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Cardboard Genocide

Board Game Design as a Tool in Holocaust Education



ABSTRACT

The following paper is a report from a board game design workshop organized by a team of memory scholars, game scholars and Holocaust educators from Jagiellonian University in Kraków for a group of middle school students (age 15–16) from Radechnica, a small village in eastern Poland. The aim of the workshop was to raise awareness and facilitate reflection on local Holocaust histories through board game design. To that end, a two-day design event was organized and conducted, to help the students develop personal bonds with the local Holocaust history. Due to the workshop's success, we believe the board game design proved to be an effective tool in the Holocaust education. The workshop results are discussed with regard to the Holocaust absence from game culture and considered in the context of the ongoing struggle to detaboo

the involvement of ethnic Poles in the destruction of Jewish communities in Poland during the Second World War.

One day, we invited a group of teenagers to gamify the Holocaust with us. The above sentence, though factually true, looks rather inappropriate when put on paper, at least at the moment of writing this article. The memory of the greatest tragedy of the 20th century is off-limits for gamification or the game culture in general – and the involvement of middle-school students gives our enterprise an additional scandalous quality. Yet, the same game design workshop for teenagers in a small Polish village proves that games can be a useful tool to explore systemic aspects of Holocaust and to allow participants to create more personal and empathic relationships with the hurtful memories of local Holocaust histories. This paper discusses interactions between the workshop findings and the way Shoah is portrayed (or not portrayed) in game culture and game studies. We start with a short review of existing Holocaust-themed games in order to move on to a more theoretical consideration of the Holocaust-themed game possibilities and reasons behind the scarcity of such games. Then, by presenting our workshop, we consider games' usefulness the preservation of Holocaust memory and address the long-standing Holocaust taboo of game culture.

HOLOCAUST AS A TABOO OF GAME CULTURE

The Holocaust remains one of the major taboos of game culture: it is a topic rarely even mentioned in games – moreover, the few existing game portrayals of the genocide are met with outrage. There has to be a special reason for that, given the fact digital games feature numerous difficult and hurtful historical subjects, such as Transatlantic slave trade in *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry* (Ubisoft, 2013); systemic racial discrimination in the USA in *Mafia III*, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* or *Detroit: Become Human* (Quantic Dream, 2018); legacy of European colonialism in *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*; or war crimes and the fate of civilians in *This War of Mine* or *Spec Ops: The Line* – with various degree of success.

Most game scholars analyzing the issue agree that the major cause behind the invisibility of the Holocaust is the social perception of games as trivial pastime, unfit to deal with serious and sensitive topics (Chapman and Linderoth, 2015; Frasca, 2000; Kansteiner, 2017; Michalik, 2015; Pfister, 2020a; Seriff, 2018). Therefore, any attempt to directly address the ultimate historical evil through a game is considered sacrilegious by popular media, as if the Holocaust were about to be made a matter for child's play. Moreover, as Eugen Pfister (2020a, pp. 275–276), and Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderoth (2015, pp. 139–140) point out, as sold globally, local restrictions regarding usage of Nazi-related symbols further limit the possibility to include the Holocaust themes or imagery. As a

result, in many World War II-themed games, both Nazi ideology and Shoah are usually whitewashed, especially if the given game allows playing as a German army or assuming a German soldier's position. The Nazi ideology and the genocide cannot be included in such games, as they tend to present War World II as a conflict between two equivalent sides, and perpetuate the idea of war being historical necessity, if not a glamorous opportunity for heroism (Pfister, 2020b, pp. 56–59). Such reluctance to include Nazi war crimes – especially in strategy games – can be traced back to the long-standing fascination with German army in wargame culture (Alonge, 2019; Pfister, 2020b).

It does not mean, though, that the subject is entirely absent from mainstream digital games, and there are a few titles including imagery associated with the Shoah. As Eugen Pfister observes (2020a, 277–279), contemporary mass-market games trying to depict Holocaust employ two basic strategies: either set the game narrative either in an alternative history, or a fictional world where some evil power mimics the Final Solution, or – if caring about historical accuracy – never mention Shoah by name, but throw in subtle hints, whose recognition relies on players' prior historical knowledge.

Wulf Kansteiner (2017) ties this inability to introduce the Holocaust as a topic for mass-market digital games with a larger problem of digitalized memory culture. As it is more open to vernacular activities and testimonies, it disrupts sanctioned ways of remembering the past, safeguarded by public institutions and based upon “time-tested rituals for containing and forgetting potentially unsettling pasts” (p. 133). The digital game market is dominated by a few large, international companies, which go the extra mile with self-censorship to effectively eliminate the risk of games becoming tools of memory disruption. This way, game producers remain a part of institutionalized, regimented culture of World War II memory, which delegates Holocaust memory to selected institutions, such as Yad Vashem or Auschwitz Museum. As a result, Holocaust-themed games can emerge only on the margins of global game culture.

For years, such marginal games formed three general groups: quizzes available on websites educating on Holocaust, failed attempts shut down due to public outrage and neo-Nazi provocations, such as notorious *KZ Manager*, a concentration camp manager first released for Commodore C64 around 1990 in Austria, and then translated, upgraded and developed for different platforms ever since (Kansteiner, 2017; Pfister, 2020a; Selepak, 2010). Only recently, three attempts to make Holocaust-themed games were made, with *My Memory of Us*, a puzzle platformer using a childlike aesthetic to tell the fairy-tale about friendship and oppression in a country invaded by evil robots (replacing Nazis), being the only one focusing on the topic directly. The other two, *Through the Darkest of Times* and *Attentat 1942* use persecution of Jews as a background for their main subject: complexity of the resistance in Nazi-controlled countries.

Even though II-World-War-themed board games are numerous and varied, titles mentioning the Final Solution are even more scarce. We're able to identify

just two of them. The first one is infamous *Juden Raus!*, a Nazi-era German board game about cleansing the city from Jewish influence, published in 1936 – and, ironically, criticized by the official SS newspaper for trivializing national effort to cleanse Germany from Jewish influence (Seriff, 2018, p. 159). The other is Brenda Brathwaite-Romero’s *Train*. Presented in 2009 it was meant as an exhibition piece and a part of *The Mechanic is the Message* project. Played with a series of yellow pawns over a broken glass (alluding to the Kristallnacht of 1938), the game was testing whether players would continue upon learning they were preparing transports heading toward concentration camps. With the powerful combination of mechanics and theme, *Train* is considered to be the only board game successfully addressing the Holocaust to date (Kansteiner, 2017; Seriff, 2018).

The limited number of games even mentioning the Holocaust, especially when compared to the much bigger number of World War II titles conveniently omitting it, can be therefore explained as a result of external pressure from official Holocaust memory custodians, considering ludic frame disrespectful. To avoid the outrage, a game has to either reframe itself from ludic to artistic, documentary or educational (Chapman and Linderoth, 2015, pp. 143–144; see also Pötzsch and Šisler, 2019), or disrupt the link between the subject depicted and history by introducing fictional settings (Chapman, 2019; Pfister, 2020a). *Train* serves as prime examples of game-based artistic installations (Chapman and Linderoth, 2015; Seriff, 2018), while *My Memory of Us* or *Through the Darkest Time* follow conventions of an artistic digital game, the former also using a fictional setting. *Attentat 1942* is in turn framed as educational and documentary, as a university-created software using historical footage and archive-based (though fictionalized) statements (Pötzsch and Šisler 2019; Šisler 2016).

But there is an additional factor to be considered: innate qualities of games as a medium for Holocaust memory. This perspective draws less academic attention, with the most prominent attempt to analyze game poetics as a vehicle for Shoah memory being Gonzalo Frasca’s *Ephemeral games: Is it barbaric to design videogames after Auschwitz?* (2000). According to Frasca, there are two main obstacles to the serious treatment of Holocaust in games: the focus on binary outcomes, especially when playing a game is perceived in terms of winning or losing, and the possibility to repeat unsuccessful actions, which leads to the trivialization of all consequences. As a result, Frasca claims “the player could follow a ‘correct’ path in order to save Anne Frank from death. And if she happened to die, it would not be important, since she would be alive the next time he restarts the game. In other words, the player would be able to jump from life to death back and forth. Therefore, those concepts would lose their ethical, historical and social value.” (Frasca, 2000, p. 177)

To remedy those issues, Frasca proposes an “ephemeral game”, playable only once on each computer, without any possibility to save, restart or repeat. This way the player would be forced to live through consequences and would not be able to experiment with optimizing the gameplay for the best effect,

thus forced to embrace the irreversibility of consequences and the ultimate nature of death.

In twenty years that passed since Frasca's paper some issues he analyzes were successfully resolved. Even though games still frequently rely on positive and negative outcomes, they are no longer necessarily binary or framed in terms of success and failure. Moreover, irreversible consequences have become a highly-desired feature of cRPGs, such as *Mass Effect* (BioWare 2007) or the *Witcher* (CD Projekt RED 2007) series. Failure is no longer necessarily equated with the "loss of a life" analyzed by Frasca. There are games that get rid of failure entirely and introduce branching narratives without a possibility to repeat unsuccessful actions. Simultaneously, there are numerous games with the "permadeath" feature, i.e. permanently removing a killed character from play and forcing the unsuccessful player to start over. While not exactly "ephemeral" in Frasca's sense – as they allow repetition from the beginning – those games seem to be a step toward the narrative experience he considered necessary for serious topics, such as the Holocaust.

With innate obstacles mostly removed, and the changing public perception of digital games as a trivial pastime, both major reasons behind developing Holocaust-themed games are gone. We should expect, therefore, an influx of Shoah games, *My Memory of Us* is a vanguard of. Such expectation leads to yet another question: what are possible benefits from the development of such games?

One answer could stem from the cultural significance of games, both digital and non-digital, in contemporary culture and media ecology. It would be a perfectly reasonable development of Astrid Erll's claim about mediatization of memory (Erll, 2011): if games are surpassing movies as the main medium for cultural memory, then censoring the Holocaust from War-World-II-themed games can do unspeakable damage to the social awareness of the conflict. Arguing along that line, Eugen Pfister points out the danger of depoliticizing World War II and reducing it to the military conflict of technologically advanced and visually appealing armies, while removing both Nazi ideology and untold suffering it caused out of sight (Pfister, 2020a). From this perspective, the introduction of the topic to the game medium keeps the memory alive and seems to be a moral obligation caused by the very existence and popularity of World War II games.

In addition, it is possible to consider unique possibilities the medium opens for shaping the Holocaust memory. Wulf Kansteiner (2017) points to digital games' capability of inducing empathy based on personal responsibility and considers digital games as a possible remedy for the consumer's passivity in the contemporary Holocaust culture. A digital game allowing the player to enact various scenarios in a simulated Shoah environment could lead to a critical examination of perpetrators' and passive bystanders' position, and teach how to recognize signs of radicalization in real life. Thus, the author considers the very thing criticized by Frasca: the possibility to explore outcomes of various

decisions without suffering consequences, to be a major asset in Holocaust education, adding an important reservation – such a game should be produced by official curators of Holocaust memory rather than a commercial company.

Susanne Seriff is far less optimistic, claiming that even though Holocaust-themed games could be prepared with best intentions in mind, they fortify the concept of Jews being “the Other” to be removed, and contribute to the growing neo-Nazi discourse and rampant Western antisemitism. Building her argument on Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony, she points to the dangers of presenting the Holocaust as playful and reinforcing antisemitic ideologies by introducing them as a part of game rules or setting: “creators of Holocaust toys and toy art may insist that their creations are mere parodic commentary – or cautious education – on the nature of evil in our lives, repeated events of history teach us that, in fact, they are playing with dangerous fire.” (Seriff, 2018, p. 167).

The latter reservation is not without merit, but assumes introducing the Holocaust perpetrator as a playable position – it is not by accident that Seriff herself criticized *Train* as a well-meaning game reinforcing hateful ideology. But alternatives should be also considered: a possible Holocaust-themed game could educate about Nazi atrocities without forcing anybody to enact the Nazi position. The question therefore arises: is it more productive to teach the horror of Holocaust by employing the perspective of persecuted Jews and making them playable characters for people of non-Jewish origin, or by highlighting the involvement of non-Jewish agents? As we argue, both solutions come with their own sets of significant issues that cannot be easily resolved

We seriously doubt whether it is ethical to put a gentile player in the position of a Holocaust victim or survivor and make them experience simulated persecution while enjoying the comfort of their own armchair. Firstly, such a perspective might be seen as an especially hurtful form of identity tourism (Nakamura, 1995), allowing perfectly safe people to assume they have experienced Shoah themselves. Secondly, it might also bring forward the problem Frasca exemplifies with the search for an optimal path to Anna Frank’s survival. To be playable, a hypothetical game featuring Jewish protagonists trying to survive in the extremely hostile environment of organized persecution would put the agency in the hands of the player. Even if such agency were very limited, as in a walking simulator, it would inevitably force the player to learn the rules, and, in turn, the way to successfully navigate the simulated Shoah. Therefore, the game would necessarily invoke the problem of personal responsibility, creating a false assumption that crafty people could learn “the rules of the game” and bolster their chance of survival. Such rhetoric easily suggests that millions of Jews murdered during the Holocaust were, to a degree, victims of their own shortcomings, as they had never learned to “play the game well.” It goes without saying that such an abhorrent idea is both inaccurate and deeply offensive, which makes the concept of a Holocaust-themed game with a Jewish protagonist extremely difficult to put into practice.

The option of putting the player in the position of a non-Jewish character involved in the Holocaust, in turn, might enforce collaboration with the Nazi regime, thus risking the pitfall Sheriff points out and lending itself to neo-Nazi appropriations, even if created as a critical project. Alternatively, such a game might feature playable characters who help Jewish NPCs to survive the nightmare of Shoah. Although tempting, such a solution caters to the trope of the Heroic Gentile, perpetuating the stereotype of agency-deprived, passive Jewish victims waiting to be rescued by external forces, a Holocaust movie trope made popular by films such as *Schindler's List*, *The Pianist*, *In Darkness*, or *Zookeeper's Wife*. It is a direct reversal of the problem created by the Jewish protagonist: in this case there is too little agency given to the victims, which suggests the Jewish population of Europe to have been an object over which forces of good and evil struggled.

The trope of a Heroic Gentile is also very precarious due to the state-regulated World War II discourse common in European countries or Israel. In many places, it is presented as a morality tale of Nazi culprits, Jewish victims and local non-Jewish resistance fighters risking their lives to save as many Jews as possible from the inhumanly efficient German death industry (Majewski et al., 2009; Novick, 2000; Steinlauf, 1997; Zertal, 2005). Such stories censor the painful truth about non-German antisemitism (Gross, 2000; Leociak, 2010; Tokarska-Bakir, 2012), local population responsibility and active participation in Holocaust murders (Engelking, 2016; Grabowski, 2011; Gross and Grudzińska-Gross, 2011). A hypothetical game focusing on heroic resistance stories, even if factually correct, would, therefore, inevitably reinforce such white-washing narrative.

We agree that the removal of the Holocaust from World-War-II-themed games is a deeply disturbing issue that should be addressed alongside the possibility to play Nazi Germany or Japanese Empire. We are also convinced that the highly interactive game medium could prevent the passivity of the consumer's position toward the Holocaust cultural memory and facilitate reflection on the subject. But we also stand by Frasca's two-decade old, insightful comment: using games to educate about Shoah and preserve its memory introduces major ethical issues caused by combining agency and player position, which inevitably leads to questioning the moral acceptability of participating in a simulated Holocaust, even to learn.

BRINGING TABOO INTO GAME

The theoretical considerations presented above became very practical for us when we were invited to organize a game-based Holocaust-related event for teenagers from Eastern Poland. The event was a part of *Uncommemorated Genocide Sites and Their Influence on Collective Memory, Cultural Identity, Ethical Attitudes and Intercultural Relations in Contemporary Poland* – a four-year research project carried out by the members of the Research Center for Memory Cultures at Jagiellonian

University in Kraków. While the research was conducted in various sites across Poland, the village of Radecznica was chosen for the game-based event due to the involvement of a local middle school in the earlier stages of the project.

Radecznica (est. population 920 in 2019) is a village in eastern Poland, nowadays inhabited almost exclusively by ethnic Poles. Before World War II, though, there was a population of Orthodox, Catholic and Jewish denizens here, Catholics being a clear majority due to the proximity of a prominent Bernardine monk monastery. During the wartime, it was also an area of heavy armed resistance against the Nazi occupation. Local guerrilla fighters are currently well commemorated and celebrated by the local church and community, in a way consistent with the dominant patriotic public discourse in Poland. Radecznica was also a witness to the local Jewish population mass killings during World War II. While researching the local memory of the Holocaust, the scholars from JU helped to uncover and properly commemorate a number of unmarked graves (Sendyka et al., 2020).

The location of mass graves in the area is known largely thanks to the grassroots activity of Stanisław Zybała (deceased in 2014), a local librarian who devoted his life to preserving the memory of the pre-war Jewish community in Radecznica.¹ His work started after a wartime discovery of the bodies of a Jewish family hiding in the forest ravine called Second Pits (*Drugie Doły* in Polish), as his childhood friend Raźła was among the dead. In 2016 Zybała's efforts and the involvement of Jagiellonian University Holocaust researchers resulted in the commemoration of the Second Pits grave by Rabbinical Commission for Cemeteries in Poland – a ceremony attended by the entire local community including middle-school students who would participate in our event three years later (Grzybowska et al., 2019).² The event we organized focused on Second Pits, as it was the case best known to the students we were working with – though it is important to stress that the site was only one of ten unmarked mass graves identified by Zybała, the biggest one counting about 70 Jews shot and buried there by Nazi enforcers.

The commemoration of the Second Pits killing site is a part of the recent debate on the Holocaust memory in Poland, turning against the biggest taboo of modern Polish history: the Polish involvement in Shoah. Ever since the end of World War II, the official, state-sanctioned Polish discourse has been downplaying local populations' involvement in murdering Polish Jews, while blowing out of proportion the scale and scope of Polish resistance fighters' and common people's efforts at saving their Jewish neighbors (Bikont, 2004; Forecki, 2010, 2013; Majewski, et al. 2009). Even though heroic efforts to help their persecuted neighbors were undertaken by a substantial number of ethnic Poles, as later confirmed by hundreds of Yad Vashem Institute commemorations (Górny, 2013), and helping the Jewish citizens of pre-war Poland was an official policy of the Polish government in exile, the opposite attitude was far more common (Bartoszewski and Lewinówna, 2007; Engelking, 2016; Grabowski, 2011; Leociak, 2010).

1. A letter by Stanisław Zybała of 6 October 2010 to the Jewish Community in Lublin on Jewish graves in Radecznica along with a handwritten map of the place where the author marked the approximate locations of burial sites.

2. The field report from commemorating practices by the Research Center for Memory Cultures (in Polish) can be found online: http://niemiejscapamieci.uj.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Nie-miejscapamie%CC%A8ci-broszura_s.pdf. The detailed account from Second Pits murder and its subsequent commemoration by Stanisław Zybała is available online (in English): <https://zapomniane.org/en/miejsceradecznica-the-gorge/>.

It is to be emphasized that mass hunting of Jewish population in hiding, informing Nazi officials about hiding spots and robbing Jewish belongings never represented the official policy of the Polish underground state; all those acts were spontaneous local initiatives resulting from the centuries of mutual distrust and aversion which escalated under the wartime circumstances and due to Nazi encouragements (Tokarska-Bakir, 2012). Despite that fact, ever since the end of the war Polish involvement in the Jewish population demise was treated as a shameful secret both by the official government and anti-communist underground. The situation started to change after the year 2000, but it is still very far from being resolved; the official state policy is to deny any Polish responsibility for the extermination of Jews, and focus on the stories of the Righteous Among the Nations instead (Bikont, 2004; Engelking and Grabowski, 2018; Gross, 2000).

The basic idea behind the workshop commissioned to the Jagiellonian Game Research Centre was to provide the Radechnica community with additional educational opportunities before the conclusion of the project, so that the scholars from Jagiellonian University not only took data from the local population, but also shared their expertise and commitment in return, an important ethical consideration in contemporary memory studies (Brzezińska and Toeplitz, 2007; Salzman and Rice, 2011). There was also an additional factor to be considered: while the commemoration of the local murder site was quite well-received by the local community, the grave itself quite quickly started to fade into obscurity. To rectify that, Jagiellonian University memory scholars decided to employ additional measures to ensure that the pre-war Jewish population and its tragic history would be remembered and understood by students of the local middle school, the youngest generation of Radechnica citizens. Looking for something else than another celebratory lecture or discussion, they turned to the Jagiellonian Game Research Centre to consider a possibility of using games as an effective tool for Holocaust education.

The aim of the game-based event we designed was, therefore, twofold: to engage teenagers through the usage of ludic practices, and to address the main topic of the research project, that is – the local Holocaust history. It put us in a unique position, as the few existing games engaging that topic deal with the fate of the Jewish population in large urban centers, including ghettos and death camps as major signifiers of the theme. While consistent with the mainstream Shoah discourse appropriated in popular culture through movies set in city-based ghettos, such as *Schindler's List* or *In Darkness*, and photos from death camps, such imagery is also quite different from the local experience and memory of Radechnica population. Therefore, we decided to design our own way of using games as a tool for students to reflect upon the systemic conditions of the Holocaust outside big urban centers or concentration camps.

The ultimate goal was to help the students resolve contradictions resulting from the clash of two competing Holocaust narratives within official Polish

Holocaust culture by appealing to their vernacular culture. We understand two factors contributing to the public memory following the description given by John Bodnar (1994, pp. 15–20). The public memory is a general set of beliefs shaping a community's understanding of its past – in our case, Radechnica's communal attitude toward Holocaust. According to Bodnar, it is a result of two competing cultures: the official one, sanctioned by institutions and power structures, and the vernacular one, born from everyday practice and individual memories of the community members. In our case, there is a tension within Polish official Holocaust culture, as two narratives compete. One of them is state-sanctioned, safeguarded by national institutions and focuses on absolving ethnic Poles from the involvement in the Holocaust. The other, trying to nuance the picture and highlight the Polish role in the Nazi death machine, is backed by the authority of academic institutions and Jewish community in Poland. As the students were heavily exposed to both contradicting ways to understand the past during the course of *Uncommemorated places...* project, we decided to provide them with creative space to explore vernacular memory of Radechnica community as a counterbalance to both discourses.

We assumed games to be a great vehicle for such an undertaking, as they foster active participation which, in turn, can lead to a change in the attitude toward the past. It is important to stress that we were not presenting students with any new information, as they had already learned about the Second Pits murder and the Holocaust in general. What we were aiming at was to activate that prior knowledge. The textbook information the teenagers had collected during classes, the participation in official events and lectures had formed what could be called an archive: a fact-oriented, static and passive body of knowledge. Our task was to turn that archive into a repertoire: an alternative mode of remembering the past, which Diana Taylor identifies as active and embodied, relying on active participation and repetition instead of memorizing (2003). That, in turn, could lead to integration of the archival, official knowledge with the vernacular culture and foster an active commemoration of Holocaust memory sites as enduring practice.

An additional challenge was the selection of a game type that would make such endeavor possible. Our participants' access to electronic equipment was very limited, as the school hosting the event lacks a computer lab. That fact ruled out digital games and turned our attention to board games as an alternative. Even though our choice was mostly circumstantial, it turned out to be an auspicious one. First of all, being independent from digital technology, it expanded the potential application of the workshop beyond educational facilities in possession of computer labs (and therefore beyond well-funded metropolitan culture centers). Moreover, board games rules are more explicitly presented and less numerous than video game rules, and therefore facilitate thinking in more systemic, rule-based way, something we wish to encourage. Finally, in many board games luck is a more prominent gameplay factor, with rolling dice or

drawing cards at random. In those games individual agency, already recognized as an obstacle when introducing Holocaust as a game theme, is counterbalanced with the with the prominence of fate.

BOARD-GAME DESIGN WORKSHOP IN RADECZNICA

Considering the aims of the workshop and the lack of board games that would facilitate the discussion on systemic aspects of the Holocaust, we decided that designing board games during the event would be a preferable alternative to just playing them. Choosing the design focus we had two factors in mind. Firstly, we considered game design potential as a learning tool, already analyzed in game studies literature. Secondly, we hoped that such focus would allow us to address the biggest ethical problem about Holocaust-themed games as explained above – namely, that designing games would introduce a different kind of agency that would not force students into one of three morally dubious positions – Nazi murderer, Jewish victim or Heroic Gentile rescuer.

We aimed to provide Radechnica students with an opportunity to discuss and personally process textbook knowledge as well as involve Shoah memories preserved by their families. The goal was, therefore, to enable safe and productive discussion on such a heavy and commonly avoided topic within a controlled environment framed by a goal-oriented exercise facilitating the conversation. In that regard, we were following Illaria Mariani and Davide Spallazzo's (2018, pp. 19–30) practice of approaching social taboos through teacher-curated game design. As a result we hoped to inspire the teenagers to develop more personal attitudes toward the local Holocaust history and help them transform theoretical, textbook archival knowledge into a more practical repertoire, an approach of extreme importance in Holocaust memory preservation (Boroń, 2013; Taylor, 2003).

Interpreting the educational potential of game design as a transformational practice, inducing lasting change on the designer, is also a concept argued by Stefano Gualeni (2015), who claims that in order to prepare the system of the game, the designer has to develop a deep understanding of the issue serving as a base for the said system, and fashion themselves in a way that transforms their comprehension and attitude toward the issue itself. Gualeni's theoretical position was reinforced over the course the game design class, with students designing games promoting healthy lifestyle slowly changing their dietary habits.

Gualeni's, and Mariani and Spallazzo's design classes were both conducted in the course of several months. In our case, the duration of the workshop was limited to two days. For that reason we decided to build upon the experience from critically-oriented game jams (Kultima, 2015). Even though the game jams' initial aim had been to increase the creativity in game development, it turned out to have highly educational properties leading to an improvement of academic performance among game design students participating in such events (Preston et al. 2012) and dissemination of values shared by organizers

and key participants (Kultima 2018). They have also proved to be an efficient tool for building a community around a tragic event, as was the case with Fukushima Game Jam (Shin et al. 2012), or facilitate culture preservation through collaboration between indigenous population and game designers, for example during the Sami Game Jam (Laiti et al., 2020). The latter case was especially important, as it demonstrated that collaboration between professional game scholars and local amateurs without any prior knowledge of game design conventions can open new ways of memory preservation, as the local participants introduce their own cultural perspective and highlight aspects of vernacular practice that outsiders can easily miss.

Drawing inspiration from the game jam culture and hoping for similar effects – a transformation of knowledge and shift in values, as well as preservation of traumatic cultural knowledge through game design – we chose a similar formula. Our workshop was designed as an intense two-day event with professionals working alongside amateurs to develop games operating under mechanical and thematic constraints.

Our final consideration was to not overwhelm students with the workshop theme from the very beginning, as their initial task was to learn how to design a board game in the first place. In rectifying that issue, we were inspired by Braithwaite-Romero's *Train*, where players were exposed to the rules and allowed to play the game only to be introduced to the Holocaust context afterwards. The shocking revelation provided a powerful tool to explore the concept of banality of evil by changing the perception of the game and forcing a critical evaluation of its system.

Inspired by that example, we decided to task the students with designing a board game on a neutral theme, featuring a mechanics for hiding, escaping or smuggling, and then to re-theme it as a Holocaust game. Thus we hoped to make the task easier while steering the participants out of the most common Shoah imagery to prevent them from designing games set in ghettos or concentration camps.

The event itself spanned over the course of two days and involved 14 students from the last class of the middle school (age 15-16), three of them dropping out during the second day due to their prior obligations. The workshop was organized and supervised by and a team of game scholars from Jagiellonian Game Research Centre including professional game designers, and a Holocaust educator watching over ethical aspects of the endeavor. Two teachers from Radeczniczna school were also present throughout the workshop. All students and their parents were informed about the reason behind the workshop and its theme before the event, and parents were asked for consent for their children to participate.

During the first day, participants were instructed in basic principles of board game design and asked to design a simple board game on a randomly selected subject, but including a specific mechanics for hiding and seeking, escaping or

smuggling. Students were divided into teams and provided with pre-prepared blank board game component sets (including boards, tokens, cards and wooden pawns) and a mentor from among the workshop organizers to guide and inspire the design process. Mentors were also asked to introduce pre-created rulesets in case participants struggled with the design process. That precaution turned out to be unnecessary, as by the end of the first day all teams managed to create playable game prototypes based on rules of their own design.

The second day started with a lecture on the Second Pits murder, delivered by the Holocaust researcher. Afterwards students were tasked to re-theme their games in a way that would fit the local Holocaust history, focusing on the systemic aspects of depicted events. The introduction of the Holocaust as a theme was hardly a surprise – the students and their parents were not only well-aware of the research conducted in Radecznica by Jagiellonian University memory scholars, but also informed beforehand that the workshop would be dealing with the topic. What was surprising, though, was the re-theming challenge, as most students assumed they would be designing a new game on the second day, with rules crafted specifically for the subject.

After approximately three hours of discussion, three working prototypes were presented by design teams, with detailed explanations of how rules designed the other day were used to cover locally based Holocaust narratives, and why such design choices were made. None of the teams decided to play the re-themed versions, even though they had readily played the prototypes before re-theming. Following games and their re-themes were presented:

1. The game initially themed as light-hearted science fiction about petty criminals escaping from a space jail was, quite predictably, themed as a game about Jewish families trying to escape the region, with a lot of emphasis on the roles of luck and local topography in the runaways' survival.
2. The game about escaping from a collapsing haunted house became a tale of group effort necessary to save a single life, strongly stressing the growing difficulty of such an act over time.
3. For the jolly game about cartoon pigs tending to a farm while searching for a hidden treasure, authors presented not one, but two possible themes. One tied the resource management of the original game with gathering the necessities for survival by swapping farm products to medicine, food and hope. The other dealt with contemporary attempts to uncover and preserve the hidden treasure of the local Holocaust memory.

All presentations had a solemn aura, as both the students and the organizers were deeply moved by the profundity of the outcomes. The last hour of the workshop turned out to be a very emotional yet rewarding experience for everybody involved. After the workshop's conclusion the prototypes were donated to the school library, more as mementos than playable artifacts.

As stated above, the immediate emotional impact of the workshop was unquestionable and very intense. As the task was to preserve the original game mechanics untouched, the students could not rely on conventional pop cultural Holocaust themes. As a result, they were forced to mobilize their knowledge of the local Holocaust history and discuss in detail how to translate it into the existing ruleset. That task allowed the participants to improve their shared knowledge through discussion and community building, as described by Mariani and Spallazzo (Spallazzo and Mariani 2018). It also allowed the students to move past the tired clichés of the Holocaust-related school education into a far more intimate territory. Although undeniably unpleasant for them, the exercise achieved its basic aim: it made a group of teenagers from a devoutly Catholic Polish village develop personal perspectives on the Second Pits murder and Jewish fate in general.

The process of designing the games validated Frasca's arguments, as all three teams not only problematized the conditions of winning the game, but were visibly uncomfortable and faced verbal difficulties when explaining them during the presentations. All groups replaced "winning" with "surviving," and one group made a point to emphasize that not everybody was able to survive the nightmare of Shoah and that it was mostly dependent on external circumstances. By reducing player's agency in the Holocaust-themed version, all groups underlined chance as an important factor in the survival.

Moreover, while re-theming the mechanics designed to cover such actions as hopping planets while escaping from the space jail or entering the haunted house, the students made an effort to redirect the mechanics from reflecting action(s) to emphasizing emotional and physical conditions of the survival. As stated above, one team decided "hope" to be as crucial as food and medicine, introducing those three resources in place of crops from their previous farming game, and another team changed reason for being on the move from active pursuit to fear of being exposed – a decision that strongly increased emotional tension. Not a single group introduced active antagonists, replacing them with the extreme hostility of social environment. Thus, the game designers avoided simplistic blame-tossing and bypassed the nationalistic aspect of the official Holocaust memory.

We consider the workshop to have been very successful in mobilizing the students' prior knowledge of the Holocaust and local history, and putting both official and vernacular archives of memory into practice. Even though it was not explicitly required by the organizers, all students turned to the local topography, seeking to relate game space with the area and subsequently discussing Holocaust memories preserved in their community and their families in addition to what was taught in class. For example, an attempt to name safe spaces on the board after local villages was discarded when, after a prolonged discussion on the said villages' attitude toward Jewish refugees, the students agreed that there were not enough shelters for Jews in the area to cover all safe spaces on the board.

The workshop had an undeniable and immediate emotional impact on all participants, including the organizers. The requirement of operationalizing archival knowledge of the Holocaust crimes transformed it into a far more personal and practical experience. Still, long-lasting effects of the workshop are difficult to assess. Even though the surveys conducted one week after the workshop give us a reason to be optimistic, we have no method to verify the durability of the transformation. The participating students were in the last grade, so they have already changed schools and are impossible to track without engaging substantial resources. As a result, we cannot repeat the survey and assess lasting influence of the experience with any degree of certainty, though both the original survey results and the very strong emotional reactions we personally experienced allow us, to some degree, hope for the workshop to have had lasting positive effects.

DESIGNING GAMES AFTER AUSCHWITZ

Though the workshop experience was a limited one, we believe it sheds some light on reasons behind the difficulty for the game culture to approach Shoah as a serious subject. Our conclusion is based on the reactions shared by all designing teams: replacing victory with survival, focusing on Jewish experience and the reluctance to play the game. We believe that those three factors co-create the final conclusion: designing Holocaust-themed games might be a more efficient and morally permissible way of addressing the Shoah through the game medium than playing such games, and board games seem to serve the Holocaust education better than digital ones. It does not mean that we do not consider the necessity of including the genocide in World-War-II-themed digital and board games, as we recognize the importance of Pfister's argument about the dangers of white-washing the conflict (Pfister, 2020a, 2020b).

Our conclusion is consistent with Frasca's (2000) observation: there is a serious obstacle for gameplay engaging the topic in a meaningful way in the game dependency on binary outcomes as a means of game progress or lack thereof, ultimately leading to triumph or failure. It was very clear when each team independently decided not to call the ultimate outcome of the re-themed game a "victory" and found competition within the game tragic rather than exciting. We do not believe, though, that the reason behind such design choice was related to design team conviction that such binarity leads to the trivialization or operationalization of death. There was also no sign of the other reason Frasca gives for the game inability to deal with Holocaust, namely the possibility to revert the action in case of undesirable consequences. No game directly dealt with death, nor included any mechanism to revert move: therefore the problem with binarity and the victory as a final outcome has to be related to other game properties.

As we have learned watching design teams discussions and subsequent presentations, all students had to overcome the major problem with translating Holocaust narrative to the set of actions performed by players. The reason

for that difficulty seems to be an inability to reconcile the Holocaust narrative preserved by public memory with two game-related concepts: personal agency leading to desirable outcome, and the conflict framed as thrilling. As a result, a strong dissonance was created, as those game elements that usually make gameplay exciting: overcoming obstacles and competing against the environment or other players, are framed as sources of trauma in the Holocaust narrative. Shoah public memory depicts conflict as source of untold suffering, and empathizes limitations of the agency, as it is often presented as unavailable for Jewish victims – especially in stories focusing on Heroic Gentile trope.

That dissonance became very clear during re-theming games. All participant discovered that forcing the opponent out of a hiding place or competing over resources is fun as long as the opponent is presented as another petty criminal escaping from a space jail, and the resources are crops to be sold on a farm market. However, the fun evaporates when the one who is chased away is a fellow Jew desperately trying to survive, and the resources turn into food and medicine. As the rules were not transformed with the game themes, the process left all parties involved with an awkward sensation of having fun in a wrong way, which contributed to the emotional impact of the workshop.

This observation can be generalized, as the dissonance workshop participants felt comes from general properties of game culture and Holocaust culture discourses, not from the particular condition of the workshop or the individual properties of Radecznica public memory.

It is, therefore, our claim that there is a basic incompatibility between the way official, public memory of the Holocaust is created and the act of playing the game. It stems from the ways agency and conflict are framed in game culture vs. the Holocaust culture. In game culture, it is common to identify struggle for control and agency the main property of gameplay or a desirable quality in a game, while the official Holocaust culture frames the same struggle as tragic and traumatic. This dissonance is manifested when players are facing a choice leading toward victory or failure, but it is not rooted in binarity of the outcome or possibility to revert choice once made, as Frasca claimed. We believe it is caused by that outcome being decided through player's agency, improving player position in the conflict against other players or AI-operated enemies. Both traits are deeply incompatible with official public Holocaust memory.

We believe that fundamental discrepancy to be the hidden reason behind the common conviction that games are an inadequate medium for the Holocaust narrative, the phenomenon described extensively by Chapman, Lidenroth (2015), Kansteiner (2017) or Pfister (2020a, 2020b). It also explains why the most common strategy to include Shoah-related motifs in games is to relocate it to the outside of the official Holocaust discourse, either by including fantasy elements or incorporating the Holocaust theme into a background of a more game-compatible narrative of armed struggle or civic resistance to Nazi regime, therefore moving agency elsewhere. It also explains why it is easier to

introduce other hurtful histories into digital games and present them through gameplay: their official memory is not as tightly guarded and curated as the Holocaust memory, whose dissemination is monitored by several institutions and nation states (see Kansteiner, 2017, pp. 129–132).

Nevertheless, we consider games to be a very powerful tool for discussing and analyzing the Holocaust memory, precisely for the aforementioned reason: the focus on agency and ability to present complex ideas as systems, not narratives (Galloway, 2006), a quality that can serve as an effective way of explaining entanglements between various actors of the Shoah. Our simple exercise showed that translating textbook knowledge of the topic into a ruleset forced a change in the workshop participants' attitude to the Holocaust and allowed them to consider perspectives they had not reflected upon before, such as the availability of resources or spatial and temporal aspects of survival. It also facilitated the transformation of archival, scripted knowledge into embodied practice (Taylor, 2003). Thus, game design turned out to be a very potent way to disrupt the official Holocaust memory, and combine it with vernacular memory and practice, as to address the local Holocaust events, the students were forced to merge what they had learned at school with anecdotes and information preserved by their families (Bodnar, 1994).

For this reason it is curated game design rather than playing Holocaust-themed games that we consider a powerful educational tool. By positioning the students as designers, not players, we successfully managed to circumnavigate three biggest issues. We avoided forcing the participants into assuming morally dubious positions of Nazi perpetrators, Jewish victims or Heroic Gentiles. We delegated agency out of the gameplay and into the game design, reducing the tension between agency constructions in game culture and Holocaust memory. We successfully mobilized the vernacular memory of the Shoah and facilitated turning archival knowledge into embodied practice. By giving the students a sense of accomplishment coming from the successful design of a functional game prototype, we hopefully forged a link between the Holocaust memory and intense emotions, both positive and negative, providing participants with more personal experience of the topic. This way we've created an emotional alternative for both the prideful state-sanctioned narrative about Polish heroism and the guilt-ridden academic tale of Polish complicity for Radechnica students.

Finally, if the reason behind attempts to break the Holocaust taboo in game culture is the intention of preserving memory through the new medium, as Eugen Pfister and Wulf Kansteiner propose, curated game design offers yet another advantage. While playing an educational Holocaust-themed game constitutes the players as students learning about the historical event, designing a game makes the participants custodians of the Holocaust memory, combining official and vernacular discourses into a unique game-based narrative. That is what prepares the knowledge of the ultimate man-made tragedy to be passed on to the next generation.

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