RPG Scoring Framework (*Definitive RPG Checklist*) with Action Physicality Index

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Abstract

This document formalizes a practical, production-friendly scoring framework for classifying role-playing games (RPGs) using six core pillars, a gender inclusivity multiplier, and an orthogonal *Action Physicality Index* (API). It codifies and extends the previously drafted "RPG Classifier" notes into a precise rubric with equations, decision gates, penalties for performative companion systems, normalization for games without companions, and ready-to-use LaTeX tables for evaluation and presentation.[1]

1 What Is An RPG? (Epistemological Grounding)

This question is important because if something such as a "JRPG" qualifies as an "RPG" by mere inclusion of experience points and level-ups, then by definition *all games are RPGs*—and the term becomes a meaningless descriptor.

RPGs are coined as such due to *play spaces*. In the 1970s (D&D) and the 1980s (Choose Your Own Adventure narratives), the term emerged to describe games where the player *becomes* rather than *performs*. This epistemological distinction matters for discoverability: a game like Baldur's Gate 3 *is* a genuine RPG aside from its D&D property—full character creation, reaction, and reactivity is what made the game successful (validated by early access feedback as Larian Studios scaled).

1.1 The Definition

An RPG is a game where the player takes on the role of something in the setting they inhabit. However, this terminology has been diluted by marketing and evolving mechanics. Every game can be *called* an RPG under a loose definition.

Using D&D as the primary example, an RPG must be a game where the player achieves:

- **Agency**: Control over who they are, who they bring, how they fight.
- **Reactivity**: The world responds to their choices in meaningful ways.

[1] This formalization builds on the "RPG CLASSIFIER" draft and checklist items already articulated.

- **Identity Ownership**: The player *defines* who they are, not merely inhabits a pre-authored character.

If a game has a lightly-defined character (e.g., Shepard in Mass Effect), agency can still exist if the player can define backstory, make meaningful choices, and shape outcomes. With strict RPGs, the player defines their backstory verbally, in writing, or by choosing a background.

1.2 The Genre Validator

If a game lacks agency, reactivity, or interaction with the world outside of story context, it is more accurately classified as:

- Action-Adventure with Skill Trees (Real-Time or Turn-Based Strategy)
- May or may not have multiple endings (often an objective "good" and "bad" ending)
- May or may not allow for different play styles

Most current games fall into these categories.

1.3 The Paradox of "All Games Are RPGs"

At its heart, *all games are inherently RPGs*—the player assumes a role and plays. That is the nature of ludic space. However, what this rubric validates is that not all games are RPGs *as defined by game system mechanics*—the depth of becoming, setting ownership, and world reactivity that allows for emergent experiences.

The litmus test: If I cannot choose the fundamental identity of my character, how can the game claim to offer me ownership of the role?

- If a game locks my gender: I am *inhabiting* a character's story.
- If a game allows gender choice: The game states "here's your story; we provide the world and systems for your ownership."

This distinction is not about quality—it is about *what kind of experience* the game offers.

1.4 Personal Case Studies (2020–2025)

Game	Notes	Hours
Recent (2024–2025)		
Dragon's Dogma 2	Open-world RPG. Player is the Arisen with a pawn system. Full identity ownership.	433h
Tainted Grail: Fall of Avalon	Binary decision design (e.g., "To Kill Galahad?"). Full agency.	20h
Titan Quest II	ARPG (Diablo-like). Greek mythology setting.	6h
Kingdom Come: Deliverance 2	RPG with predetermined character but immersive agency and multiple endings.	135h
Abiotic Factor	Immersive sim. Player defines gender/background. Sandbox, no branching endings.	63h
SCUM	MMORPG. Prisoner on a gameshow island. Sandbox survival.	166h
Elder Scrolls Online	MMORPG played solo PvE. Full identity ownership, all DLC to Necrom.	80h+
Baldur's Gate 3	CRPG. Enough agency that devs patched Minthara into good playthroughs.	174h
Cyberpunk 2077	Edge case: Immersive-Sim/RPG hybrid. Johnny Silverhand creates ludo-narrative tension.	247h
Project Zomboid	Immersive survival RPG. No ending other than death—a story of endurance for each character.	169h
I Was a Teenage Exocolonist	Deckbuilding RPG. Very dark; requires multiple playthroughs to change events you didn't know about.	105h
Legacy / Formative		
Oblivion	First modding experience. Played through an ice storm on a tablet-sized TV.	500h+
Fallout 4	Majority vanilla. Extensive settlement/exploration focus.	1000h+
Dragon Age (Origins, II, Inquisition)	Full series. Strong companion/reactivity. Dark fantasy, specism, gritty.	160h+
Dragon Age: Veilguard	Did not finish. Combat improved but narrative felt sanitized—lacking the grit of prior entries.	—
Mass Effect (1, 2, 3)	Full trilogy. Shepard as lightly-defined protagonist with agency.	160h+
Prey	Immersive sim. Strong systems-driven emergent gameplay.	120h
UnderRail	Turn-based CRPG. Narrative/reactivity keeps drawing back despite slower pace.	—
Wasteland 3	Turn-based CRPG. Unique decisions and novelty drive replay despite combat tempo.	—
Honorable Mention		
The Sims 4	Full identity ownership, emergent storytelling, no combat. Arguably an RPG under this framework.	1500h+
Counter-Example (Named "RPG" but Isn't)		
Chef RPG	Management sim, not an RPG despite the name. Stardew-like. Waiting for updates.	12h

Note: Both Tainted Grail and Dragon's Dogma 2 are about "breaking the cycle" with a True Ending that requires decisive play. The Sims is included because it satisfies the core RPG criteria (agency, identity, emergence) despite lacking combat—proving that combat is not a prerequisite for RPG classification.

2 Overview

The framework separates *RPG-ness* from *action feel*. The six RPG pillars produce a raw score on a 0–6 scale; a gender inclusivity multiplier is applied post hoc. Companion systems are validated via a strict gate; performative "followers" incur a penalty. Games with no companion system are neutrally normalized. The API scores the tactility and depth of real-time combat/traversal on a 0–10 axis, preserving clarity between systemic role-play and kinesthetic action.

3 Core RPG Pillars and Scoring

Each pillar can be scored binary $\{0, 1\}$ for decisiveness, or fractionally in $[0, 1]$ when partial support exists. The six pillars are:

1. **Player Identity & Definition** (I)
2. **World Reactivity to the Player** (W)
3. **Agency Over Companions** (C) *(if applicable)*
4. **Playstyle Freedom** (P)
5. **Endgame & Story Outcomes** (E)
6. **Emergent Storytelling** (M)

3.1 Operational Rubric (Subcriteria)

For reliable scoring across evaluators, each pillar is anchored by three subcriteria ($b_1, b_2, b_3 \in \{0, 1\}$). A pillar may be computed as the average of its subcriteria, then rounded to $\{0, 0.5, 1\}$ if desired.

1. Player Identity & Definition (I)

- **Customizable Persona**: Origins/background/worldview beyond surface appearance.
- **Backstory Control**: Past is chosen, written, or emergent (not fully pre-authored).
- **Moldable Protagonist**: If predefined, history/personality still meaningfully steered by play.

2. World Reactivity to the Player (W)

- **Dynamic NPC Behavior**: Dialogue/behavior varies by identity, choices, reputation.
- **Faction/Political Standing**: Multiple groups track opinions of the player.
- **Persistent Consequences**: Actions drive durable world state changes.

3. Agency Over Companions (C)

- **Optionality**: Can run solo or with companions by choice.
- **Build Influence**: Control over companion loadouts/skills/roles.
- **Autonomy Stakes**: Loyalty shifts, departures, or death tied to player actions/neglect.

4. Playstyle Freedom (P)

- **Approach Variety**: Melee/ranged/magic/stealth/diplomacy viable per build.
- **Build Impact**: Stats/skills substantially alter gameplay (not flat numerics).
- **Non-Combat Options**: Negotiation, sabotage, stealth resolve challenges end-to-end.

5. Endgame & Story Outcomes (E)

- **Branching Endings**: Cumulative choice reflection beyond a final binary switch.
- **Variable Epilogue**: Ripples of playstyle/relationships presented in post-state.
- **Reactive Final Act**: End-state shaped by prior events, allies, factions alive/dead.

6. Emergent Storytelling (M)

- **Replay Variability**: Meaningfully different outcomes across runs.
- **Systemic Emergence**: Interacting systems create unique player-driven stories.
- **Anecdotal Richness**: Organic situations worth retelling ("*I can't believe that happened*" moments).

3.2 Raw and Final Scores

Let S_{raw} denote the unadjusted sum:

$$S_{\text{raw}} = I + W + C + P + E + M. \tag{1}$$

No Companion System (Neutral Normalization). If the game truly has *no* companion system (and does not claim one), exclude C from the denominator and rescale:

$$S_{\text{raw,norm}} \;=\; \frac{I + W + P + E + M}{5} \times 6. \tag{2}$$

Performative "Companions" Penalty. If the game surfaces "companions" that are followers on rails, with no build control, loyalty stakes, or departure autonomy, set $C = 0$ *and* apply:

$$\Delta_{\text{fake\_comp}} \;=\; 0.5. \tag{3}$$

Gender Multiplier. Post-multiply by $G \in \{1.00, 1.25, 1.50\}$ given:
- 1.00: No gender choice.
- 1.25: Binary choice.
- 1.50: Broad/non-binary options, meaningfully acknowledged in-world.

Final Score.

$$S_{\text{final}} = \begin{cases} (S_{\text{raw}} - 0.5) \times G, & \text{performative companions} \\ S_{\text{raw}} \times G, & \text{valid companion system} \\ S_{\text{raw,norm}} \times G, & \text{no companion system} \end{cases} \tag{4}$$

4 Action Physicality Index (API)

The API is a separate axis in $[0, 10]$ capturing combat/traversal physicality without inflating RPG-ness:

$$\text{API} \;=\; A_1 + A_2 + A_3 + A_4 + A_5, \quad A_k \in \{0, 1, 2\}. \tag{5}$$

4.1 API Subscores (A_1–A_5)

- A_1 **Modality & Pace**: Real-time commitment, animation priority/recovery, i-frames, stamina/poise.
- A_2 **Tactility & Feedback**: Hit-stop, stagger, collision fidelity, readable SFX/VFX, camera discipline.
- A_3 **Systemic Combat Depth**: Build $\rightarrow$ moveset expression, stances, swaps, cancels, environment interplay.
- A_4 **Encounter & AI Design**: Multi-enemy pressure, AI flanks/retreats/zoning, boss states/phases.
- A_5 **Traversal & Physicality**: Climb/vault/grapple, aerial control, weight/terrain (wind, slope, water), verticality.

4.2 Combat Turn Model (Categorical)

$$\text{CTM} \in \{\text{Turn-Based},\ \text{Real-Time},\ \text{RTwP},\ \text{Hybrid}\}.$$

This label is descriptive for filtering; it does not affect API directly.

5 Classification Thresholds

Pair S_{final} with API on a 2D chart to compare *role-play depth* vs. *action physicality*:

- **True RPG**: $S_{\text{final}} \geq 6.5$
- **Immersive-Sim RPG Hybrid**: $5.0 \leq S_{\text{final}} < 6.5$
- **Action-Adventure w/ RPG Mechanics**: $S_{\text{final}} < 5.0$

6 Decision Gates and Notes

6.1 Companion Validity Gate

A system is a *valid companion system* iff at least two of the following are true:

1. Player can opt-in/out of bringing companions (*optional*).
2. Player materially configures companion roles/skills/equipment (*build influence*).
3. Companions can leave or die due to player actions/relationships (*autonomy stakes*).

If the game *markets* companions but fails all three, set $C = 0$ and apply $\Delta_{\text{fake\_comp}}$.

6.2 No Companion Case

Games that do not attempt or market companion systems are not penalized. Use $S_{\text{raw,norm}}$.

6.3 Romance/Relationship Depth

Romance that meaningfully affects factions, loyalty, quest routing, or endings is scored within W and/or E. Cosmetic romance should not inflate scores.

7 Implementation Macros (LaTeX)

The following block defines scoring expressions for drop-in reuse:

$$S_{\text{raw}} = I + W + C + P + E + M, \tag{6}$$

$$S_{\text{raw,norm}} = \frac{I + W + P + E + M}{5} \times 6, \tag{7}$$

$$S_{\text{final}} = \begin{cases} (S_{\text{raw}} - 0.5) \times G, & \text{perf.} \\ S_{\text{raw}} \times G, & \text{valid} \\ S_{\text{raw,norm}} \times G, & \text{none} \end{cases} \tag{8}$$

$$\text{API} = A_1 + A_2 + A_3 + A_4 + A_5, \qquad A_k \in \{0, 1, 2\}. \tag{9}$$

8 Evaluation Tables

8.1 Pillar Scoring Template

Pillar	**Subcriterion A**	**Subcriterion B**	**Subcriterion C**
I Identity/Definition	Persona customization	Backstory control	Moldable protagonist
W World Reactivity	Dynamic NPCs	Faction standing	Persistent consequences
C Companion Agency	Optionality	Build influence	Autonomy stakes
P Playstyle Freedom	Approach variety	Build impact	Non-combat solutions
E Endings & Story	Branching endings	Variable epilogue	Reactive final act
M Emergence	Replay variability	Systemic emergence	Anecdotal richness

Table 1: Checklist template. Score each subcriterion $\in \{0, 1\}$; pillar score is average (optionally rounded to $\{0, 0.5, 1\}$).

Game	I	W	C	P	E	M	S_{raw}	G	Pen	S_{final}
Ex. A (no companions)	1	1	–	1	0.5	1	–	1.50	0	8.1
Ex. B (valid companions)	1	1	1	1	1	1	6.0	1.25	0	7.5
Ex. C (performative)	1	1	0	1	0.5	0.5	4.0	1.50	0.5	5.25

Table 2: Example scoring. S_r = raw score, G = gender multiplier, Pen = penalty, S_f = final score.

Game	A_1	A_2	A_3	A_4	A_5	API	CTM
Example A	2	2	1	1	2	8	Real-Time
Example B	0	1	1	1	0	3	Turn-Based
Example C	2	2	2	2	2	10	Real-Time

Table 3: API scoring (0–10) and categorical CTM label.

8.2 Game Scoring Sheet (Filled Example Format)

8.3 Action Physicality Index Sheet

9 Usage Notes

- Keep pillar scoring *binary* for clarity in market mapping; switch to *fractional* when doing deep-dive design audits.
- Always publish both S_{final} and API. Two games can tie on RPG depth yet feel radically different in action.
- For transparency, include a row noting whether the companion gate, penalty, or normalization was applied.

10 Appendix: One-Page Worksheet

Pillars (check ☐ = 1, leave blank = 0)

I Persona ☐ Backstory ☐ Moldable Protagonist ☐
W Dynamic NPCs ☐ Factions ☐ Persistent Consequences ☐
C Optionality ☐ Build Influence ☐ Autonomy Stakes ☐
P Approaches ☐ Build Impact ☐ Non-Combat ☐
E Branching ☐ Epilogue ☐ Reactive Final Act ☐
M Replay ☐ Emergence ☐ Anecdotal Richness ☐

Companions: Valid ☐ None ☐ Performative ☐ (apply $\Delta_{\text{fake\_comp}} = 0.5$)

Gender Multiplier G: 1.00 ☐ 1.25 ☐ 1.50 ☐

Compute:

$$S_{\text{raw}} = I + W + C + P + E + M \qquad S_{\text{raw,norm}} = \tfrac{I+W+P+E+M}{5} \times 6$$

$$S_{\text{final}} = \begin{cases} (S_{\text{raw}} - 0.5) \times G & \text{performative} \\ S_{\text{raw}} \times G & \text{valid} \\ S_{\text{raw,norm}} \times G & \text{none} \end{cases}$$

API (0–2 each)

A_1 A_2 A_3 A_4 A_5 $\qquad$ $\text{API} = A_1 + A_2 + A_3 + A_4 + A_5 \in [0, 10]$

CTM

Turn-Based ☐ Real-Time ☐ RTwP ☐ Hybrid ☐