

TURN-BASED ROLEPLAYING GAMES

AN ASSESSMENT BY VERTEGRAS

A GENRE THAT DEFIES TIME

A roleplaying game is virtually anything that allows the player to feel immersed into the game's world; from characters, story, choices, and direction. And one could argue that almost every game is a roleplaying game but there's a subgenre of roleplaying games that lingers in the background and periodically breaks the mold. And that's turn-based roleplaying games, let's dive into the legacy that it bestows.

Preface.

Harking back to the table-top roleplaying games (TTRPGS) like Dungeons & Dragons, Warhammer, and Pathfinder - roleplaying games had the player act as their character in full. From actions, to conversation, to their story. While not necessarily taking the direct pull of table-top roleplaying games by storm, the concept of turn-based systems and the immersion were large pinnacles that were transitioned into video games. Many turn-based series sprung up in the early ages, Final Fantasy, Dragon Quest, and one of the largest IP on the planet, Pokemon. However, as video games evolved past the 2D limitations of the generations of old, direction for most games have since left it by the wayside. Except when the lightning in the bottle strikes again.

Pokemon: Baby's First TRPG.

Most players of all ages know Pokemon. There's a large chunk of gamers who live and breathe Pokemon. And while this isn't a slander review on the fall of Pokemon in the modern era, it has to be mentioned here, as Pokemon is likely the first turn-based roleplaying game that gamers try. If not the actual video games, the trading card game invokes a similar style. It is a turn-based card game after all, similar to Magic: The Gathering.

Pokemon, Pocket Monsters, is by definition the staple turn-based roleplaying game. The stories told tend to be more reserved, "gotta catch em all" and focused on a simple gameplay loop of one Pokemon Type beats the other like rock, paper, scissors. Fire beats Grass, Grass beats Water, Water beats Fire, for example. This is integral into the DNA of most TBRPGs after it. The simplicity is a pro and a con, while many appreciate the simple nature of Pokemon - others would like it to experiment. And we've seen the Pokemon Company do so, with Mega Evolutions, Z-Moves, Gigantamaxing, and such. But are those enough?

Final Fantasy: A Turn-Based Legacy That Never Was?

Final Fantasy gets a lot of flack with the modern games "abandoning" the turn-based formula that the first three games had. Which is quite interesting because the series has had more

ATB, active time battles, than turn-based installments. The only distinction is that most of those games had an option that essentially converted them into quasi-turn-based RPGs with the Wait option. However, most people in the modern era have split their opinions down the middle on if Final Fantasy should return to a more traditional style of turn-based elements or continue the direction that the modern three entries, 15, 7R, and 16 respectively, have shifted towards. Which is almost more of an action hack and slash combo oriented gameplay loop. As a lot of arguments have directed the conversation to the spiritual successors of Final Fantasy and allowing the series to continue in this path.

Octopath Traveler: In the Name of Spiritual Successors.

This game was originally a Switch exclusive before jumping to Steam and down the road, a surprise Xbox / Game Pass shadowdrop. Octopath Traveler is what many argue to be what Final Fantasy would've and or should've been if it retained the turn-based formula moving into the past decade. An argument there is that Octopath, while inspired by the 2D sprite work, has a different tone and direction that is opposite to Final Fantasy games. Octopath Traveler compared to FF7 is a stark difference in the story (or stories) being told. Octopath Traveler does an amazing job at executing on the turn-based system with gameplay evolutions that rewards the player for balancing Breaks and Boosts to achieve insane numbers. However, Octopath Traveler suffers in that its story is broken into bite size pieces between the 8 characters and while they are all relatively great characters on their own, unfortunately none of them can carry a similar weight to Cloud Strife or Marth.

My disagreement is that spiritual successors shouldn't eliminate the want for turn-based Final Fantasy's return as there's a large enough market for both to coexist. Final Fantasy is a larger name that could bring attention to the smaller titles, like Octopath Traveler, Sea of Stars, and the like while also continuing a real-time action adventure game. Both genres can work together.

Baldur's Gate 3: Near Perfection Against Modern Pushback.

This is something I've noticed more and more as turn-based RPGs hit the scene with great success. These lightning in the bottle moments always get incredible pushback from other genre gamers, and it tends to be for the same reasons. And this one is in the spotlight predominantly because it took the world by storm, Baldur's Gate 3. Not only a turn-based RPG, but a table-top inspired Dungeons & Dragons turn-based RPG. This game is the video game form of what it is like to be in a D&D campaign, Dungeon Master included! This game has garnered tons of attention and with that, some bad faith arguments about the genre as a whole. While this isn't Larian's first video game, it is a magnum opus. As many gamers have expressed their discourse against the turn-based nature. Slow, analytical with RNG as a large element (pesky dice rolls!) - with the concept of 10+ minute turns of properly organizing your crew accordingly, this doesn't sit well with many gamers. In a gaming space that loves the fast

high-speed first-person shooters and the more competitive natures of battle royales, MOBAs, and the like - it would feel like it should catch up with the times. However, not every genre is for every player. Baldur's Gate 3 is not for every gamer, it will not resonate with people who have had no interest in Dungeons & Dragons (or any other TTRPG) before its release. It will not magically resolve the issues that players might've had with other turn-based RPGs. It is the embodiment that there will be games, and should be games, that aren't bending for everyone's tastes. Not everyone will like the large-scale RPGs of the Witcher, Starfield, Elder Scrolls, and that is okay.

Fire Emblem: Now That's Strategy.

Stepping back from a more subjective topic to hit on a niche but growing subgenre of turn-based roleplaying games, Strategy TBRPGs. While I am still clinging to the hopes of another Final Fantasy Tactics, the largest known series in this genre would likely be Fire Emblem. While opting for a grid-based chess-like design, this feels like a middle step between table-top and the other turn-based games. As the units are deployed on set tiles, having individual movement requirements and layering another step to the puzzle. And that's a perfect example, they play like puzzles.

Something I would like to put here, Fire Emblem wasn't always a large name but with a combination of some Smash Bros. influence and colorful character designs, it started to shift to be a more known IP. This was driven home after Three Houses was released, already four years later, it remains a larger and more consistently discussed than the entry after it, Engage. While Awakening did save the series, the IP has exploded, similarly to Baldur's Gate 3, with Three Houses.

Persona 5: A Game of the Year Ahead of the Curve.

Originally a Shin Megami Tensei spin-off, the Persona series arguably has taken the spotlight as a colorful contrast to the grimdark vibes that the SMT series is known for. This is furthered by the choices that the Persona series has made to separate it from other TBRPGs. The calendar system and incredible depth social story links. This is most apparent in the latest installment of the series, Persona 5. This 100+ hour TBRPG had something that put it against the juggernauts in the 2017 GOTY awards, such as Breath of the Wild, Super Mario Odyssey, Horizon: Zero Dawn, and even PUBG. Two of which were right off the release of the Nintendo Switch. How did it fight against them? While designed as a PlayStation 3 game, Persona 5 evolved in every way from 3 and 4 before it. (*Caveat here: I know there's 1 and 2 but even ATLUS acknowledges that 3 is when the game direction has taken a different turn and separates 1 and 2 from the remaining three.*) With that, Persona 5 oozes a colorful aesthetic choice that makes it stand out against a lot of other games with a cast that makes it hard to not feel intrigued by. And this is only amplified when looking at Royal, the better version, that came out shortly after fixing a lot of the small complaints that players had. Persona 5's hook was that once you

started to get invested, it doesn't let go. The rock, paper, scissors of Pokemon evolved with stylish animations, quips, Baton Passes, and All-Out Attacks. These small things break the normality and naturally slow turn-based progression with a collection gimmick behind the Personas just like Pokemon. This is only exacerbated by the story and character development that flourishes in the game. Much like Fire Emblem, Baldur's Gate, and Final Fantasy, it's hard to not to start to care about each of the cast.

Every Rose Has Thorns.

Not every turn-based RPG will hit the same for each player, including those who love the genre. I personally love them, I grew up with Paper Mario 64 and The Thousand-Year Door remains as one of my top three GOATs. However, there's certain issues that each of these games have. A slow burn, as many put it, the genre is slow, it doesn't feel engaging.

"It takes too long to get going" as many of them, the stories take a decent amount of time, Persona 5's first chapter, the first Palace, is a roughly 10 hour tutorial. Not many are willing to invest that time for it. With that, stories with such long and developed pieces take years to write, develop, to voice act, to make sure it is coherent, and with games like Baldur's Gate - where there's choices? Baldur's Gate 3 was in development for 6 years, 3 of that being Early Access. A long development time for these games also contributes to how many are released. Persona 5 was released in 2016 (JPN) and 2017 (worldwide) - it's already been 6 years since then.

"Combat feels boring or doesn't evolve" - Taking a formula and dramatically shifting like Final Fantasy will cause some tension for certain fans, it will also draw in new ones. While evolving on the preexisting like Persona makes it feel really good to see how the games built off one another. The All-Out Attacks, the Baton Pass, Showtimes are examples of these. Octopath, a smaller title, has one of the smoothest combat situations, it rewards the player for performing accordingly. Even games way back when like Shadow Hearts had ways to involve the player beyond a back and forth with the Ring, a quasi-Quick Time Event that affected damage, criticals, defenses, even shopping!

And the last one, an incredibly controversial one. Fanservice. Most, if not all, of these games have questionable fanservice tacked into them. Might that be intentionally to draw more appeal, to cater to those that are a bit... interesting. While some do it more tastefully, like Octopath Traveler's Primrose, some like Fire Emblem Fates' Camilla does it in a way that many have contention against her. This skewers a lot of people's conceptual image of these games because the imagery gives a negative connotation. And I cannot dismiss that good games suffer at times because of this, we should try to strive to find balance.

Conclusion.

To wrap up. Turn-based RPGs are wide and far between, from start to finish are something unique. And while they will not, and do not, appeal to every player - they shouldn't have to. They are incredibly successful and have battled against the other genres as a stalwart piece of time. From being game of the year contenders to being fan favorites that are held to modern discussions, these games will not go by peacefully.

Turn-based RPGs aren't for everyone but if one interests you, give it a try. It might unlock a whole new world.

Bonus.

Oh hey, you're still here? Here's a bunch of turn-based RPGs that you should check out if this interests you.

Fire Emblem.

Three Houses (Switch) if looking for incredible character writing or story direction.
Fates (3DS) or Engage (Switch) if looking for refined gameplay loops.

Persona.

All three are on modern consoles & GP.
3 Portable has two different stories. (Also, Persona 3 Reload is coming out in 2024!)
4 is a great time, streamlining issues from 3.
5 Royal has TONS of content with tons of replayability.

Baldur's Gate 3.

On PS5, PC, and coming soon to Xbox Series X|S.
Dungeons & Dragons, the video game. It has everything you can think of, including, yes, sex scenes.

Pokemon.

Might sound like nostalgia but all of the older ones are better.
DS era (Platinum, Black & White)
GameCube spin-offs like Pokemon Colosseum or
Gale of Darkness.

Just don't play Sword / Shield or Scarlet / Violet.

Tales of Series.

Basically all of them are pretty solid.
I like Tales of Arise the most. (Xbox X|S, PS4/5, PC)

Paper Mario 64 & TTYD.

These two are as traditional as traditional get but seeing the Mario universe this way is something unreal. Easy to pick up, ways to master and challenge it. I recommend these heavily.
Legally: PM64 is on NSO or 64.
PM TTYD is on GameCube and the remake is coming in 2024 on Switch.

Octopath Traveler 2.

PS4/5, PC, Switch, coming soon to Xbox Series X|S.
If you like the first one, the second is just better in every way. The only real reason to play the first now is if you like the cast more.

Honkai Star Rail.

This game while having gacha mechanics is a full fledged turn-based RPG that takes elements from Persona, Pokemon, and more with a colorful presentation that Hoyo Verse is known for from their previous games.