Games as historical and artistic allegories

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***Abstract*—This document focuses on the concepts of allegory and game in Philosophy and History. This is part of an ongoing project that favors allegory as a worldbuilding strategy in the domains of Philosophy, Art and Ludic Studies. Walter Benjamin's take on allegory (or the nominalistic approach we apply his insights to) is presented as a suitable tool for reading games and other cultural documents historically, especially for developing games as works of Art.**

Keywords—allegory, History, Ludic Studies, Philosophy of Art, Philosophy of Games

I. Introduction: History and Philosophy at play

This text reviews concepts in Epistemology in order to situate games among documents of History, as well as to clarify ethical implications of their diverse uses. There will be an emphasis on the notion of games as allegory.

This quest relates to History in many ways: games are disputed rhetorical terrain in technological avant-garde [1]; this work is a part of an ongoing Ph.D project that discusses games as historical documents; more people in recent years have favored the allegorical reading of games [2]. After acceptance and presentation, it is to be inscribed in the annals of this event, a document in the History of Ludology or Philosophy of Games, depending on Historiography.

These ways a document relates to the world may be called "functions" for that text [3]. Such uses are phenomena in an infinite set of phenomena we call "world", which we account for *ad hoc*, through the lenses of our eyes and values and languages, in the form of History. We contextualize phenomena in the world by relating names they yield (instances of names you read or hear or images you see) to the corpus of History (or the suitable corpus, accepted paradigm [4] or specific semiotic domain [5]).

In order to discuss such documents on games and Art, consisting primarily of propositional texts (books, articles, ethical debate), we find it fit to employ a nominalistic approach that draws upon Goodman [3] and is translated into the *lingua franca* of General System Theory (paradigmatic in the Ludic Studies [6][7]), as nominalism is based upon this very widespread phenomenon: names.

Here System Theory accepts any taxonomy that categorizes names in a manner compatible to this definition: *a system is a set of related objects, forming a functional whole* [8] (for art and media as such systems, see Vieira [9]).

For this particular system consisting of a short paper intended to be included in the annals of an academic event, the nominalistic approach proposed by Goodman [3] is chosen as an epistemological approach to comparing worlds and relating objects that are words and systems that are texts. Names such as History and Philosophy will be discussed by use of other names, supported by references (relations) that contextualize what is said about games and Art (and how those systems are used to build "versions" of the world [3]). Related concepts, objects or systems are listed in parenthesis, as to illuminate the reader's path through common semantic features or structural relations, or akin semiotic domains (that present competing world versions).

This paper aims at connecting contemporary academic approaches to cultural objects and History, an ethical value dear to the program Humanidades, Direitos e Outras Legitimidades (USP), to which the project belongs. The longer goal is to support endeavors on the understanding of games both as historical documents and as artwork and the ethical implications of said strategies for building the *game world* [10] (ways of *worldmaking* [3]).

Walter Benjamin has cast diverse lights on domains named above. He debates the philosophical tradition on play as a feature of thought (for instance Schiller and Kant, for more see [11]); his contributions to the notion of storyteller ("The Storyteller" [12]) have influenced games and History; historical exegesis is influenced by his idea of documents (or works of art etc.) as monuments to capitalism and ruins of History (in the *Arcades* [13] and the "Theses" [14]). His work on allegory as a mode of artistic discourse is developed in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* ([15], henceforth *ODTA*, as usual for the latest Brazilian edition).

A distinction between historic analysis or artistic poiesis in Benjamin's allegorical reading is thus necessary in order to better apply to game uses. This analysis cannot be fully Benjaminian both because Benjamin's work is notoriously ill-structured, intentionally open and tragically incomplete and because the elected methodology is the aforementioned nominalistic approach.

Thus this paper produces a propositional system (builds a world version [3]) that responds to the tradition by making ethical and political choices (the factual selection, values, the writing phenomenon and its intrinsical errancy) that should aim for an impact on said tradition, as it is expected from academic papers. Such ethical choices relate to the functions games assume as cultural artifacts: there are different ethical implications to reading games as either History of Culture in general or History of Art in particular, among other uses.

II. Playful Philosophy and the Philosophy of Games

Roughly, in the history of human thought, first there was *doxa* (opinion). Myths have ordered the world of individual opinion, building culture as fictional narrative (*mythos*) and serious myths (religion, History). Philosophy claims to show a better depiction of the actual world, questioning dogmas

and paving way to Science. Science confirms or denies philosophical speculations with tests, consolidating truths.

Enlightenment sees ludic Philosophy blossom (see Brian Sutton-Smith on the "rhetorics of the imaginary" [11]), as well as the rise of the concept of artistic authorship: the poet, the storyteller now gain new status and responsibility as they unveil truth in a way alternate to Philosophy or Science. Art (and games) still may or may not mean anything: "When is something Art?" is a central question for Goodman, see also [16]; social implications on the status of art will be discussed in the XXth century by Cultural Studies [17] and Social Studies [18].

The evolution of the epistemological status of Art could be nominally described here as a turn from the prevalence of Aesthetics to the age of Philosophy of Art. The aesthetic point of view would see experience as sensorial, hence scientifically decipherable, the technique as unveiling of universal beauty or truth. Modern Philosophy of Art would see it somewhat differently (*e.g.* as the kantian *sublime* is not the same as *beauty*), perhaps very differently (as Modernist movements question civilizational standards of beauty and order). In short, by the turn to the XXth century, while modern Philosophy and Science are as serious as reason can be, art becomes revolutionarily ludic. Surely, as Huizinga [19] pointed out, relating the evolution of civilization to the decline of *paidiá* (ludic spirit), that time had come for new worldbuilders to write new paradigms.

In the semiotic domain of Art, the end of Modernity is felt as technical disruption (the naturalistic take on nature and appearance that is technically confronted by impressionists, cubists, dada alike). As, since modernity, artists are imbued with the mission to present some kind of truth, and without the safety of a solid canon, their quest is now for a form that represents such complex phenomena as life in our world. New approaches will then rise, such as Phenomenology and Relativism, trying to make sense of fragmentary reality. Apparently, early Benjamin sees the allegorical mode as a playful response to such a crisis, for allegory is already a ruinous medium.

While artists are toppling the conventions in the History of Art and freeing the form from old concepts such as universal beauty or natural form, which have eroded with the whole of modernity since the advent of the "masters of suspicion" (Charles Darwin, Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, as coined by Ricoeur [20]), in the 1920s Benjamin asked what to do to the ruins from that epistemological building. His theory of allegory aims at rescuing art from convention (representation), making it a live simulacrum ("presentation", as Cowan [21] helps us read the concept of *Darstellung*). Benjamin praises Nietzsche for rescuing tragedy from the moralist approach that prevails in Western Culture, from Aristotle to Schopenhauer ([15], pp. 103-113).

As his analysis of actual works of Art unfolds, Benjamin opposes religious and profane drama in the sense that Religion has a direct epistemological passage to truth: "While profane drama has to stop on the limit to transcendence, it gets there through detours, in a ludic way" ([15], p. 78 - originally "*Wenn dennoch das weltliche Drama an der Grenze der Transzendenz innehalten muß, sucht es auf Umwegen, spielhaft, ihrer sich zu vergewissern*").

This seems like a phenomenalistic response, based on a ludic application of the allegorical mode, as proposed in *ODTA*. He describes baroque theater as a kind of drama that has a ludic approach to reference, attempting to reach universals not by means of transcendental concepts (that represent ideas or archetypes or conventions), but by playful, immanent presentation. As he breaks down plays, mainly from the German and Spanish traditions, it becomes clear that this effect cannot be attained by such an allegory based merely on convention. In the best plays, the objects play, presenting the aesthetic experience. No need to say characters in allegoric mode are not to be seen as complicated individuals with conflicting motivations as are real human beings, rather regarded as vessels for the metaphors to come. In that sense, the theory of allegory may conflict with the aristotelian tradition of verisimilitude that prevails in Western storytelling.

By the same time, Ludology matured as the semiotic domain centered on games. Huizinga [19] is ambiguous when referring to games *stricto sensu* and other systems as "games". The polissemic grounds for a contemporary Philosophy of Games were laid. Depending on what is a game, there are diverse ontological and ethical implications.

III. Ludic Studies as humanism

Here, Ludic Studies mean many fields of knowledge that emerged in the late Modern Age: leisure economy in the XIXth century helped develop modern Game Design and Arts; modern Education yielded new understanding of childhood and *paideia* (Play Studies, Toy Library techniques); contemporary Art requires new sets of rules. Contemporary Ludology has evolved to be a complex, transdisciplinary corpus; it can't mean the study of games from an abstract point of view alone any longer. Games may be treated as culturally relevant artifacts, increasingly important in the History of Global Economy, true Art or mere publicity media, but they also have their own ontological status, apart from other media domains (such a paradigm is confirmed by the mapping by Koenitz [22]).

Ludic Studies have to deal with games as cultural artifacts [17], as open cultural systems (in the context of post-modern referential crisis), as complex emergent systems (player agency *versus* author control), as ideological tokens from cultural industry, as pleasure toys, as the newest, most advanced form of Art (for the latter, see Bolter and Grusin [1]). A game is a document for the historian to read in search of those other uses and meanings, which are usually implicit or ideological [14].

What we seek, here, is to distinguish between games as any cultural artifact, to be read in the context of cultural struggle through the lens of historic representation (as a document), and games as works of Art, to be read through the lens of ludic presentation (as play), designed to depict some true version of the world (or attempt to, as Science and Philosophy do). Of course, what games should be treated as art depends on contingency (to "when is art?", Goodman responds: Art is paradigmatic, just like Science [3][16]). The distinction between Art and technique, visible in the world of phenomena as relations like "artist and artisan", "Art and Design", "author and developer", is clearly attached to material and social matters, prejudices and ideology.

In short, games as systems that function as Science (and scientific applications, such as education) would respond to different epistemologies, being "interested games" (serious games, games for change) guided by other functions, while uninterested games would be "games for the game": either purely aesthetic (if merely entertaining) or freely true to artistic worldbuilding. The ensuing artistic responsibility is a political one: as Arlindo Machado points out, "works that use new technology for art become a critical tool" [23].

This train of thought helps understand why ludologists have such distinct approaches on player agency, even when thinking about games as art form [22]: they agree games are a form of narrative distinct from others, but the way the user or player interacts with each game may vary not only due to technical limitations, but also in accordance to the experience the system is supposed do convey, the desired aesthetic experience and the level of player freedom that works best for the presentation of each game as narratological structure (from toy to book [10]).

Therefore, according to the "author as world builder" paradigm, the separation between embedded and emergent narrative relies on the different functions the system has (when is it Art or when is it Education or Advertisement or pleasure). An advertising game may be quite chaotic (hence not allegorical, for the alterdiscourse requires some degree of cohesion in order to work) and still communicate the desired message to the player (as exemplification [3]); many educational games would probably prefer the referential mode to the metaphorical one, as they represent Science, and still have a diverse approach to user agency; artistic games (as commercial ones are usually treated, independent from its factual "artistic qualities") and philosophical games could employ both denotation and metaphor to present a game world. It can be argued that the different functions a system has will be better suited to different player agencies, resulting in a conflict [24]; it apparently does not help people from trying to combine all these functions into the same, complex system.

The ontological difference is evident: a serious game such as an educational app or a newsgame is an interactive simulacrum that represents the world in a referential, conventional way. It might even present itself as impartial or merely denotative, especially when strictly scientific, but would still be read, historically, as all cultural artifacts: pieces in a greater cultural game of domination, spaces for cultivating values good and bad. As shown above, on the other hand, Art is not merely technique or Science; its innovative tradition and post-modern lack of reference implies choices from the artist.

By immersing the player in an interactive new world, a game maker as worldmaker always makes a subjective stance on what the world is or should be. This stance, although motivated by many cultural values, is ultimately political, for it consists of the actual design choice made in the real world by the author.

IV. Games as allegory

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The historical context helps us understand two different ways in which Walter Benjamin shines light on hermeneutics: the allegorical mode as described in ODTA [15] (and "The storyteller" [12]), as worldbuilding strategy for the artist, versus the materialist reading of History (objects as allegorical pieces in the capitalist system, in the Arcades project [13], or reading History "against the grain", in the "Theses" [14]. The argument here is that many allegorical game readings invoke the latter, while the first may be more interesting for Art purposes.

Van den Beukel [2] lists some authors that employ Benjamin while addressing the allegorical mode of games, such as Stallabras, Galloway and Wark; when reading such authors, van den Beukel emphasizes Benjamin's "theory of the allegorical mode in capitalism" found in the Arcades: "any person, any object, any relationship, can mean absolutely anything else" ([13], p. 175). The problem, here, is that such a materialistic exegesis is Benjamin's approach to all of History; in that sense, everything is to be read as metaphors or, rather, monuments and ruins that tell History indirectly. Below, this approach will be called synecdochical reading, unintentional allegory, or merely historical reading.

Benjamin's theory of allegory from *ODTA*, which will be called the artistic reading of documents, is one that applies to authors "highly reflective of game allegory", as Beukel puts it. The theory of allegory in *ODTA* is one for the presentation of the world in a reflective, playful mode: it is simulacrum, not repetition. Consequently, metaphor as cryptography is therefore not the type of allegorical construction Benjamin defends, for it would rest on keys of interpretation external to the text; Benjamin looks for a way to keep sense inside the text (the ludic response to the referential crisis).

Benjamin's presentation of allegory as worldbuilding refrains from secrets meant for those "in the know", favoring the presentation of images (even though never referentially complete, as all language is), dead metaphors and old conventional structures may not qualify as sound allegorical construction, which helps denounce a choice from game developers, as Beukel points out, that justify old story forms and tropes on the universality of archetypes... conventional symbols are not live metaphors. Dead metaphors lose meaning over time. Live metaphors transcend the limits of temporal decay. As Benjamin concludes by the end of *ODTA*, German baroque theater demands interpretation for "it was conceived in the spirit of allegory, since beginning as ruin and fragment. And, while other [forms] shine as in the first day, this form fixes on the last [day] its image of beauty." ([15], p. 253).

A full allegory, like the contextualized story coming from the true storyteller [12], presents reality playfully, with the addition that the post-modern artist, just like some baroque writers, has no support from idealism (a traditional strategy for reading myths) or from transcendental representation (as religious art has).

Consequently, allegory as a mode for writing games as Art implies a conflict with both the aristotelian paradigm (the verisimilitude model, according to which good

contemporary characters are "round", "complex" characters), but also is at odds with old concepts of allegory, as the secret code _the idea of allegory as cryptography is not favored by Benjamin, although artistic responses to political conditions may generate such welcome coded messages (see Favaretto [25] on allegorical response to Brazilian totalitarianism).

By reading games as involuntary allegories, one might see not the relations between objects themselves in an artificial, novel, ludic world, somewhat corresponding to the actual, phenomenical world, but only the relations of power and culture that preside over game making. This way one will read games as synecdoches, rather than allegories: games seen that way are metonymic emblems of material relations, not allegory in full (for example, Coleridge defines metonymy as opposed to allegory, as seen in Fletcher [26]).

Beukel also accounts for the conflict with aristotelian verisimilitude that springs from the allegorical mode. Although verisimilitude and allegory appear at odds many times, some argue that systems can be built as both (see "Machado de Assis alegorista" [27], as a way of reading romantic and naturalistic prose as also allegorical). It is possible to check it for coherence as both "realistic" (in the aristotelian sense of verisimilitude) and "allegorical" (because of presentification of concepts in the experience, not because of some symbolic convention, as weak as any convention in postmodern paradigm). In any case, ethical implications follow and will be presentified as politics when the game is played (in its many uses).

From the game developer perspective, complex characters and stories (be them embedded or emerging from player agency) have much to do with the aristotelian tradition in narrative, as cultivated in mainstream novels, movies, and the realistic video game: not only should a work of Art be aesthetically and morally beautiful (the allegorical discourse being hidden as secret or metonymy for the future, not a present use), it should appear plausible or empathic. How game designers will show what is "real" reflects their individual values combined politically in their collaboration. History will analyze those as emblems or ruins of those prevailing values [14]. On the other hand, to embrace the allegorical mode in poiesis is itself a risky business, for allegoresis implies (as the allegorical function is explicit) the reader or player will look for a coherence or an idea or the lively presentation of concepts, the "other thing it is supposed to say" (*allegoreuo*). Apparently this is a challenge some game developers that think games as Art are willing to take [2].

As a result of above findings, the project on games and allegory will now apply both the historical (synecdochical) interpretation and the allegorical analysis to a game system. The first view is aided by Oral History and the social sciences as tools for "brushing History against the grain" [14]; the second analysis is the allegorical interpretation, less as hermeneutics of individual game systems than as an example for the artistic concepts proposed by this epistemological construction.

As to the History of Games, this avant-garde medium is one of the fields in the cultural battle, developed through the lenses (and restrictions and interests) of finance, entertainment, culture and technique. What the medium says depends on its intrinsic properties, but also the use we do of them [28]); as Flusser [29] predicted for media in general in the age of telematics, board games and video games are tied to socioeconomic models and cultural values (and as such we may read them as synecdoches that inform History), but how they function may change [3] and artists play with that intentionally [23].

So, while today the struggle is between games, as products in transmedia contracts that compete for consumers' resources and minds, it may be the case, following the logic of complexity or hypermediation, that time will consecrate games that unite both the immediate aesthetic experience that appeals to consumers, be it via verisimilitude or fantastical simulacrum, and the present experience of allegorical truth, as a redeemed *mythos*, game as the ultimate work of Art ([1], after [30]).

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