badassery when Daenerys Targaryen marches of with the slaves in the latest episode of *Game of Thrones*. If you, the viewer, did not care about her you would not feel as strongly when she has this moment of triumph. Personally I have never felt the same towards a character in a computer game but this bond is always present when I play pen-and-paper roleplaying games.

Jonas Lindroth did a fieldwork study about virtual worlds being seductive illusions, showing that technology does not necessarily support players’ immersion in fictional worlds. This is interesting because in an excerpt from one of his many interviews a player talks about how World of Warcraft, a globally known MMORPG, is a pale and miserable game without the roleplaying. In this case the roleplaying is something made and implemented by the players, and not actually supported within the game. The description he gives of how the players roleplayed is very similar to pen-and-paper (Lindroth 2012:480-481).

1.1 Background

From my education I have retained a lot of experience with games in all of its forms and the way a narrative is communicated to the player is what I have come to find most interesting. A burning passion resides inside me towards the art of storytelling and my experience tells me that pen-and-paper roleplaying is the form of gaming that tells stories most satisfactory. My belief is that it is possible to learn a lot about by what means we, the game developer community, can create meaningfulness in a character. Through this wisdom we then get a better understanding of how to get the players extensively invested in the characters in a game. This study will focus on the character aspect of the narrative; how roleplaying games premiers and encourage players to invest and care about the characters they play.
Previous research regarding narrative in pen and paper roleplaying games has been difficult to locate. However, there is a lot of material regarding roleplaying games in general and even more studies have been conducted regarding narrative in games. Joris Dormans (2006) describes four distinct definitions of roleplaying in his article *On the Role of the Die: A brief ludologic study of pen-and-paper roleplaying games and their rules*, though in this thesis only the definition of pen and paper roleplaying will be described.

Dormans describe four different types of roleplaying games and names pen-and-paper as the oldest. The label pen-and-paper stems from the fact that those are the tools utilized while playing. Important information about a player’s character is recorded on a character sheet and if there are any locations that need visualization they are mapped out on paper. Pen-and-paper roleplaying games are played around a table and due to this they may also be referred to as table-top roleplaying games. The games are more often than not told than enacted and the player describes her actions, thus making her character do what she says she does. Rules determine the traits, abilities and power of the character to describe how effective her actions are. Dice play a significant part in almost every kind of game since they bring an element of chance and unpredictability (Dormans 2006).

Since this paper only focuses on the pen-and-paper roleplaying, when the term “roleplaying” is used, without further specification, the aforementioned form of roleplaying is referred to.

1.2 Terms and abbreviations

MMORPG stands for Massive Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game. It is a game played online with other players in a persistent world. Often several hundred of players play on the same server.

NPC stands for none player character and is a term used often in roleplaying games when talking about characters that are not played by a human player. For instance; a merchant selling his wares to the player is a NPC.

RPG is an abbreviation for Roleplaying Game. What exactly a roleplaying game is depends on who you ask. Hence in this thesis the abbreviation is only used to shorten the term. For example it is used to shorten digital roleplaying game to digital RPG or pen-and-paper RPG.

Pen-and-paper character, or pnp-character, refers to a character played in a pen-and-paper roleplaying game.

Digital character refers to a character player in a computer game. For example Commander Shepard from the Mass Effect series is a digital character.

Game Master(GM) is a player in a pen-and-paper roleplaying game. She plays as the world and all other characters, or monsters, within the world while the rest of the players play one character each.
1.3 Hypothesis

Dormans mentions in his article that

Most roleplayers will point out that pen-and-paper roleplaying games offer considerable opportunity for actual roleplaying and dramatic developments within the game, while they scorn their computer counterparts as mere “character-builders” or nicely decorated spreadsheets. (Dormans 2006)

He gives no reference or source to validate this statement. However, my own experience of the roleplaying community tells the same story. Based on my own experiences with roleplaying, in both digital and analog form, the hypothesis of this paper is that through study of pen-and-paper roleplaying games it is possible to find ways to improve the characters in the digital roleplaying games since narrative and deep, or round, characters are found more frequently in pen-and-paper roleplaying games.

1.4 Purpose and aims

The primary purpose of this thesis is to via qualitative interviews and comparison to previous research study if players form affection easier towards pen-and-paper characters compared to characters they play in digital roleplaying games. Based on the statement that in pen-and-paper roleplaying games one gets closer to the character that is played I will try to find out why and if it is possible to, in theory, apply the finding on digital roleplaying games. This thesis will also study what players claim makes them form bonds more easily in pen-and-paper roleplaying games and why it is so. To do this I have formulated three questions that I will answer in the analysis:

Is a character necessary to fully experience a story and if so, why?

How do the players describe the bond that they form between themselves and a character in a pen-and-paper roleplaying game compared to a digital roleplaying game?

What do the players think is important when it comes to forming bonds to characters that they play?

The questions are formulated to fit the interview technique used. When qualitative interviews are conducted it is prudent to be prepared with questions that relates to the primary subject. The first and second questions about narrative in general are quite vague and unrelated to the primary purpose, nevertheless are they able to bring up discussion about character and make the conversation with the participants easier. A detailed description of the qualitative interview is found in the method chapter.
1.5 Method

This study will use a qualitative way of gathering data. Through focus group interviews with three different groups, totalling eleven participants over all the groups, a deep and detailed result will be produced rather than numeric values. Reading of literature will also be a part of this thesis; it will, however, be used to describe narrative in games and what roleplaying is.

To investigate however there is something to learn from pen-and-paper roleplaying games, regarding narrative, qualitative interviews will be conducted with subjects that play both digital roleplaying games and pen-and-paper roleplaying games. They will get to answer questions regarding the characters they have played in both versions of roleplaying games and questions about immersion and the bond between character and player.

1.5.1 The interview

The chosen method of interview is called focus group interview and is a popular way of conducting interviews according to Trost, a professor at the department of sociology, Emeritus Faculty at Uppsala University. It is a qualitative way of interviewing which implies that the purpose is to get the exact and detailed information from the interviewee rather than numbers. A template that describes the subjects of the interview is all the interviewer needs and the interview is more of a conversation between the interviewed that is regulated by the interviewer (Trost 2009:44-45).

Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann discuss the qualitative interview as a research base and they make the reader well aware that qualitative interviews are regarded as less reliable. They are very much like a normal conversation and also known as the unstructured interview or no-standard-interview. This form of interviewing does however let the interviewees hear each other’s points of view and discuss them together. This lets the interviewees approach the subject of the interview from different angels than their own, giving more input from each interviewee (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009:32-33).

Appendix 1-3 contains the three interviews with short notes on what was said and when it was said. Appendix four is the introductory letter and Appendix 5 is the interview guide that was used during the interviews.
1.5.2 Selection

To choose the participants of this research there has been no limitations to age, social background or gender. To find three groups of players that would let me visit them is difficult enough and additional constraints are deemed superfluous. In the above mentioned appendix there will be descriptions of the individual participants. The playthroughs will be conducted and observed in Visby but the participants are derived from several different locations in Sweden.

When contacting the participants students from Gotland University that studies game design were highly prioritized and every participant in the groups except one is a game design student. The reason was to save time since it would make discussions during the interview a lot easier due to the fact that everyone is familiar with the terms used. It minimizes the time needed to explain what a character is, define what narrative is and explain what a roleplaying game is.

1.5.3 Limitations

There should be no misconception about this thesis regarding what it will not do. In no way will there be a discussion regarding other aspects of pen-and-paper roleplaying games. The study of the relationship between player and character is the sole purpose of this paper. If the studies would prove that there is a deep correlation between character investment and for example the rules of the game; this will be discussed but only regarding how they relate to the character.

The method used, as a whole, is not applicable in any other research. The qualitative interview is useable on its own and a type of interview I recommend when detailed answers are desired. But the method is designed according to the purpose of this thesis. The validity of the method is firm. Eleven different participants will be interviewed and since the interviews are of the qualitative sort the material from eleven different subjects will be reasonably extensive. Furthermore the participants are well versed in the roleplaying game genre of games, both digital and pen-and-paper, and ten out the eleven participants are game design students.
1.5.4 Method discussion

When doing qualitative group interviews there are some pitfalls to keep in mind. First and foremost the terms used in the interviews like narrative, deep or round character or what exactly is implied by saying good character. Even though precautions are taken regarding this the person conducting the interviews should make sure that everyone is talking about the same subject. Miscommunication and misunderstandings could otherwise make the whole interview useless and force the researcher to redo the interview. During this form of interview it is also important for the interviewer to keep his tongue in check. When researching a subject one has a passion towards it is important to keep in mind that the opinions of the participants is what you are there for, not to see if they agree with the researchers opinion or not. It is vital to keep the discussion going in the right direction and to add fuel to the fire, but never should the interviewer take over the interview and rant about the subject at length. Keep in mind that a certain level of involvement in the discussion does not have to be a bad thing; it creates a less formal mood and helps the participants forget that they are being recorded.

1.5.5 Ethical Considerations

During the design of the study the different aspects of the Science council’s (2002) demand of ethical consideration were followed. The four recommendations regarding individual protection are; the requirement of information, the requirement of consent, the requirement of confidentiality and the requirement of usage. The requirement of information means that the researcher communicates the different conditions that apply regarding the participation in the study to the participants. Furthermore, the purpose of the study and any details that may affect the participants shall be revealed. The researcher should, simply put, not withhold any information regarding what the study is about so the participants are able to make an informed choice. To accomplish this requirement an introductory letter was sent out to the participants (see Appendix 4) that clearly states what the purpose is and what the participants will contribute and do during the study. My name and possible ways to reach me were also included.

The requirement of consent ensures that the participants know that their involvement in the study is completely voluntary. The introductory letter lets the informants know this as well. The requirement of usage is there to ensure that the participants know in what way the data gathered from the study will be used. In this case the data will only be used for this thesis and nowhere else. Finally there is the requirement of confidentiality which means that the participants may be completely anonymous if they want to. This is stated in the introductory letter and the participants are also asked if they want to be anonymous or not in person.
1.6 Previous Research

To find previous research where differences between pen-and-paper roleplaying and digital roleplaying games, regarding the player’s investment in their character, have been studied is challenging. However, articles and books regarding roleplaying in general is not a problem. Below a short summary of some of the references used in this thesis will be presented.

One article written by Joris Dormans, *On the Role of the Die: A brief ludologic study of pen-and-paper roleplaying games and their rules*, defines four different forms of roleplaying games. The article is quite useful since it describes pen-and-paper roleplaying in explicit detail and does so from the point of view of someone who does not know anything about roleplaying. The article does, however, not use any form of references or previous works to assert the claims it make. The article is more of a chronicle than a scientific paper, though I still believe in its trustworthiness since my personal experience of roleplaying is the same and Joris Dormans is a known lecturer, scholar and designer (Dormans 2006).

*The Effort of Being in a Fictional World: Upkeyings and Laminated Frames in MMORPGs*, written by Jonas Linderoth, is truly interesting piece of work. For this thesis only a short excerpt from Symbolic interaction, vol 35, issue 4 pp. 474-492 has been used. It is a report of a ten months long field study made by Linderoth following a roleplaying guild in World of Warcraft. The report shows, that contrary to common beliefs, technology does not support a players feeling of immersion in games. This is interesting since the bond between player and character discussed in this thesis is closely related to immersion. Linderoth gives an impression of thoroughness, sincerity and authority due to the good references and detailed description (Linderoth 2012).

*In Sympathy with narrative characters* by Alessandro Giovannelli is an article were the writer discuss the importance of a sympathetic response within the perceiver of a narrative. Giovannelli studies the notion of sympathy for others and defines the phenomenon as a multifaceted one and not only the feeling of pity towards another. Giovannelli means that we respond sympathetically when we pity Desdemona in her failed attempt to persuade Othello of her loyalty and love as well as when we feel happy for George O’Malley when he finally pass his intern exam in Grey’s Anatomy. Giovannelli submits that this way of looking upon the notion of sympathy is crucial when it comes to understanding how to create engaging narratives that gives us a rewarding experience. The article delves deep into the problem of defining sympathy and does so adequately, however the article does not focus on how a perceiver of a narrative reaches the sympathy which is the focus of this thesis. The important piece to take from this article is that it discusses the importance of sympathy from the perceiver and what is needed by the perceiver, according to Giovannelli, to achieve this sympathy (Giovannelli 2009).
Robert McKee writes in his book *Story* how to design a character and how you get to know one. McKee talks about characterization and true character, the difference being that true character is the persona defined by the choices made in a dilemma and characterization being how we define a character in observable qualities. The work by McKee encompasses everything regarding story and only a fragment of it is used in this thesis. It is chapter 129 and the materials under ‘Characters are not humans’ and ‘Character Dimensions’ (McKee 2013).

Kenneth Klaine’s degree project *Komplexitet och negativa karaktärsdrag i fiktiva karaktärer* is another source that looks at how we get to know characters in movies and series. His work delves deep into the subject of creating characters that engages the viewer and talks about the credibility or trustworthiness of the character. The phenomenon I have described as a bond towards a character is in Klaine’s thesis called identification. The work by Klaine goes on for roughly eighty pages and has been used first and foremost to help me get an understanding of this bond in other media. In the chapter called *Komplexa karaktärer* he talks about how there has to be a consistency and clear direction for the character to create credibility. This could be interesting to look at from a game perspective since there often is a similar, but unspoken, rule in pen-and-paper roleplaying games (Klaine 2012).
2 Result

In this part the three interviews will be presented in a summarized version where the answers have been shortened. During the interviews several of the participants spoke in a way that did not work well in text; long pauses mid-sentence, sounds like ‘eh’, ‘ehm’, ‘mm’ together with an informal sentencing made the answers look like gibberish in written text. Hence I have interpreted what they were saying and rewritten it in other words, often in a more summarized fashion. I have taken careful consideration to the words used to avoid losing their intention and meaning.

Furthermore, a lot of the data is not included in the thesis. This is due to the fact that when you use qualitative interviews you get a certain amount of irrelevant discussion and answers to a question might need to be dissected out of a long monologue on what the participant think is the most important aspect of character development in a TV-series. When a quote starts in the middle of what the participant said I use […] to show this. This means that if you listen to the interview you will not find the quote when the person starts to speak.

The participants are anonymous. The names are fictional and the participants are given random names to substitute their real ones. The participants in the first interview have been given names starting with the latter A, the second interview with the letter B and the third with the letter C.

2.1 Interview 1

In the first interview several interesting findings were made. When asked When you play an RPG, on computer or in pen-and-paper form, do you play to experience a good narrative? The participants all gave the same answer; yes.


Agustus: Näe jag håller med.

Alistair and Abel nods.

Anton answers that when he is playing CRPGs the main goal is to experience a good narrative. However, when he plays a pen-and-paper roleplaying game the narrative is not as important; Anton, and the other participants, agrees to Anton’ statement. This statement shows that the hypothesis of this thesis does not apply to this group. They do not think narrative to be important in pen-and-paper roleplaying games, though they also say that narrative is interesting too.

The group continues to talk about the games they play and how a firmer relationship forms between their pen-and-paper characters rather than the characters they play in a digital RPG. As answers to the question: Would you say that you connect more to your pen-and-paper characters? They said:
Anton: Definitivt.


Agustus: Jodå.


Anton, Agustus and Alistair all say that they to form a stronger bond to their pen-and-paper character. Although, Abel tells us that it is the other way around for him. He says that the pen-and-paper characters are simply an image of himself and too much alike him for him to feel any special connection; it bothers him that he plays as himself. He like to take a lot of time to think about his choices when he plays, what to say or how to react in a certain circumstance. Hence Abel shows that the hypothesis is not always true. The participant also describes how, in a digital RPG, his experience is only focused on him and his character rather than on the whole group. He does not have to impede his gaming experience by taking other players goals and ambition into consideration, he is able to play exactly how he likes to play.

2.1.1 Summary of the interview

The group answers positively when asked if they form a closer bond to pen-and-paper characters with the exception of Abel. Abel describes the reasons for this quite extensively but the other three do not give any concrete answers when asked why. Furthermore, the group is not able to describe their characters’ appearance nor do the characters have any names even though the group has been playing for three consecutive meetings with these characters.

Regarding what the players think is important when it comes to forming bonds to characters they answer that choices with consequence and time is what they feel creates this bond. It is important to them to be able to see the impact they have on the world.

2.2 Interview 2

The second interview was a great addition of information. The three participants gave positive answers when asked if they form relationship bonds between pen-and-paper characters more easily than with digital characters although they gave one exception as we shall see. The group discussed why they form bonds to characters at length and presented three interesting common denominators; exposure to the character over time, choices with consequence and finality when playing.

In the excerpt from interview 2 above Bruno explains why he believes that you form bond to characters in general. He gives the character Shepard from the game series Mass Effect as an example and states two, for him, incredibly important factors; time and choices with consequences. Baxter also voices this opinion in a different part of the interview where he explains that the lack of consequence is why he dislikes MMOs since it is important to him to follow character development.


He says that it is very important for him to be able to contribute to the world, to change the world; this makes him feel involved in it. He does not like MMOs because the world does not react upon his actions; it does not change. Furthermore Baxter thinks that the reason behind why a bond between player and character is formed more easily in pen-and-paper roleplaying games is because you get to know the character from beginning to end, you create the character from scratch and then you watch them live and, most often, die.

The group briefly touches upon the subject of multiplayer as well, that your character plays a part in other people’s experience as well.


Here Bruno talks about the fact that it is something you are doing with your real life friends, the ‘it’ being playing pen-and-paper roleplaying games. He says that when you meet your friends one evening, play some roleplaying games and develop your characters and are enjoying it thoroughly you enhance the emotional bonds between player and character. Furthermore you enhance the bond to the world and story as well. He gives an example of a group he has been playing with for over five years where he as a GM have incredibly strong emotional bonds towards all of the characters thanks to the evolution, development, of the characters and how actions in the past affect the present in the game world. You see how the characters actions have had consequences in the world and how the characters develop as a response to the consequences.
These choices, and their consequences, get an extraordinary finality in pen-and-paper roleplaying games according to Bellatrix. Usually you are able to save your game in digital RPGs and that creates a kind of safety net; your full focus is not necessary since you are able to reload if something does not turn out the way you want.

Bellatrix: Jag kan fästa mig vid nästan alla karaktärer det behöver ju inte ens vara rollspel egentligen. Men jag är ju helt klart mycket mer rädd om min egenskapade karaktär i ett bordsrollspel för att i digitala spel har du ju alltid en sparning som du kan ladda om. Men om du kör på riktigt i ett riktigt bordsrollspel då är det borta för alltid... och det tynger mycket mer i brädspelet än det skulle göra i ett digitalt spel.

Dan: Ni nickar med hållande.

Bruno: Ja.

Baxter: Ja hehe.

Bruno: Jag håller med det hela.

The participants were asked if they get more easily attached to pen-and-paper characters or characters in digital roleplaying games. Bellatrix answers that she gets easily attached to almost every character and that it does not have to be in a roleplaying game. Furthermore she says that she is more cautious with a pen-and-paper roleplaying character since in a digital game you always have your saved games, you may always load a previously saved game to get a second chance. If you play for real in a pen-and-paper roleplaying game, then it is lost forever and that makes it matter a lot more than in a digital game. Baxter and Bruno share this opinion with Bellatrix.

The last piece of data gathered from the interview that is significant to this thesis is that all the participants agreed that narrative is very important for roleplaying games. They all answered positively when asked if narrative is important as shown in the excerpt below.

Dan: När ni spelar, är narrativet viktigt för er?

Baxter: Väldigt för mig.

[...]

Bruno: Ja då är narrativet det främsta för mig.

Baxter: Ja.

Bellatrix: Jo samma här det.. utan narrativet så är det inget kul.

They express the view that it is vital in digital roleplaying games and not as much in pen-and-paper roleplaying games, but still important. In digital roleplaying games it plays a big part in the development of your character since it is the only thing you may act upon or react on.

Baxter explains that there is a difference between pen-and-paper roleplaying games and digital roleplaying games. You play the different types of RPGs with different goals and expectations; hence the narrative does not have to be as good in a pen-and-paper roleplaying game. He also talks about how he likes to follow the development of a character, to follow the characters journey and see the change to the character caused by the events it goes through. In pen-and-paper roleplaying games, Baxter says, the narrative does not have to be as strong since you are able to influence the development of your character through your own choices; in a digital roleplaying game you seldom have the same freedom to do this.

2.2.1 Summary of the Interview

This group feels that they form bonds towards pen-and-paper characters a lot more than with digital characters, and this group also contains an exception. Bruno describes his relationship with Commander Shepard from the Mass Effect series to be on par with his pen-and-paper characters. Furthermore they discuss at length the reasons behind the forming of this bond and come up with three specific reasons; fellowship, exposure over time, choices with consequences and finality.

2.3 Interview 3

The third group had four participants and they all answered positively when questioned if they think narrative is important in roleplaying games in general.

Dan: Tycker ni att narrative är viktigt i rollspel?
Carl: Ja!
Cedric: Narrativ är ju navet i ett rollspel.
Cesar: Ja
Criss: Ja det finns inte så mycket att rollspela emot om det inte finns något narrativ.

Cedric and Criss takes the answer further and described the narrative as the central focal point of roleplaying games, without it there is nothing to base your roleplaying on. Consequently the group starts discussing what exactly narrative means.

Cedric: Total sand-box är motsatsen till narrativ. Det finns fortfarande en värld med städer, byar och folk där men det finns inget som knyter ihop dem där.

13
Dan: Jag tror att man separerar på narrative och lore I det här sammanhanget.

Cedric: Absolut, narrativet är ju oftast knutet till en historia eller en konspiration.

The group discusses what they mean when they say narrative and reach the conclusion that narrative is the plot or the story of the game. They separate the background, or lore, of the world from the story transpiring right now in the moment. Afterwards the subject changes to focus on characters and how players form bonds between themselves and their characters.

Dan: Hypotesen är att spelarna formar band till sina karaktärer, en nära relation, mycket lättare i penna&papper-rollspel än i digitala rollspel.

Carl: Jaa!

Cedric: Hehehe

Dan: Ni två säger också ja?

Cesar och Cedric [Nickar medhållande]

Criss: Jag skulle nog inte svara ja på det.

Dan: Istället säger du?

Criss: Jag skulle nog säga att det går lika bra oavsett medium.

The group snorts and laughs at the question before them as if the answer should be blatantly obvious for everyone, but Criss disagrees. He believes that it does not matter if you play a roleplaying game in pen-and-paper form, on a console or on a computer; you have the same conditions for achieving good roleplaying. A discussion ensues where the group talks about why pen-and-paper roleplaying games encourages and enables better roleplaying while Criss explains that the ability to roleplay or form a bond to your character is entirely within the player. The rest of the group insists that you have a certain freedom in pen-and-paper roleplaying games and that this would make it a lot easier for the players to connect to their characters. Criss keep talking about how the ability to connect to a character resides within the player.


Carl adds another reason to why pen-and-paper roleplaying games make you care more about your character, the finality in your decisions. An adventure in an analogue roleplaying game will never be the same, Carl says. If you play with a new group they will not react in the same way to the events taking place or actions taken by your character and if you play it with another game master the experience will be entirely different even if the base plot is the same.

The third group talks about how community, or fellowship, takes part in the development of your character and how the character you play affect more people than just yourself.

Cedric explains that when he plays digital roleplaying games he plays alone and that human interaction has always been very important to him. He tells us how he forms a picture, a vision, of his character but when he plays pen-and-paper roleplaying games this picture is affected by everyone else’s input and reactions on his character. He believes this is important since it creates bonds to his character through other people and through their characters as well. Carl then elaborates on the subject and expresses his view on character development through other players.


Carl agrees to what Cedric says and adds that the interaction with other human players helps you develop your character. This is something you can see when you look back and reflect on what your character once were. The doctor you started out with may develop into this cold, almost evil person, and on the way he has this cynical evolution from pleasant goody-two-shoes to this morbid, nasty surgeon. The character’s development often takes off in a direction one does not anticipate form the start when you play pen-and-paper RPGs. All due to the fact that you play with other people who gives you a sort of feedback on your play style, on what you do.

The third group believes that you need a character to actually experience a narrative. When asked if the participants believed if you need a deep or round character to experience a narrative they answered the following:

Carl: Jag tror att jag sätter mig in mer i narrativ när jag spelar en rund karaktär. Jag påverkas inte lika mycket när jag spelar en karaktär jag inte knytter ann till.


Cedric [nicker medhållande]

Carl and Criss both argue for the necessity of a character when you want the player to care about a narrative. To really care about a story, Carl says, he needs a character to follow that he cares about. They describe how Skyrim is more of a sandbox game rather than a roleplaying game since you never get any chance to roleplay; you fight, loot and advance the story but your character never develops. Criss describes how he does not care for Skyrim’s story at all but instead want to get stuff; stuff meaning magical weapons and levels.
Lastly the group gets to answer the question what do you think makes the player form a bond to a character in roleplaying games?

Carl: När beslutens ligger så nära som möjligt det jag vill göra och det kännas rätt. Då knyter jag band tror jag.

Cedric: När man känner att valen man gör påverkar någonting och man har fått påverka valen själv. När karaktären är skapad av mig med en del utav mig i sig. Och när karaktären har varit med om events som jag haft en del av att bestämma vad som häände i. När min karaktär har fått erfarenheter som jag delar med den så stärker det bandet jättemycket.

Cesar: Jag bildar starkt band till karaktär när jag får valmöjlig, så många valmöjligheter som möjligt och när det finns en balans mellan mina valmöjligheter och jag kan motivera varför jag gjort de val jag gjort.

Criss: jag skulle säga att jag gör det när jag får följa med i utvecklingen av karaktären, oavsett om det är att den växer eller att man vecklar ut den (får reda på saker om den). Att få reda på saker samtidigt som den gör det.

Dan: Behöver man få vara med och påverka åt vilket håll den utvecklas?

Criss: Nej det skulle jag inte säga. Så länge det inte bryter mot vad jag lärt mig om den tidigare.

Cedric: Så länge den inte bara är jag eller helt utan min input är jag nöjd.

Carl and Cesar believe that they form bonds to characters when they make important and big decisions; these decisions let them define their characters. It is also important that the decisions have some sort of effect. If the decision is on a matter of life and death but the player never gets to perceive what the outcome was it will not affect the player. To follow the development of a character, learn about the character together with the character, is another reason according to Criss. Furthermore the group says that it is not necessary to be able to influence the development as long as the development is coherent and follows a clear path. Cedric says he does not want to be the only source of influence on the characters development, that he wants other sources such as other player characters or NPCs to influence the development.

2.3.1 Summary of the Interview

The last group follows the pattern from the other interviews, three out of four answer positively when asked if they form bonds to their character more easily in pen-and-paper roleplaying games. The reasons to why they form a bond to their pen-and-paper character more easily is the following: fellowship, that the choices they make are exactly the choices they want to make and that you follow the development of the character. Furthermore they say that as a player it is not necessary to be able to influence this development as long as it happens and they also mention the importance of big events and choices of a certain magnitude.
3 Analysis and Discussion

In this section I will delve deeper into the answer given by the player and try to weave them together into concise and graspable concepts. The analysis is made with only roleplaying games that focus on narrative and story in mind. I am well aware that there are games one could describe as RPGs that does not focus on narratives at all. Any conclusions, or theories, presented are primarily applicable for story driven RPGs, although there might be more general conclusions as well. Giovannelli talks about how important sympathy is when creating a character that the perceiver should care about. As described previously Giovannelli promotes the view of sympathy as something more than just pity for a character. He takes it even further and claims that to truly experience a narrative the author needs to evoke sympathy from the reader towards the main character. The notion of sympathy as something more than pity, to vicariously experience what the character experiences, is a very good description of the bond I have tried to define (Giovannelli 2013:92).

The interviews all show a certain level of cohesiveness regarding answers to the first question: Do the players feel that they form a closer relationship towards a character in a pen-and-paper roleplaying game compared to a digital roleplaying game? Out of the eleven participants eight answered yes. This shows that even though there are exceptions, as to every other rule, I claim that the hypothesis strikes true when slightly re-phrased: Players generally get more attached to the characters they play in pen-and-paper roleplaying games compared to digital roleplaying games.

The remaining three gave different answers to why they are not of the same opinion. The participant that did not answer positively in the first interview said it was the other way around, he felt more attached to his digital characters compared to characters he play in pen-and-paper roleplaying games. He describes how he likes to take his time, lacks the imagination and acting skill required to enact a character made from scratch and how he like to play solitary.

In the third group the participant tells us he does not see why there has to be a difference, that the attachment, or bond, perceived is created by the player and not the game or the platform. Lastly the participant in the second group said he does in almost all cases feel this way; that it is easier to form bonds with pen-and-paper characters, though he gave an exception: Commander Shepard in the Mass Effect series. Later there will be a more detailed description of Mass Effect since it is a game I find illustrates the themes found in the result and apply to the specific kind of RPGs mentioned above. Nonetheless I will first describe the reasons found to why a player forms a bond to a character.

The reasons to forming this bond, as seen in the results of the interviews are the following: exposure over time, choices with clear consequences and a sense of finality when playing. These are the reasons named when talking about roleplaying games in general. In pen-and-paper roleplaying games the participants also named fellowship as a reason. The reasons, or themes, will receive an in-depth analysis as to why they make you bond with a character together with a comparison between pen-and-paper RPGs and digital RPGs.
3.1 Exposure over time

Exposure over time is the one reason that every participant in the study agreed upon, it is important to have enough time with the character to get to know her. An example brought up in two of the interviews is Mass Effect where several of the participants spent countless hours following the story of Commander Shepard and his crew. There is not really much to say about this since every game lets you spend time with your character, it does not matter if it is pen-and-paper or digital. The differences lies with what you let the player do within this time. The time spent with the character does not let you, by itself, get to know the character. We do not know Mario’s dark secret even though we all have spent countless hours with the plump plumber.

On the other hand, this should not be news to anyone since Adams mentions that long games coupled with narrative is a necessity since it is hard to engage the player for a longer time without it. Especially important would a narrative be if there is a character the game focuses on, as is the case in almost every RPG (Adams 2010:156-157).

3.2 Choices with consequence

The players did not only form a bond towards Shepard, even if it was the strongest one, they formed close relations towards every member of the crew and the game is full of choices that will have dire consequences. The player is forced to choose which members of the crew she will send on certain missions that are close to suicidal, and what consequences that will entail are obvious. The fact that you get to make these choices and experience what Shepard does in several different dilemmas is a crucial key towards getting to know a character. McKee talks about how one does not get to know a character truly until the character is in a dilemma; how the character acts when under pressure shows us who she is (McKee 2013). This is something Mass Effect, and several other digital RPGs, do with varied competence.

Pen-and-paper RPGs works a bit differently. Every single choice, and action, has consequence since the Game Master is able to improvise. Hence the game itself is able to wrap itself around your choices and evolve in ways almost impossible to predict before a session starts. Digital RPGs lack the skill to improvise which limits them when it comes to the consequence-part. This does not necessarily have to be a problem in digital RPGs. As mentioned above: one only gets to know a character when she is faced with a dilemma; the bigger the dilemma, the truer is the choice to the character. There is no need for the constant adaption to every choice made by a character as long as there are a sufficient amount of big life-or-death dilemmas along the way to thoroughly develop the character. In two of the three interviews development of character was said to be the greatest contributor to getting attached to a character.
That one reason to why we bond with characters should come as no surprise. I remember the first *Knights of the old Republic* game, and even more so the sequel, where the developers made me reevaluate the choices I made several times and how impressed I was about this. According to McKee we only get to know a character truly when we see how they act in high-pressure situations. When a character is faced with dilemmas and have to make tough decisions we get to see their true character (McKee 2013). This is something that needs to be reflected upon; we get to know a character when we see the choices she makes. In movies and books this makes perfect sense; however, in most roleplaying games the player is making the choices as the character. Simultaneously the player is making the choice and getting to know the character by the choices made by the character. This implies that the player would need to intuitively make the choice and then react to the choice made; a process that sounds a bit odd and at a first glance as an inferior way of communicating a character to a perceiver. In pen-and-paper roleplaying games the player often creates a backstory to help with this problem.

### 3.3 Finality

The sense of finality is something that pen-and-paper does very well and adds a lot to the whole atmosphere of the game, everything matters. Every step you take, every breath you make is done and no moment is ever relived just because you realized ten minutes later you made the wrong decision. Personally I think that the option to make every choice final in a digital RPG would be tremendous, but to force it on a player would be plainly stupid. If there is no special circumstance regarding the game that would benefit greatly by implementing this sense of finality it should not be enforces. Neither does it add anything to the relation between player and character. I believe that finality would be a great complimentary feature that adds drama to the big dilemmas in a digital RPG; then again, I have no data to support it more than one of the participants in the second interview expressing this opinion and my own opinion.

### 3.4 Fellowship

Fellowship is a factor mentioned by every group when they were asked to identify what exactly made them create bonds with the characters in pen-and-paper roleplaying games more easily compared to digital RPGs. Fellowship was not the word they used exactly, however it is what I think best describes the word they were looking for. The groups talked about how you play together with other people and how your character affects others, but also how your character is influenced by the input of your fellow players. They brought up the fact that when your character has a meaning for not only you, but others as well, the importance of the character grows. In the third interview one of the participants talked about how digital roleplaying games do not give the player any rewards for playing with their character in mind. By this the participant mean reacting in a certain way defined by the characters previous actions and background, and not reacting in the way that necessarily has the biggest gain for the player. Amongst all the other positive aspects of fellowship it also brings the reward of playing as your character, playing the role, to the table.
In a digital RPG there is no rule or mechanic stopping you from making decisions that does not fit your character. There is also no reward to be gained by acting as your character should. But in pen-and-paper RPGs you play with other players who also have a relation to your character. This relation is partly player-to-character but also character-to-character. A player in a pen-and-paper RPG is often judged by how well it sticks to character, and if there is development of the character it has to be obvious to not upset the other players. Personally I have never heard of a group that has rules to govern this, instead it is more of a silent understanding amongst the players and breaking this wordless agreement breaks the immersion. Is it possible that what makes players get attached to their characters is the impact they have on others and the reactions created by it? That every player in the group is more or less forming the characters together and watching them grow. Simply put: the bonds of others to your character fortifies your personal bond to your character as well.

It was also discussed at length during the interviews that the possibility to influence the narrative helped players form a bond and also that the scripted narrative was of lesser importance in pen-and-paper RPGs. Participants also described how it was important to them that their character made a difference in other players’ experiences. It is possible that the reason players get attached to their characters in pen-and-paper RPGs is because the characters have the power to influence not only certain aspects of a story or a few of the characters they encounter, but all of it. The pen-and-paper characters are able to influence everything in the game world.

3.5 Playing your character

During the interviews the participants also discussed how Commander Shepard is not a character that the player creates from scratch. The player may choose if Shepard should be a good version of Shepard or a bad version of Shepard, but the player is not able to choose exactly how this is going to be portrayed. The fact that Mass Effect uses this predetermined character to help engage the player in the narrative is very interesting and comes very close to what pen-and-paper RPGs do. Although the characters created in pen-and-paper RPGs are created from scratch by the players, background story and all, the way you play the character is very similar.

The way a player plays her character in a roleplaying game, in my experience, is a lot closer to the way the player plays Commander Shepard. An excess of freedom actually restricts the player more than the very limited freedom that Mass Effect gives the player does. In Mass Effect you are given a character, a role, instead of creating one from an empty husk. Furthermore you are not able to choose exactly how Shepard will act in explicit detail; you may only choose the implication on a general basis; you do not see exactly what Shepard will say in a dialogue. This enforces the player to act like Shepard, she is not able to go out of character.
The continuity and credibility of a character, is something that Klaine brings up in his degree project when he talks about how a viewer identifies with a character. If a character keeps taking actions, or makes choices, that are not in line with what we, the viewers, have seen before of this character we dismiss the character as bad or shallow, not believable (Klaine 2012:14-16). Commander Shepard gives the player the choice of being good or bad but only let the player influence Shepard on a macro level. Exactly what Shepard will say or how the commander will act in a scene is scripted and already decided by the developers. By doing this the developers create a firm and deep bond between player and character that is very uncommon in digital RPGs.
4 Conclusion

The easiest question to answer is the one about if players find it easier to form a bond with their character in pen-and-paper RPGs compared to a digital character. The data gathered through the interviews clearly shows that the answer is yes; players get more attached to their pen-and-paper characters. It is not quite as simple to give explicit reasons to why this is so even with the answers given by the players in this study. One has to keep in mind that the research is quite small and only has eleven participants. The students who took part in the study were extremely qualified to do so but nonetheless, it would have been preferable to have more data.

The short version of the answer to ‘why?’ is: Long playtime with your character coupled with the possibility to make big choices, choices that have impact on the story, will give the player the best foundation to build a relation towards her character. Furthermore the bond between player and character seems to be reinforced if the player is unable to save the game and load it when she makes a poor decision. Last, but not least, playing with other people and being able to influence each other’s experience has a great effect on the emotional investment by the players.

The first two reasons are well known and well used in digital RPGs and there is really no help to get from them in how to improve the bonding between player and character regarding digital RPGs. The following two reasons are at a glance something I would dismiss as either irrelevant, regarding the finality, or very improbable, regarding the multiplayer. The previous research into character in other media shows that the difference between movie, book and game is not that big when it comes to identifying with a character. McKee and Klaine together help us understand how this process works in other media and it is my belief that in video games the choices we make is our way to get to know our characters.

4.1 My Actions with My Consequences

The interviews show that important choices which let the player alter the world will create a response within the player forming said bond. In other media it is through the choices and actions of the character we get to know her and I believe it is the same in RPGs. This might as well be true in every genre of video games but I will only talk about RPGs since that is what I have been focusing on. In pen-and-paper RPGs the player always get to see the consequences if her choices while in digital RPGs the consequences might not be obvious, or exist for that matter. This is the main reason as shown by the study and the one feature that should be looked at further regarding how to improve player character relations.
From talking with the eleven participants and listening to the interviews over and over one idea got a firm foothold in my brain; the thought that the answer to why we form bonds with characters is actually rather simple. In most RPGs the player is assuming a role that exists inside the world. The player is not an observer, she is there and she matters. This is due to the fact that the character is the player; they are not separate in the same way the audience in a theater is to the character in the film. Therefore, in an RPG you have to be very careful with the sense of immersion within the player since the character will be more or less trustworthy and coherent depending on the player’s choices.

As Klaine describes there is a certain need of cohesiveness in the characters actions for us to perceive it as trustworthy or, in lack of a better word, real. Thus a new problem arises to the forming of the bond between player and character; immersion. Immersion is quite fragile and when it is broken the player will not sympathize with the game’s world and its problems as deeply as if it was intact and suddenly everything around the character seems unimportant. When we do not care, we are not able to form this bond as described by Giovannelli.

Nevertheless, regarding answers to the question if it is possible to find ways to improve the player’s investment in her character in digital RPGs by studying pen-and-paper RPGs, there are none. At least no definitive answers in this thesis, the study is too small. I present what I think is important and what I have gathered from reading the literature and talking to the participants in the interviews, no more no less.
5 Continued Research

It has been clear to me throughout the work on this thesis that the ability to have an impact on the world, or story, and to be able to change the world is vital. It is described as something that a good RPG should have but also as a way to form a bond towards your character. I think a deeper study into how actions define us, and thus the character we play, could be of interest to see if the results would be applicable on digital RPGs. Writers of manuscripts and novels, who study intensely how we identify and get to know a character on the screen, already have a very firm understanding of how this work, how you create sympathy towards a character and how you get to know one. A game centered around the feature of having an impact on the story could be fascinating. As mentioned in the third interview, one does not necessarily have to create the character one plays as long as one gets to be a part of its development. This development comes through choices and thus a game based on choices alone could be an effective way to tell the story of a character. It was mentioned in the third interview that you do not actually have to be able to influence a character’s development as long as you are able to observe it and experience it. Personally I believe this contradicts the fact that the players want to be able to affect the world and make choices with consequence, plus it would make the RPG more of an interactive movie rather than a game; but that is just my opinion.

Additionally it would be interesting to see how a game with a feature that rewards the player for playing as her role would be received. A game that would in some way give the player a boon for sticking with her character and not make decisions that does not rhyme well with her true character. In pen-and-paper roleplaying games there is often an understanding amongst the players that one should play his role, not only to get the best loot, but play it convincingly. When a player accomplishes this she is often rewarded with a sense of self-worth from the positive feedback from the other players and herself. Furthermore, this would hypothetically increase the immersion of the player, or rather the time spent immersed. If my conclusion is indeed correct that when the player does not care for the world; this leads to the player caring less for the character which in turn obstructs the forming of a bond. I think it would be very interesting to see if there is a relationship between rewarding the player for playing as her character and the sense of immersion felt by the player, does it increase? Do the player break immersion less than without the reward?

The fellowship part is maybe the most interesting reason given to why we bond with characters, that the characters gets a higher affection value when we play with other people. This is something that I found very interesting since it never occurred to me personally that the way a player can affect another one with her character is what gives the character importance. Nevertheless I think digital RPGs could do well to consider multiplayer as the next step. Imagine a game like Portal, but instead of solving puzzles you experience a story and a few intense battles with shady fellas. A very kliché and simple adventure from a pen-and-paper roleplaying game except you experience it through a computer game with your best pal at your side. All the visual and auditory feedback that digital RPGs are so good at would truly help the story come to life, and the possibility to change the outcome of the plot and act against NPCs and your friend’s character would be a new experience.
Literature and references


<http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/dormans>  
website visited: 2013-04-23


<http://www.epubbud.com/read.php?g=GUXB8BEW&tocp=129#chapter129>  
(2013-05-14)


<http://www.codex.vr.se/texts/HSFR.pdf>  (2013-05-01)
5.1 Verbal sources

Interview 1: Abel, Anton, Agustus, Alistair.

Interview 2: Bellatrix, Bruno, Baxter.

Interview 3: Cedric, Carl, Cesar, Criss.

5.2 Appendixes

Interview 1. Appendix 1

Interview 2. Appendix 2

Interview 3. Appendix 3

Introductory letter. Appendix 4

Interview guide. Appendix 5