Conference Paper

Gamification of Violence in Analog (Tabletop) Thematic Games: Splices, Wrinkles, and Translation Gaps

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Abstract

Modern tabletop (analog) games are riding a wave of popularity being a part of ``resisting the digital'' trend. First of all, imaginary worlds of media franchises become represented in tabletop games with their specific ways of creating interactive narrative and gaming algorithms. Secondly, tabletop games address complicated issues and concepts of today's world. The authors aim to examine specific ways of representing violence in tabletop games, with plots already employed by pieces of different types of media. The authors believe that the hybrid nature of modern tabletop (analog) games involves a hybrid methodology, including phenomenology, hermeneutics, procedural rhetoric, the ideas of R.Kayua, M.Wolf, L.Manovich. The concept of violence is analyzed with reference to V. Podoroga, A. Usmanova, S. Zizek, V. Benjamin. The result of the study is a comprehensive description of the representation of violence in board-themed games. The authors argue that violence is represented in tabletop games at several levels and in different forms: narrative violence, visual violence, symbolic violence, etc. The study indirectly confirms the non-autonomy of the game process, the dependence of the game narrative on the experience of acquaintance with the "imaginary world."

Keywords: media theory, game studies, boardgames, tabletop games, violence

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1. Introduction

The place of games in the world of art and aesthetics raises many questions. On the one hand, media theory and philosophy recognize games as their study subject and admit the important role of gaming skills in the structure of post-literacy. On the other hand, games still develop on the sidelines of art. They certainly are cultural artifacts, or even ``culturally conditioned artifacts'', as Hans-Joachim Backe puts it [1]. And that makes games difficult to study: cultural conditioning implies the analysis of subtexts and allusions. Whereas in new media theory gaming narrative is reduced to algorithm (L. Manovich), plot is discredited, and the hierarchy of all the components is dismantled by database. Most analysts prefer describing game-related social phenomena instead.

And when the ``cultural artifacts'' are addressed, their specific visual and software solutions tend to be in the spotlight. Moreover, the division between digital and analog phenomena had an impact on games. The design of the digital ones is analyzed, but the situation with analog or tabletop games is more complicated. The ``picture'' is made complete in one's imagination and analyzed by its undertones and references. And yet, analog games are actively employing popular plots and get integrated into media franchises. Tabletop game industry takes account of current trends and represents sensitive subjects and issues. A tabletop game may not only be based on fantasy fiction, but also inspired by an environmental problem, historical event, political conflict, interdisciplinary scientific matter, or in our case, violence.

2. Materials

The study objects include tabletop games based on a story (plot, narrative), referring to an artistically designed universe (historical, sci-fi, fantasy, realistic, etc.) and structured with a complex system of rules and roles. Those games are referred to as ``thematic'' on boardgamegeek.com website. The choice stems from the fact that such games are similar to cinema and fiction, which makes the comparison procedure possible. Being associated with media franchises, thematic games open another window into imaginary worlds, in the words of Mark J.P. Wolf [2, 392]. Imaginary worlds or fictional universes unfold in written rules, elements of game mechanics (mostly card games), meeples or character figures. Text becomes both constitutive and performative, which requires players to use their imagination, making an effort to create a world model, whether economic, political, legal, criminal, environmental, etc. The games impose algorithms, typology and, in a sense, frames on social structures. T. Donovan [3, 227-238], developing similar ideas, describes some games as passing a verdict on the mankind.

The subject matter optics that we turn to is violence as a tool of tabletop games, its discursive capacity and translation problems. The materials for study include ``Betrayal at House on the Hill'', ``Eldritch Horror'', ``Elder Sign'', ``Archam Horror'', ``Dead of Winter'', ``This War of Mine''.

3. Methods and Methodology

The research included analysis of concepts, hypotheses and reflections considering the study subject and object, interview of gamers, digital ethnography of certain gamers'

forms, analysis and interpretation of the acquired data, extrapolation of certain description techniques and methods to the obtained material.

Since there is no traditional scientific discourse on the subject of tabletop games yet, it should be decided which **categories** will be used to describe violence representation in tabletop games. Structured logic of *interface* is borrowed from ``The Language of New Media'' [4]. Both the L. Manovich's work and J. Murray's ``Hamlet on the Holodeck'' [5] will provide rationale for transforming narrative into *algorithm*. Perceiving thematic tabletop games as ``parts of fantasy franchises'' is supported by M. J. Wolf's arguments.

Our understanding of violence used for the task at hand is based on M. Yampolsky's thought. ``Violence emerges `on the horizon' along with the ability to conceptualize, to make rules and to break them, to punish violations'', etc. [6, 60]. Thus, it is a social action aimed at a person (or in our case, a character) against their will. Besides that, we give serious consideration to the tradition of understanding violence as a tool of repression that underlies culture. Based on A. Usmanova's view of the visual as violence, we draw analogies to games and specify two modes of interpretation: firstly, we consider violence as a violent action of one character towards another; secondly, as a set of coercion techniques: to a certain action in a game, to making a choice, including choosing to act violently [7].

The set of **methodological approaches** is a hybrid, but this is caused by the hybrid nature of the object, lack of its aesthetic autonomy (``window into an imaginary world''), controversial aesthetic and ontological status, and discursive uncertainty of the theory. Games can be described by answering the question of how things work (interface). For that purpose we address the elements of intermedia analysis, procedural rhetoric, narrative analysis, bearing in mind that, strictly speaking, according to L. Manovich game narrative is algorithm. Referring to game as act of imagination and ``window into an imaginary world'' requires the use of traditional phenomenological and hermeneutic methods. Thus, we can answer the question of how and why people play in their imagination.

The specific nature of the subject also requires **methodological clarifications:**

First of all, thematic games draw the interest of researchers due to their similarity to both visual arts (cinema, photography) and literature. Their connection with literature is stronger than that of videogames, since mediaphobes don't blame tabletop games for killing imagination. A player uses ``reader's imagination'' to see the move of a game token as a meaningful game action. That allows us to conceptualize the problem of violence as symbolic violence (S. Žižek), to speak of violence narrative, of violence visualization, to use the theories of violence that have been applied to literature before,

to look at games as violence formalization, symbolization, representation, with reference to the theories of W. Benjamin, H. Arendt, S. Žižek, V. Podoroga, A. Usmanova, A. Gornykh.

Secondly, relying on the rule book is important. It brings together a world order, or a state system, as well as the logic of characters' development and actions. Such logic presents a player with goals, primary objectives and plot basis. It allows us to speak of violence not within game narrative, but rather within the game itself, enabling us to actualize the concept of game (Caillois et al.). That concept incorporates symbolic violence into game violence, which is characterized by sophisticated relationships with the world.

Finally, a tabletop game is a complex hybrid form of culture and media. It is heavily affected by the videogame industry: in some cases, dedicated mobile apps are used to define the way the plot unfolds, like in ``Archam Horror'' or the second edition of ``Mansions of Madness'', for instance. Besides, some game developers increase the complexity of the actual ``tabletop'' game mechanics of a player's interaction with the world: while in Lovecraft inspired ``Mansions of Madness'' players interact with items, monsters and each other, ``Eldritch Horror'' introduces ``reckoning'', church, police, and mafia.

4. Study Description

The connections between a piece of art and violence have been mentioned by W. Benjamin, H. Arendt, S. Žižek, G. Agamben, V. Podoroga, M. Yampolsky. The position of the authors of this research is based on the assumption that such connections persist when media franchises are considered instead. The authors have described certain ways violence can be represented in thematic tabletop games. Some of the ways were inherited from the related pieces of art (books, movies, TV series), while others are specific to games. To classify those ways, the authors turned to both classic and modern works on game studies by J. Huizinga, R. Caillois, I. Bogost, J. Juul, J. Murray. Highlighting the differences between tabletop games and videogames was based on the works by T. Donovan, A. Vetushinsky, A. Muzhdaba. The hypothesis was tested by checking the theoretical results and generalizations against first-hand experience shared by gamers on blogs, social networks, and thematic websites (tesera.ru, boardgamegeek.com).

5. Results and Discussion

The authors suppose that violence representation in tabletop games can be considered at three levels:

First level deals with the ``World -- Players -- Game'' interrelatedness which falls into three pair connections that should be properly described before integration:

1) *Game --- World.* Real world violence is a condition of game violence. Taking the form of ``objective'' violence (S. Žižek) [6, 8] and ``habitual'' violence (V. Podoroga) [9, 189], not only does it become a background for individual and social life, but it also becomes a means of this (de)socializing consolidation in the form of norms, rules, and traditions. The point is, we do not consider that violence. ``Subjective violence'' (S. Žižek) is what we usually call violence. That is excessive aggressive actions as compared with the usual ``habitual'' violence background. As such, it does not become a part of the game. However, we tend to share the ideologically supported perception of excessive aggression. Habitual violence and our idea of excessive aggression ``come into play'' when it begins, turning from ``being-in-itself'' to ``being-for-players'', becoming a means of pleasure, a study object, a behavior algorithm or a subject of free choice. They are included as a set of codes, defining the death of the author, according to Barthes.

2) *Player --- Game.* Let's ask ourselves a childish question: why do we play? And what does the pleasure of violence mean for us? Let's turn to Roger Caillois' classification, where he matches types of games with the corresponding fundamental attitude that would define a game's goal, its meaning, emotional background and, consequently, although just partially, the type of violence specific for the game. According to R. Caillois, ``There are only four types of such attitudes: striving to win a proper competition relying only on one's personal merits (agon); giving up one's free will and passively, anxiously awaiting the judgement of fate (alea); willing to try on someone else's identity (mimicry); pursuit of vertigo (ilinx) [10, 76].

We will not adhere to Caillois's thought precisely, but will rather suggest an interpretation. Each of those attitudes has its specific transition to distortion, overstepping the bounds of reason and harmony. For agonal games focusing on victory, the corresponding distortions are rudeness, selfishness, and, possibly, sadism. For aleatory games that teach to submit to fate, such distortions are fatalism, superstition and, possibly, masochism. Distorted mimetic attitude turns into loss of identity, and distorted pursuit of vertigo turns into drug addiction.

As it was described above, thematic games are complex phenomena where one or more of the aforementioned attitudes and corresponding manifestations of violence

may play an important role, to varying degrees. Some games may directly contradict theoretical approaches. For instance, Lovecraft inspired ``Eldritch Horror'' and ``Archam Horror'' combines mimetic and aleatory attitudes, despite being considered fundamentally incompatible by Caillois himself. Those games are based on a unanimously accepted system of rules that is relevant to the game world (mimicking), and in which players' actions to achieve their goals (agonal component) depend on chance. That is why tabletop games can be considered mixed type games capable of inciting different kinds of attitudes and combinations thereof. Then, again, much depends on a reader's previous experience. Immersion in the universe of Lovecraft and his followers contributes to ``getting into'' a character.

Mimetic attitude is very important for the type of games in question. In a narrative-defined world we are almost always characters. Who are we mimicking? There are two options. The *first* one is to play a character, which would correspond to mimicry enacted only in one's imagination. The limits to this are set by the gaming space itself (table, board) becoming the representation space for an imaginary character, while in ``real'' mimicry a character is represented by a player's body. The *second* option is to play with a character, operating it like a puppet or a doll. Mimicry is corporal, it is a theater. Operating is supracorporal, and it is a puppet theater.

3) *Players -- World*. Both types of imitation are secondary in relation to the first mimesis which initiates a game and halts the ``normal'' world. Such a game is not about ``me wanting to be someone else'', since I want to stay myself. On the contrary, I want the world to be different, allowing me, the real Me, to finally become myself. We do not emulate anyone in particular, but by our coordinated actions we emulate the world initiated by the game.

Switching to a game ``negates'' the significance of the ``normal'' world rules. Without cancelling or denying them, it just halts them, which is similar to a reader's immersion into imaginary worlds. Seeing it as mere escapism (although it cannot be denied) leads to missing something important. The important point is that such suspending of the real world can be understood as something similar to ``divine violence'' described by W. Benjamin. That is, not as leaving it, but as an inactive demand for it to change relative to the ideal. According to Caillois' concepts, any game implies setting behavior examples that ideally combine order and freedom: ``Models suggested by games are attempts to foresee the orderly world that should replace natural anarchy'' [10, 37]. It means that the first mimesis initiating a game is emulating the ideal order. H. Gadamer interprets the category of mimesis in the same way [11, 242]. But it also means that the one who plays is not satisfied with the way he lives, displeased with the habitual conduct patterns, he

is a potential rebel that arouses suspicion -- that is the way society responds to new types of in-game behavior.

«World -- Players -- Game». It can be assumed that once a game has started, it pauses the world ruled by unlawfulness and chaos, in a metaphysical sense mimetically reproducing the Creation myth, the myth of Law and Order, and eventual victory of animal over human; while in socio-political sense it restores the myth of social contract, of the transition from pre-political war of all against all to meaningful political and social establishments. That would be great, but why play submission? Why experience, albeit through a character, something that makes us feel the violence of the system?

Taking into account the cruelty of rules systems and of the in-game world itself, as well as the masochistic nature of aleatory element in games, gaming practice could be associated with a sort of an emotional distortion, and to draw parallels between the possibility of stopping a game and a safe word in BDSM games. But if the analogy is flipped, BDSM games can be perceived as a demand that the world invents its safe word for violence, and that experiencing systemic violence in a tabletop game is a demand that the system outside the game gets elaborately rebuilt.

Second level covers the relationships between players (and not their characters). The first mimetic action, that is starting the game, is preceded by the decision negotiated by players that act as a society imbued with power. The decision is to accept the rules and act differently than in the ``normal'' life. According to H. Arendt, it is a manifestation of nonviolent power that ``corresponds to the human ability not merely to act, but to act in coordination'' [12, 50]. But along with the rules comes the possibility that they can be broken, as well as the ghost of violence as punishment for breaking the rules.

A game makes one follow the rules of its world, submit to the power of ``the law as something external, forced, turning a human into a tool'' [12, 59]. But we submit to this power voluntarily, and in the case of tabletop games, that is especially obvious. T. Donovan also draws attention to this point, comparing tabletop games with videogames: ``Tabletop games have transparent rules, they are open for all the players to see, and not woven deeply into inaccessible software code'' [3, 238]. Of course, every game requires following its rules consciously and voluntarily, ``since a game is primarily supported by the willingness to play, that is, by commitment to follow the rules'' [10, 35]. Following the rules in sports is ensured by referees, in gambling -- by the casino, in computer games -- by the game itself, but in tabletop games players themselves should ensure following the rules, staying within the boundaries. The possibility of cheating (turning dice, for instance) makes such state of affairs provocative. But it also emphasizes the voluntary nature of accepting the rules. And what happens in case of cheating? ``Ignoring the

rules, he returned to the natural state and opened doors for any misconduct, tricks, and fouls, avoiding which was exactly the point of the conventions agreed upon'' [10, 36]. Play by the rules if you want to be a human, and not an animal. Breaking such conventions may become the cause for real life violence happening ``outside the game'' but relating to it.

Third level relates to various and intertwined violence phenomena inside the game itself. All of them, one way or the other, are based on the in-game world and the Rule book that are nonviolent as such, being empowered by players' free choice.

1) *Violence of the plot.* A plot often exploits violence guiding players' actions and the game itself. Something is happening... And that can't be good. The logic of an inevitable disaster turns out to work as a great instrument for entertainment and structuring violence in accordance with the plot.

The game ``Dead of Winter'' based on ``The Walking Dead'' constructs its plot employing the collapsed state situation. Lack of resources, imminent death, the need to constantly stay on high alert, and the suspicion atmosphere present violence as a natural tool not so much to gain power, but rather, to survive. Characters' qualities imply checking whether the means match the ends, which often ends badly for the characters. Crossroad mechanics might trigger uncontrollable reactions such as depression, resentment, paranoia, etc.

The plot of ``This War of Mine'' game has a similar system logic (there is a videogame as well). The in-game world looks like an aftermath of certain historical events in a besieged city. Players try to survive in the situation of a war conflict, collapsed state administration, and failure of all the life-support systems. The logic of siege makes them trade with the enemy soldiers, go looking for water armed with an axe, raid stores, garages, and hospitals, shoot flickering curtains. One after another the characters get depressed, go insane, and leave their shelter.

In the aforementioned games such as «Eldritch horror», «Elder sign», and «Archam Horror» that are inspired by ``The Myth of Cthulhu'', the plot takes players to the potential situation of the ``Ancient Evil'' revival, which would most likely lead to the end of the world. The characters are put at a disadvantage: every move is strengthening the enemy and potentially weakening the resistance. Death, insanity, disease, portals bringing another batch of enemies in, advantages turning out to be disadvantages -- all these stem from the disaster logic itself.

2) *Mythical violence.* It is the kind of violence that is defined by the plot and contributes to its rhythmic arrangement. That is what a game uses to oppose characters at every move. It serves as a necessary challenge requiring a response. We might not like what

a game does to us, at that is fine, since it is in the nature of mythical violence to be perceived as normal even being recognized as violence. In a game based on ``A Song of Ice and Fire'' that is formalizing multifaceted nature and versatility of the means used to fight for power, every hierarchy of power reasserts itself from time to time with taxes, tolls, and assignments. In ``Charterstone'' the will of the forever king works that way, and ``Feudum'' forces to fight a war. In ``Eldritch Horror'', the rhythm of the game is set by a special ``Mythos Phase'' that defines opening new portals with monsters, making The Ancient Ones come sooner (or later), or deterioration of characters' condition.

3) *Subjective and intersubjective*. It refers to agonal attitude. It exists between characters, as well as between a character and the game. There is also an element of mimesis: enjoying the imagined scenes of violence.

At this level, it is worth considering the tension between ``game'' and ``play'', between the rules setting formal boundaries and in-game actions. ``Game'' programs the system's violence, presenting it as a natural consequence of the myth. As for the in-game actions (``play''), choice is offered to a player (between good and bad, violence and nonviolence). There are role playing games that involve a game master (DnD). The one who plays for the dark side, in ``Mansions of Madness'', for instance, plays the part of pure evil, recognizing its actions as driven by human logic. Provided with various tools of violence and driven by the will to win, a player empowers evil by acting outside the boundaries of system algorithm. A game does not confront a player with a moral choice, only the choice of tools. The in-game behavior of a game master can be reduced to two models defined by the goals: ``anything for the win'' and ``anything for the process'' (narrative aesthetics). The one facing a moral choice is a character confronting the game or game master while trying to reach game's objectives. Mechanics are different, the most popular ones are: crises, crossroads, encounters. For some, it is a choice of their strategy of conduct (according to the character's traits), for others -- agonal interest (anything for the win), and sometimes empathy plays its role as well.

4) *Territorial violence*. The games in question in most cases remain spatial games. A game is limited by its map (static or dynamic). Player's actions are represented by moving characters on a real map, which may be not only a condition, but an actor of the in-game world. A map plays against you, a map plays for you. It may be false or may lead to the true one, and may consist of alternating locations (like in ``Elder Sign''). It seems that this game element is the most archaic - seizure of territory, movement, suffering, adventure.

A map can also indicate a position in time. Time points in ``T.I.M.E Stories'', despair tokens in ``Dead of Winter'' and ``Eldritch Horror'' limit the range of possible game

actions: in ``T.I.M.E Stories'' the loading number defines game duration, which affects the score in case of victory, and in ``Elder Sign'' time speed defines the way a monster can be fought.

5) *Aleatory violence.* Aleatory component in role playing games is very strong. Feeling that nothing depends on you, the world is hostile, and fate is playing against you combined with a frankly oppressing setting may be the only result of the game, and that is normal. Let's remember that, according to a Caillois' concept, aleatory attitude is associated with giving up one's free will and willing to submit to the power of Fate. It can be assumed that, in a sense, we want the sacred. The sacred is meaningful, but uncontrolled. It is reasonable, but unpredictable. It's as if the world deprived of mythology wants to reclaim it. Our world is empty, flat, small, and valueless. Compared to it, a game world is abundant, vertical, big, and priceless. Controlled resanctification in a game world does not mean striving to bring the archaic back to reality. It just reminds us over and over again of our ability to launch the process of creating meaningful worlds.

6) *Symbolic violence.* This is the level of visual and textual representation of the afore-mentioned types of game violence. Accepting our fate, we accept the representation, world model, and *modus operandi* determined by the world model. Habitual perception of violence, conditioned by movies, TV series, comics, and videogames, builds clichés for in-game actions. The variety of possible images of an orc, a zombie, or a suspicious tough guy in an alleyway is not limitless, but already predefined by P. Jackson, the authors of ``The Walking Dead'', etc. And the possible responses to such encounters are also based on the moves already played before. Game elements refer to familiar visual imaging, and in that sense a player is not free from the mass cultural context.

6. Conclusion

The results indicate that, due to it specific form, hybrid nature and genetic relationship with other types of media, a tabletop game applies various levels of control and coercion to the player through avatars. In a broader sense, a game as a cultural phenomenon implements symbolic coercion. Compared to the reader, the player has more possibilities to influence the state of affairs, not just empathizing, but making choices, although limited by the rules and algorithms. In doing so, the player voluntarily and willingly accepts this in-game coercion, limitation, control, etc. It is similar to literary coercion: physical violence, repressions, brutality of the system and hard moral choices are narrated; pictures and images are not externalized. A game reproduces pain, death, fear, apocalyptic horror, violence itself -- all for the sake of enjoyment. While Podoroga's

camera introduces the possibility to peek, creates the panopticon effect, a game allows one to get into another world, becoming a part of it. A tabletop game, however, has no externalized imagination (A. Vetushinsky). As a ``window to a fictional universe'', it is rendered in the player's imagination, based on images and allusions borrowed from different pieces of art.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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