Justice and Violence: the Study of Gameplay in the Infinite Engine cRPGs

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Introduction

The main goal of the paper is to analyze the gameplay design of the computer role-playing games (cRPGs) which are based on the influential Infinity Engine developed by the BioWare studio, with the theoretical framework provided by the Walter Benjamin's conceptions of violence and justice. It will be based on the following titles: *Baldur's Gate* series (1998-2001), *Planescape: Torment* (1999) and the *Icewind Dale* series (2000-2002). My aim is to interpret the particular epistemology of play present in the Infinity Engine games with the help of philosophical ideas introduced by the German thinker.

In the essay *Critique of Violence* (originally published in 1921 as *Zur Kritik der Gewald*) Benjamin argues that every meaningful violent act either protects the existing law or establishes the new one. I would argue that this notion, along with his distinction between the oppressive Mythic and Divine violence, finds a parallel construction in the Infinity-based game mechanics. In other words, the Infinity Engine fosters a particular model of moral standards which are exerted on the gameplay level by the altered model of the *Advanced Dungeons&Dragons 2ed* character progression. One example of this process is the justification of violence by the dominant forces of politics: in *Baldur's Gate* series even the most morally questionable deeds are rewarded if the player finds authorities (usually important NPCs) powerful enough to use the Benjamin's "means-end category" (Ross 2014: 94). In other cases, the gameplay is altered by the scripted encounters that bypass the player's agency by disabling the option of pre-buffing before a particularly difficult and unavoidable fight, which effectively prevents the player from a premature advancing in a story. Such gameplay features are directly supported by the Infinity Engine specification (like the implementations of the .CRE and .BSC types of game data), therefore constituting a mix of software and player-actions patterns that can be analyzed and interpreted in the context of the game engine output. In other words, in my research I will investigate the construction of the "learning patterns" of the Infinity Engine games and then use the following data to investigate the motivation and philosophical stance behind the various possible player's decisions.

Along with the philosophical framework provided by the work of Walter Benjamin and his commentators, I will use the tools developed by the Infinity Engine modders to extract and analyze data directly connected with the aforementioned software. Among them I will focus on data-altering amenities such as EE Keeper and DLTCEP, although more complex programs such as WeiDU, NearInfinity and Infinity Explorer will be used to illustrate the connections between the violence-based game mechanics and the gameplay design of Infinity Engine titles.

In the paper I will work with the Miguel Sicart's (2008) definition of game mechanics,

conceptualized as "methods invoked by agents, designed for interaction with the game state". In my research I will provide the data which support the claim that the game mechanics and game systems of the games released from the Infinity Engine foster a specific game style that can be described with the help of Benjamin's notions of justice and violence. My aim is to discern and describe the transition points between the game mechanics (which operates within Infinity Engine code-imposed rules and limitations) and particular tactics of gameplay (which are necessary to achieve designed game goals, such as advancing in the story).

The motivations behind this kind of research are as follows: there are relatively few analysis of the game engines that aim at linking the philosophical and conceptual critique of the gameplay with the study of the software-based, mechanical foundations of the games themselves. I would argue that the epistemological process of "learning how to play properly" involved in the analyzed titles is tightly connected with the design of the Infinity Engine, and is susceptible to the philosophical analysis with the use of the terms introduced by Walter Benjamin. By juxtaposing the technical features and rules of the Infinity-based games I will try to comment on the mutual influence between the software and the gameplay in the context of knowledge production.

Walter Benjamin: the importance of justice and violence

At the very core of the Benjamin's reflection about Justice and Violence lie two crucial distinctions: between Mythic and Divine violence and between the law-making and the law-preserving violence. While the first distinction is made quite clear, the second is implied and problematized through various cases of historical social constructs. Of the two kinds of violence only the Mythic one can be "recognised as such with great certainty", for the results of the Divine violence – such as the absolution of sins – cannot be intersubjectively perceived and acclaimed by the humans. Though the main goal of Benjamin's essay is to "expound" the relation of violence to the law and justice (Benjamin 1986: 277), he inevitably touches the subject of the sacred status of life and messianic dimension of the very nature of the law. In reality the relations between the various subjects of Benjamin's musings are impossible to fully be illustrated and explained, but I would argue that the system implemented in the Infinity Engine games is surprisingly accurate in portraying the main tensions that occupy Benjamin in *Critique of Violence*.

As often is the case with the writings of the German philosopher, his thoughts cannot be summarised with a concise conclusion or even one, definite thesis. *Critique of Violence* is perhaps one of the most elusive of his writings in that regard. It is, however, also precise in defining the mutual connection between the means and justice: "just ends can be attained by justified means, justified means used for just ends" (Benjamin 1986: 278). Or, as one of the Benjamin's commentators observes, "justice must be found in an alignment between means and ends, where the attainment of one will establish legitimation through the guaranteed attainment of the other" (s.81). In a computer RPG justice is a difficult concept to wield and measure, but law can be attributed to the game mechanics as a set of rules, which in case of the Infinite Engine games is also coherent with the law and rules of the fictional universe establishing the game's narrative. If we can trace how the "justified means" are exerted through the game mechanics, we can learn about the epistemological patterns that the player is expected to internalize to achieve a given goal.

An example of the this law-enforcing strategy is the chapter 7 of the first *Baldur's Gate*, when player must keep the low profile while exploring the city while being charged with the (mostly false) accusations. If the player decides to use violence against the law enforcers, the reputation factor drops dramatically, which causes any non-evil aligned party members to immediately and irreversibly abandon the PC. Benjamin in his essay observes the peculiar interest of the law in a monopoly of violence – not with "the intention of preserving legal ends", but because its existence outside the scope of law is dangerous in itself (Benjamin pp 281). The Infinity Engine defines progress as gaining experience, which can be obtained through doing quests, solving puzzles and progressing in the story, but the seemingly unlimited reservoir of experience points lies in the process of using violence, that is killing other sentient inhabitants of the game world. From the perspective of game mechanics, reputation system is basically the only factor that may hold back the power-hungry player from committing mass murder anywhere she / he goes. In Infinity Engine the "XP value" above zero is by default attributed to all of the creatures, but only a handful of the .CRE files determine the reputation penalty after a kill.

There is also one more interesting feature of the Infinity Engine: no creature, NPC or party member is entitled to achieve significant, individual progress without the help of the player. At the beginning of a game, all people are equal, but only player can effectively execute its will on the game world. Some of the modern cRPGs implement different *modus* of interactivity. In *Skyrim*, the non-player characters and creatures inhabiting the game world gain power in direct relation to the player's progress. The level scaling keeps the open world of Elder Scrolls an interesting place to explore, as the game environment directly (and inevitably) reacts not only to the player's behavior, but to its very being in the world. In that sense, the cRPGs that implement said system of level adjustments may be the ultimate answer to the old philosophical problem of the indifferent world, as described by Leszek Kołakowski in *The Presence of Myth*. Or, more likely, such titles try to negotiate and alleviate the fears connected with thoughts about death (and the world undisturbed existence without our presence) and individual suffering (as the inexplicable dimension of the everyday life). This is not, however, how the Infinity Engine works – its characteristics place the player's character in the center of epistemic experience, but at the same time deprive her or him of the special ontological status in relation to the game world. *BG*, *ID* and *PS:T* ultimately judge the individual characters by their relation to the core game mechanics, whereas in *Skyrim* it is the individual hero – the player's avatar – who dictates the course of the universe, and in a very literal way. This fact has its repercussions: the latest single-player *Elder Scrolls* game succeeds as a simulation, but not as a narrative experience; the main plot remains hidden behind the stunning visual craftsmanship of the game world, and vast majority of the quests bear no consequences to the individual playthrough.

The Infinity Engine seemingly develops similar approach to the PC. It inevitably places the player character in the position of someone special, to whom all the game actions relate to: when the PC (the player character) file status changes into "death", the game ends. Other companions and party members can be brought back to life, but the moment we lose control of the main protagonist, our journey is no more; in case of a solo play, even successful "charm" spell in *Baldur's Gate* is lethal and results in displaying an animation signalizing the player's ultimate defeat. Regardless of the statistics and potential for future development, the protagonist occupies the position of the law maker – but, regarding Benjamin's distinctions, it

is the position of a mythic law maker, constrained by the two contradictory forces: the "pure" and "divine" violence.

Infinity Engine Games: the context

In my analysis of the Infinity Engine games I would like to address the fact that the first implementation of said software came out at the time of a specific crisis. In the second half of the 90. The games based on the *Advanced Dungeons&Dragons* franchise were believed to already had their hey days – at least as far as commercial success is considered. At that time the market was abundant in titles that provided the players with the thrills of an adventure-like exploration and combat packed in the design principles of a cRPG genre, to name just *Eye of the Beholder*, *Menzoberranzan* or *Ravenloft: Stone Prophet*. Therefore, it was not easy to pitch the big PC investors a game that would at its core be an attempt to recreate the tabletop RPG experience in the digital world of a video game. The translation from the real-time, narrative-driven RPG session to the single player gameplay required making the game engine that would effectively automatize the dice-based mechanics of combat and make it a driving force and foundation of the narrative experience. One of the biggest challenges was to negotiate the agency of the player: the constraints of the system should not limit the creativity in advancing the game, but at the same time the plot must remain coherent and to some extend immune to the player's efforts to gain combat advantage as soon as possible.

I would argue that any interpretation of the gameplay must take into consideration the main design principles and genological dominants prevailing in a given time of the digital games' history. I would argument for this approach even though such distinctions are often difficult, if not risky, inevitably obscuring and omitting some of the tendencies at the expense of achieving the broader scope. The cRPG genre in this regard is marked with a notable disjoint, dating at least as far as the premiere of the first *Diablo* (Blizzard North, 1996). With the advent of games that mixed rogue-like elements (see Garda 2013) with the more standard role-playing repertoire, like the main character's stat progression and often heroic, plot-driven action, the gameplay itself finally took precedence over the meticulous quest design, ultimately subjugating the on-sight construction of the game world accordingly to the player's actions. In that regard some Infinity Engine titles, notably the *Icewind Dale* series, abandoned altogether the concept of responsive game world, which rules may be negotiated in some other form than pure violence. The *Icewind Dale* games and *Planescape: Torment* mark the two radically different approach to the game engine: first focused on relentless *hack&slash* action, while second values the importance of the story. While *ID* tells its tale by visuals, mechanics and music, *P:T* is focused on written word and dialogues. Having said that, they both share the same engine-related design principles: the importance of statistics determined in the character creation process and particular party composition. Whether it is a weapon to-hit roll measured against the value of armour (the infamous THAC0 system in *Baldur's Gate*) or wisdom attribute check determining possible dialogue option in *Planescape: Torment*, the game engine pushes the player into a specific mode of gaining knowledge about the game. The epistemic process may in fact be drastically different in case of its various implementations, but ultimately encourages the trial / error type of play as one of the most efficient in completing the designed game goals.

The Infinity Engine, according to the Benjamin's distinctions, makes the player's character quite problematic. While playing *Baldur's Gate* or *Icewind Dale* we are forced to make the

law on the go. In a sense each of our decisions to use violence is equal to Benjamin's law-making act of a mythical provenience: the actions are justified by establishing precedence after precedence, as long as the law-preserving violence, guarding the game's narrative core, is left intact. As our team comprise of the only non-static actants in the game's universe, we are privileged executors of the law. But if we step out and try to test it against the designed, linear storyline that permeates the seemingly freeform exploration patterns of ours, the engine has a few clever ways to put us back into a predictable trajectory. If we travel too often between the separate areas (defined by the .ARE files) without the main quests resolved as 1 (checked), we're very likely to face an ambush that at a given point of the playthrough is very likely to kill our PC. Of course, we can always reload the previous save. The game world would act as if nothing happened, but the engine taught us a valuable lesson: we cannot escape our destiny, and both of the twin faces of the law must have their share.

According to Benjamin, that is just right, as the law "can never be fully constituted", and law-making and law-preserving violence must constantly negotiate the extent of their domains. To put it in other words, "each act of law-preserving violence, then, contains within it a defensive moment of law-making violence, where the legitimated regime re-posits itself as such." (Abbott 2008: 83.)

This strange dialectic is made flesh in the Infinity Engine. It is also no coincidence that the moments of antinomy both in lawmaking and law-preserving violence that serve the just ends in Infinite Engine games have a distinct, political dimension. The founding conflict in all three I-based series is of economic origin. Iron crisis in *Baldur's Gate*, barbarian onslaught and supply shortages in *Icewind Dale*, even the no-place and ethnic pot of Sigil world in *Planescape: Torment* are inherently plagued with social and political instability. *Siege of Dragonspear,* the newest (and probably last) full-fledged implementation of the Infinity Engine also has its narrative axe founded in gigantic migration crisis that plagues the imaginary realm of the Sword Coast.

Infinity Engine: variables and data

The close analysis of the Infinity Engine would not be possible without the tools provided by the modding community, mostly designed with particular intend to alter the *Baldur's Gate* game series. In my analysis I used two basic categories of said programmes. First were simple browsers that provide insight into game files (like Infinity Explorer). Second comprise of editors, which provide numerous options to edit, save and implement modified files into a game. In the latter category I should distinguish NearInfinity, which proved to be extremely useful in testing real-time engine responses to altered behaviour of particular game files as well as changing the save files and experimenting with different sets of data input. It is also important to note that nowadays Infinity Engine has its own portable, open-source version named GemRB, which cross-platform character supports usability innovations unheard of at the time of the engine's initial release, such as touch based input and extensible plugins design. Another useful resource is the IESDP (The Infinity Engine Structures Description Project) with a fully available source code and online library providing valuable insight into specific parts of the engine's features.

In the context of Walter Benjamin's conceptualizations of law-making and law-preserving violence some features of the Infinity Engine structure are more important than the others. Among the most crucial are .ARE, .CRE and .BSC files, governing maps data, creature attributes and AI scripts respectively. I will now analyse each of them in an attempt to discern some interesting features that may shed some light on patterns of interaction that are available in the game and therefore directly shape the learning patterns for the player.

The .ARE files in Infinite Engine can be described as static holders of data – each game area is represented by a fixed, bitmap picture. It also establishes a set of frontiers in which the narrative and gameplay elements must fit into. In all Infinity Engine games, the map files serve one important role – they prevent the fragmentation of space. In practice it means that each .ARE file establishes a different, closed world that sets a scenery for violence acts of the player. The design of the combat in Infinity Engine games is based on intervals of real-time action between the pauses, during which players gain the opportunity to assign orders and actions. The .ARE files have their own scripts, but mainly for the purpose of displaying cinematic cut scenes at a right time or determining the presence of given NPC according to player's previous actions. Another feature are "triggers", which usually act as the hot-spots for enemy spawns. Contrary to some modern implementation of isometric, party-based cRPG combat like *Pillars of Eternity*, Infinity Engine allows for a great deal of unrealistic actions involving the game terrain, like walking circles around the enemy and shooting arrows while simultaneously maintaining safe distance. In a sense, the player cannot be fully occupied by an enemy; there is almost always possibility to run away without any major consequences. Last but not least, the inhabitants of the maps are fittingly described as "Actors", and each map has its own place in the story; it is either an optional area, the theatre of freeform law-establishing violence, or a place crucial to the plot, often a city area, where the law-preserving violence actions demand to be acted upon to advance the story.

The architecture of .CRE files can be summed up by one quote from *Critique of Violence*: "For from the point of view of violence, which alone can guarantee law, there is no equality, but at the most equally great violence" (Benjamin 1986: 296). Browsing through the .CRE files, one observation stands out. The engine has only a handful of pre-set creature types, which are often modified to fit their purpose in the narrative (or combat encounter) by addition of undroppable (and therefore effectively invisible to the player) items. Even the Forgotten Realms heroes of great power – and great in-game stats according to the *AD&D* system – like Drizzt Do'Urden, are equipped with possessions that enable them to become a successful representation of mythic, law-preserving violence.

Artificial intelligence scripts, or .BSC files, are a multipurpose powerhouses of Infinity Engine, but their usefulness in modding activity is surprisingly limited by the other constraints of the software. There are essentially five levels of AI scripts, with each of the tier overwriting commands from the lower tiers: default, general, race, class, override. The last level is reserved for override catalogue in the game files, which contains mainly items statistics. What it means is that practically the only way for a weapon to change its wielder's behaviour is to be cursed, i.e. completely take over the creature's agency. Either the tool is just a tool, or it completely breaks the game – *tertium non datur*. It is important to note that all three highest tiers (default, general, race) refer to the broad, initial specifications of the creature, which can be conceptualised as its "nature" and defined place in the game system. The default status of a creature in Infinity Engine is exhausted by the violent "means" of its

existence. However, the saving grace for the .CRE files subjugated to the power of the scripts lies in the option to engage in a dialogue - instead of a fight - with a player. That option is also largely governed by scripts, but it always refers to the paramount dialog.tlk file. Like in the Benjamin's quasi-messianic philosophy, the medium of the language is a key to understanding the work of justice, violence and myth.

Conclusion

In the last parts of his essay, Benjamin focuses on the nature of the divine violence. It is something that possess the power to break the vicious, mythical cycle of law-making and law-preserving violence, and in this sense divine violence is free from the myth, law and destiny altogether (Lipszyc 2012: 53). If myth involving violent acts of law-making and law-preserving is the domain of the player's actions defined by the engine, and destiny is just the mechanical representation of engine-driven rules, then the true divine violence must lie beyond the scope of the player's agency. Even if the story portrays our main character in *Baldur's Gate* as a child of god, it is a god from the myths, not the God than Benjamin wishes to transcend the moral values.

Concluding *The Critique of Violence*, Benjamin states that the sacredness of life is a recent invention: "what is (…) pronounced sacred was according to ancient mythical thought the marked bearer of guilt: life itself". There is no coincidence that the player character in each of the Infinity Engine games indeed bears the guilt of life. This philosophical trope is further developed in the work of one of the most famous admirers of Walter Benjamin, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben.

Games

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