Systemically Implied Atmospheres

Towards a Mechanistic Understanding of Atmosphere
in Pen and Paper Roleplaying Games

Jonathan Jung Johansen

INTRODUCTION

This paper argues that parts of a roleplaying system tune both the player's *mood* toward, and the *atmosphere* of, the real and imaginary environments created in play.[1,2] This paper's intervention is that mood and atmosphere are modulated hinges of the sensorial qualities of objects in space and the perceived relation to space. This article explores this tuning from a cybermedia perspective where the mechanical system, materiality, and player perspective may be isolated from one another. *The analysis itself will discuss* how the materiality of the JENGA tower, the DREAD system of rules in the cybermedia process, and the horror roleplaying game perspective as implied by the DREAD manual combine to affect atmosphere and mood.[3, 4, 5]

Considering the variables of an actual roleplay situation, uncovering how atmospheres and moods are modulated in actual play is too ambitious for the scope

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1   Mood is to be understood as any single player's emotional state.
2   Atmosphere is to be understood as the properties of environments and conventions that govern their reception.
3   A Jenga tower is a pile of fifty-four wooden blocks stacked three on each level in alternating directions.
4   JENGA (Scott, Leslie, 1983, Hasbro).
5   DREAD (Ravachol, E. and Barmore, N, 2005, The Impossible Dream).

of this article. Instead, this article concentrates on play as described within the rulebook of the single roleplaying game system DREAD. By deriving assumptions about play from what the system states and implies, the operations of the tuning process can be deduced. Therefore, this paper adopts a mechanistic perspective that only considers play implied by the norms and explicit rules of the system, with minimal authorial interpretation of rules.

In DREAD, players sit around a table where a JENGA tower is placed centrally. One player is the host, who provides the basic framework of the story, while the rest of the players each control a character created beforehand by answering a questionnaire the host has created based on the scenario. Whenever the host determines that a character is at risk, they may request that a player pull one or two blocks from the tower. Removing blocks without the tower toppling means that the player avoids the risk. If the player opts not to pull or abandons a pull, the host may deem that their character is unsuccessful, harmed, or the situation in the imagined space escalates, but the character remains in play. If any player besides the host topples the tower for any reason outside a requested pull, their character is removed from the game or cannot meaningfully affect the game anymore. The tower is rebuilt if toppled, with the pulled bricks removed. Every block pulled out makes the tower more precarious.

ROLEPLAYING GAMES AS CYBERMEDIA

According to Jonne Arjoranta's inclusive model of roleplaying games, all pen and paper roleplaying games have the following characteristics: an *imagined space* shared between players called a *gameworld*. [6] In it, the participants have *shared powers*. The ability to affect the *gameworld* must be shared, or else it would be storytelling. Finally, there are different *modes of interaction* with the Gameworld depending on the system. There are rules governing what each player is allowed to interact with, how they may interact with it, and if physical tools are used to arbitrate. To identify when a roleplaying system tunes atmosphere and mood, I will focus on when the affective potential hinges specifically on interactions explicitly described by the system.

Roleplaying games are complex *gestalts* realized through play. Roleplaying systems contain rules that must be interpreted and integrated into the imagined

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6   Arjoranta, Jonne.: "Defining Role-Playing Games as Language-Games. International Journal of Role-Playing", in *International Journal of Role-Playing* 1 (2011), pp. 3-17, here p. 14.

world by the players. This echoes Espen Aarseth's and Gordon Calleja's observation that any *game as object* is fundamentally incomplete until used as a *game as process* in actual play.[7] The Game as Object is a cybermedia object consisting of sign, materiality, and mechanical system—each affecting one another.[8] The Game as a process incorporates the player, necessitating that they engage the cybermedia object with a game perspective.[9] *Process* in the case of a roleplaying game means that the mechanical system can be invoked in idiosyncratic ways during each play session, creating new meanings and reconfiguring play. Myriad factors can influence these invocations. For example, the player's emotional state during play, the space and particular tools available, relationships between players, and rules modified, added, or unused in a group. In roleplaying games, the mechanical system makes the difference between *game as object* and as *process* very apparent, because the system does not contain the imaginary content that is the subject of play. Rather, the imaginary content is created by talking to one another. José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding stress that roleplaying games are socially constituted, as opposed to board games with defined roles for boards and tokens between game sessions. According to the authors, "people talk and act a given game and game world into being – When people stop enacting it, the game ceases to exist."[10] Contextualizing this act within Aarseth's and Calleja's cybermedia model, this enaction is part of the non-trivial effort and perspective required for the player(s) to constitute the Game as Process.

Frequently, a randomization tool like dice is used to impact the imaginary world or used to determine the result of a ruling in the gameworld.[11] Though varying between players, the numerical values and rule system both lend meaning to and impact the imaginings of roleplaying: Gordon Calleja notes that randomization tools may impact the player's imagining of an action's severity by *Synthesis.* An example is a die determining the success or failure of an action. A player could

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7   Aarseth, Espen/Calleja, Gordon.: "The Word Game: The Ontology Of An Indefinable Object" in *Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games* (2015).

8   Ibid., p. 6.

9   Ibid., p. 6.

10 Zagal, José/Deterding, Sebastian: "Definitions of "Role-Playing Games", In: agal, José/Deterding, Sebastian (eds.), *Role-Playing Game Studies*, New York: Routledge 2018, pp. 19-48.

11 Games entirely without randomization do exist that instead rely on player interpretation or arbitration of factors inside the imagined world, such as amber diceless roleplaying (Wujcik, E, 1991: Phage Press.).

use a higher numerical result as inspiration for a more grandiose imagining or retelling of their success. Therefore, Calleja states that "[mental episodes can be] generated from stringing together a series of causally related segments of Synthesis of interaction with and interpretation of game rules, representation, and mental imagery."[12] This concept of Synthesis is important, as it describes how parts of a system without imaginary content may affect imagination. By analyzing when the system requests specific actions of players or where the rules specifically request the use of physical materials, be they props or randomization tools, it raises the possibility of moods or atmosphere being affected. This influence on moods and atmosphere operates without necessarily describing the specific effect in actual play by constraining assumptions of imaginary content to what is explicitly demanded by the game as object.

The above-mentioned facets make it difficult to analyze an actual play situation by isolating how a system itself affects atmospheres. On the other hand, the fact that no mechanics can take effect without player enaction complicates analyzing atmosphere solely through the system. Operating under the ruleset, players themselves must act the mechanics into existence. In a digital game, mechanics exist as coded interactions computed by the device automatically. But as players instantiate the rules in pen and paper roleplaying games, the rules are subject to interpretation and modification during play.[13] Some of these rules contain verifiable schemas for action, while others solely affect a player's perspective on the imagined world. Espen Aarseth and Pawel Grabarczyk dub the verifiable category of rules *interpreted mechanics* and[14] the unverifiable category of rules *postulated norms.*[15] In the case of DREAD, we can verify by the rules system whether the tower topples and if the players follow the rules by removing the toppling player's character. The effects of interpreted mechanics are part of the mechanical system in the cybermedia model, while the effects of Postulated Norms are assumed to inform the implied players perspective. An example of such a Postulated Norm in

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12 Calleja, Gordon.: "Experiential Narrative In Video Games", In: *DiGRA '09 – Proceedings of the 2009 DiGRA International Conference: Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory*.

13 Dormans, Joris: "On the Role of the Die. A brief ludologic study of pen-and-paper roleplaying games and their rules", In: *the international journal of Computer Game Research* 6 (2006).

14 Aarseth, Espen/Grabarvzyk, Pawel: "An Ontological Meta-Model for Game Research", In: *DiGRA '18 – Proceedings of the 2018 DiGRA International Conference: The Game is the Message*, pp. 1-14.

15 Ibid. p. 14.

DREAD is the advice 'dwell on the familiar,' where the host is given the advice to draw on experience and memory to quickly create depth, which can be interpreted as liveness and atmosphere. It is impossible to verify whether the environments talked into being are true copies of the host's memory, and whether a felt quality of depth is attributable to the host generating the environment from past experiences. Whether the environment will be perceived by other players as 'familiar' is also dependent on each player's values. To minimize the cognitive dissonance created in the player's imagination during actual play, implied roleplay disregards the arbitrations that a player must make, such as the narrative means by which the host removes a character from being playable in the imagined space if a player makes the tower topple. Instead, it only considers the player as a configuration of the game. This position can be extrapolated from Aarseth's concept of the implied player, a player that follows the expectations created by a game system and as such is "a function of the game, a slot in a game machine that can be filled by any rational, critical, informed person."[16] Following this rationale, the player is a construct produced by the gameworld's limitations on actions.

Analysis of roleplay alters this perspective. There is no hard limit to what actions can be acknowledged in a roleplaying situation. A more fruitful analytic framework is *Implied Roleplay:* a construct arising from moments activating only a component part of the written roleplaying system and considering *only the necessary minimal way* for the rule to run to its completion. Only in these moments when interpreted mechanics can be invoked, and this invocation can be seen as verifiably misunderstood or true, can we with a degree of certainty discuss the effects of synthesized parts of the system upon mood or atmosphere. It is only these moments I discuss in the analysis of the mechanical system in DREAD. Lastly, Implied Roleplay makes certain assumptions about the perspective of the implied roleplayers. These implied players all partake in a vivid imagining of the shared world, assuming that instances of that world inside each player's imagination are comparatively similar. Ergo, no adjudications or discussion about the interpretation or validity of a particular interpreted mechanic should take place except when arbitration or discussion is suggested by the wording of that interpreted mechanic. I also assume that these player constructs all have perfect knowledge of what interpreted mechanics can be invoked.

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16 Aarseth, Espen: "I Fought The Law. Transgressive Play And The Implied Player", In: *Proceedings of the 2007 DiGRA International Conference: Situated Play*, pp. 130-133.

ATMOSPHERES AND MOOD IN ROLEPLAYING GAMES

For the philosopher Gernot Böhme, *Phantastike Techne* describes the affective potential of designed objects and environments, and actions taken within these spaces in relation to an audience member. As such, it provides a touchpoint between the tower (designed object), player interactions (containing both audience member and actant), and the designed space (imaginary space and physical space) that are included in a session of DREAD. Böhme goes on to explain phantastike techne as the way in which objects radiate outwards and influence observers by their enclosing sensory impressions like light, heat, and sound instead of their geometric properties. The culturally and interpersonally defined reception of these stimuli make phantastike techne manifest as an emotion in the observer. In other words, these are a stage designer's techniques to fabricate an environment and tune it to a set of affective potentials that surround and impress themselves upon the experiencer. This emanation is what Böhme calls *Ekstases*.[17] These concepts originally allow Böhme to disseminate the atmospheric properties of any material element of designed environments**,** viewing the creation of atmospheres through the production aesthetics of stage design. Applying them to the rules and mechanics of a roleplaying system initially poses a challenge: phantastike techne relates to objects in space, not insensible elements such as numerical rules or norms governing how objects in an imagined situation react in roleplaying games. The randomization tools used in roleplaying game rules are material and during their use move and make sound. They may thus emanate Ekstases depending on how they are used to stage the environment. Furthermore, due to Synthesis and depending on the tools (dice, cards, candles, the JENGA tower) used in the system, the material tools represent meanings particular to the imagined situation.[18] Through the rules tied to them, these tools create certain expectations and outcomes with their physicality and therefore have ekstatic potential. The mechanical system itself does not create moods and atmospheres but rather physical actions of a system.

This modulation is made possible by way of the object's emanations and by how it moves in space in relation to the experiencer's "Felt Body" (Ger.: "Leib"). Following Hermann Schmitz, "Encorporation" (Ger.: "Einleibung") is the process of connecting one's own felt body with another body or object in space through

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17 Böhme, Gernot: "The Art Of The Stage Set As A Paradigm For An Aesthetics Of Atmospheres", In: *Ambiances* [Online] Rediscovering (2013).

18 TEN CANDLES (Stephen Dewey, 2015; Cavalry Game).

sensory qualities.[19] This encorporation is afforded via suggested movement (Ger.: "Bewegungssuggestionen").[20] The object and space become a felt part of a perceiver's own felt body, that is, something which is perceivable as if being part of a person's body.[21] For example, if a specific die is repeatedly thrown and only used for determining the danger of a situation, then that die, and its audiovisual ekstases, will come to be associated with danger, which becomes doubly effective when it lies within the view of the player(s). Effectively, when a player takes this die into their hand, ready to cast it and concede to its power of life and death over the player's character, they would feel the danger emanating from this die weighing heavy in their hand.

Ekstases can then theoretically emanate from two planes in a roleplaying game: The first plane is the player's physical presence enclosed by the physical space in which they play. The second plane is a solely imagined space, the player's imagined focal point and how this exists in the imagined space. Both planes interact, of course, made apparent above with the die example. However, the tension between imaginary and physical phenomena remains. The tension lies in transferring concepts of atmosphere creation like ekstases or encorporation tied to the perception of physical phenomena to a context like a roleplaying game with imaginary phenomena. The mental focal points for the player (the player character) and the environment that radiates toward the player character are imaginary constructs, there is no physical object which can radiate towards or immerse the player's senses through heat, sound, or lighting. Yet, in a roleplaying session, the atmosphere conjured by the ekstases of the imagined objects created through interaction and mental habitation may impact the player's mood: A player's mood may reach paranoia because of the eerie atmosphere of the environment that their character inhabits, as with Böhme's example of being moved to tears entering a space with a somber atmosphere.[22] Following Böhme, every production aesthetic has its own particular means for conjuring atmosphere via its medium and the atmosphere conjured in an imagined environment in a roleplaying game emanates in the form of speech.[23] Böhme writes:

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19 Schmitz, Hermann: "Atmospheric Spaces", In: *Ambiances* [Online] Rediscovering (2019).

20 Ibid. p.4.

21 Ibid. p. 4.

22 Ibid. p. 22.

23 Böhme, Gernot. *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres. Ambiances, Atmospheres and Sensory Experiences of Spaces*. (2017) Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

"[…] atmospheres, however, can also be produced through words or through paintings. The particular quality of a story, whether read or heard, lies in the fact that it not only communicates to us that a certain atmosphere prevailed somewhere else but that it conjures up this atmosphere itself. Similarly, paintings which depict a melancholy scene are not just signs for this scene but produce this scene itself."[24]

While the precise staging of this environment via speech during play is unverifiable in Implied Roleplay, it is possible to discern whether a roleplaying game text contains advice on how to best verbally stage and thus conjure these gameworld environments. Again following Böhme, atmosphere is a quality that exists between physical environment and perceiver: through their own sensuous presence, the perceiver's reality accesses part of the environment's sphere of presence.[25]

Implied Roleplay sheds light on how the mechanics and materials bring specific properties into sensuous proximity of the player: a pen and paper roleplaying game does so in implied play when a norm or interpreted mechanic is loaded with words that construct imaginary environments which then produce the atmosphere. More specifically, an atmosphere is implied to be conjured when mood-bearing words are tied to dice or other objects, thus providing additional means for encorporation. Processes or workshops may be necessitated before play, whose purpose is to shape a player's conception of the imagined space before it is constructed during play (or vice versa) to stage the imagined space to fit a specific player's conceptualization of a mood. This process of atmosphere conjuration via 'staging the imagination' is different than the production of atmospheres in conjunction with material such as paintings or the staging of a theater play, wherein it is impossible to make sure the atmosphere's sphere of presence fits to the reality of all perceivers that can access it.

The material of the tower: No computation elicits horror

If the players are to engage with DREAD as a roleplaying game, they must view the material and mechanical parts of the gaming situation as such. Before discussion of either material or Interpreted Mechanics, a description of the implied roleplayers' perspective with which to view either is necessary. Markku Eskelinen

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24 Böhme, Gernot. *The aesthetics of atmospheres. Ambiances, atmospheres and sensory experiences of spaces.* (2017) Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

25 Ibid. p.20.

suggests that gaming situations can be divided into *equipment* such as tokens, and a *manipulation* of these tokens which is the configurative praxis of gaming.[26] At its most ludic, the player's frame for manipulating the equipment is governed by rules and goals, and degrees with which the players can affect the game environment. I will focus on where the player's perspective affects the resolution of an interpreted mechanic by way of informing the manipulations the player makes. But what is the perspective that the DREAD manual implies? The objective of the DREAD system is stated on the introductory page:

"Dread is a horror game. There is no reason that the content of any game of Dread needs to be any more horrifying than you wish it to be, and therefore Dread can be played suitable for nearly any age. However the contents of this book delves into mature topics at points, in order to facilitate groups who enjoy those sorts of horror, so please exercise discretion when passing this book around."[27]

With this paragraph, the game explicitly sets as a goal to facilitate individual forms of horror ranging from the prosaic to the visceral. While it is impossible in Implied Roleplay to verify whether that goal is reached during play, it is possible to see when and how the DREAD system urges the host to enforce the framing by specific manipulation of the interpreted mechanics: Multiple chapters of the book are used to inform the player on how to create a specific mood, such as a Suspenseful mood[28]. these chapters only contain postulated norms not allowing for mechanical analysis, they inform the host on how to invoke interpreted mechanics at certain points in the game with special emotional potential. They also describe how the questionnaire or the tower can be used to prime the players emotionally for a specific type of horror before play, starts[29] depending on the situations in which the host will thereafter request pulls from the tower. These chapters serve as advice for how to 'stage the imagination,' guiding the host on how to conjure specific atmospheres by using responses in the questionnaire, or affecting the player's preconception of the imaginary world. For example, chapters that describe how the *supernatural* theme relates to the tower, and how the pulling mechanic may best be utilized to enhance the theme, gives the host a repertoire to embrace the ecstatic

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26 Eskelinen, Markku: "The Gaming Situation", In: *The International Journal of Computer Game Research, Volume* 1 (2016).

27 DREAD (Ravachol, E. and Barmore, 2005: The Impossible Dream) p. 0.

28 Ibid p. 87.

29 Ibid p. 90, 117.

potential in the tower and the gameworld effects of its toppling vis-à-vis the mechanics for an *eerie* or *strange* atmosphere.[30]

Considering the JENGA tower's materiality without the DREAD system, or any imagined space, reveals a possibility for an atmosphere of tension and anxious player moods: as long as the tower is physically unmoving yet unstable, it suggests the possibility of toppling. encorporation offers anxiety as a mood for players and the atmosphere of the room becomes tense by the ekstases of the JENGA tower's (in)stability when it does move. As the tower may be affected by any vibration, such as the errant movements of other players, any moving body is made available for encorporation into the player's own felt body.

Furthermore, the tower as a randomization tool has qualities that must be considered in relation to Synthesis. In a traditional dice-based roleplaying game such as DUNGEONS & DRAGONS, an implied roleplayer will know that if they need to roll five or above on a six-sided die, they will have a 33% chance of success, and the emotional tension of a roll of the die will largely be determined by that particular roll's success-to-failure ratio and the effects of success or failure. As Joris Dormans points out, in such mathematically complex roleplaying games, players experienced with the system of rules may come to "see the numbers and the chances instead of the drama."[31] Jaroslav Švelch explores this tension in his examination of the dual nature of how monsters in games tend to be enemies that can be defeated by mechanical means and knowledge of game mechanics. Within literature, monsters represent confrontations with awe and terror, whereas in computational games, a monster's ability to threaten the player may be fully grasped through its bestiary entry and come to stand as a signifier for mere damage and/or defense numbers.[32] This harms the monster's potential of evoking feelings of awe and sublime in the player.[33] Even though these numbers are advised not to be accessible to players in the context of DUNGEONS & DRAGONS,[34] implied roleplayers would know that the monster as a threat *could* be fully understood if its entry in the written bestiary would be known. Therefore, Švelch summarizes that "[DUNGEONS & DRAGONS] is a game of fantasy, but also control—it is not just

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30 Ibid., p.96.

31 Dormans, Joris: *On the Role of the Die*.

32 Vella, Daniel: "No Mastery Without Mystery. Dark Souls and the Ludic Sublime", In: *The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 15 (2015).

33 DUNGEONS & DRAGONS (Gygax, G, and Arneson, 1974, TSR inc).

34 Gygax, Garry: ADVANCED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: MONSTER MANUAL, Lake Geneva: Tactical Studies Rules 1979.

about dungeons & dragons, but also dice & spreadsheets. It combines the thrill of exploration of the unknown with the security of an ultimate knowability."[35]

Švelch compares this tendency of encyclopedic enclosure in games, where beings and the world can be fully grasped by their level of threat based on *mathematical operations* and numbers, to Peter Galison's military models of reality on cybernetic battlefields,[36] which translate combatants into subjects of tactical calculations.[37] Švelch concludes that DUNGEONS & DRAGONS is decidedly a computational game even though it is played with no digital aid, because it follows the 'digital' impulse to encyclopedically contain its fantastical contents.[38] DREAD resists this impulse of turning its threats into component parts of a computational warfare model whose purpose is to be fought and destroyed. There are no numbers, statistics, or calculations that can contain and reduce DREAD's possible monsters or other horrific phenomena to mere numbers. Still, the very much tangible and material qualities of the tower exert an influence on players that can draw their attention to its ludic properties, as is acknowledged in the chapter about *suspense:*

"Every time a character attempts something with a questionable outcome, no matter how mundane, every player's complete attention will be on the tower. This is something of a double-edged sword. While the players will be focusing on the game, they might not be focusing on the story. Their minds will naturally turn to thoughts about the tower: which block seems the loosest, where would it be most strategic to pull, does it lean too far in that direction, and so forth. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, but if the story is at a point of high tension, or when you really want to build the suspense further, you will have to keep the story at the forefront of their minds."

The quote speaks to the intention of using the tower to firstly create and maintain tension. However, it also acknowledges that imagination may be suspended during this process. To counter this, the text encourages players to describe the consequences of the pull immediately afterwards as to not release tension—and to keep the player's imagination somewhat tethered to the fiction. The synthesizable

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35 Švelch, Jaroslav: "Encoding Monsters. "Ontology of the enemy" and Containment of the Unknown in Role-Playing Games", in *The Philosophy of Computer Games Conference* 2019.

36 Ibid., pp. 3-4.

37 Galison, Peter: "The Ontology of the Enemy. Norbert Weiner and the Cybernetic Vision", in *Critical Inquiry* 21 (1994), pp. 228-266.

38 Švelch, Jaroslav: "Encoding Monsters. "Ontology of the enemy" and Containment of the Unknown in Role-Playing Games", p. 6.

meaning does not come from the cybernetic qualities the tower has on a battlefield, delineated by rules. Rather, meaning is generated through the interconnection of the situation in the gameworld and the stakes of any given pull as exemplified by the tower's stability. Over the course of play, the precariousness of the tower in DREAD becomes, by way of repetition of the above-mentioned Synthesis, a reminder of all prior actions and comes to symbolize the mounting horror in the imagined space.

The JENGA tower does not offer the mathematical consistency of a randomization tool. The success or failure of a pull depends on how many blocks have already been removed and the player's dexterity, which does not amount to the transparent mathematical distribution of a dice roll. While the JENGA tower's ludic properties within the DREAD system are clear, the chance of successfully pulling a block cannot be determined on the tower's current physical state. This in turn means that threats in the game are not accessible as ludic tokens via logic and math but are rather felt and sensed via the tower through the player's own felt body.

Escalating tension and suspense-vis-à-vis the horror roleplaying game perspective—are built into the progression of a DREAD game. Materially, this is done in three ways. First, by way of the tower's promise of an impending collapse. Second, the tower materially becomes more unstable as play progresses and blocks are pulled out, even without rules applied from the DREAD system. Third, the tower's destabilization is compounded by an interpreted mechanic: Whenever the tower is toppled and reassembled, it will be destabilized by pulling out several blocks before play starts. After it has then been rebuilt, any present player will have witnessed the fictional event tied to its fall. These elements combine to reinforce the tower's signification of horrors to come based on horrors experienced: every pulled-out block represents the event in the imagined space that elicited the pull. Its current state is a direct result of past events in both real and imagined space. The state of the tower becomes increasingly available for Synthesis vis-à-vis the horror roleplaying game perspective: With every pull, with every topple, the ekstatic power of the JENGA tower grows and so does its influence on the atmosphere.

If compared with DUNGEONS & DRAGONS and the randomization tool used within it, the die, Svelch's cybernetic containment makes itself apparent. Over time, the same die type is used to test whether a character succeeds at a given action. The values that represent a player character's physical and mental health can decrease over play, and this may increase tension. Compared with DREAD, however, these systems do provide a baseline outcome and goal for any hostile

interaction.[39] That is to say, if health is reduced to zero, a player character is defeated. Contrary to DREAD, a player's tension does not impact their ability to roll their dice in DUNGEONS & DRAGONS as the health and sanity values in the system are abstractions of the sublime to the mundane and graspable, each with an individual and contained use. Materially, the die may also be safely contained in the player's hand while the tower confronts the—possibly tense or even shaking—player with increasing precariousness.

Suspense is an emotional tension generated by knowledge of a future happening. Even in DREAD'S implied roleplay, a knowledgeable player cannot know how a situation will reliably resolve in the imagined space, contrary to a system that gives numerical values and means to defeat enemies.[40] The game provides no means to fully contain the risk that the tower represents. What the implied roleplayer does know is that at some point, the tower will topple in physical space. Because this happening is tied to the imagined space via the consequences of a failed pull, suspense is realized.

When the tower is finally toppled for any reason, the character of the player who caused it to fall is removed from play.[41] By way of Synthesis, the capability to topple the tower, even accidentally, ties the player and imagined space together, creating a feedback loop between the player's mood, the atmosphere of the physical space, and the atmosphere of the imagined space. If the tower is sufficiently unstable when the host invokes the interpreted "pull" mechanic, the player can only choose to forfeit their agency temporarily by passing, or face near-certain horror by pulling. This is a communal experience, further underlining that more than one player feels this atmosphere of horror: even if one player succeeds, the next player to pull has an ever smaller chance of success as one more block has been removed.

When the pulling mechanic is invoked, the tower itself becomes the point of anchorage for the player's kinesthetic emotion of mounting horror, while simultaneously arresting imagination by stopping play from progressing. If the tower moves a little in this process, promising to tumble, and if it finally does tumble, the possible consequences can manifest themselves more clearly in the player's imagination; the once inchoate emotion within the player's imagination now takes on both a thematic center in the action and an anchorage point in physical space. This effect echoes Schmitz's observation regarding the manipulation of fearful

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39 Deterding, Sebastian: "Gameplay: Map or Frame?", in *CFP: Games as HCI Method Workshop CHI* 2016.

40 DREAD (Ravachol, E. and Barmore, N, 2005, The Impossible Dream).

41 Ibid. p. 16.

atmospheres: "If in a preliminary form of fear without a point of anchorage, the area of condensing is experienced with corporeal anxiety, the result is horror, which is rounded off into fear when a point of anchorage is added,"[42] making the emotional quality spatial.

CONCLUSION

This case study of DREAD and its use of the JENGA tower hints at the possibility of understanding atmospheres not only as properties of the corporeal body in contact with a physical world but as something which can be analyzed through a cyber-media perspective that takes into account the ways in which a roleplaying game is a social process. The term Implied Roleplay was suggested to describe the game processes bound to happen in any roleplaying game that uses a given roleplaying system. For analyzing how atmospheres are intended to be conjured by playing a particular system, unverifiable, postulated norms can be analyzed to see if they prime players towards perceiving the imagined environment in a specific way, or prime players towards using one another's atmospheric conceptions to construct environments that conjure atmospheres they are receptive to. Interpreted mechanics, the verifiable elements of a system, can be put under further analytical scrutiny: their resolution and the process of resolving the mechanic can be partitioned to see when these can be incorporated into an implied player's felt body through dice or other material tools necessitated by the minimal interactions implied by the system. In these cases, it can be said that an atmosphere is mechanically implied by the system.

With this in mind, with the JENGA tower as the material dimension of the DREAD cybermedia object, the player during play becomes aware of the tower's position in relation to their felt body, and of how their own and other player's movements or any reaction may cause the tower to topple. During play, the tower then comes to serve as a reminder for all actions taken before. The atmosphere emanating from the tower's ekstases is all the more affective because its potential collapse completely eliminates player agency. A player's ability to successfully complete a pull is affected by their physical body, and their mood is again affected by both the atmosphere of both the physical and the imagined space. This creates a cybernetic feedback loop where the tension in physical and imagined space feed into one another. Because of the tower's inability to numerically contain threats

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42 Schmitz, Hermann: "Atmospheric Spaces", In: Rediscovering (2019). (9) Ambiances [Online].

in the imagined world, it can be assumed that any emotions tied to the threat and thus the tower will first be felt as inchoate atmospheres, then felt as more condensed emotions as the mechanics give the atmospheres a concrete point of anchorage, via the tower's ekstases, and sensed as moods. The Synthesis of the tower straddles the imagined and real environments, causing mood(s) and atmosphere(s) conjured in either environment to feel true in both.

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