

# Categorizing RTS Games

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The modern Real-Time Strategy (RTS) gaming community is a broad one thanks to the wide-ranging diversity of commercial RTS games in stores today. Although these games generally all share the common characteristic that they give players direct control over units and a simple goal (destroy your opponent), the means of achieving this goal varies widely across games. In this paper, I discuss how an RTS game is affected by particular strategic game elements, and propose that analyzing these variations can lead to a useful way of subcategorizing games of this genre. I intend to do this analysis in the *Battle for Middle Earth* series, while also drawing on my experience with other RTS games (the *Warcraft*, *Starcraft*, and *Command and Conquer* series).

Keith Co (2007) identified a series of influential RTS games that revolutionized and greatly contributed to the evolution of the genre. The particular contributions he identifies almost all involve certain strategic gameplay elements – rules – defined by the game developers that are intended to directly affect the way a player tries to accomplish his goals. For instance, *Warcraft II* introduced *fog of war*, which grants a player vision of an area only if units are present there; the Blizzard RTS games and the *Age of Empires* series explored the use of multiple types of gatherable resources; *Total Annihilation* featured *persistent*, or hero units.

All of these game features are intended to directly affect the way the game is played: fog of war forces a player to scout, diverse resource types present players with worker allocation decisions, and non-expendable hero units must be kept under close watch. Strategic gameplay elements are associated with particular tasks given to the player. During the semester, I intend to classify these game features based on the kind of task they demand from the player in order to help identify sub-categories of the RTS genre.

While it is clear that the RTS genre has evolved greatly since its inception, whether the new “revolutionary” features add depth to the game can be questionable (Adams 2004). The *Battle for Middle Earth* series has been described as an “RTS for noobs” and created only to cater to fans of the *Lord of the Rings* story line and not RTS gamers (Wissner-Gross, 2007). The game features a very simple economic model: farms automatically add resources (of which there is only one type) over time, and combat units will automatically manage themselves with no user intervention. Perhaps it was the intent of the developers to try to shift the focus of the player away from tedious details that require fast hands, and toward strategy and build choices. In my local gaming community, there is a clear divide in RTS preference: some gamers prefer the faster-paced games requiring significant multitasking and others prefer games like *Battle for Middle Earth*, but none like both (Bhat; Chang; Liu; Misra; Wissner-Gross 2007). It will be interesting to investigate what properties of a game’s features would lead certain players to prefer it.

Wissner-Gross said that he plays the game because it is easier than other RTS games; perhaps this is in line with the generally observed trend that games are getting easier in order to appeal to broader audiences (Raby 2005). The trend for users wanting easier games is exemplified by the ever-present collection of hacks, cheats, and other external programs

designed to give the player an edge (Hoglund & McGraw 2007). However, I believe that classifying RTS games is not as simple as being easy or hard, or requiring fast multitasking. I intend to play *Battle for Middle Earth* while comparing its features to other RTS games I have had experience with, and identifying the strategic game elements that make them different and appeal to different people.

Works Cited

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