

Reconfiguring Narrative in Contemporary Board Games: Story-Making Across the Competitive-Cooperative Spectrum

Adam Brown
Deakin University

Deb Waterhouse-Watson
Monash University

Abstract

While on first appearance tabletop board games would seem to epitomise ‘traditional’ or ‘old’ media, the impact of the rise of crowdfunding and online forums on the production, reception, and actual use of games by players reveals them to be at the centre of the (r)evolution in transmedia (inter)textualities. There is an intrinsic complexity in the multiplicity of narratives generated both within and between various board and card game incarnations; yet, board game culture has thus far been substantially neglected by scholars (with few exceptions), which is also the case in relation to how transmedia relationships reconfigure the meaning(s) shaped by and through texts, by players. This paper will address these issues through a close analysis of selected board games that adapt influential screen texts, highlighting that the frequent subversion or even inversion of the storyworlds of the source texts impact strongly on ‘conventional’ modes of narrative and identification. Governed by the adoption of various mechanics and innovative uses of the ‘competitive-cooperative’ spectrum, such transformations in board games frequently entail significant ideological implications – both positive and negative – for how meaning(s) might be generated through play. Through a textual analysis of the board games, complemented by an examination of the reception of these games in video reviews and discussion forums, we argue that the relationship between popular screen texts and the board game narratives that expand, revise and even resist them, offer considerable insight into the complex synergies between form and content.

Keywords: Transmedia, Board Games, Card Games, Firefly, Battlestar Galactica, Lord of the Rings, Spartacus, Screen Media, Reception Studies, Narrative, Adaptation Theory, Transmedia Storytelling.

Adaptation theory has long since moved beyond simplistic notions of ‘fidelity’ to an ‘original’ text. In 1975, Geoffrey Wagner formulated three categories of filmic adaptation: ‘transposition’, a direct transfer to screen with minimum apparent interference; ‘commentary’, which retains the core structure despite some alteration or reinterpretation; and ‘analogy’, which involves a significant departure from the source text in order to create an ‘original’ work (222). Two decades later, Brian McFarlane took this further by working to replace ‘fidelity’s’ privileged status entirely with an emphasis on intertextuality, positioning the literary precursor as a “resource” (1996: 10). Yet, conceiving the use of different media as transmedia storytelling – heavily impacted by the

‘participatory’ nature of today’s digital media culture – replaces these processes of adaptation with more complex ways of constructing a fictional universe, indicating considerably more diverse, flexible, and interactive frameworks within which texts and textual meanings are generated. While most storyworlds arguably retain a ‘narrative core’ (Scolari 2009: 598), subsequent or concurrent texts extend, enrich, and above all provide a fundamentally different experience of that world.

The transmedia (inter)textualities of board games inspired by feature films and television programs exemplify this, with many games extending the storyworld in particularly sophisticated ways. The construction of narrative(s) within board game

adaptations, and how gamers are positioned in relation to these narratives, reveal numerous and often ‘unconventional’ modes of player positioning. While the participatory potential of digital games and other web-based transmedia texts has been widely recognised (Perryman 2008; Phillips 2012), board and card games are rarely considered cultural texts whereby players interact with and participate in a narrative. The multiplicity of stories and narrative perspectives created within various ‘offline’ game incarnations of, for example, the *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Game of Thrones*, *The Hunger Games*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *The Walking Dead*, and *Spartacus* franchises highlight the strategies game designers employ to build on or, in some cases, *away from* the narratives which produced the games. We therefore ask how do the more ‘conventional’ narrative perspectives of film and television source texts translate into board games?

Just as the shift from novel to film involves literally rewriting the former (O’Flinn 1986: 198), board/card games (‘board’ or ‘tabletop’ games hereafter) radically alter the filmic devices of cinema and television by replacing them with entirely different conventions. Governed by the eclectic adoption and combination of various mechanics and often innovative uses of what we term the ‘competitive-cooperative’ spectrum, such transformations in tabletop games invariably alter how meaning(s) might be generated through play. The nature of transmedia storytelling is to expand ‘the range of narrative possibility’ beyond the typical beginning, middle, and end (Jenkins 2006: 119). However, the subversion or inversion of the ‘narrative core’ in some games can be seen to disrupt even these processes of telling/discovering/building stories about pre-existing storyworlds. This paper addresses these issues through analysing several board games that transform the narratives of influential (and commercially viable) filmic and televisual texts for the tabletop. We contend that the relationships between popular screen texts and the board game narratives that expand, revise, and even resist them offer considerable insights into the complex synergies between form and content at the heart of transmedia storytelling.

With few exceptions, scholars have largely neglected board game culture, and this is even more

the case in relation to how transmediality reconfigures the meaning(s) shaped by and through games. Recent studies such as Stewart Woods’ (2012) investigation into Eurogames, and Sarah Bowman’s (2010) work on role-playing games, have been immensely valuable in furthering understandings of the social aspects of gaming; however, little attention has been given to the textualities of board games and the ways in which they position players in relation to narratives. Similarly, studies of transmedia storytelling mostly focus on film, television, digital media, comic books, novels, and digital games (Jenkins 2006; Perryman 2008; Phillips 2012; Scolari 2009), but have thus far omitted tabletop games from critical attention. Reflecting this, we undertake a textual analysis of board game aesthetics and mechanics – and, crucially, how they intersect – complemented by our own gameplay experiences when engaging with the games in question. Moving from a reflection on how current writing on transmedia storytelling intersects with narrative theory, we provide a thematic analysis of competitive games, cooperative games, and games from different places on this spectrum which set aside – if not undermine – the narrative core of their source texts.

Transmediality, Perspective, and the Narrative Core

Much narrative theory is preoccupied with dissecting and fixing the form of narrative construction (Bal 1997; Cohan and Shires 1998; Martin 1986). Terminology is always contested, although conceptions of authorial agency as absolute and narrative structure as a fixed and finite property underpin each theory. Such conceptions do not translate easily to board games, as players hold a large degree of agency, and their choices (constrained by game mechanics and chance) influence how the story is constructed. Deb Waterhouse-Watson’s concept of the ‘fabula pool’ – ‘a collection of events and actors from which a writer selects, to organise into a story’ (2013: 14) – provides a useful starting point for theorising narrative construction in board games. If the final narrative(s) of a game session begin from a ‘fabula pool’, this accounts for the range of narrative possibilities. Indeed, the process of constructing the story is as much about which elements are selected as how they

are arranged. Different characters may be chosen; they travel to different locations, acquire different items or abilities, or engage in battles. Markedly different narrative outcomes can be drawn from the same 'fabula pool'.

In a board game narrative (or, better, an instance of a narrative within a particular gameplay experience), no single agent determines which events occur and in what sequence. While a similar point might be made of filmic or televisual texts given the large cast and crew involved, this is fundamentally different from players' interactions with board game rules, components, and mechanics. In fact, gamers themselves can be considered 'narrators' (even in the act of reading narrative events from cards, or parts of the rulebook out to other players), or 'authors', given the narrative/tactical decisions they are encouraged to make. Depending on the type of game, players cooperate to build the narrative, or compete, working against one another to reach different outcomes (some recent games even offer a choice between these two paradigms, or combine them). The size and scope of the fabula pool will vary from game to game, and the degree of agency afforded to players depends on the mechanics of a game's design; nevertheless, players 'participate' in the narrative's construction.

Perspective is also central to narrative theory, and the means of construction promotes different degrees of identification and sympathy with characters. We use 'identification' as Jonathan Cohen explains it: 'imagining being someone else and imagining behaving like someone else' (2001: 246). In a first person narration, where the narrator speaks as 'I' (and is thus also the focalizer), identification and sympathy are often thought to be strongest as the reader has direct and sole access to the character's perspective. In third person narration, where the narrator is external to the story, there is a greater narrative distance from characters; nevertheless, the narrative can be focalized through one (or more) characters, so that readers are positioned to identify more strongly with these characters, being given access to their perspective. Sympathy can even be more easily generated as third person narration appears to be more 'objective'. Second person narration is a rare form where the addressee is constructed as a character in the story. The focalizer is implicitly the *empirical reader*, and

yet the reader-as-character is often constructed in ways that may not sit comfortably with them (due to an implied gender, for example).

In a board game, with players often taking on the roles of both 'authors' and 'narrators', narrative voice is subjective and fluid: playing as a character combines first and second person narration, and sometimes third, depending on the individual player and game. In many games, players articulate the actions they are going to take using 'I' (sometimes a requirement, as in *The Hunger Games*-inspired game *Catching Fire: Seeds of Rebellion*, 2013), thus acting simultaneously as author and narrator. Some games address players in the second person, so that authors and narrators external to the player are present. Further, there is commonly a broader narrative level 'above' this where the game's overall storyline (often with a linear structure of passing hours, rounds, or seasons) serves as an umbrella over each player/character's activities, providing gamers with an 'omniscient' third-person perspective on events running concurrently with more 'closed' involvement with their individual character(s). Some players talk about the actions 'their' character will take in the third person. However, this does not necessarily mean less identification with a character, and in fact the reverse may be true. Speaking as 'I' may indicate a lack of connection to the character and narrative, whereas speaking in the third person signals a recognition of the character's presence in the game and storyworld.

A crucial concept underpinning our examination of transmedia storytelling in board games is the 'narrative core'. Scolari conceptualizes this as primarily comprising a storyworld's first form (2009: 598), but this is not always a clear-cut case – as Will Brooker's poststructuralist analysis of the 'ambiguous relationship' of Christopher Nolan's recent Batman films to earlier incarnations of the Dark Knight reveals (2012: xi). Nonetheless, even here, the primary plot threads, protagonists, antagonists and so on can be found repeated across platforms and versions. In the case of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, for instance, the adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien's novels for the screen in director Peter Jackson's blockbuster trilogy – despite their close links to the pre-text overall – can be seen to shift or expand some narrative elements with the increased involvement of certain

characters. Nevertheless, the overall the core narrative drives remain the same: the protagonist-heroes must complete their quest to defeat the dragon Smaug (*The Hobbit*) or destroy the ring of power while avoiding its corrupting influence (*The Lord of the Rings*). As our analysis of several board game case studies will demonstrate, the ways in which tabletop game narratives adopt – and sometimes actively resist – the narrative core reveals important facets of transmediality on the tabletop. Narrative perspective can also play a role in examining the ways in which a text appropriates a storyworld's narrative core, as this may even be inverted. When this involves more than just a shift in point of view, it can result in the narrative perspective being reversed to position all gamers against those with whom they would conventionally identify via the source text, reversing and marginalising the narrative's core drivers.

A key point to note here is that the activities and behaviours of board gamers cannot be determined by textual analysis, such as that which follows, any more than they can be determined by a game designer. Thus the following reflections, as with all textual critique, must be qualified as they primarily stem from an investigation into the textualities of games (rulebooks, mechanics and components). The nature of 'play' opens up gamers' engagement with tabletop games to a myriad of possible 'readings' and uses of any game (perhaps to a greater extent than most other media); while the majority of players will be expected to play in similar ways, customised 'in-house' rules proliferate (published online or developed privately) rendering this inherently contingent. As in any critical analysis, findings concerning audience/player positioning are provisional, though they do shed light on the ways in which cultural texts like board games work – particularly those that transfer storyworlds from audio-visual media to fragmentary physical collections of boards, cards, plastic pieces and dice. It must also be noted here that the following analysis is informed by our own extensive engagement with these games and their pre-texts (and numerous others), which inevitably influences our impressions. We highlight this explicitly where relevant and useful, although this personal contextual issue need not be considered intrusive or problematic to the research. Indeed, playing games (in

conjunction with other methodologies) is the only certain way to approach understanding them; direct, self-conscious, and ethical immersion into the subject of one's explorations always contributes value to any quantitative or qualitative study.

In his multifaceted interpretation of third-person action/adventure game *God of War*, David Ciccoricco emphasises how narratological, textual analyses of such texts are valuable because they 'are not simply video games with appealing stories, but games in which story mechanics and game mechanics are integrated, interdependent, and ultimately inseparable when it comes to understanding how and why we play them' (2010: 233). The same can be said of contemporary board games of all kinds. Indeed, many of these reflexively highlight their creation of narratives (and not only through rulebooks providing literary backstories outlining a storyworld's mythology). Instructions for Fantasy Flight's *Beowulf: The Movie Board Game* (2007) describe each player's goal as 'striv[ing] to tell the most epic version of the Beowulf saga' by 'guiding the hero and his companions to recount the chronicle in the most exciting way possible'. Significantly, a game's three rounds are framed as 'Acts', revealing an attempt to connect the meta-narrative(s) with Robert Zemeckis' digitally-animated film, although the game uses no filmic images. However, the game's tile placement mechanic (which requires players to place consecutive cardboard tokens in lines to achieve the most advantageous numerical outcome) arguably fails to fulfil the thematic promise of recounting an epic narrative. The game also strictly limits each player's interaction with their Beowulf figure, which can only be used in one 'Act'. A similar lack of in-depth engagement with narrative and character can be found in Cryptozoic's more recent card game loosely based on the theme of *The Walking Dead* (2013). Essentially a short 'filler' game of hand management and mathematical scoring, any particular randomised deck chosen for a game may contain no 'hero' cards depicting sympathetic (or unsympathetic) human characters from the series. Comparatively simple games like these have led to scepticism in existing board game literature about the merits of game versions of films and television programs (Woods 2012: 17-20); however, a number of more complex tabletop versions of screen texts

reveal interesting differences between transmedia stories constructed using innovative gameplay modes.

Narrative Construction and Player Positioning across the Competitive-Cooperative Spectrum

Determining which board games count as adaptations of film and television source texts is a slippery process. Many games thematically linked to *The Lord of the Rings* and *Game of Thrones* explicitly draw on J.R.R. Tolkien and George R.R. Martin's writings rather than their film and television reiterations, though such games, including Fantasy Flight's *The Lord of the Rings: The Card Game* (2011), *Middle-Earth Quest* (2009), *War of the Ring* (2004), *A Game of Thrones: The Board Game* (2011) and *A Game of Thrones: The Card Game* (2008) may be played with Peter Jackson's films and the HBO series informing gameplay as much as, if not more than, the books, depending on the gamers' experience of these other texts. Other games, such as Flying Frog Productions' *A Touch of Evil: The Supernatural Game* (2008) and *Last Night on Earth: The Zombie Game* (2007), derive their 'cinematic' aesthetics from popular movie genres, but do not reference specific films. For the sake of clarity, we focus on more clear-cut transmedia texts, which generally borrow images or plot points directly from the associated films or series and incorporate these into game components and mechanics. At the time of writing, the 'Movies/TV/Radio' forum on the website *Board Game Geek* lists 4,404 games as thematically linked to these media, underlining the impossibility of covering the vast range of games comprehensively. Without aiming to making sweeping generalisations, this section surveys what we term the 'competitive-cooperative' spectrum by reflecting on selected examples that exemplify important facets of transmedia storytelling, narrative construction, and player positioning.

If contemporary board game culture can be considered marginalised within game studies and academic scholarship, perhaps the least considered subsection of this topic is cooperative games. The last several years have seen a marked increase in both the number and proportion of tabletop games that, to varying degrees, encourage players to work together in order to win 'against the game' (usually

represented by an automated and/or randomised series of steps that provide tasks or challenges to the players). Crucially, the competitive/cooperative distinction is not an either/or binary, as many games require players to collaborate somewhat before or while attempting to undermine or outmanoeuvre other players, seeking to be the sole victor or the highest scorer in a team win. We conceptualise this variety as a 'spectrum' along which games may be marketed as 'competitive', 'cooperative', and 'semi-cooperative', although they differ in the degree of co-operativeness or competitiveness required. To complicate matters more, even greater flexibility can be found in games such as *Fortune and Glory: The Cliffhanger Game* (2011) and *Conquest of Planet Earth: The Space Alien Game* (2011), which can each be played in competitive, cooperative, team, or solo modes.

The position(s) along the competitive-cooperative spectrum that any given game occupies is highly significant in terms of how narratives are constructed and players positioned to identify (or otherwise) with characters. There is an intriguing irony in competitive games which are inspired by screen texts that revolve around working together to solve problems or survive life-threatening situations. *Castle: The Detective Game* (2013) pits gamers against one another by encouraging them to take on the persona of one of the show's main investigators and solve a murder case before the other players. Likewise, *The Lord of the Rings* deck-building games (2013) use similar mechanics to the competitive Ascension card game series (2010-2013), requiring players to 'gain' allies and other useful cards from a central area to defeat the fellowship's archenemies and gain more points than other players attempting to do the same. When opposing players 'possess' Legolas and Gimli as their starting characters, the irony deepens as the in-film friendship between the two characters is at best set aside, and at worst actively undermined – thus contradicting a significant sub-theme of the narrative core which sees the elf and dwarf struggling to overcome their race-based hatred for one another. On the other hand, Cryptozoic's *The Walking Dead Board Game* (2011) and *The Walking Dead Board Game: The Best Defense* (2013) explicitly attempt to blend cooperative and competitive play to simulate the 'every man for himself [sic]' dynamic of the popular HBO

programme. Other games at various points on the competitive-cooperative spectrum further reveal the multiplicity of narratives and gamer subject positions available. *Firefly: The Game* (2013), for example, reveals immensely different processes of narrative construction and identification from the games mentioned above, including a more nuanced mode of gamer positioning, through a competitive framework.

Firefly: The Game

Writer-director Joss Whedon's *Firefly* television series merges generic conventions of the space opera and the western to depict the (mis)adventures of the roguish captain and crew of the *Serenity* (a *Firefly*-class spaceship), who encounter a series of close calls with the 'Alliance' authorities and barbaric 'Reavers' in their quest for wealth and, more often, survival. Despite being controversially cancelled after only one season, the 2002 series developed a cult following and was brought to the big screen as a feature film, *Serenity*, in 2005. The game's components depict locations, characters, vehicles, and props from its televisual source text so that players can explore and experiment with various scenarios in the popular storyworld created by Joss Whedon. *Firefly: The Game* offers players the choice of six 'Story Cards' during set-up, one of which will be the focus of each game's proceedings (see Figure 1). The 'Desperadoes' Story

Card, for instance, tells players in the second person that 'Your checkered past is catching up with you and the Alliance is hot on your tail!', reflecting a key preoccupation of the series' portrayal of the roguish crew of *Serenity* and their frequent encounters with authorities. Each Story Card provides for differences in game setup, ensuring – along with other features of the text – that each gaming experience will be markedly different from all others. The game's narrative focus is further exemplified in players' selection of a *Firefly*-class ship and 'Leader', who flies around various Sectors of space to complete 'jobs', purchase weapons and ship upgrades, hire crew, avoid entanglements with the Alliance and marauding Reavers. While each player pursues the same goals, laid out consecutively on the Story Card, the ways in which players accomplish these (or fail to do so) vary dramatically due to the large variety of encounter, job, and 'misbehaving' cards which players are randomly allocated. Although the game is competitive in design, the ways in which a player can intrude on another's gameplay are minimal (the only negative action possible is described below). Instead, players can buy, sell, or swap various game components using a trading mechanic identified by the game as the ability to 'Parley with Rivals'. Rather than encourage gameplay of domination or extermination, as in most war games, the emphasis in *Firefly* is on narrative and



Figure 1: *Firefly: The Game*. Image by Adam Brown.

the mini-quests that are accumulated to form a multilayered story arc; players are therefore positioned to be involved in their competitors' journeys, as well as their own.

Gameplay in *Firefly* entails a flexible mode of engagement with elements of the science-fiction series, particularly in the multifaceted identification promoted with the storyworld's inhabitants. The ship's captain or leader remains a permanent fixture throughout the game, as even if 'killed' while on assignment, they are simply returned to the ship rather than discarded or removed from the game like all other characters. These characters, represented by cards with their name (or a label, for less individualised figures such as 'Enforcers', 'Scrappers', or 'Med Staff'), a photograph from the television show, their special abilities, and how much they cost to be hired and paid for each successful job. Significantly, the frequent conflict amongst the *Serenity* crew in the *Firefly* television series is represented through a feature of the game that renders any members of the crew 'disgruntled' once certain conditions are met, for example: if a player does not pay crew members their cut, or forces a moral character to partake in an immoral job. If a disgruntled character is not sent on 'shore leave', they will abandon ship if they become displeased with their circumstances a second time. Even though the aesthetic design of the cards depicting leaders and regular crew members are identical in shape and aesthetic design, players are positioned to view these characters in starkly different ways.

While one's leader in *Firefly* is literally indispensable, crew members (disgruntled or otherwise) can be summarily dismissed to a discard pile as long as the player's ship is located in an appropriate Sector (board space). Further highlighting the discardability of these secondary characters, who may also be traded using the aforementioned 'Parley with Rivals' function, disgruntled crew can be stolen by other players in the same Sector if they can pay their hiring fee. While losing a character in this way might be mildly frustrating to one's game strategy, crew can easily be replaced and re-hired if available, rendering them expendable; despite the fact that some of these crew are major figures in the narrative core of the series. The regular process of using, discarding, and replacing characters is not unique to competitive

games, but is also evident in cooperative games like *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* (2013) and *The Lord of the Rings: Dice Building Game* (2013). Yet while Tolkien's much-beloved characters in these games are – to use game terminology – 'retrieved', 'recruited', or 'mustered' for battle, *Firefly's* emphasis on the show's characters' hiring and maintenance costs commodifies the characters. Cards depicting central characters usually include quotes from the series to personalise them and create links to the series – for example, the card for *Firefly's* mechanic Kaylee includes a quote which evokes her manner of speaking and role in the series: 'Don't know how. Machines just got workings and they talk to me'. However, this personalisation is heavily subordinated to their points value and role in the game. On one level, this commodification again reflects a central theme of the series: money. Indeed, the rulebook goes to great lengths to connect the game mechanics to the series by incorporating fifteen direct quotations of dialogue on pages with associated gameplay instructions. For instance, just below the directions for hiring disgruntled crew away from other players, a prominent caption contains words spoken by the show's protagonist, Malcolm Reynolds: 'I do the job; and then I get paid'. On another level, the commodification of the crew runs counter to the series' portrayal of such characters, who are treated as integral to the narrative. While 'Mal' Reynolds does threaten his crew with dismissal on multiple occasions, it is clear that he values them, and thus the game's emphasis on commerce at the expense of character relationships misses a key aspect of the storyworld. Nevertheless, through a variety of means, *Firefly: The Game* reveals a nuanced transmedia relationship that effectively captures some key elements of the series by providing an expansive fabula pool for players to navigate. Another transformation of an immensely popular science-fiction television series accomplishes this within a more – though not fully – cooperative paradigm.

Battlestar Galactica: The Board Game

Battlestar Galactica: The Board Game (2008) and its three expansions draw extensively on the immensely popular science-fiction television series that ran from 2004 to 2009. A remake of a series that began in 1978, *Battlestar Galactica* portrays the daily



Figure 2: *Battlestar Galactica: The Board Game*. Image by Adam Brown.

struggles of the last remnants of humanity being hunted through space by cylon, evolved humanoid versions of robots initially created and exploited by the human colonies, who now seek the extinction of their creators. The game provides a sophisticated blend of cooperative and competitive play that seems to disrupt aspects of the core narrative in constructing alternative stories taking place within the world. Nevertheless, the continued popularity of the game (the core game is ranked 22nd on the *Board Game Geek* website) indicates that this does not inhibit fans of the series from engaging with it. The fabula pool is extensive, with a range of playable characters, and battles and other events brought about through chance or player choices, which rarely accord with the events of the series. Nevertheless, these significant differences occur within overarching themes that closely reflect the experience of the source text. For the majority of the series, viewers are unsure which characters are human and which are non-human cylon actively working against the human fleet, or sleeper agents who are themselves unaware that they are cylon. Running in parallel with these tensions, one to two players discover at the beginning or mid-point of the game that they are a cylon. Until the cylon(s) are revealed to all, cooperation can be somewhat ambivalent, as helping the humans' mission too much in the first phase may be counter-productive to

a player if they later become a cylon. Players must also remain suspicious of each other: working out early who is a cylon provides a distinct advantage to the human characters. Further, the characters to be revealed as cylon will mostly be different from those in the core narrative, which clearly disrupts what viewers already know about these characters. However, the way that this 'traitor' mechanism functions mirrors the tension and uncertainty seen between (and within) characters on screen, and thus reflects the essence, as it were, of the core narrative and the storyworld. From a viewer's perspective watching the series, any of the characters might have been a cylon until the final reveal.

Engagement with one's *Battlestar Galactica* character is more sustained and in-depth than many games. Character cards are detailed, and each possesses three unique abilities based on characteristics in the series: two positive and one negative (see Figure 2). For example, Chief Galen Tyrol's ability is 'blind devotion', which viewers of the series may recognise as stemming from his efforts to hide his girlfriend Sharon's sabotage attempts in Season 1. Together with the cardboard game piece featuring a photograph of the character's face and upper body, players familiar with the series are continually positioned to see their character as the one introduced in the series. Characters are also assigned the roles of

Admiral and President according to their rank, which will again rarely reflect those in the series directly: although the likelihood of the reckless Kara Thrace becoming President or Admiral, let alone both (as happened in one of our own games), is laughable, game events and the combination of characters playing make it entirely possible. However, rather than fundamentally altering the *character*, these possible events drawn from the fabula pool allow for greater player engagement, as the ways this comes about (sending other players' characters to the brig) are consistent with the storyworld established in the television series. Further, attempting to uncover the traitorous cylons requires significant interaction between players, and in our experience of playing with fans of the series, much of this drew on our prior knowledge (and vocabulary) of the characters. This combination of factors can greatly enhance player identification and immersion in the storyworld.

In games where the narrative produced will inevitably be different each time, this creates the effect of close 'parallel universes', rather than inconsistency or infidelity, where a few significant departures from the narrative core can create alternative narratives that stand alongside that of the source text. There are some games, however, that take these narrative disruptions much further, bringing about an *inversion* of the narrative core that relies on a perspective on and of the storyworld that subverts source texts in new and, for some, discomfiting ways.

Struggles in the Storyworld: The Inversion of the Narrative Core

In his pioneering work, Henry Jenkins writes of the need for a transmedia storyworld to remain 'consistent with what viewers know' (2006: 106). Of course, it is possible that some players have little or no knowledge of a board game's source text, though in the cases under examination here – involving storyworlds that are widely recognised and games that are designed for/marketed to fans – this is unlikely to be the typical case. When players (with the requisite intertextual knowledge) are able to experience a storyworld from the perspective of the narrative core's villains in games such as *Game of Thrones* (2012), *Star Wars: The Card Game*, and *Battlestar Galactica*

(particularly in its expansions, where gamers can be revealed as Cylon Leaders from the beginning of play), it might be tempting to claim that the processes of narrative construction and identification in these games signify a radical departure from the storyworld. However, this is not a new phenomenon, with *Dr Who*'s evil Daleks starring in a series of spin-off books in the 1960s and 1970s (Perryman 2008: 22), and the *Battlestar Galactica* series itself incorporating the television movie *The Plan* (2009), which portrays events from the first two series from the cylons' perspective. Despite some players taking on the role of villains in tabletop games ranging from Decipher's *Star Wars: Customisable Card Game* (1995) to Fantasy Flight's *Star Wars: X-Wing Miniatures Game* (2012), the narrative core remains intact. As previously argued, *Battlestar Galactica* retains the essence of its core, and when different players control the forces of good and evil in such games, the status (moral and otherwise) of these sides, and the relationship between them, remains relatively stable. The light and dark sides are both displayed on the tabletop opposing each other, just like in the world of the source text, and players familiar with the narrative core share a collective understanding of this state of play, no matter which side they are positioned to identify (and hope to win) with. The core's primary 'quest' remains in play, even when some gamers play as the villains – they simply dynamise other characters and goals within the narrative. Yet some games disrupt these more familiar processes of telling, discovering, or building stories about pre-existing storyworlds, and in fact invert or set aside the narrative core.

The Lord of the Rings: Nazgul – A Semi-Cooperative Board Game

On first glance, the board of *The Lord of the Rings: Nazgul* (2012) (see Figure 3), which visually depicts key battleground sites from *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers*, and *The Return of the King*, appears to follow (albeit simultaneously) the narratives of Peter Jackson's first three Tolkien-inspired films. However, these sites are given the unconventional labels of 'the defeat of Rohan', 'the conquest of Gondor', and 'the capture of the Ring-bearer', and are therefore the inverse of those of the narrative core, as they represent the failure of the fellowship's

quest at various stages. Unlike most tabletop versions of this popular storyworld, *Nazgul* sees each player take control of a villainous nazgul, with their mission being to work together on campaigns that seek to defeat the sympathetic characters and armies of the pre-text. The game's semi-cooperative designation refers to the fact that players must cooperate in order to defeat the 'cursed Hobbits', as the rule-book calls them. If all heroes from the narrative core are not defeated in each setting being contested, all players lose the battle. However, each turn players also 'vie for Sauron's favour', betting against one another to gain advantages in upcoming battles, so that they can gain the most points and win the game. On the surface, this seems akin to Jenkins' observations that a video game where the avatars are James Bond villains presents the storyworld 'from an alternative moral perspective' (2006: 106). However, the implications of narrative construction and player positioning in *Nazgul* are far more drastic. Focalising the narrative exclusively through these characters and pitting them against the source texts' heroes *inverts* the narrative core, as all players attempt to bring about the inverse of these events. Further, it is not simply the same story seen from an alternative perspective, but the narrative drive is radically altered – far beyond that of the selective disruption of narrative in the

Battlestar Galactica board game. Players' active involvement as narrators and actors within the *Nazgul* story, and the necessity of seeking success in evil defeating good (not that such distinctions really apply anymore), mean that numerous heroes with whom fans of the trilogy identify and empathise with need not only to be conceived as the enemy, but killed in order to proceed through the game. Each turn, random hero cards are drawn by the player and placed as obstacles to the nazguls' victory in combat. If a player successfully defeats a hero, they gain that card for its victory point value, rendering the virtuous protagonists of the narrative core a threat to be conquered and a commodity to be pillaged.

Importantly, those familiar with the wider *Lord of the Rings* storyworld approach this aspect of the *Nazgul* game in different ways, as this excerpt from Tom Vasel and Sam Healey's online review (2012) for the influential board game podcast/network The Dice Tower indicates:

- Healey: At one point, I killed Legolas, and I felt bad...
Vasel: Yeah, we're working together... and we're like, ah- no, no high-fives there. We just killed Legolas.
Healey: We just killed the coolest archer ever.
Vasel: What have we done?



Figure 3: *The Lord of the Rings: Nazgul*. Image by Adam Brown.

These reviewers, clearly fans of the film trilogy, were uncomfortable with how the game positioned them as actors within this particular narrative. However, some respondents to the review find this part of the game immensely satisfying. User-generated comments on the *YouTube* video and *Board Game Geek*.com page where the review is embedded include: 'Killing Legolos sounds nice. I hated that character. :)' (2012), and 'We felt like the Nazgul, working together, strong as a group, and taking down the heroes felt awesome!' (comment on Vasel 2012). This again points to the subjectivity of generating meanings in these transmedial texts. Indeed, from our own experience of the game, some players found great satisfaction in killing hero characters that they disliked, particularly players who disliked aspects of the narrative core. This demonstrates how narrative positioning and focalisation in a game – as with a book – does not necessarily equate to identification. Players' responses to the inverted narrative depend in part on their prior experience of the storyworld, as well as positioning techniques within the game. Interestingly, Vasel emphasizes in his review that 'we could pretend to be evil', but 'it got kind of boring, thematically', in part due to the lack of individuation of the nazgul characters, which are similar in appearance and have identical abilities, and the fact that the players were 'all just doing the same thing' (2012). With only minimal characterisation in the source texts for these characters, it is difficult for players to flesh them out during gameplay without additional characterisation within the game itself.

Spartacus: A Game of Blood and Treachery

Like *Nazgul*, the Gale Force Nine board game *Spartacus: A Game of Blood and Treachery* (2012) (see Figure 4), together with its expansion *The Serpents and the Wolf* (2013), sidelines the narrative core to offer a game that overwrites the essence of its source text. Running from 2010-2013, the three series and one prequel miniseries from which the board game originates comprises an ultra-violent and heavily sexualised depiction of the legend of Spartacus, an enslaved gladiator who rose to lead an insurrection against Rome. The show's audience is, of course, positioned to identify with the protagonist and the slaves who rebel with him, and *against* the various

Roman authorities who torment their victims with torture, rape, and death. Having been encouraged to view with disdain the viciousness and lasciviousness of Roman citizens, the board game places players in exactly this position. The game's subtitle alludes to this inversion: 'A Game of Blood and Treachery' modifies the first season's subtitle 'Blood and Sand' to reflect the game's shift from a sympathetic representation of Spartacus' training and growing rebelliousness in the Ludus of Quintus Batiatus, to the exclusive perspective of the 'Domini' of Rome. The Domini own the gladiators and other slaves, greedily seeking wealth and power. With the aim to rise through the ranks of the Roman establishment, the rulebook's description of the 'spirit of the game' notes, 'players will bribe, poison, betray, steal, blackmail, and undermine each other. Gold will change hands again and again to buy support, stay someone's hand or influence their decisions' (2012). The Roman character cards contain a similar level of detail to those in *Battlestar Galactica*, with special abilities linked to their roles in the series, again creating strong links to these characters known from the source text. This fundamentally subverts the narrative and ideological perspective of the series, as while some viewers may find the villains more interesting and prefer them to the heroes, the heroes and drive of Spartacus's narrative core are marginalised to the point of erasure within the game's narrative(s). Indeed, the gladiators' uprising does not even appear as an obstacle to be overcome, but is done away with altogether.

Sympathetic characters – both gladiators and house slaves – developed throughout the source text are present in the game as character cards that can be bought and sold during a 'Market Phase'. These characters are then sent to fight in the arena (with its bloodied ground portrayed on the central game board) for the possibility of gaining more wealth and 'Influence' for a Dominus, or simply retained as a source of gold and other benefits. Commodified in an absolute sense (taking this much further than that in the *Firefly* game), the subjugated ethnic minorities under Roman rule (with many given a racial identity but no name) display no agency in any form. This is a highly significant transformation in the transmedia relationship between screen text and board game, as



Figure 4: *Spartacus: A Game of Blood and Treachery*. Image by Adam Brown.

the essence of the former is underpinned by the continual efforts of gladiators and other slaves to undermine and destroy the Roman authorities who threaten their freedom. In *Spartacus: A Game of Blood and Treachery*, the characters who are well-known to any fan of the series have no capacity to work against their oppressors. The 'Attributes' they have – represented by varying numbers of dice for 'attack', 'defense', and 'speed' – are only used when they fight for their Dominus in the arena. Additionally, the special abilities of the various characters – gladiator and house slave – only benefit the Dominus/player to which they belong, whether through extra fighting skills or bonuses to the owning player's schemes. Furthermore, while the cover image of the game box displays a large action shot of a sword-wielding Spartacus for marketing purposes, this figure has almost nothing to do with the game – and, indeed, if his character card is not drawn during the 'Market Phase' to be bought and controlled, may not appear at all (and often did not, in our experience of the game). Unlike *Star Wars* games in which good and evil oppose one another, *Spartacus* does not allow the central characters of the series the possibility of engaging in the 'War of the Damned', now the subtitle of the entire series.

The exclusive positioning of players to identify with their Dominus is reinforced by the large 'House Card', which visually render various Roman tyrants from the series and enable the player to keep

track of their Influence and assets whilst they conspire their way to victory. Similar to the mild discomfort that some players of *Nazgul* experience, some scenarios made possible in *Spartacus* conflict with player expectations borne from knowledge of the series. For instance, as avid fans of the series, we experienced a range of emotions between amusement and anxiety when one of us continually won gladiatorial combat in the 'Arena' phase while fighting with Ashur, a particularly treacherous character and one of the most demonised in the series whose fighting skills are severely limited by a long-term injury. Even more importantly, the inversion of the narrative core in this transmedial text can have curious – and not entirely unproblematic – ideological implications.

Despite the heavily stylised aesthetic of the *Spartacus* television series, which eroticises both the female and male body, the narrative of the series does constantly draw attention to the persecution of women. One scene in the first season of *Spartacus* depicts the Dominus Batiatus anally raping a female slave at the suggestion of his wife Lucretia, though the act is not portrayed voyeuristically like other parts of the series and the suffering of the rape victim is to a degree foregrounded. No explicit reference to rape can be found within the board game (which has an 'Age 17+' recommendation, presumably for implied violence and explicit language); however, one of the 'Starting Slave' cards, which will likely appear in most playthroughs, uses a cropped image of the

woman's face while she is being raped. Taken out of context, this intertextual link may not be noted by gamers, but it does point to the consequences of the altered narrative core. Just as problematic sexualised content in video games has been linked to the widespread reinforcement of prevalent sexist attitudes (namely toward women) in society (Sarkesian; Sturmer and Burkley 2012), a similar argument might be made for the proliferation of gendered representations in contemporary board game culture, and *Spartacus* is arguably a case in point. With no special ability and only the bare minimum of attributes, the vulnerability of the anonymous 'Attendant' (like other non-gladiator slaves) becomes increasingly disconcerting if one considers that players are invited by the game rules to commit such characters to the arena if they wish or need to. In essence, this involves sacrificing helpless slaves with next to no chance of winning to potential 'decapitation' so that the controlling Dominus does not lose Influence for declining an invitation to fight. Our own extensive play of this game has not seen any house slave sent to the arena in this way – which our recognition and articulation of the ethics involved may in part have influenced – but the potential (and encouragement) for this to happen is there. The inverted narrative core of *Spartacus: A Game of Blood and Treachery* can be an immense pleasure, but it can also be a guilty pleasure.

Conclusion

In her recent article 'Rethinking Game Studies: A Case Study Approach to Video Game Play and Identification', Adrienne Shaw (2013: 349) writes that it is essential 'that game studies more thoroughly interrogate how and when specific games invite identification, as well as be more attentive to the way in which individuals are more or less inclined towards identification'. Shifting the focus to the marginalised context of board gaming, we have aimed in this paper to contribute to an understanding of at least the first part of this recommendation, analysing the ways in which players of various tabletop games are positioned in relation to characters within storyworlds that are familiar (given their likely experiences with the games' source texts), and the unfamiliar means of accessing them due to the transformations that board game aesthetics and mechanics engender. These

transformations demonstrate both the fluidity and subjectivity of the construction of narrative perspective, and the possibilities that stem from players bearing the 'narrative core' in mind. An investigation of the latter issue that Shaw identifies, requiring an in-depth exploration of gamer responses through quantitative and qualitative means, is beyond the scope of this paper; although, it is an important area of future research, particularly in relation to the likelihood and nature of alternative readings that gamers undertake. The synergies explored between textual analysis and our own gaming experiences give an indication of the games' highly complex positioning of players and the resulting experience(s) of storyworlds. Our exploration of the various modes of narrative construction across the competitive-cooperative spectrum can therefore serve as the foundations for further investigations into this crucial aspect of transmedia storytelling.

In contrast to the player of first-person shooter video games, who experiences the game 'through the exclusive intermediary of another – the avatar – the "eyes", "ears", and "body" of which are components of a complex technological and psychological apparatus' (Rehak 2003: 104), the characters with whom board gamers are positioned to identify are frequently more changeable and transitory. Like video game identification, however, which is 'grounded in interactivity' (Murphy 2004: 235), board games require players to take on an active role in their engagement with both narrative and character(s). Rather than accepting a pre-constructed narrative, gamers participate in the narrative-building process as narrators, performers, and, to a degree, 'authors', drawing characters, events, and locations from a 'fabula pool' partly offered by the game, and partly derived from previous engagement with the wider storyworld, especially its narrative core. This demonstrates how board games enable a form of participatory engagement in the forming of a particular narrative, which many see as pivotal to the success of a transmedia storyworld (Bernardo 2011; Phillips 2012; Pratten 2011). These tabletop games eschew the more 'passive' act of watching the associated film or television program, yet invite players to bring their prior knowledge of the source text to bear on the gameplay, with sometimes disruptive consequences for gamer

expectations, as in *The Lord of the Rings: Nazgul*, as well as important ideological implications, as in *Spartacus: A Game of Blood and Treachery*. The inversion of the narrative core in games such as these problematises earlier conceptions of the 'adaptation' process, highlighting that a pre-text can become considerably more than a 'resource' of seemingly stable meaning that shifts from one medium to another, but rather exists in constant dialogue with game and gamers through the provision of an extensive fabula pool which may produce radically different narratives each time the game is played. Inhabiting various places along the competitive-cooperative spectrum, games that stem from screen texts range from the competitive but non-confrontational *Firefly* to the uncertainties permeating the traitor mechanic and cooperative play of *Battlestar Galactica*. From these examples alone, it is clear that the diverse and complex modes of transmedia storytelling revealed in contemporary board games serve as a (perhaps surprisingly) interactive means of co-constructing narratives.

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