Replaying the Lost Battles:
the Experience of Failure in Polish History-Themed Board Games

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Abstract

The article aims to analyse ideological aspects of depicting failed historical battles in games in order to reflect on the game medium's potential to depict events conventionally regarded as tragic. This is shown through the case studies of two Polish history-themed board games (*Little Insurgents* and *7 Days of Westerplatte*). The procedural arguments formed in the games are analysed and checked for consistency with their representational layers. The ideological aspects of the games are shown in terms of the dominant Polish politics of memory (the cultural practices of selecting past events as worth remembering by the community and attributing certain values to them).

Keywords: procedural rhetorics, board games, failure, politics of memory, history-themed games

Résumé en français à la fin du texte

Introduction

In the last several years in Poland, one can observe a significant rise of popularity of board games referring to real-life phenomena, especially Polish history. Around thirty history-themed titles were published in 2009–2010, thus forming the most prominent thematic group among the newly released games manufactured in the country. Most of them function on the market as regular entertainment products, but also have clear educational intentions and are often published by or in cooperation with state or regional institutions, and as such can be regarded as serious games (Michael, Chen, 2006) or persuasive games (Bogost, 2007) – games that have a primary goal beyond mere entertainment. In Polish history-themed board games these goals are connected with specific ways of remembering certain events, groups or figures, and can be described in terms of politics of memory – 'the activities that one intentionally undertakes in public in order to strengthen or change citizens' collective memory' (Nijakowski, 2008).

In this paper, I aim to analyse ideological aspects of two chosen Polish history-themed board games published in recent years, especially their discursive connection with the dominant Polish politics of memory, through the lens of Ian Bogost's procedural rhetoric. I will specify how certain worldviews are conveyed through these games and whether the procedural arguments formulated through their rules are congruent with their representational layers. I will focus on the games which share a particular thematic trait: the depiction of a historical event in which the Polish side was ultimately defeated. This choice allows us to explore how certain game design choices relate to popular and institutional discourses of cultural memory centered around such events.

Methodological contexts: procedural rhetoric

The concept of procedural rhetoric was proposed by Ian Bogost in his book *Persuasive Games. The Expressive Power of Videogames*. According to Bogost (who uses the term coined by Janet Murray), procedurality is "a core representational mode" of videogames (Bogost, 2007) and is connected with the general notion of procedure as a way of structuring

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behaviour. Procedural representation is different from other forms of representation (spoken or written) as it "explains processes with other processes" (p. 9). Procedural rhetoric, in Bogost's formulation, is "the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures" (p. ix). In postulating the autonomy of procedural expression, the author draws a parallel to a recent, but already well-established concept of visual rhetoric:

> Just as visual rhetoricians argue that verbal and written rhetorics inadequately account for the unique properties of visual expression, so I argue that verbal, written, and visual rhetorics inadequately account for the unique properties of procedural expression (p. 29).

> The very notion of a visual rhetoric reinforces the idea that rhetoric is a general field of inquiry, applicable to multiple media and modes of inscription. To address the possibilities of a new medium as a type of rhetoric, we must identify how inscription works in that medium, and then how arguments can be constructed through those modes of inscription (p. 24).

It is worth noting that even though Bogost focuses his attention on the persuasive aspect of rhetoric (so mostly on the narrower, Aristotelian sense of the term), he also mentions its broader, expressive understanding (p. 29). While most of the examples used in *Persuasive Games* are titles with an openly declared educational or political intent, procedural rhetoric is fit (and often used) also for examining games that are not accompanied with such statements and do not fall into the serious games category. Procedural rhetoric allows for ideological analysis of the game through highlighting the procedural arguments formed in its mechanics and their connection (or disconnection) with the representational layer of the game (text-based narrative, setting, openly declared intent etc.) Not only can the aptness of the process-based argument be assessed, but also its coherency with the broader textual content of the game. As Bogost demonstrates, sometimes the argument derived from certain mechanical procedures contradicts or undermines the representational layer (or the specifically declared intent) of the game; such cases will also be presented in this paper.

For the sake of clarity, it should also be noted that – as in literary studies – the term 'rhetoric' can be understood as a composition of tropes within the text and also as a discipline of knowledge about the construction and application of texts. Analogically, the game can 'have'

its procedural rhetoric (a set of process-based arguments), but also can be examined 'through' procedural rhetoric (the methodology of analysis).

Bogost's theoretical concept is designed for and focused on videogames. According to the author, rule-based representations are

> tied to the core affordances of the computer: computers run processes, they execute calculations and rule-based symbolic manipulations […]. Videogames are computational artifacts that have cultural meaning as computational artifacts (p. ix).

Despite Bogost's (openly admitted) focus on and preference for digital games, procedural rhetoric is also suitable for examining non-digital games (as well as "any medium—computational or not—that accomplishes its inscription via processes" – p. 46). For textual and ideological analysis, traits deriving from a work being procedural seem more crucial than those resulting from it being computational in a digital sense. Board and card games, for example, are also based on processes and symbolic manipulations. The game rules are openly stated in the instructions and not concealed in the code, and they are not actualized automatically, but enacted by players according to rules. Still, in most situations, to play a game effectively players need to follow predefined rules. Even if deviations in applications of the rules do happen – in the forms of so-called 'house rules', fan mods, or simply as a result of misunderstanding the instructions – board and card games are primarily presented to players with a fixed set of rules, and the typical way of playing follows the rules. It is worth noting that when using procedural rhetoric as a method of analysis it is not enough to simply read and comprehend the rules; the game needs to be played several times in order to uncover the potentially meaningful dynamics that derive from the rules, but are not explicitly stated; sometimes these dynamics seem to be incongruent with the overall theme and tone of the game. Such occurrence will be later noted in the examination of the *Little Insurgents* (*Mali Powstańcy*).

In this paper I focus on specific design aspects of board games (especially those connected to the notion of failure), I analyse their procedural arguments, their consistency with the representational layers and declared educational intents of these games, and their discursive connection with the dominant Polish politics of memory promoted by institutions.

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Methodological contexts: politics of memory

The analyses of the games will be facilitated by the concept of politics of memory. As stated before, politics of memory is understood here as "the activities that one intentionally undertakes in public in order to strengthen or change citizens' collective memory"[1] (Nijakowski, 2008, p. 44). Nijakowski notes that politics of memory is undertaken by various parties, not only the organs of government (p. 52). As Maria Kobielska describes the notion:

The main participants of the debate on national identity (the state, the Church, political groups) promote various images of the past, using diverse mechanisms of its understanding, valorising and selective shaping and inventing their traditions. The central, traditional model of memory in Polish state and national community accentuates specific historical events and patriotic attitudes […], shaping its image through accordingly constructed practices of remembering certain aspects of the past. On the other hand, this model is being dismantled by projects of local memories of various kinds, which take into consideration mostly minority experiences and build certain communities around them. (Kobielska, 2014, p. 19).

Certain practices than can be described as politics of memory are inevitably informed by and grounded in the current (broadly understood) politics. The very act of selection of the elements from the past to be presented as worth remembering requires a set of ideologically non-neutral decisions of inclusion and exclusion and is informed by contemporary politics; the way these elements are expressed in a certain medium is another subject of potential ideological analysis.

Nijakowski claims that in recent years in Poland there was a significant increase in institutionally supported politics of memory practices, dating from 2004, when 'politics of history' was included in the official program of the conservative party Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice) (Nijakowski, p. 190), which later in 2005 won both parliamentary and presidential elections. Even though the first government ran by PiS lasted

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[1] In his book on Polish politics of memory, Nijakowski proposes three definitions of the term, one broader and one narrower than the cited one. The former understands as politics of memory 'all activities – conscious and unconscious, intentional and accidental – that lead to grounding and strengthening of the […] collective memory and to changing it' (Nijakowski, 43). The latter narrows the phenomenon down to 'all intentional activities of politicians and other officials that have a formal legitimisation and aim to strengthen, erase or redefine the specific elements of social memory'. For the purpose of analysing board games supported by institutions, the moderate version of the definition seems the most suitable.

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only until 2007 (and the president Lech Kaczyński's term of office ended prematurely with his death in a plane crash in 2010), the intensification of memory and history discourses was ongoing and visible in the social mainstream ever since and gained new momentum after PiS regained power in 2015. Politicians and institutions are also accentuating the importance of popularising history, especially by putting history-themed narratives in contemporary media and in a form understandable and attractive to young people. Among these practices, the memory of Warsaw Uprising is arguably a central point, as "the event is being continuously recalled and utilized nowadays, so that it has become a cultural (and pop-cultural) icon" (Kobielska, 2014b, p. 37). As Kobielska concludes after examining the discussion around the celebrations of 60th anniversary of Warsaw Uprising in 2004:

> cited opinions show that the celebrations of 2004 were perceived as exceptional, renewing the unattractive discourse of history and giving momentum to culture practices referring to it. […] it seems that the main question that replaced the slightly overshadowed 'how to pay homage to the uprising' was 'how to show it as something attractive'. Broadly speaking, it was about actualising the uprising as an experience, not as a historical event – and an experience that would convey the message which the audience would want to aspire to. (Kobielska, 2014a, p. 135)

I would argue that this discursive environment which encouraged publications of many history-themed pop cultural works and underlined affective and experiential aspects of cultural memory is also one of the reasons of the increased popularity of historical board games, starting with the release of the popular game *Mali Powstańcy* (*Little Insurgents*) in 2009, which will be the first case study analysed in my article.

Nijakowski calls this intensification of politics of memory practices inspired by PiS "the martyrological offensive". This refers to the fact that the dominant discourse of remembering Polish history proposed by this group is connected with celebrating the events in which Poles were oppressed, attacked and often defeated, but supposedly maintained their ideals, courage and sense of dignity, which allows to speak of martyrdom and "moral victory". As Nijakowski describes this tendency (not without a sarcastic tone):

> In this discourse Poles are great not only by their culture, religion and civilization, but also bravery and heroism. The trope of Pole-the discoverer and Pole-the genius fades into background in favour of the dominant trope of Pole-the fighter, who always fights for the noble cause, even if he is doomed – like an ancient tragic hero – to be defeated by heartless powers. Poles are victims not in the sense of defeated losers, but in a religious sense – as offerings. They offer their lives not only at the 'altar of fatherland',

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but also of the world, inscribing themselves into the divine plan, the theodicy. That is why the national megalomania does not entail creating a 'Hollywood TV show' of only heroes and celebrities, but also of more or less anonymous masses of victims, whose hands and souls remained pure, virginities unspoiled. (Nijakowski, p. 199)

The historical events which are remembered predominantly in this martyrological tone in the Polish politics of memory often become topics of board games. This poses an interesting design challenge and a research question: how can the experience of defeat be presented in a game that aims to reinforce the notion of national greatness? How to commemorate lost battles in a medium that conventionally allows for victories? A recent article on the connection of board games and cultural memory proposes to study structural metaphors (Begy, 2015). The category of failure will be a key to my discursive analysis of these games. I will analyse two games which use different approaches to face the challenge of depicting a failed battle: *Mali Powstańcy. Warszawa 1944* (*Little Insurgents. Warsaw 1944*) and *7 Days of Westerplatte* (*7 Dni Westerplatte*); I will describe their procedural rhetorics and connections with the dominant Polish politics of memory. It is, however, worth noting that these are only examples from a bigger set of board and card games depicting failed military struggles from Polish history, chosen here for a more detailed analysis because of their potential to highlight the most apparent aspects of the interplay between their procedural and representational aspects, as well as their choice of topics of high cultural significance – both the defence of Westerplatte and the Warsaw Uprising are arguably the most iconic examples of tragic, heroic military failures in Polish cultural memory. *7 Days of Westerplatte* is the first game focused solely on this battle (although there are several games depicting the broader context of the September Campaign of 1939). The Warsaw Uprising appears more often in Polish games - there was a relatively simple strategy board game *Grey Ranks* (*Szare Szeregi*) published by a wargaming company in 2009 to little success; a video game *Uprising44: The Silent Shadows*, a shooter with RTS elements from 2012, a huge commercial and critical flop; and a relatively successful FPS game *Enemy Front* from 2014 with some levels set during the Warsaw Uprising. Little Insurgents is chosen for the analysis because of its particularly interesting relation with the notions of victory and failure, as well as its influence on the whole new wave of Polish historical board games.

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In regard to game conventions used, it is also important to note that these games are products aimed at a general, mainstream audience, and they do not belong to a wargaming genre in a standard sense of the word. Historical board wargames, typically, aim for realistic simulation of historical battles and wars, and are usually designed as competitive struggle between two players; the possibility of taking both sides of the conflict is inherent part of their design, connected to a potential of exploring counterfactuals (*what-ifs*) of historical events, which is an important part of the appeal of games for many wargaming hobbyists. While in the so-called *realism vs. playability* debate in the wargaming community there were varied stances on where to put accent and how to design battles with uneven forces, there was a general preference for both sides of the conflict being playable and enjoyable. That being said, victory could be defined in non-obvious terms, for example as a relative divergence from the historical outcome instead of its complete reversal (Sabin, 2012). Moreover, wargaming hobbyists often deny any ethical or political motivation in their choice of one of the conflicting sides (Peterson, 2012); it is quite obvious that, for instance, in a competitive wargame set in the European theatre of World War II somebody has to play as Nazi Germany. While regular wargames depicting battles from the Polish history that are being created in Poland (most notably by the company Taktyka i Strategia) typically allow for playing on both sides, the new wave of Polish history-themed board games aimed at general market uses different genre conventions. For these games, reinforcing cultural memory and national identity is a priority, thus putting players in the role of Poland's enemies is potentially problematic and generally avoided, most usually through putting more weight on cooperative rather than competitive mechanics. For instance, in the card game *Rok 1863* (about the January Uprising against Russian Empire), players assume roles of the leaders of different Polish insurgent squads, fighting with the common enemy, but competing for "glory points"; in *Ta Ziemia* (*This Land*) about organising the Pope John Paul II's first pilgrimage to Poland in 1979, each player is a group or institution connected with the democratic opposition, and all players act against the Communist authorities trying to sabotage the visit. When the game *WarCard: Afganistan* depicting the fight between Polish forces (as part of ISAF troops) and the Taliban in Afghanistan was published in 2013, it was met with some controversy due to the possibility of playing on the Taliban side (Janik et al., 2013). In general, most of the titles of the new wave of Polish historical board games employ the dialectics of heroism and victimhood; most of them are set during the periods in which

Poland was subject to military or political domination from the outside, like in the time of World War II or the post-war Polish People's Republic (1944–1989) under the Communist, Soviet-influenced rule. The typical way of depicting characters of these games is to underline both the oppression under which they live and their heroic opposition against it. Since in these games roles assumed by the players are so strongly connected with identity discourses, the topic of enacting (or avoiding) historical failures becomes especially significant, and approaches to categories of victory and failure discussed in the wargaming community are not sufficient to explain discursive aspects of the games described in this article.

The uprising without violence. *Little Insurgents*

Mali Powstańcy. Warszawa 1944 (*Little Insurgents. Warsaw 1944*) by Filip Miłuński is a family-oriented board game with cooperative mechanics and a drawn, cartoonish visual style, published in partnership with the Warsaw Rising Museum.[2] Each player commands a scout patrol (consisting of individual young scouts represented as tokens) moving through Warsaw and delivering orders during the Warsaw Uprising in 1944. The theme of the game is the activity of the Scout Military Mail, and the historical brochure in three languages (written by an academic historian Stanisław F. Ozimek, PhD) added to the instructions provides the necessary background. As we can read in the brochure:

> The Scout Military Mail is one of the extraordinary phenomena of the Warsaw Rising. Its establishment came not only as a fulfilment of the need to stay in touch with the loved ones, but also served as one of the symbols of the functioning of the legal Polish State, and proved that the society was capable of self-organisation in extreme circumstances.

It is clear that this description is not purely informational, but also didactical: it aims to underline the heroism of scout volunteers in the face of danger and dire conditions and the importance of establishing institutions such as the Scout Military Mail during the Warsaw Uprising. Other parts of the brochure also support this claim (English version of the brochure quoted verbatim): "In extreme combat conditions, all post branches, functioned perfectly, as well as sorting and censorship offices (military information was removed). Letters were duly distributed by boys and girls – mail carriers devoted in their service to free Poland."

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[2] 'Warsaw Rising Museum' is the official English name of the museum. When not referring to this institution specifically, I use the name 'Warsaw Uprising' for the historical event.

Before describing the mechanics of the game, it is important to highlight the very choice of the topic. Since the game is family-oriented (recommended for age 8 and older) and – as one could read in the promotional materials – has 'no elements of violence', Scout Military Mail seems a suitable part of history of the Warsaw Uprising to be presented in a game for a twofold reason: it allows to depict a non-violent part of the uprising struggle while still remembering the dedication and heroism of the insurgents (in this instance: the teenage members of the underground scouting, which was at the time part of the underground Home Army). However, designing a game about the Warsaw Uprising containing 'no elements of violence' requires making several highly non-neutral discursive omissions. The materials added to the game not only do not mention the casualties among the Scout Military Mail, but also casualties during the Warsaw Uprising at large.

As we know from multiple historical accounts, the Warsaw Uprising was a violent military struggle against the Nazi Germany lasting for over two months, in which the Polish forces were ultimately defeated, with the estimated number of casualties reaching 200,000, most of them civilians. Among the events taking place during the Warsaw Uprising, there were heavy bombings, artillery shellings, mass murders, rapes, planned destruction of the city, displacing the survivors to the labour camps, etc. The decision of the Polish underground forces to start the uprising remains highly controversial to this day; the rationale behind it was to liberate Warsaw with own forces before the entrance of the Red Army, but the wrong predictions made about the front situation, the unexpectedly strong counterattack by the Germans and the lack of support from the Soviets contributed to the disastrous outcome (Davies, 2004). The voices questioning the decision to start the uprising are being somewhat curbed by the official, institutional Polish politics of memory. Kobielska analyses a motto put near the beginning of the exposition at the Warsaw Rising Museum:

> One would need to live through all this to understand that for Warsaw it was impossible not to fight". According to this rhetoric, rejecting the idea of inevitability of the uprising has to result from the lack of first-hand experience of the occupation and the impossibility to understand the motivations of those who had this experience. […] the very existence of another side, namely those who think that there was an alternative to the uprising, is not even suggested, which obviously contributes to the naturalization and neutralization of the proposed perspective. (Kobielska, 2014a, p. 145)

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In *Little Insurgents*, the aim of the players is to deliver as many orders as possible, moving between the places on the map of Warsaw, using cards and special rules for movement. The game is both cooperative and competitive: while the players declaratively play on the same side and share the common goal (or, to be more precise, avoid the common danger – a higher number of German troops entering the field or losing the districts to the Germans), they also compete in the number of orders delivered (modified by the "secret targets" in the extended variant) – there is only one winner of the game. There is no in-universe, diegetic explanation given for the competition aspect. It is unclear what should be the motivation of the scouts competing with other patrols; reward from the command? pride of being superior to others? While the theme of the game suggests unity of all the scouts in the common struggle, the mechanics sometimes makes interrupting other players' plans profitable (for example claiming a high-valued order before another player reaches it). So while the representational layer of the game aims to show the value of cooperation, this ambition is undermined procedurally.

As for lacking "elements of violence" – indeed, in *Little Insurgents* there is no permanent danger presented to the scouts controlled by players. In the basic variant of the game (recommended for children and inexperienced players) there is a token of a German soldier, moving on the board according to the automated rules. When the German soldier reaches a scout, this scout goes to prison and effectively loses the next round. However, in the next round the scout automatically leaves the prison; moreover, the player is free to choose the field on the board to deploy them. This is an important ability in the game based on movement between locations on the board. On one hand, this rule can be seen as a way of equalising the chances after one of the players suffered a handicap – a common occurrence in board game design. On the other hand, this can be used as an exploit – in some situations, being arrested can be used to get to the distant point on the board before other players. Therefore, procedurally, being arrested by a German soldier is not only harmless, but it can be – given specific circumstances - profitable. The careful omission of violence in *Little Insurgents* does not provide a tangible sense of danger or failure during the game, and leads to a radical dissonance between its topic and mechanics: while the insurgents being captured by the enemy soldiers during the Warsaw Uprising would typically face execution, rape, or

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being sent to labour camps, in the game the same situation is treated lightly and without meaningful consequences.

The dissonances peak in the conceptualization of victory and failure. When too many orders stay undelivered, the German troops tokens enter the board, firstly blocking the routes between fields, then taking over and blocking the whole districts for the rest of the game. The message that can be read from this mechanism is clear – undelivered orders lead to worse communication, worse communication leads to losing districts to the Germans, and too many lost districts mean the failure of the uprising. It is obvious that models of specific phenomena presented in the game form are simplified, and yet through procedural arguments they propose a theory on how these phenomena work. So the theory on the success of the uprising presented by *Little Insurgents*, through abstracting from other possible factors, seems to put responsibility on the Scout Military Mail. The mechanics of the game suggests that the teenage scouts had a crucial importance in the success of the whole struggle – a stance that contributes to the heroic depiction of the members of the Scout Military Mail, but also greatly overstates the importance of underage insurgents and obfuscates the broader social and military context of the event. The mechanical failure does not provide a very meaningful educational experience of failure; aside from the obvious possibility of learning from (mechanical) mistakes for the purposes of next game sessions, it does not tell the players anything on the historical reasons or consequences of the fall of the Warsaw Uprising (or any counterfactual variant of the known outcome).

The depiction of victory in *Little Insurgents* is even more confusing from the point of view of remembrance of the Warsaw Uprising. The card "Victory" is put in a specific place in the deck of order cards at the beginning of the game (twelfth from the bottom). Therefore, the game is won automatically after enough orders are successfully delivered. Putting a victory card in a specific place of the deck is essentially a time-limiting mechanic. In the context of the topic of the game, this design decision suggests that the victory simply comes with time; translating it into historical terms, the procedural argument formulated here would be as follows: to win the uprising, the insurgents simply needed to keep fulfilling their tasks for a long enough time. Such claim is ideologically non-neutral for several reasons. Firstly, it suggests that the uprising was possible to win in these specific historical circumstances (the

game does not suggest anyhow that this could be a partial or relative victory). Secondly, it suggests that the duration of resistance was critical in success; an implausible stance considering that the uprising capitulated after over two months of fight, even if it was originally planned to last no more than week. The victory card offers no clue on the diegetic explanation of the victory; it is unknown if it is obtained through a withdrawal of the German forces, a favourable peace agreement signed or the liberation by external forces. Adding to the confusion, the word "victory" is written in three languages that are also being used in the instructions, namely Polish, English and German; the card reads, respectively, "Zwycięstwo!", "Victory!" and "Sieg!" – the last one seeming especially (and probably unintentionally) ironic in this specific context.

However clumsy certain design decisions of *Little Insurgents* may feel, the game is generally in line with the dominant Polish politics of memory on the Warsaw Uprising, promoted actively by the Warsaw Rising Museum (an institutional partner of the game). While the game's depiction (and – to a certain extent – glorification) of underage militants can be seen as ethically dubious, it is grounded in an established tradition of Polish politics of memory. The title of the game clearly refers to the well-known monument of The Little Insurgent erected in Warsaw in 1983, depicting a child combatant. Even if the figure of the Little Insurgent is partially symbolical (children were generally not participating in actual combat, only in auxiliary combat tasks), remembering the underage participants of the uprising is a rather visible motif in the institutional practices (partially thanks to the contemporary Polish scouting organisations which see the underground scouting from the World War II – called Grey Ranks – as an important part of their heritage). Usually though, these practices of remembrance mix the reverence for heroism and bravery of the young insurgents with underlining their tragic situation. This notion of tragedy, as well as any meaningful reflection on the consequences of the Warsaw Uprising, is completely lost in *Little Insurgents*; the mechanics of the game, the discursive omissions in the educational materials and the light-hearted, cartoonish tone of the visual design paint the image of the Warsaw Uprising as a youthful adventure, devoid of violence, confusion and long-term consequences. The ways of depicting victory and failure in the game contribute greatly to these simplifications.

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Winning by repeating failure. *7 Days of Westerplatte*

Was the dissonance between representational and procedural parts of *Little Insurgents* impossible to avoid? Can an event conventionally presented as tragic be successfully depicted in the game form without contradicting or undermining the intended message? The game *7 Days of Westerplatte* (*7 Dni Westerplatte*) designed by Łukasz Woźniak and published by STGames in 2013 provides an interesting case for considering these questions.

The topic of the game is a military event considered the very first episode of World War II in Europe (on September 1st, 1939), namely the German assault on the Polish Military Transit Depot on Westerplatte peninsula in Gdańsk – an army post shortly referred to as 'Westerplatte'. The Polish garrison was under siege, heavily outnumbered, suffering the attack of the infantry, shellings from naval units and air bombings. The crew of Westerplatte signed capitulation after seven days of fighting, which – according to the dominant mode of remembering this event in Poland – is considered a surprisingly long time in such circumstances.

7 Days of Westerplatte is a cooperative game focused on resource management and decisions on attack tactics. The players command the Polish forces while the movement and attacks of the German units are automated by rules and card drawing. Most of the enemy forces are depicted as gradually advancing on four lanes toward the part of the board depicting the Westerplatte garrison. Such convention is often used in the tower defence genre of digital games, where the goal of the player is to fight off increasingly strong waves of opponents, usually coming through the same route. Thematically, zombies are often enemies in this kind of games; here, the German forces are also shown as such steadily advancing danger. The design choices in *7 Days of Westerplatte* are closer to conventions of wargaming than in *Little Insurgents*, but the game is still distinctively different from this genre – there is no possibility of playing on the side of Germany, and German and Polish forces are subjected to different sets of rules. It is clear that the fighting forces are not treated as equal adversaries, and that the identification with overwhelmed Polish heroes is the priority here.

The losing condition for the players in *7 Days of Westerplatte* is relatively straightforward, technical in nature, and easily translatable into real-world scenario: the failure is a result of a

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wall being completely destroyed on two action tiles; then it is assumed that the next assault by the enemy brings the defeat to the Polish side. The victory condition, however, is more interesting: in order to win, the players need to survive the number of turns representing seven days.

Thus, on a representational level of the game the victory in *7 Days of Westerplatte* does not depict the actual military victory over German forces, but surviving the siege as long as the historical defenders did. To put it differently – players aim not to win the fight, but to repeat the failure of the allegedly heroic crew. As mentioned before, there are varied ways of defining victory in classic wargames, and one of the popular ones is measuring how the player's outcome in the historical simulation differed from those known from history (Sabin, 2012). In *7 Days of Westerplatte*, however, this is not the case: the players can repeat the achievement of the Polish defenders, but they cannot surpass it. This might seem counterintuitive, but is in line with the martyrological tone of the Polish politics of memory; the victory in *7 Days of Westerplatte* is not pragmatic, but ritual. The procedural rhetoric behind this design solution also aims to underline the heroism of the historical defenders: the rules of the game assume that withstanding for a longer time was impossible, and giving the players the opportunity to beat this achievement would be inappropriate. In the game aiming for remembrance of the heroic deed, a ritual repetition is more important than counterfactual exploration of possible scenarios.

Ironically, these ideas conveyed by the rules are contradicted in the educational part of the game manual, written by Mariusz Wójtowicz-Podhorski, a historian working in the Westerplatte Museum. The style of the text is rather pompous and even more didactic than the similar material in *Little Insurgents*; the author writes that

> Superbly trained, agile, mentally resilient, well-armed and equipped Polish soldier on Westerplatte, maintaining high morale and patriotism, was rising much above the German soldier. […] No wonder that they held their post for seven days, even though they could have defend themselves just as long as Hel [another military garrison on the Baltic coast], i.e. until October 2nd.

While it is not openly stated in the description, Wójtowicz-Podhorski is a proponent of a revisionist interpretation of the events on Westerplatte, according to which the defenders could easily withstand longer and the capitulation was the result of a mental breakdown of

the garrison commander (see Wójtowicz-Podhorski, 2009). None of the mechanical elements of the game reflects such claims. Again, there is a discrepancy between the procedural rhetoric of the game and its text-based educational content, possibly deriving from the different interpretations of the events on Westerplatte held by the designer and the historian who wrote the introduction to the game. These interpretations are contradictory to some extent, but they both underline heroism and combat skills of the Polish soldiers; if the revisionist interpretation were to be reflected in the game, the rules would need to include a mentally unstable commander and allow the players to withstand thirty two days instead of seven. As I stated before, apart from Wójtowicz-Podhorski's introduction, *7 Days of Westerplatte* seems to support the dominant, heroic narrative of Westerplatte in which withstanding a week-long siege was already a significant achievement. It can be read as an example of employing tragedy in game form in one of the senses pointed by Juul, where "a game has a counterintuitive disconnect between the enjoyment of our accomplishment and our empathy with the plight of the protagonist" (2013, p. 93); starting the game of *7 Days of Westerplatte*, players are expected to identify with the Polish soldiers, but they already know that their (diegetic) failure is inevitable (even if they can still 'win' on the mechanical level). Juul himself later downplays the potential for this kind of tragedy in games, and commenting on the tragic finale of *Red Dead Redemption*, assumes that it works mostly because it is surprising for the player (he also argues that the most interesting ways of representing tragedy in games is based on complicity in ethically dubious actions of the protagonist [p. 110–112]). The case of *7 Days of Westerplatte*, however, shows validity of the first aforementioned interpretation of tragedy in games, where the audience's enjoyment is disconnected from the protagonist's success in the end; typical members of the Polish memory culture understand from the start that they should expect diegetic failure in *7 Days of Westerplatte*, just as typical ancient Athenians presumably expected the death of the eponymous character in the play *Antigone*.

Conclusions

In *Persuasive Games*, Bogost describes a practice of formulating certain claims in a game by using failure expressively:

> If procedural rhetorics function by operationalizing claims about how things work, then videogames can also make claims about how things don't work. […] I want to suggest

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that such games operate by a common procedural rhetoric, the rhetoric of failure.
(Bogost, p. 85)
In his analysis of *September 12th*, Bogost states that in this game "the rules depict the impossibility of achieving a goal given the tools provided" (p. 88).

The analysis of *Little Insurgents* and *7 Days of Westerplatte* through the lens of procedural rhetoric allowed for uncovering and describing dynamics which were not immediately transparent and obvious, for diagnosing the ideological implications of certain mechanics and for assessing their consistency with the openly declared intentions of the game and their broader discursive environment. While both *Little Insurgents* and *7 Days of Westerplatte* depict the events perceived and remembered as failures, they do not seem to use any advanced rhetoric of failure: in the former case, the discursive omissions and simplifications prevent the game from proposing any meaningful stance on the success or failure of the Warsaw Uprising, and in the latter, the experience of (diegetic) failure serves affective and ritual purposes, rather than reflective or speculative purposes. Nevertheless, the thematic choices of these games are rather unusual in a medium that is predominantly concerned with progress, completion and winning. The tension between game conventions and the ideological implications of these titles produces some non-obvious discursive effects, and further research on the uses of failure in games of different themes and genres will surely prove useful.

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Résumé

Cet article s'attache à analyser les aspects idéologiques dans la représentation d'échecs militaires dans les jeux de façon à réfléchir sur le potentiel du média quant à l'intégration d'évènements tragiques. La démonstration se déploie à partir d'une étude de cas de deux jeux

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de plateaux polonais à thématique historique (*Little Insurgents* et *7 Days of Westerplatte*). Les arguments procéduraux formés dans les jeux sont analysés et testés pour leur cohérence par rapport aux couches représentationnelles. Les aspects idéologiques des jeux sont présentés à la lumière de la politique dominante de la mémoire en Pologne (les pratiques culturelles consistant à sélectionner les événements passés qui sont dignes d'être mémorisés par la communauté, et l'attribution de certaines valeurs à ces événements)

Mot-clés : rhétorique procédurale, jeux de plateau, échec, politique de la mémoire, jeux historiques

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