Pool of Radiance

Sam Roberts

Pool of Radiance is a computer role playing game released by Strategic Simulations, Inc. It is the first of SSI's 'Gold Box' games, and the first officially licensed Advanced Dungeons and Dragons computer product. It was designed by a team of game designers from the publisher of AD&D, TSR, and coded by the SSI Special Projects team. It was eventually released on the Commodore 64, Macintosh, IBM, and Nintendo, and the game designers published an adventure module of the same material for AD&D. It won the Origins award for 'Best Science Fiction or Fantasy Computer Game of 1988', and was eventually novelized, had both remakes and sequels, and remains immensely popular. Despite being available for so many formats and platforms, Pool of Radiance was not designed specifically for any of them, and the constraints and affordances of each platform deeply shape the experience of playing the game in that format.

Pool of Radiance and its successors, the SSI Gold Box games, are all based on the same adaptation of the 1st edition Advanced Dungeons and Dragons ruleset. It is a simplified adaptation, but effective, and unlike anything else available at the time. It lifted ideas from the best crpgs the programmers and designers had played, and fit them all around the AD&D ruleset, which was the forbear of almost all of
those products.

Pool of Radiance built to follow the format of table-top roleplaying, and a player starts by creating 6 characters. Players navigate the world by moving in a first person perspective through square grid maps, presented in the upper left portion of the screen, while character statistics are displayed in the upper right, and the bottom is reserved for text describing surroundings or encounters, and a set of options allowing you to encamp, examine characters and inventories, search, or other dungeon crawling options. When the player encounters something, a sprite picture appears in the upper left, and the bottom part of the screen presents options for interaction, along with text describing the encounter. If the player enters combat, the view changes to an overhead 2d battle-map, where turn-based tactical combat occurs. As each monster and player takes a turn every round, battles with large numbers of

monsters can take an extraordinary amount of time, this is a very accurate depiction of the tabletop Dungeons and Dragons experience.

Pool of Radiance is set in the city of Phlan, a part of the official AD&D Forgotten Realms world, and specifically a part of the world set aside by TSR for development in computer games. When you start a new game, you can create anywhere from one to six characters, from the stock dungeons and dragons class archetypes – cleric, fighter, thief, and wizard. Multiclass is available, too, and with 5 races, there are an abundance of options for the player. Though, as we'll see in a moment, most of those options are bunk.

From there, the player sets out into the City of Phlan, an ancient trading city and stronghold that was destroyed years before. A group of former adventurers has seized a stronghold in the city, and has put out a call for adventurers to help reclaim the rest of Phlan. Your characters are such adventurers, and you take commissions from the city council, explore areas of the city and the surrounding region, and fights lots of monsters for loot and experience.

Pool of Radiance tells the story of a small cabal of humans and demi-humans who are trying to reclaim a once-proud, now abandoned city from the monsters that inhabit it. The player takes commissions from the city clerk who directs him to different adventures in the surrounding regions, and slowly exposes the story of Tyranthraxus, the demon who is controlling the monsters of the city. The player may explore any part of the city they wish at almost any time, but will only receive commissions in a specific order, and the area's difficulty scales based on that order. So though free exploring is encouraged, too much exploration means you get deaded.

An interesting side note: though some documentation claims Pool of Radiance is an adaptation of the 2nd edition AD&D ruleset, the game is clearly based on the 1st edition rules. This results in some generally unbalanced aspects of the classes and races – none more clear than the rules for Strength and exceptional Strength. I won't dive into it here, but essentially, to have a high or maximum strength character, you are forced to play a male, and likely a human. Power gamers gnash their teeth in fury, I know. This is primarily due to the game being, at its heart, designed for tabletop play. The tabletop environment puts a great premium on randomness and 'realism,' both very important factors in classic wargaming.

These quirks are common throughout the game, and are the natural product of the restrictions and affordances of the tabletop platform. The

play experience of Pool of Radiance is shaped by these platform affordances, but not just the affordances and restrictions of tabletop gaming. In a much more direct way, Pool of Radiance is shaped by the distinct hardware platforms it has been presented on over the years.

Pool of Radiance is a classic rpg in many ways, but because of the fundamentals of D&D adventure design, the city and map are always technically wide open, and the small details of life you can come across add greatly to the atmosphere. Monsters increase in difficulty based on the area you have entered, so though you can take your adventuring party wherever you wish, many areas are by default closed off. And you can choose which commissions to accept and which to ignore. Only a few certain missions are required to navigate the story, and with a strong enough force, you could bulldoze your way through the monsters in your way and destroy the game's boss without ever completing a commission. Years later, such flexibility in console rpgs will lead to the mighty Level 1 complete, a task whereby you harness your obsession to defeat a crpg using the most pathetic versions possible of your party. In Pool of Radiance you most likely would still get destroyed, as a single attack from Tyranthraxus, under the best of circumstances, can kill half your party.

An abundance of secret passwords to discover, along with passages, routes and other items, open up options for players, who can parley and run from fights, use stealth and disguise from time to time, and can approach the game in many different ways. Proper application of running and intelligent use of the magic items you can find, can minimize the need for fighting (and the acquisition of loot and exp) or the experienced dungeon delver can go room to room, kicking doors down. With what is in reality a small set of options, the game does provide the player with an opportunity to establish a personality and identity for their characters inside the world of Phlan. The reasonably good writing of the major non-player characters reinforces this, though much of it is recorded in a physical adventurer's journal you must consult as you play.

I first played this game in the late 80's, on the family Macintosh in my parent's basement. I remember clearly hours of playing the game, which I felt was more engrossing and addictive by far than other games I had played. I was amazed that I could play Dungeons and Dragons without waiting for my no-good bum friends to come over. But if they did come over, we could still play the game together, each making our own characters and adventuring together through the world of Phlan.

As a first step of research on this project, I determined to play the game as I had as a child, and with the assistance of my friend Tracy Fullerton, who had both an old Mac, and the game disks, we setup and dived in to the game for an afternoon of adventure.

Tracy, too, had fond memories of the game, and much similar to mine – skipping grad school homework and staying up late to play with a friend, as they adventured together. Though we both shared memories of the slowness of the interface – battles against many small monsters, which occur several times in the game, are only dangerous at low levels, but can often take up to an hour of real time, because of the speed of the game engine on the hardware. Tracy recounted often setting the game to autobattle and going out for pizza when such situations occurred.

So we ordered pizza and went to work. The game was in many ways much as I remember it, but though we had forewarned ourselves, we were completely unprepared for the restrictions of the platform, the slowness of the game, and the often bizarre interface choices. Perhaps because no on had offered icon selection or assemble character portraits before, some of the interface choices just stunk. Lots of having to cycle through whole sets again if you missed what you were looking for. It took a heap of time getting our characters made, and purchasing equipment was no simple matter. Finally after what seemed a frustrating amount of time we were prepared for battle and had a first commission from the Town Clerk. We also had begun to form micro personalities for our characters and were begin to invest in them, possibly because we spent so much time with them in the creation process.

We set out into the slums, and marked several first small successes. The party was balanced, I remembered the location of a secret treasure stash, and we were accomplishing our mission. Then we met our first fight against a horde of monsters. It took 45 minutes for them to finish slaying us. I asked if we should load up our last save, but at that point our endurance and will to live was completely drained. I bid Tracy a good evening, and departed.

Disappointed in some ways, I went home and dug out my old IBM copy of the game, purchased in the early nineties when I got my first windows PC. Pool of Radiance actually runs in DOS, and there are many quality dos emulators floating in the world. Quickly I was playing the game myself at home.

Emulated DOS on a modern machine is FAST. Way, way fast. In the same few hours I had played with Tracy, I was handily into the game,

probably at what might be called the halfway point, rather than igno-miniously dead in the Slums pursuing the first mission.

I was beginning to interact with Porphys Cadorna, the sneaky council-man in the game who ends up betraying the characters to the mighty evil boss of the fallen city. However, my party was faceless automata of killing, and I got little rise out of Cadorna attempting to cheat and use them, since they were running around working the system and being used mercilessly by me to soak up exp and loot. This is also the point in the game where you can do a lot of different, interesting missions to build strength and settle the region. I simply pushed on ahead and dealt death and destruction to my foes, enjoying the Cadorna storyline to its fullest and ignoring everything else the game offered to me.

My personal experience playing the game on each platform was dic-tated it seemed, in part, by platform, but also in part by style. I had ap-proached the game from the standpoint of a role-player the first time, and garnered enjoyment, but eventually was halted by the systems limit-ations, technological and design. In the DOS emulator, I approached the game to succeed, and enjoyed doing so, but found an inability to pursue the things I was interested in past the limitations of the game, and found the speed of play offered little personal investment for me in the charac-ters and their accomplishments.

The first experience became a story about failure, about overwhelming odds, and about the good hearts of our band of adventurers. The second experience was a story about greed and power, and a lesson in might making right. Both of these stories rose from the same text, but the lenses brought to the game by the platform and by myself, the player, modified that text.

In 'Racing the Beam', Ian Bogost and Nick Monfort examine the Atari VCS as a video game platform, and discuss in great detail how the af-fordances and restrictions of that hardware platform constrained and shaped development of software for the console. Pool of Radiance is a game that is shaped by it's original platform (table-top roleplaying), but I have found that the experience of playing the game was as shaped by the platform the game was presented on, and that those constraints and af-fordances informed my play experiences as much if not more than they shaped the game's design. Secondly, though Monfort and Bogost are dealing specifically with computational hardware platforms, I posit that all platforms (computational, non-computational, hardware, software, etc.) affect both a game's design and play experience.

John Barthes writes "Greek tragedy, its texts being woven from words with double meanings that each character understands unilaterally (this perpetual misunderstanding is exactly the "tragic"); there is, however, someone who understands each word in its duplicity and who, in addition, hears the very deafness of the characters speaking in front of him—this someone being precisely the reader (or here the listener). Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author."

Barthes speaks here of the reader of a text being the true author that text – that the person who wrote it is merely a scriptor, setting the words onto paper. The text becomes alive and obtains meaning when it is read, and what that meaning is, is dictated solely by the reader, and their personal perceptions, ideas, and prejudices. In his essay S/Z, Barthes describes these as lenses they bring to viewing the text.

I have clear memories of the difficulty of the game, which can catch you unawares, and particularly that certain areas with randomly generated foes became horrific later, because at high levels there would be dozens and dozens of monsters on screen. This was a problem inasmuch as a combat against that many monsters could take an hour of playtime, and much of it passively watching your characters get attacked. I also remember that achieving success in the game was deeply pleasurable – the time I invested in each achievement, in each character level and magic item made them feel solid, important rewards. And yet viewed through the lens of my most resent playthrough, those items had become unimportant commodities, cash equivalents and excess, to be swapped out for the next better item I could find. Both experiences became texts that I authored, by focusing my attention on certain parts of the game, and by taking them through the lens of their individual platforms.

In a very real way, games are such texts – all meaning of the experience arises from how the user views and approaches the content and rules laid out by the designer – a player approaching from the idea of building the strongest combat party will play a group of only men, to better improve his chances of combat might; whereas, a player approaching the game from the idea of a heroic adventure may want an exactly even split, for a more balanced set of characters. These choices affect how we view the game and its meaning, and how we read the text and situations the game presents us with. Each moment of the game, if often not

containing a moment of choice, is always being affected by the choices we have made to reach it, the characters we have presented to this world, and the story we are building in it.

The lens of the Macintosh affected my personal reading by forcing me to spend more time creating and deciding what and who my characters should be, and how they were to present themselves to the world, and drew attention to the lack of such a lens when I approached the DOS playthrough from a hack and slash perspective. The text changed as I read through those lenses, and the lenses of my personal perspective on the ideas therein.

I became very interested in the idea of the game as a look at a fallen, ruined, and hopeless society, and an examination of the personal greed and ambition that often destroys efforts to revive it. I wanted to spend more time with Cadorna, and more time in a place where the base facts of life are in constant threat of destruction by overwhelming odds.

So I dug up a copy of Ruins of Adventure, the TSR published adventure for AD&D written by the Pool of Radiance development team and based on the same material. I run a semi-regular game with a group of friends, and thought that if platform is such an important lens for building and examining the meaning and story of a game, I would select the platform that I knew best suited to such discursion, and the one with the most possibilities, tabletop role-playing.

Quickly, I was staying up til all hours, preparing the new campaign for our session, and adapting the old adventure to the modern system we play with. I often found myself ignoring writing this very essay to instead look at a part of the adventure, or to tweak some of the class and system choices I was making for the adventure to better suit the mood and ideas of the game I wanted to run. I truly fleshed out Cadorna, adding layers of villainy and plots to what already exists in the adventure.

We have begun the quest, and the players are greatly enjoying exploring the city of Phester (as I have decided to call it). They have become deeply interested in the black market, and have interacted with a group of thieves within the city walls. They also have taken great pleasure in kicking down doors and obtaining loot. These are often the types of games we run, where kicking doors, chopping heads, and divvying loot is the name of the game. As such I shouldn't be surprised that they have not yet risen to the Cadorna bait. It's early yet, though, and the players are rising to the occasion of delving into a world of despair and chicanery.

Surprisingly, though they get the mood, they have not delved deeply into the history of the city, or the details of its life and citizens. These things are rich in the computer versions, possibly because if you spend time with the adventurer's journal at all, they are clearly communicated and layered into the other text of the game.

If I often run hack and slash adventures, is it any wonder that that is how my players are choosing to read this new text with which I have presented them? Is it any surprise that the players are taking immediately to the atmosphere, since I have laid it on so heavily in the early going? The players of my game are bringing lenses to bear based on their prior experience with me, and based on how the text of the game is being spoken and presented. If I want them to get entangled with Cadorna, I need to present this clear position as the speaker that these people are duplicitous and not to be trusted, while positioning the ensuing reactions as highly desirable to the players. If I often ran such games, I would have no need, because the players would already have that information about the speaker.

Furthermore, as the readers of the text and authors of their own experience, each player brings their own desires for game style and story to the table. Jim always desires forthright heroic adventure, and leaps at opportunities for heroism and great deeds, often overlooking opportunities for dealing and double dealing with npcs. Clark, on the other hand will always try to cut a deal or backstab an npc. Their lenses, and how they understand them and bring them to the table will result in the path the game takes.

Pool of Radiance's design and rule set are well suited to this style of experience. Though, like almost all crpgs the gameplay is focused on combat, the variety of roles in combat, quests and characters in the game provide players a plethora of approaches and character personalities to enter the world with. From there, simple and effective design choices – the continuing personality of the environment, the procedurally increasing difficulty based on party power, the immensity and scale of the world compared to the players ability to interact within it – all these heighten the idea of an abandoned, threatening environment, one in which the players face overwhelming odds. This is reinforced by the starkness and difficulty of the 1st edition Advanced Dungeons and Dragons rule set – a game renowned for mercilessly killing players at all opportunities. And the confluence of these elements puts this story emphasis forward, while allowing for endless interpretations, stories, and experiences within. The design contains themes and statements to be

interpreted, without remaining hidebound to a certain style or path of play for the player, understanding that what arises from the game will be personal for each player, and actively trying to assist that rather than force its own commandments.

However, the additional lens of platform limits the game. The inherent rule set and design of the experience still exists, but the platform adds additional rules and lenses. Playing on the Macintosh inhibited the application of some lenses to the game, limiting the experience. Because of the sheer difficulty and time consuming nature of navigating the world on that platform, certain approaches and styles of play were limited. I was unable to bring the dungeon grinding lens, or the overwhelming badass lens to apply. But it naturally enhanced lenses dealing with my characters, and was definitely far better suited to play with multiple people than the emulated DOS version.

The tabletop version has by far the most different rule set, and is the most open and adaptable experience, though the platform does place many natural restrictions on play. The speed of play at the table is as slow or slower than even on the Macintosh, the platform requires multiple players, and the learning curve of the rule set is much higher. Also, computers role dice and do math for you. You never need a sharpened pencil (except for mapping, of course) – and if you really screw up, you can load your last save game.

And this, perhaps, explains the joy that I once felt at playing Pool of Radiance on my family Macintosh in the basement, alone for hours at a single fight, or with friends cackling about the relative merits of our characters and the entertainingly foul things we were doing to our foes. Before I had played this game on a computer, I had never engaged in a similar game experience except by tabletop – I brought the lens of tabletop gaming to the new platform. The speed was on par, and the game had many advantages for me personally over tabletop – for one thing, I could play it alone, or with one other friend – something very tough to do with tabletop gaming, and groups of three or more were not always the easiest to find as a child, particularly for something as unwholesomely nerdy as D&D.

Furthermore, when viewing this same platform again through the lens of having played modern crpgs on modern machines, with modern interface design, all Tracy and I could notice was the speed of the game and the lunacy of some of its interface choices. When I played the game on my personal machine in DOS, coming from the experience of the Macintosh, all I could see was the speed, and the joy of power crawling

my way through the dungeons. And finally returning to good old tabletop, I wanted to explore most deeply the parts of the game that the computer limited, true interaction with npcs, and an emergent betrayal plot.

These urges are perhaps natural. As Bogost and Monfort note, the game is naturally shaped by the platform it is designed for – and Pool of Radiance was originally designed for the tabletop. It is designed to make best use of the affordances and restrictions of playing a game around a table with friends, and feels occasionally clunky when forced to be experienced through another platform. To take a game effectively to multiple platforms, this suggests a need to redesign from the top, taking into account a new set of affordances and restrictions based on the game's new platform.

Pool of Radiance, and games in general, give naturally to Barthes' view on readers authoring texts. And just as a platform becomes a major component of how the player views the text, not only in the current experience, but also by shaping future lenses for the player if they approach the text again. Pool of Radiance takes natural advantage of this, by creating a malleable, provocative text through its rules, events, characters, and environments.