RPG Analysis Paper

*Risus* & *Munchkin*

Nicole Maiorano

GAT 212-A

24 January 2012

**Introduction**

Many analog Role-Playing Games (RPGs) have extremely complicated systems. These systems are often a barrier of entry for new players unless they are extremely invested in the game already. However, there are several RPGs out there that do not have extremely complicated systems. A couple of those games are *Risus* and the games in the Munchkin series. Both of these games make it easy for non-RPG players to pick up and play while also keeping many of the basic elements of the RPG genre despite the parodical statements they make. While they have many things in common, they are also very different. This paper will explore the similarities and differences of these games.

**Characters**

Neither *Risus* nor *Munchkin* makes use of character sheets. *Risus* does not keep track of character levels, only character traits/skills that are known as Clichés. The rules of *Risus* define Clichés as “a shorthand which describe what a character knows how to do.” Players can choose any Cliché they can think of to define their characters, so long as the GM permits it. Once a character’s Clichés are chosen, the player may put ranks into them. Each player is given ten 6-sided dice; each one is considered a rank. No Cliché can have more than six ranks and less than one, however, when a character is considered “starting his/her career,” no Cliché should have more than four ranks. For some sample Clichés from the Risus rules, see figure 1 below. Along with the Clichés, characters are defined by short descriptions written by the players and the names the players give their characters. Once all players have defined their characters, the game can begin.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Barbarian | Beating things up, drinking, whoring, grunting, sweating |
| Computer Geek | Hacking, programming, fumbling over introductions |
| Kid | Being a sidekick to heroes, making friends with Giant Monsters |
| Poltergeist | Being dead, throwing things, scaring people |
| Other Kind of Vampire | Self-pity, erotic blood poetry, wearing black |

Figure 1

Cliché Examples from *Risus* Rules

*Munchkin* uses a much simpler system than *Risus*. The players only need to keep track of their levels. All players start as level one and have no class. When a player kills a monster, he/she levels up. Sometimes players draw cards that allow them to level without killing a monster, and other times players will draw class cards that give the player an ability (or two) that generally help the player’s progress. Each class is typically a well-known stereotype from whatever universe the set is parodying. For example, *The Good, the Bad, and the Munchkin* has class cards such as Cowboy, Indian, Outlaw, and Dude, all of which are typical stereotypes one would expect to find in a Western parody. See figure 2 below for an example class card. While classes are generally good things, defining what a character is best at, *Munchkin* also takes into the account that some classes have weaknesses as well. Every once in a while, a monster will need to be fought that gets bonuses against particular classes such as the level 2 monster the Jackalope that gets a +3 bonus against any player with an Indian class card equipped. Player characters in any *Munchkin* game can change at any time and is very rarely static.

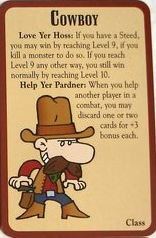


Figure 2

*The Good, the Bad, and the Munchkin* Cowboy Class Card

From the two different character models above, we can see that *Munchkin* and *Risus* are extremely different games. Where *Risus* keeps some of the traditional RPG ideas, such as character name and traits, *Munchkin* throws all convention out the window completely. Despite the major differences between the two character systems, they still have something in common that is very separate from most other RPGs: the lack of a character sheet. *Risus* and *Munchkin* are two very different games, yet they both have obvious similarities.

**Items**

Both *Risus* and *Munchkin* have systems for items that are very different from many other RPGs out there. In a traditional system, players are generally given an amount of currency mandated by the GM and allowed to buy any items they desire or deem necessary. Sometimes players are not given currency or allowed any items on their characters and the GM has created a campaign where the characters find important items or currency. The systems of *Risus* and *Munchkin* break away from the so-called traditional method of getting items, though neither game is extremely similar to the other, either.

*Risus* breaks away from the traditional item model in a very simple way. All characters are assumed to be equipped with all of the “Tools of His Trade.” This means that the items the characters are carrying depend entirely on what the characters Clichés are. For example, if a character has the Cliché “Cowboy,” that character has, according to the *Risus* rules, “leather chaps, [a] lasoo, a couple of pearl-handled six-guns and some chaw.” Players can expect their characters to have any items that are stereotypical of that Cliché. Most, if not all, of these stereotypical items are vital to the character being able to use the corresponding Cliché. Some items are more important to a Cliché than others, such as a sword for a Warrior or a computer/cyberdeck for a Netrunner. If a character looses one of their items, they may only use half the number of dice they are allowed to use (this is based upon the number of ranks in the Cliché). However, if a character happened to lose one of the more important items, the GM may decide that that item is a required item, and therefore, the character would not be able to use the corresponding Cliché at all. On the other hand, there is the possibility of obtaining special tools. Such tools are required to be found during the adventure, players cannot start with them. These items (magic wands, state-of-the-art technology, etc) may give bonus dice to Clichés that can utilize them. This is different than traditional RPG systems because the players don’t choose their items, but instead only choose their Clichés which dictate the items the character has.

Similar to *Risus*, *Munchkin* does not give the players the option to buy whatever items he/she wants. At the beginning of the game, all players are dealt a number of cards, some of which may or may not be usable items, such as headgear, armor, weapons, etc. There are several items throughout the game that either need a specific class or have class restrictions. The biggest difference between the *Munchkin* games and traditional RPGs is that all of the items in *Munchkin* are obtained randomly from a deck of cards. A player may draw a number of Treasure cards (which generally contains items) after killing a monster. In addition to killing monsters, players can obtain items by trading with other players. Players are able to change what items they have out in use with items they have in their hands at the start of their turns with no penalties. Since items are obtained so easily, they can also be used to gain levels. If a player discards items, he/she adds up the gold value of all of the items (given on the card) and gains a level for every 1000 gold’s worth of items he/she discards. *Munchkin* sticks to the idea of currency, but it uses it very differently than any “traditional” RPG system. The game also breaks away from the idea of buying particular items or getting items from the GM who probably decided the items based upon the adventure and/or the characters.

These two games are very similar, and yet, very different. Neither game allows players to really choose what items they begin with, nor do they allow the GM to decide what items the players have to start with. Both games allow players to obtain items throughout the course of play. Each game may use a different way of getting the items, but they are still similar in this way. Both would be incredibly different games were there no way to get items throughout the course of play. Additionally, both games have an element of randomness to the items. The randomness is very clear in *Munchkin* where items are drawn from a deck, but it is much less obvious in *Risus*. The randomness of *Risus* comes in with the interpretation of the Clichés. For instance, one player may think that a Musician needs a guitar while others may think that a Musician instead needs a harmonica. Therefore, since the Clichés can be interpreted differently for every game, there is a small element of randomness to the items that characters will have.

These games still handle items very differently despite their similarities. Where *Munchkin*’s items are practically entirely random chance, the items in *Risus* are determined by the players and the Clichés the characters have. *Munchkin* players have much less say in what items they get since they only get the items that are drawn from the deck. *Risus* players have a say in what items their characters have, but they are extremely limited in what items they can have based on their Clichés. Furthermore, items in *Munchkin* are not necessary to enter combat or perform actions. Instead, items in *Munchkin* are used as bonuses, adding strength to a player’s character in order to defeat more powerful monsters. *Risus* requires that a character have all the items considered part of its Cliché in order to use it to its full potential, even possibly even at all, in any given situation. Overall, the way items function in these two games is actually fairly similar.

**Combat**

Most RPGs handle combat in similar ways. There’s usually a roll to see if a character hits whatever it may be attacking and, provided it does it, another roll to see how much damage the hit does. Combat systems like this are generally complicated and may scare away the less dedicated and/or interested players. Both *Risus* and *Munchkin* stay away from these extremely complicated combat systems, making the games more accessible to wider audiences rather than just focusing on the typical RPG audience.

*Risus* has a system that is far less complicated than that of many “traditional” RPGs, yet it still has a level of complexity for anyone new to the RPG genre. According to the rules, combat is defined as “any contest in which opponents jockey for position, utilize attacks, bring defenses to bear, and try to wear down their foes to achieve victory. Either literally or metaphorically!” These conflicts may include such things as: arguments; dogfights; wizard’s duels; seduction attempts; and actual physical combat. During combat, characters are able to really put their Clichés to use.

When entering any sort of combat, the GM may declare which of a character’s Clichés are appropriate and which are inappropriate for the type of combat. For example, if a character has both the Warrior and Hairdresser Clichés and is entering physical combat, then the GM would probably say that Warrior is an appropriate Cliché to use and Hairdresser would be inappropriate to use in physical combat. However, the inappropriate Clichés may still be used to make an attack, but the player needs to describe/role-play the scenario in an *extremely* entertaining way. In addition to being extremely entertaining, the attack must be “plausible within the context of the combat, and the genre and tone that the GM has set for the game,” according to the *Risus* rules on using inappropriate Clichés during combat.

As for determining the outcome of combat, anyone involved decides which Cliché they wish to use. This is the same whether players are fighting each other or a Non-Player Character (NPC). Only one Cliché may be used per round during combat, but any number of Clichés may be used during the one combat. All attacks require the participants to roll a number of six-sided dice. The number is determined by what Cliché is being used and the number of ranks put into that Cliché—however many ranks a Cliché has is the number of six-sided dice rolled. Both rolls are added up and the lowest total is the loser for that round. The loser must remove one die from the Cliché that was used in that round of combat for the remainder of the fight. If a character has chosen to use an inappropriate Cliché during a fight and the inappropriate Cliché wins the round, the loser must remove three dice instead of one from his/her Cliché. However, if the inappropriate Cliché loses, only one die is lost. If a character has any Cliché worn down to zero dice during combat, then he has lost that fight. At the end of combat, all lost dice are regained at a rate determined by the GM.

The loss of dice from the loser’s Cliché creates a feedback loop in which the winner is able to continue to win and the loser will continue to lose. This loop is used to keep combat at a fairly quick pace instead of allowing it to drag on forever, especially if a Cliché has the maximum number of ranks allowed (which is typically six, but may be altered by the GM if desired).

During combat, players as well as NPCs are able to make teams. For instance, a swarm of spiders is a team comprised of all NPCs/enemies. Players are allowed to form teams with other players or with NPC allies. When the team is comprised purely of enemies, and is probably run by the GM, it’s mostly for ease of play. The GM will only need to use one set of dice instead of 700 in order to attack with a swarm. The swarm would be the same as a single foe, mechanically, but it would have more dice to attack with. Such a team is called a “Grunt-Squad.” A Grunt-Squad is able to have any level of Cliché that the GM feels is acceptable, as stated in the rules of *Risus*. Until they are defeated, the Grunt-Squad will stay together as a team. Teams that include players function very differently. A Team Leader must be declared, usually being decided by whichever character has the highest ranking Cliché in the team. If there is a tie, then the title must be designated to one character. When fighting, every character on the team rolls dice. However, only the Team Leader’s dice all count. All other members only contribute any sixes they rolled and other team members who don’t roll anything above a five do not contribute anything to the total for that round. All Clichés being used must be equal in appropriateness or inappropriateness. If the team loses, a single member of the team loses a die (or three if the team was defeated with an inappropriate Cliché). If a team member volunteers to take the “damage” then he/she loses twice as many dice, but the Team Leader is allowed to roll twice as many dice during the next round. If no one volunteers, then everyone in the team rolls the Cliché they are using for combat and the lowest roller loses the normal amount of dice. A team may decide to disband at any time during combat, but if they do, then everyone loses one die from the Cliché they were each using as if it were “damage.” If the Team Leader leaves the team for any reason (dropping out or dice reduced to zero) every member of the team takes one die of “damage” because the team has been disbanded without a leader. The team may immediately reform with a new leader. If the team was disbanded due to the last leader volunteering to take the “damage,” then the new leader (should the team decide to reform) will be able to roll twice as many dice during the first round of combat with the new team.

During play, conflicts may arise that will not be considered to be combat. These are conflicts that end quickly, such as a pistol-duel. If there is no “’wearing down of the foe’ and no jockeying for position” then it isn’t actual combat, according to the *Risus* rules. These short encounters are settled with a single dice roll using Clichés in the same way as combat. The player/character with the highest roll wins the conflict and the game continues.

There will also be times during a game when characters may not have Clichés that work for a given situation. In the case that only one player or less may participate, all players are given two free dice to play with. If a player already has a Cliché that works for the situation, he/she still gets the bonus dice and may add them to the relevant Cliché. However, if a player does not have a Cliché that is relevant, he/she may adopt one for the duration of the conflict. This may happen either during a combat or during a smaller conflict, but this rule is really there to ensure that all players are able to participate and have fun.

Overall, *Risus* uses a system that is complicated to those who have never really played an RPG before, but it is very simple when compared to that of a traditional RPG. It remains faithful to the use of dice, though it only uses the most common type of die—the six-sided die. This choice was made to make the game appear more accessible to those wary of the many different types of dice used in other RPGs (like *Dungeons and Dragons* and *Pathfinder*). At the same time, it also makes it so that the probability of rolls stays within the confines of one to six six-sided dice, in which case, it becomes a little easier to predict the outcome of a roll. Despite the relative simplicity of *Risus*, it still has a very complicated combat system, especially when compared to a game like *Munchkin*.

*Munchkin* takes combat and simplifies it to a point where it no longer resembles an RPG combat system. On a player’s turn, he/she is required to flip over the top card from the Door deck. This action is called “Kicking Open the Door.” If the card is not a monster, the player has a few options: either draw a card from the Door deck to put in his/her hand; to play a monster from his/her hand; or to pass the remainder of his/her turn. However, if the first card turned over is a monster, the player must enter combat. Combat is resolved by comparing numbers—the monster’s combat strength versus the player’s. Combat strength is determined by taking the player’s or monster’s level and adding all modifiers (positive and negative, many of which will be items for players) to it to get a total. See figure 3 below for an example of a monster card. If the monster’s combat strength is greater than or equal to the player’s, the player loses and must run away. If the player’s combat strength is higher than the monster’s, then the monster is defeated and the player gains a level (or two depending upon the monster—all bonuses are stated on the monster card) and the number of Treasures listed on the card.



Figure 3

*The Good, the Bad, and the Munchkin* Monster Card

During combat, a player may not change any of his/her equipped items. The only cards that can be played while in combat are “one-shot” items. These are items that state “Usable only once” on the card and must be discarded after use. Such cards can also include cards that will modify the monster’s combat strength or cards that will defeat a monster without killing. However, cards that get rid of a monster without killing do not allow the player to gain a level from the win and may not allow him/her to get the treasure, either. Of course, other players may also play cards to stop the player in combat from progressing. This may include “wandering monsters” or traps as well as cards that might boost the monster’s combat strength score. If an opponent adds a second monster to the fight, the player in combat must be able to win against the monsters’ combined combat strengths. A player may not fight one and run from the other, but may get rid of one of the monsters if he/she has a card in his/her hand that will get rid of a monster without killing it. In the case that a player does that such a card, if he/she then runs away from the second monster, he/she does not get any treasure.

If a player cannot defeat a monster on his/her own, he/she can ask other players for help. A maximum of one player may help another to defeat a monster. The helper’s total combat strength is added to the player’s total combat strength. That total combat strength is then compared to that of the monster (or monsters). Even if someone decides to help the player, anyone else may continue to play cards to make it harder (or impossible) for the player and his/her helper to win the fight. In the situation where no one is willing to help, a player may choose to bribe others to try to get them to help out.

There will be times when a player will just not be able to defeat a monster and will be forced to run away. If the player runs away, he/she does not receive any levels or Treasures and his/her turn is over after the attempt to run away. If the player has a helper and they still cannot defeat the monster, they must both run away separately. To attempt to run away, the player must roll the die. If the roll is a five or better, then the attempt is successful. Usually, if the attempt to run away is successful, bad stuff doesn’t happen, but all monster cards should be read since some monsters do bad stuff even when the player runs away successfully. All monsters, though, do bad stuff if the attempt is a failure. If a player is running away from multiple monsters, he/she must roll to run away from each monster separately. It is possible for more than one monster to do bad stuff to a player. It is also possible for the helper to be effected by the bad stuff if he/she gets caught. Once the combat has been resolved, either by running away or by killing the monster (or monsters), the monster cards are discarded.

By only making it possible to successfully run away on a five or better, it makes it feel like the roll is a lot more important. There is a two in six chance that running away will be successful. This makes it more likely that a player attempting to run away will be caught by the monster, which allows the act of rolling a die feel much more like actually running away from something you simply cannot fight.

It is possible for a player’s character to be killed in *Munchkin*. If this happens, the player loses all of his/her items. However, he/she keeps any Class or Race cards and remains the same level. He/she is also still affected by any trap cards that were affecting him/her when he/she died. All cards that were in the player’s hand are laid out with all items he/she had in play. All other players may choose one items from these cards. If there are any cards left after all other players have taken one, they are discarded. If a player is “Dead,” he/she may not retrieve cards for any reason and cannot level up. When the next player begins his/her turn, the player’s new character takes effect and he/she may help others in combat, however, he/she will not have any cards. When it becomes his/her turn again, he/she draws four cards from each deck and may play any cards he/she wishes before continuing with his/her turn as normal.

The combat system of *Munchkin* is extremely simple, especially when compared to that of *Dungeons and Dragons* or even Risus. This simplicity allows for a much wider appeal than that of other RPGs that don’t simplify the systems down near the limit of still being an RPG. It is much less of a mathematically based system than *Dungeons and Dragons*. Encounters are based more upon deck random, which makes it easier to predict what cards will be drawn later in the game—provided the make-up of the deck is known by players (or whomever may be watching the drawing of cards). Cards are less scary and significantly less “geeky” than a bunch of different types of dice, making *Munchkin* a game that is accessible by audiences that are hesitant about playing traditional RPGs.

Simply from the descriptions above, it is clear that *Risus* and *Munchkin* are very different when considering their combat systems. *Risus* uses a system that is significantly based upon the ability to role-play the scenario. At the same time, the use of dice for combat in *Risus* is extremely important. Players are required to roll a number of dice and then compare their rolls. *Munchkin*, on the other hand, relies upon the player drawing a card and then simply comparing numbers that are laid out in front of them. *Risus* also allows players to enter combat against one another where *Munchkin* only allows players to directly fight monsters, though other players are allowed to interfere with the fight (whether it’s helping or hindering is up to the interfering player). The combat in *Risus* takes longer to resolve than the combat in *Munchkin*, but it also has a wider spread of possibilities of outcomes through the use of one to six dice. *Risus* also allows players to actually wear down their enemies through the attrition of dice as a result of losing a roll during combat. This gives the feeling of actual combat where one is whittling away at the opponent’s health or stamina, etc. whereas *Munchkin* only has a quick measure of strength. These two very different combat systems do, however, have something in common: the dice they use. Both games stick to the classic six-sided dice, which makes each game seem a little less scary to those who don’t typically play RPGs. Aside from the accessibility of the six-sided dice, the dice also allow for a fairly even and predictable spread of numbers when rolling the dice. Overall, these games treat combat in very different ways, yet both remain highly simplistic.

**Parody**

Both *Risus* and *Munchkin* are games that parody traditional RPGs. These games were intended to be comedic in nature. *Risus* is “designed to provide an ‘RPG Lite’” experience either for new players or for a low key night where players don’t want to put too much brain power to use. Originally, *Risus* was called *GUCS: The Generic Universal Comedy System* as a parody of *GURPS* and is still described in the rules as a “Universal Comedy System.” The parodic nature of the game is evident in the character creation system where players choose Clichés as traits. These Clichés are based heavily on stereotypes from traditional RPGs, but also from any other known stereotypes. Players are encouraged to use Clichés such as Hairdresser, Latin Lover, and William Shatner, among others as well as to make their characters in a twenty second period of time. Even the name of the game describes its joking nature. Risus is Latin for laughter, though it seems unlikely that the majority of the audience would be aware of this. Another area where the comedic nature of the game is obvious is in the use of inappropriate Clichés during combat—players are required to be able to describe the “attack” in a “**really, really, really entertaining manner**.” Overall, the game is intended to be hilarious and fun to play, causing it to fall under the category of parody.

*Munchkin* is intended to be humorous in many of the same ways that *Risus* is. It is, like *Risus*, a game that parodies traditional RPGs. This parodic nature is obvious in the stereotypical Classes and Races that are available throughout the game sets, of which there are many. Along with these hilarious stereotypes and clichés, the name of the game is also intended to be comedic. Munchkin is a term used in gaming to describe a player of a non-competitive game, typically RPGs, who plays in an extremely competitive way. Such players play for themselves, often making the game less fun for those who are actually trying to play cooperatively. The game is actually a game perfect for gamers like these, though. They play to “win,” and *Munchkin* is, underneath it all, a competitive game that uses RPGs as a basis for its systems and theme. Throughout the rules, the writer/designers make several jokes, adding to the comedic nature of the game. Another important part of the comedy is the items and monsters. They are all given names that are puns or just hilarious in general, and they really add to the parody of the game. All parts of the *Munchkin* games really add to the comedy of the game, causing it to easily fall into the parody category.

Parody is one area where *Risus* and *The Good, the Bad, and the Munchkin* are really similar. They both make fun of stereotypes and clichés while not forcing the players to go too much into the world of the traditional RPG. These games both focus more on the player having fun than on systems and details. Both games are RPGs for people who don’t particularly like RPGs. This category is the area where the two games really come together to reach the same goal of entertaining the players.

**Conclusion**

*Risus* and *The Good, the Bad, and the Munchkin* are both very different and very similar games. Both games are intended to be comedic in nature and both poke fun at stereotypes and clichés in their own ways. However, they each have their own approach to combat. While each tries to be simple in the way they handle combat, they each have intricacies that could be simpler. Both games break away from the typical way of handling items, each using a separate method, however, both keep the item systems very simple and easy to understand. Character creation in each game is extremely simple, though each takes a very different road to get to that simplicity. Overall these games are not extremely similar mechanically, but they both attempt to give players very similar experiences.

**Comparison Chart**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | ***Risus*** | ***Munchkin*** |
| **Characters** | No character sheet; Clichés as traits; Charcter name & description; No level progression | No character sheet; stereotypes for classes & races; level progression |
| **Items** | Character start with necessary items; cannot use Cliché to full potential if missing any vital item; may obtain magic items during adventure | Character starts with random items; obtains items by killing monsters; items provide bonus to combat strength |
| **Combat** | Uses only six-sided dice; may be between players or between player & NPCs; Teams may be formed; wearing down of enemy, attrition of usable dice; Cliché against Cliché | Uses only a six-sided die; only between player and NPC monster; allows other players to interfere (help or hinder); compares combat strength (level + all modifiers); may attempt to run away from fight |
| **Parody** | “RPG lite”; meant to be comedic; focuses more on players having fun than on systems | RPG without the Role-Playing; meant to be comedic; focuses more on players having fun than on systems |

**References**

*Risus: The Anything RPG*, S. John Ross, ©S. John Ross

*The Good, the Bad, and the Munchkin*, Steve Jackson, ©Steve Jackson Games Incorporated

Wikipedia.com

* *Munchkin* article -- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Munchkin\_%28card\_game%29
* “munchkin” article -- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Munchkin\_%28role-playing\_games%29
* *Risus* article -- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Risus