

The Interplay of Two Worlds in Blood Bowl: Implications for Hybrid Board Game Design

Ville Kankainen
University of Tampere
Tampere, Finland
ville.kankainen@uta.fi

ABSTRACT

Digital board games, along with hybrid board games, that combine physical and digital elements have grown in success recently. This interview study compares the experiences of playing a material board game and digital adaptations of it. Overall, the material and digital play were experienced to be different aspects of the same hobby – thus being parts of a wider pastime. The results provide insight into different aspects that players appreciate in both ways of playing. In conclusion, these results are weighed as to what kind of design implications they offer for future hybrid board games.

Author Keywords

Board game, miniature game, digital adaptation, hybrid experience, miniature gaming, game experience, digital board game.

ACM Classification Keywords

K.8.0 [Personal Computing]: General - *games*

INTRODUCTION

With recent technological developments, we are moving towards hybrid experiences that draw affordances from both the material and the digital world, blending them into completely new experiences [17]. This is especially seen in hybrid playful products [14, 15]. One subcategory of these are board games which come with varying levels of hybridity [6].

For the hybrid experience to emerge, the material and digital element does not have to be present at the same time, they can take turns and work independently of each other [14].

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Hybridity can even be understood as a multidimensional interplay of physical and digital environments, a form of hybrid ecology [9]. The game experience is an amalgam of a number of factors [4], and in hybrid products it is all the more difficult to restrict the experience to the actual action of playing the game itself (cf. [2, 5, 11, 12, 15 and 16]). In the end much of the game experiences available to us are somewhat hybrid in nature [16]. As such, it is a valid question if playing a material board game and its digital adaptations form a wider hybrid experience altogether.

From the design perspective it is important to understand which features are the best of both material and digital board game experiences. As such, this study explores how players experience playing a material board game and digital adaptations of it. This is done through the case of a two Player¹, miniature board game *Blood Bowl* (BB) (1987, Games Workshop) (see Figure 1), by interviewing people who have played both the material board game and digital adaptations of it.

Blood Bowl was selected for this study for several reasons. First, there is no prior academic research done on *Blood Bowl*, maybe because it is a niche game. Still the game has an enthusiastic fan base, who have stayed with the game for many years. There is also a vivid online community around



Figure 1: *Blood Bowl* 3rd edition. ©Ville Kankainen.

¹ As the members of each team in the *Blood Bowl* are called players, for the sake of clarity I will write the word “Player” with a capital “P” whenever I point to the human player

playing the *Blood Bowl* instead of the fictitious *Blood Bowl* team members.

the digital adaptation of the game. Looking into the sociability around the core game experience can offer new insights for developing hybrid board games. Further, as a historical example of digitalization of a board game, *Blood Bowl* illustrates the relation and interplay between material and digital gaming.

An integral part of the game are the wargame-like miniatures, with all the culture that accompanies them [3]. In the digital adaptations this element is all but nonexistent, and as such, it is interesting to understand how it affects the overall experience. Also, as the rules of the material game and digital adaptations are virtually identical, it is more beneficial to compare these than it would to compare experiences of playing those games with more divergent rulesets. Further, the author has had many years of experience playing different versions of *Blood Bowl*, which offered valuable insights on the culture surrounding the game.

ELEMENTS OF THE EXPANDED GAMING EXPERIENCE

Maaik Lauwaert [8] speaks of the *core* and *periphery* of play. In the core are, usually, the facilitated (i.e. designed) play activities while the periphery covers the emergent activities that designers did not take into account. Together these form what Lauwaert calls the geography of play. Activities can move from the periphery to the core and vice versa. As, for example T.L. Taylor [12] argues, the borders between physical and virtual worlds are vague, and much of the social interaction important to online play actually happens in the physical world.

The social interaction has been noted as the main source of enjoyment in euro style board games [18]. There are various ways this occurs during a game session, interestingly Xu et al. [19] have noted that seemingly unnecessary and easily automated routines, like rolling the dice or moving the game pieces, create social interaction. It seems that tangibility and social interaction go hand in hand. Due to this, digitally augmenting these tasks does not always confer a positive outcome. For example players of the miniature wargame *Warhammer 40 000* (1987, Games Workshop) preferred to roll dozens of dice instead of using dice rolling applications [3]. It seems that in digital adaptations social interaction is less important to players [10, 13].

Activities, such as painting and modelling miniatures, engaging with game fiction, and building an army list, are all important parts of the *Warhammer 40 000* hobby as a whole [2]. The enjoyment, and the experience, are intimately linked to the interplay of these activities, which can have temporal distance between them. In this context Carter, Gibbs and Harrop [2] use the concept of *pastime* to describe the collection of interlinked and associated activities that serve to occupy one's time and thoughts pleasantly.

² <http://forum.bloodbowl-game.com/> (Retrieved: June 8, 2016)

BLOOD BOWL

In *Blood Bowl* both Players control a team of up to 16 players, in game similar to rugby. The goal is to score more touchdowns than opponent. Tackling opposing players is also an important feature of the game. *Blood Bowl* can be played in two modes - either as single matches, or as a campaign mode called league. In a league mode team members improve by gathering experience and leveling-up between games.

The original *Blood Bowl* board game was released in 1987, as a byproduct for miniature wargame *Warhammer Fantasy Battle* (WFB) (1983) by Games Workshop (GW). The latest digital adaptation is *Blood Bowl 2* (2015, Cyanide). Cyanide also hosts an official *Blood Bowl* forum.²

The last official release of the material game was the third edition (1994, GW). After that the rules have been available online as a living rulebook. With the recent digital adaptations, the game has risen in popularity, and according to rumors on war gaming websites, a new version of the physical game is due in 2017 [1].

One of the most popular digital adaptations of *Blood Bowl* is an unofficial, Java-based, player versus player game playable at *Fumbl.com*. The game has been online since 2002.³ Over time, *Fumbl.com* has grown into a full online community which contains historic statistics of the games played, game related news, rules and a message board. The community also has a dedicated IRC-channel.

DATA AND METHOD

This study is based on nine thematic interviews which were conducted during the summer and autumn of 2013. The interviewees were acquired by posting messages on several online discussion boards that were known to have active *Blood Bowl* players. Also, a message was posted on a local miniature war-game club's *Facebook* page.

Prior to the interviews, two open discussions were carried out with experienced *Blood Bowl* players in order to find out adequate themes for the interview. The finalized themes were: *sociability, motivation, life style & materiality, aesthetics, rules* and *game fiction*. In addition, the interviewees were asked to fill in an online form before the actual interviews took place, in order to collect background information and to help the interviewer to focus on the games the interviewee was most familiar with.

The age of interviewees varied between 22 and 39 (median 32). All of them were all male, which is in line with another study on miniature gaming culture [2]. In general, the participants had a lot of experience playing both the material *Blood Bowl* and at least some digital adaptations of it. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and in Finnish which was the native tongue of all participants. The length of a

³ <https://fumbl.com/> (Retrieved: June 8, 2016)

single interview varied, from 1-2 hours, and the final data set contained around 13 hours of unedited audio material. The material *Blood Bowl* with miniatures was present at all the interviews to inspire the discussion.

The collected data was analyzed with a form of thematic content analysis. It was done with the help of *Atlas.ti* qualitative analysis software. The interviews were transliterated in their entirety in order to capture the full context. After the overall picture was formed all interviews were coded at the level of both line and paragraph, loosely following the interview themes. As the goal was to identify categories of experience it was not necessary to code inclusively on the line level. This process produced almost 1400 codes.

The codes were then inductively turned into arguments, such as “playing digitally is easier than playing materially”, or “playing is more important than painting miniatures”. Arguments were further merged until there were around 150 codes, these were grouped together via an iterative process until the final categories emerged.

RESULTS

The qualitative analysis provided six main categories describing *Blood Bowl* gaming experience: tangibility and aesthetics, fiction, continuance, the way to play, accessibility and community. These categories are not mutually exclusive and some features of the hobby can overlap with different categories (see Figure 2). This demonstrates the holistic nature of the hobby (cf. [2]).

Around half of the interviewees were predominantly interested in miniature gaming and thus preferred material *Blood Bowl*. The remainder of the interviewees were more interested in playing the digital adaptations of the game. Interestingly though, even those players who preferred the material version of the game, still played the digital adaptations a lot. In the following, the interviewees will be referred to with abbreviations I1-I9.

Tangibility and Aesthetics

Although most of the interviewees said that they mainly play *Blood Bowl* digitally, they still stated that they enjoy playing the material version of the game more. Overall, the interviewees expressed that the material game had a better “feel” in it. They felt that they can affect things more in the material game: “[I3] *this is something that I’m doing myself. It’s not virtually somewhere out there - it’s in front of you. You can see it, you can move it.*”

The importance of die rolling came out in some of the interviews. One interviewee noted that: “[I3] *Dice have that feel in them. They have the mysticism and physics that come with them too. It feels much better to throw the dice on the table and hear them rattle on the cardboard or table than pressing a button which just gives you some random generated number x.*” Rolling the dice also adds suspense to the gaming event and before important rolls players sometimes take a long time to shake them in their hands, while the spectators also join the tension: “[I6] *People stood up yelling out loud with their hands in the air: ‘Yes, yes, yes! It’s dead, finally!’ The opposing player was looking over the table like the world was ending right there. His best player just died against this damned newbie team.*”

Miniatures were also considered to be an important part of the gaming experience. None of the interviewees deemed them necessary to play, but preferred using them if possible. They were seen, at the least, to be a nice visual addition to the game. Modelling stadiums was also appreciated: “[I2] *you do take it a little bit more seriously when someone has actually spent dozens of hours to build that kind of stadium.*”

One interviewee explicated that the miniatures are the sole reason to play miniature games, and felt that they should always be painted. To most, it did not matter how the miniatures look during the match – they are only tokens of play. In addition, miniatures are often admired outside of the actual gameplay, but usually by people who are familiar with



Figure 2: Overlapping of the Categories. ©Ville Kankainen.

the hobby. One interviewee related that painting and modifying the miniatures made them feel more personal.

Miniatures also seem to inspire imagination: “[13] *it is some kind of imprint on the miniature which it cannot get rid of. It is simply marked in everyone’s mind that the guy who paws the ground with his hand is the guy who once made a touchdown in an impossible situation.*”

Blood Bowl miniatures were usually acquired for the needs of the game – less frequently just for the aesthetic value: when you have more teams, you have more options to play with. Those interviewees who owned *Blood Bowl* miniatures said that they do collect them to some extent. Many did not have any miniatures at all and, when playing, they borrowed miniatures from someone who had them.

Miniature collections were mostly stored in the boxes in which they were transported, although some interviewees felt that they would have like to display them at home if possible. If miniatures became useless the players usually disposed of them – the collections did not usually have value as such, although one interviewee told that he acquired some of the missing teams just to complete his collection.

Fiction

All the interviewees felt that the fiction of the game, and the fantasy theme, were important factors in becoming interested in it in the first place. Some had previous experience with other GW games prior to *Blood Bowl*, whereas others became familiar with the shared fictional world in which they are set via *Blood Bowl*. The shared fiction was seen to be helpful in learning the game as it justifies some game mechanics. Prior knowledge of the fiction also made the game world feel deeper: “[18] *it’s a kind of a same thing if you compare how Pokémon is familiar to people who play the card game, digital games and watch the series*”.

Overall, interviewees felt that the fiction was thinner in the digital adaptations than in the material board game. To some extent this seemed to be tied to the miniatures as they stir up the imagination. The interviewees felt that the humor of *Blood Bowl* fiction, which they described as dark and ironic, supported the overall theme of fantasy races playing football. Still, a player who enjoyed immersing into the fiction felt that team members should not be given silly names that break the fiction. Naming the players was also seen as a way to make team members more personal, especially in the digital adaptations.

The shared experience that players felt when playing the material game acted as facilitator for fiction generation. The fiction is built together, for example, by recalling what kind of game-related occurrences are connected to specific miniatures. Although the game was mostly played pragmatically, interviewees stated that some of the game related events were explicated through the fiction, and there was a roleplaying aspect to it.

Interviewees thought that some of the fiction does transfer to digital games. Still, especially in Fumbl.com, they felt it depends a lot on how much the Players themselves are willing to actively generate the fiction by naming and writing background stories for the teams and team members, adding pictures, writing game reports etc. Some said the fiction in digital versions felt stronger if you are familiar with the material board game. The commentators in Cyanide’s *Blood Bowl* were also seen as strengthening the fiction.

It is also interesting that to some interviewees the fiction was more important when they were playing against a person they knew to some extent. The background of random opponent’s team was not as interesting as the background of the team of a Player they knew.

Continuity

One of the most inspiring aspects of *Blood Bowl* for the interviewees is the continuity. It occurs in several ways. All but one of the interviewees enjoyed playing league games more than single matches. Secondly, the material board game, in particular, is often played with old friends, sometimes developing the same teams year after year. Further, digitalization has kept the game alive while the popularity of the material version was low.

The league style of playing was enjoyed as it offers the possibility to develop the team between matches. This, therefore, allows them to plan long-term strategies: “[13] *If in Blood Bowl you have a team that someone else has made for you, and you haven’t given those names by yourself, levelled them up from the beginning and made them the champions of the league, it doesn’t feel like anything. It’s not Blood Bowl at that stage!*”

Interviewees noted that it is hard to arrange long leagues on the material board game as you usually have a fairly limited amount of opponents to play with and while you learn their tactics the game becomes boring. It is also hard to find enough time to arrange game sessions. Digital adaptations do not have this problem, and one interviewee said that he had played with the same team since he began playing on Fumbl.com many years ago. Keeping track of past games in the form of statistics was also noted to be fun.

It was interesting how one interviewee explicated that he had experienced real sorrow when an important team member died: “[13] *it feels like you have actually lost something, not just like, ‘oh, my miniature in a board game died, what a shame’. When they have developed a personality and they die, it is actually annoying.*” For one informant playing single matches was too frustrating as he feared losing important players.

Finally, the interviewees speculated that without the success of Fumbl.com, *Blood Bowl* might have been completely forgotten. The material game might have been hard to obtain during certain periods, and it was also easy to return to playing the game when it was available online.

The Way to Play

The material *Blood Bowl* was appreciated more than the digital adaptations of it. Most interviewees thought that playing digitally is just a substitute for material playing, which was perceived as authentic *Blood Bowl*: “[15] *it’s just a substitute for me. It’s just a way to channel the passion for this game if I don’t have a possibility to have the real thing.*” This was especially the case for those interviewees who liked painting and modifying the miniatures.

Opinions among the interviewees varied as to whether they regarded it important that the miniatures are painted and representative. Five of the interviewees saw miniatures somewhat essential for playing the game. Some thought that even though the miniatures need not be painted they should at least be representational. Others were fine to use some other miniatures as a proxy, if no representational miniatures were at hand. For a few, miniatures had no importance at all. They considered the game more as a strategy game than a miniature game, and did not mind if they had to use abstract cardboard counters instead of miniatures. These interviewees also said that on the *Fumbl.com* they use symbolic counters, in which the player position is presented as a combination of letters, instead of more commonly used player icons.

Blood Bowl was played in a quite achievement-oriented manner regardless of the platform. Usually team members were advanced on the basis of what is the most effective strategy in order to win matches, but there were different approaches. One informant, for example, chose a particular team based on personal thematic preferences rather than how effective the team is: “[15] *In the internet it’s described as a game mechanically challenging team, but I don’t care because it’s fun to play with them, and it sure is stressful to play with them. It’s just so cool that they are vampires!*”

Digital adaptations were often used to practice the tactics and for trying out teams that the interviewees were unfamiliar with. One interviewee also noted that the people responsible for updating the official living rulebook have been active members of the *Fumbl.com* community, and the rules were developed based on the comments and data they gathered on the site: “[12] *By playing the board game you just can’t get the data of how some skills or skill combinations work. But in there, when it’s done a thousand times, you can at least form an opinion on it.*”

In some gaming groups the winner of a cup got a real world reward, like a pack of good coffee. They also had a bounty for killing high level players in participants’ teams. In one league the bounty was paid as in-game currency which is normally acquired after each game and used for example to buy new team members. In another group the bounty was paid as a real world reward: “[13] *it’s the best scorer in the whole league, and the best killer. It’s completely unstoppable! I think there’s still a bounty for it. If someone kills my necromantic werewolf she will get a free 10€ Steam-game.*” The bounties were considered as adding to the overall atmosphere of the game.

Accessibility

Unsurprisingly, the digital adaptations were considered to be less tedious and faster to play as they do not need any preparations or other kinds of time consuming chores. This means that the digital adaptations can be played more often than the material game. Although material playing offers more as an experience through tangibility and social interaction, in most situations digital adaptations have better accessibility.

Digitalization also helps to find people to play with. It was a common problem for the interviewees not to find enough fresh opponents to play with. It was also possible to play online with friends who for some reason were too far away for the material game: “[18] *me and my friends, all those who I used to play with, went on their separate ways, and we didn’t see anymore. It was still fun to play, so we moved into the Fumbl, because it was there.*”

Online play also makes it easier to manage schedules and logistics, as it can be hard to get all the players and material game accessories to a certain place at a certain time. The opportunity to play a single player game against an AI is also an important factor for the accessibility, as the game can be played even if there is no other person or an internet connection available. It also makes the game easier to play in difficult situation, for example when travelling.

In some aspects the material game can be more accessible. Some of the interviewees said that they initially got interested in the game because of the beautifully painted miniatures pictured on the game box. The possibility to combine painting the miniatures with playing the game was important to one of the interviewees. The fact that you can meet like-minded people while playing a material board game makes it preferable to some of the interviewees.

Community

Community was of great importance in both the material game and its digital adaptations: “[18] *the social network that builds up around a league makes that league more interesting than it would be if it was just a board game.*”

In the digital adaptations, socializing was more often connected to things that happen in the game, when in the material game the array of subjects seemed to be wider.

Furthermore, in the digital adaptations, socializing takes place outside the actual playing of the game, whereas when playing the material board game, the whole gaming situation was considered as a social event.

Intimacy was considered to be one of the merits of the material game. The reactions of the opponent can be seen, for example. At the same time, some found it good that in the digital adaptations you could concentrate only on winning the match and did not have to socialize if you did not feel like it. Interestingly, one interviewee told that online game felt more like the material game when he used a VoIP with the opponent.

When playing the material game, to some interviewees it was more important to have a good time with friends than actually trying to win the game. The game frames these get-togethers, but the main source of enjoyment comes from socializing with old friends. For one interviewee having a communal meal is an important part of the event, giving a rhythm for the evening: “[15] *Food is ordered when we start to play, then we play, then the food arrives and we take a break from the game and eat. Then we start this discussion about the daily politics or some other subject.*”

The presence of other people, besides the ones playing, also builds up the communal atmosphere. Spectating was especially interesting for the interviewees if they were going to play against those whose game they were observing. It allowed them to study opponents’ tactics. On the *Fumbl.com*-site the spectator experience was said to be blander than on the material game, because it lacked the sense of presence.

One interviewee pointed out that it was more interesting to follow the *Fumbl.com* discussion board after he felt he was part of the community. In his words this happened after he started to identify the commenters by their user name. Those who had spent a long time on the site, said that they had acquaintances who they had known for years. The community was considered a place for the like-minded: “[11] *it’s like a classic retreat. Everybody knows why I am here, so I don’t have to explain anything*”

One interviewee even felt that the IRC-channel was the same thing as the *Fumbl.com* community. Some felt that it is a good thing in an online community that you do not need to be active all the time: “If I happen to be online at IRC and someone asks something on the channel, or in private, I answer them. I rarely start any conversation myself.” All in all, it was considered a merit for *Fumbl.com* that it had a wide user-base. Although Cyanide’s *Blood Bowl* has a community of its own, it was not seen to be as communal as *Fumbl.com*, and thus it was considered pretty faceless.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Considering the results above, it seems that playing *Blood Bowl* can be seen as holistic pastime, where material and digital aspects have different, although sometimes overlapping, roles. It can be understood as a collection of separate but interlinked activities i.e. as a *pastime* [2]. In this case the pastime also contains playing the digital version, as it offers a way to practice tactics and offers the opportunity to play in different ways than with only material version of the game. This gives various indications for the design of hybrid board games.

The role of miniatures is interesting in *Blood Bowl*. Similar to miniature war games, they are in the heart of the play, but due to the nature of the game their role is diminished. Still, they do bring an interesting material dimension to it. Some players ignore them, but to others they offer a base for more emotional attachment than regular game pawns. These

players feel a deeper sense of loss when losing a character in the material game than in digital adaptations.

With techniques like 3D printing it would be possible to customize your character digitally, maybe based on publisher’s official models, and use them in the material version of the game. On the other hand, players could be offered a way to scan their modified miniatures for use in the digital version of the game.

The appreciation some players had for the material game could be drawn from the fact that they were initially introduced to material version of the game. However, nostalgia forms an important part of the overall experience, as can be seen with the recent success of *Pokémon Go*. Scanning miniatures could be one way to support this aspect.

Following Lauwaerts [14] thoughts on core and peripheral play activities, it is useful for the designer to examine the different ways players use the product. In the case of *Blood Bowl*, the creation of online *Blood Bowl* in the form of *Fumbl.com* originated in the periphery, but may have affected the publishers will to release a digital version.

One way to support social elements of gaming experience could be with mobile apps that allow players to upload pictures and data of their physical game sessions to an official website. It would allow the presentation of painted miniatures to other players, as well as using pictures as a base for game related discussion. This would create the communal aspect of the hobby. It could be further improved with some kind of achievement mechanism where a digital app awards players for tasks accomplished in the material version of the game.

The hybrid element could also offer a metagame to be played between the game sessions. For example, micromanaging an ongoing league, this would combine games played with both material and digital versions of the game.

In general, hybrid board games should offer experiences that appeal to multiple senses and, at the same time, utilize the possibilities digitalization offers for communication and socializing. Future research could delve deeper into the question of what significance the material aspect has in forming a gaming experience. It would also be interesting to compare the findings of this study to a modern hybrid board game like *X-COM: The Board Game* (Fantasy Flight Games, 2014).

This study compared the game experience of playing the material *Blood Bowl* board game and digital adaptations of it. The nine interviewees of the study experienced both the material and digital play to be different aspects of the same hobby – different platforms support different needs. Looking at this experience as a holistic *pastime* with multiple elements can offer various insights for the design of hybrid board games. This would allow the best elements from both worlds to be extracted, creating a unique hybrid experience.

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