

РАФАЛ БАРТОС

THE MOTIF OF WAR IN TABLETOP ROLE-PLAYING GAMES:
AN EXPLORATORY STUDYМОТИВ ВІЙНИ В НАСТІЛЬНИХ РОЛЬОВИХ ІГРАХ:
ПОШУКОВЕ ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ

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Abstract. This article explores the prominent motif of war in tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) through the analysis of popular games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Warhammer* fantasy role playing game. The author argues that the motif of war is a prevalent theme in RPGs due to its ability to prompt players to engage in epic battles and quests and to develop complex storylines. The article draws upon theoretical frameworks such as narratology and ludology to analyze how the motif of war shapes player experiences in these games and how it contributes to the evolution of TTRPGs as a genre. Through the analysis of game mechanics and thematic elements, the author demonstrates that the motif of war serves both as a source of conflict and a means of creating immersive gameplay experiences. The article concludes with a reflection on the implications and potential future directions of studying war in RPGs.

Keywords: the motif of war, tabletop role-playing games, tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Warhammer* fantasy role playing game, ludology.

Introduction. Tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) have gained considerable popularity over the past few decades, attracting players with fantastic worlds, immersive storylines, and interactive experiences. Many TTRPGs are set in fictional worlds of historical periods where war is a central element of the setting. These games often fall into genres like high fantasy, science fiction, or military. The motif of war in them serves as a backdrop or a driving force for the Game Master to create a story for a short scenario or long campaign. The games in those world settings provide players with an interactive and complex narrative, allowing them to create their characters, through which they can co-create and experience great stories and complete challenging tasks.

The Aim of the Paper. Among the many themes explored in TTRPGs, the theme of war is the most common. It stands out as a recurring and fascinating aspect that has attracted players for generations (Lewin, 2012; Tresca, 2017). **This article aims** to explore the importance and impact of the theme of war in role-playing games.

Understanding the theme of war in TTRPGs has significance beyond its entertainment value. Observing how war is depicted can shed light on the human fascination with conflict and the broader cultural narratives embedded in these games. In addition, this exploration can yield insights into potential ethical considerations, cognitive processes, and social dynamics that emerge as players navigate war-related scenarios within the safe confines of a fictional game environment.

The Role of War in TTRPGs. The theme of war is a central element of TTRPGs, shaping the dynamics of the game, and providing a framework for epic quests, character development, exploration, and player experience. As players immerse themselves in these unique game worlds, they will be allowed to take on the role of noble warriors, cunning strategists, or fearless heroes who must often navigate the complexities of war-torn landscapes. The war is always going on somewhere, existing in the background of the world or simply appearing in the player character's story. The theme of war also introduces conflict, which allows players to make difficult moral decisions, allowing for continuous character building and their story, while enabling them to experience personal growth in the game world. The backdrop of war creates a sense of urgency and high stakes, captivating players, keeping the pace of the game moving, and drawing them deeper into the game's story.

The theme of war is a motif with rich narrative potential, very often exploited by game creators and game players. Game masters often create sophisticated stories revolving around the intricacies of war, political struggles, and the socioeconomic effects of conflict (Mearls & Crawford, 2019; Pramas, 2005). Such stories, depending on preferences, allow players to shape the outcome of battles, form alliances, and influence the course of history and geopolitics in the game world.

The motif of war in TTRPGs emphasizes the importance of collaboration and teamwork. In times of conflict, players must rely on each other, pooling their skills and resources to overcome challenges and achieve their objectives. Successfully navigating the rigors of war requires trust, communication, and strategic cooperation among players. The cooperative nature of TTRPGs shines brightest when players work together to achieve victory against formidable adversaries.

Character Growth and Moral Dilemmas. War often blurs the lines between good and evil, and TTRPGs use this ambiguity to present players with moral dilemmas. Player characters, and thus players themselves, may be faced with difficult choices that will test their personal beliefs, forcing them to weigh the value of their individual lives against the greater good or question their cause's righteousness. These decisions have lasting consequences and very often shape the character's development and moral compass. War is often the crucible of personal growth and heroism in TTRPGs. As players navigate the chaos and danger of war, they can demonstrate courage, leadership, and sacrifice. The challenges and obstacles that war presents allow characters to develop skills, form deep bonds with other characters, and find their place in the narrative. By facing the hardships of war, characters can evolve, develop, and become legendary figures.

Exploring moral dilemmas allows players to reflect on their value system, on their feelings, and face ethical issues. Through their characters, players can explore different perspectives, question their preconceptions, and explore the complexities of morality in the context of war. This exploration adds layers of depth and complexity to the gameplay, allowing characters to evolve and develop based on the decisions they make. Thus, the player can see the consequences of bad choices. TTRPGs provide players with a platform to explore the psychological effects of war and showcase their characters' struggles and growth in the face of adversity. The horrors of war can have a profound impact on characters, both mentally and emotionally. Characters may face experiences of loss, trauma, and violence, each of which leaves a lasting mark. By roleplaying, players can delve into the emotional depths of their characters, revealing their coping mechanisms, resilience, and efforts to heal from difficult experiences. These experiences allow characters to evolve, developing empathy, compassion, and strength as they find ways to overcome their internal struggles.

The theme of war can also challenge characters' existing affiliations and beliefs, potentially leading to significant changes in their moral compass. When the characters encounter the harsh realities of war, their beliefs may be questioned or even destroyed.

It is worth noting here that TTRPGs can also serve as a tool for dealing with various traumas for the players themselves. Importantly, however, the game must be conducted by an expert who has special education and permission to help deal with problems. Under no circumstances can it be a random person who does not know how to provide specialist help – there is a very high risk that the problem may deepen.

During their adventures, player characters may encounter NPCs from opposing factions who may challenge their perception of good and evil. Through interactions and exposure to different perspectives, characters can undergo ideological changes, questioning their loyalties and re-evaluating the principles they hold dear. Such changes in alignment can have a profound impact on character development, opening new stories and opportunities for personal growth.

TTRPG games, as mentioned earlier, allow players to take on the role of army commanders, offering them the opportunity to test their leadership skills and cope with the challenges of command and the burden of responsibility. When leading an army, as a commander, it is very important to find a balance between your needs and those of your allies. The character and the player are faced with difficult decisions about tactically complex choices (Mäkelä & Schmidt, 2020). Additionally, the player and the player's character who puts themselves in the role of a leader, regardless of the situation, should inspire their subordinates and motivate them to follow him. Leadership skills also help develop the player's communication skills and allow them to feel the burden of responsible leadership.

War is often associated with acts of violence and cruelty, but thanks to the narrative of TTRPG games, heroes can face the consequences of their actions and seek redemption. War experiences can force characters to reflect on the morality of their actions, leading to feelings of guilt, remorse, and a desire to make amends. Characters may undertake quests or engage in acts of sacrifice to make amends for their past actions and seek forgiveness from those they have wronged. These journeys of redemption allow players to delve into themes of forgiveness, atonement, and personal growth as their characters strive to find inner peace and positively impact the world around them.

In summary, exploring character development and moral dilemmas in the context of war in TTRPGs provides players with a unique platform to make complex ethical choices, overcome adversity, and develop their characters' identities. The challenges presented in war narratives allow characters to evolve, learn from their experiences, and emerge as heroes forged in the crucible of war.

Historical and Societal Exploration. War often has profound historical and societal implications, and TTRPGs provide a platform for exploring these themes in depth. TTRPGs can be set in a wide range of historical eras, from ancient civilizations, the medieval world, the Industrial Revolution, modern war, or even futuristic and alternate history settings. By experiencing these unique settings and their cultural, technological, and social aspects, the Game Master and his players can explore the portrayal of diversity.

Players can create characters from, for example, a rich pool of different ethnicities, social classes, and backstories. For more realistic gameplay the Game Master and players often engage in research to accurately portray the historical or social context of the world setting and the characters. That research can involve studying clothing, technology, language, political structures, class struggles, racism, colonialism, and more.

The motif of war prompts players to engage with the social and cultural aspects of the game world, as they encounter diverse factions, explore the consequences of war on different communities, and delve into the motivations behind the conflict. This motif adds a layer of complexity to the gaming experience.

Through interactive storytelling, players gain insights into the broader context of the war: the political motivations, the power struggles, and the socioeconomic impacts. These explorations can spark discussions and reflections on real-world history, politics, and societal dynamics, fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities of war and its impact on individuals and societies. Additionally, players can gain a deeper appreciation for the intricacies of different periods and societies.

Conclusions. The motif of war holds a significant place in the world of tabletop role-playing games. Through its immersive storytelling, character growth opportunities, and strategic gameplay, war creates a captivating experience for players. TTRPGs continue to explore and refine the motif of war, offering endless possibilities for engaging and thought-provoking gameplay. As the genre evolves, further studies and analyses are warranted to better understand the impact and potential of war in TTRPGs.

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БАРТОС Р.

МОТИВ ВІЙНИ В НАСТІЛЬНИХ РОЛЬОВИХ ІГРАХ: ПОШУКОВЕ ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ

Анотація. У цій статті досліджується провідний мотив війни в настільних рольових іграх через аналіз таких популярних ігор, як «Dungeons & Dragons» та фентезі-рольової гри «Warhammer». Автор стверджує, що мотив війни є центральною темою в рольових іграх, які спонукають гравців брати участь в епічних битвах і квестах, а також розвивати складні сюжетні лінії. Спираючись на такі теоретичні засади, як наратологія та лудологія, стаття показує, як мотив війни формує досвід гравців і як він впливає на еволюцію жанру настільної рольової гри. Через аналіз ігрової механіки і тематичних елементів автор демонструє, що мотив війни править за джерело конфлікту і засіб для створення захопливого ігрового досвіду. Стаття завершується висновками про наслідки та потенційні майбутні напрямки вивчення війни в рольових іграх.

Ключові слова: мотив війни, настільні рольові ігри, настільна рольова гра «Dungeons & Dragons», фентезі-рольова гра «Warhammer», лудологія.

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