

## Lack of storytelling in free online rpgs

I'm noticing a severe lack of real story lines, much less storytelling, in free online rpgs. The problem isn't only found in [free online rpgs](#) - it's in many paid rpgs as well - but the free ones are ubiquitous these days, especially in their MMO and MMORPG forms. Fans of science fiction and fantasy have increasingly entered these games, as have long-time rpg players. There is plenty of new blood drawn to these games, such as the flocks of Harry Potter fans who may or may not have tried role-playing HP characters (usually done in writing on online forums), but have now moved on to explore other types of role-playing and associated gaming.

### Real RPGs have emotional involvement

The very term 'rpg' indicates the genre's roots in face to face table-top gaming that began with *Dungeons and Dragons* in the mid 1970s. I think it's great that rpgs found such a ready home in the cyberscape, but the thing that makes an rpg a fascinating experience at the table - both socially, and in the imagination - is the degree of emotional involvement that can be fostered as player engages with plot, and with characters, both human and NPC (non-player characters, for you non-gamers out there).

Frankly, it boggles me that so many people claim to role-play when they are running a limited character around a limited landscape with (generally) limited responses available to them in their actions, and all this in a strikingly plot-poor setting. As rpgs have moved away from stand-alone desktop gaming and into the MMO environment, increasing sophistication on the back end allows for more self-determination. But it no way emulates the richness or (usually) achieves the feeling of intense personal involvement in a role that face to face play does.

### Why are people content to be "Toons"?

It is sadly telling that in today's free MMO world, many people refer to their characters as "toons": short for cartoon, meaning the avatar that represents the human player. That is exactly right: multi-dimensional people have been reduced to the state of one dimensional cartoons, and even more unbelievably these flat caricatures are happily worn and animated by real humans who think they are "role-playing".

There's a huge psychological gulf between first-person "being" a character, and third-person manipulation of a toon, i.e., character playing at a remove. That is central to why there has been a breakdown in great storytelling and the creation of environments that truly sweep people into a believable, immersive game space. Now that tools in this industry have matured as they have, I would think it's time for free online rpgs - and paid ones too - to rethink their approach to storytelling. They need to break through the player-at-a-remove distance that is so incredibly common in these games, and find a way to invite people to *live* in these worlds, not keep them strangled in linear plots and fooled into thinking that moving a toon through kill/loot/level loops is in any way related to real *role playing*.

While they've created astounding technical tools for the look and feel of these environments,

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where are the comparable innovations regarding storytelling and personal engagement? Astonishingly lacking. This industry won't really come into its own until that breakthrough in storytelling structure happens, and when it does, MMOs will finally have found their long-sought Killer Ap.

I hope it's soon. I want to play it.