'The Mechanic is the Message': Board Game Design as a Performative Research Tool in the Historiography of Domestic Violence Against Children

« The Mechanic is the Message » : la conception de jeux de société, instrument de recherche performative pour l'historiographie de la violence domestique contre les enfants

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PREO

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Textes et contextes

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20-1 | 2025
Le domestique, lieu de production du politique / Le parlementarisme au prisme du modèle de Westminster : continuité, rupture, évolution

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Introduction

1   During the second half of 2022, I developed a working prototype for a board game on the theme of domestic violence against children in Ireland. *Black & Blue* is set in the 1980s, a period which overlaps with my own childhood and, more importantly, situates the action of the game after the global dissemination of research on the Battered Child Syndrome (Kempe, Silverman, *et al.*, 1962) but prior to the professionalization of social work in Ireland (Skehill, O'Sullivan & Buckley 1999), increased funding for child protection services, and the child-centred legislative reforms of the 1990s (Buckley, Whelan *et al.* 2008: 9-12)[2]. It also comes before child-focused amendments to the Irish Constitution and the creation of multi-agency safeguarding structures in the 2010s[3]. Such structures (Tusla in Ireland and Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs in the UK) emerged in response to public revelations of abuse and the recognition that dispersing child safeguarding responsibilities across individual agencies working in isolation and not systematically sharing information was endangering children (DCYA 2017: 2-3).

2   My principal objective was to measure the potential of the long experimental process of game design (as opposed to the relatively short experience of actual gameplay) to activate, reinforce, guide or accompany in some way the historiography of child maltreatment. Intuitively, I felt that there could be benefits for the historian-designer in performatively researching frameworks for thematically coherent in-game choices and that the experimental and experiential aspects of the design process itself could open up promising qualitative research pathways. 'Performatively,' in this context, refers to conducting research and experimentation in a manner that actively shapes and generates knowledge, highlighting the dynamic process of doing, enacting, and embodying the research (Haseman 2006). My experiment (which involved both conception and playtesting[4]) was directly motivated by an invitation to participate in the University of Lille research project "*Le domestique comme lieu de (re)production du politique*", in the context of which I had the opportunity to present the game for the first time during a workshop on domestic space and violence in February 2023[5].

3   The notion of translating real-world violence against children into a
     game will not appeal to everyone. Some will see it as an inappropriate
     response to a complex and sensitive issue [6], unethical, in bad taste,
     highly offensive, a waste of time, or all of these at once. This is under-
     standable. In the 20th century [7], board game designers did not gener-
     ally adopt a critical approach to the issue of violence. Combat, death
     and destruction are thematically essential to many games [8] but the
     superficial, designer-generated narratives of the vast majority of
     commercial titles have hindered rather than promoted serious,
     player-generated conversations about violence [9]. Outside the genre
     of historically accurate wargames which depict battles in meticulous
     detail [10], there has been little enthusiasm for facilitating the transfer
     of insights from the in-game actions of characters to real-world,
     flesh-and-blood players. In *Cluedo* (1949), for example, games begin
     after Dr Black has been murdered. Three of the six potential murder
     weapons (lead pipe, candlestick and wrench) imply that he has been
     brutally beaten to death but the theme of extreme violence is only
     briefly present to provide a sensational (and, thus, commercially at-
     tractive) backdrop for a straightforward elimination and deduction
     game, and is not meant to be explored in any depth by players. The
     designer simply took advantage of the vogue for murder mystery
     games in the 1940s (Pilon 2015). Tobias Allen's *Serial Killer: The Board
     Game* (1991) pushes the trivialization of murder to even greater
     lengths by having players control characters who travel around a map
     of the United States killing as many innocents as possible while trying
     to avoid getting caught in states with the death penalty (Shatzkin
     1992). Games such as this do no more than provide subversive, irrev-
     erent and cathartic entertainment, and only promote a deeper un-
     derstanding of what it is to be a victim or perpetrator of horrible
     crimes when they attract the critical attention of the media, politi-
     cians or concerned citizens, and a public debate ensues.

4   The potential of this medium to promote critical thinking and stimu-
     late nuanced conversations about historical and contemporary social
     issues has been limited by the perception of play as a useless activity.
     According to anthropologist Thomas Malaby, "the history of Western
     thought has constructed a distinction between productive action as a
     contribution to society (ultimately in the material sense) and unpro-
     ductive action, or play" (Malaby 2007: 100). [11] Board game designers

Jakub Wiśniewski and Michał Oracz corroborate Malaby's analysis that play is not expected by the general public to lead to new insights:

> We were told that board games cannot and should not confront a meaningful story, like a book does [...] and that people don't need them to be thought-provoking. [...] We heard that board games cannot present anything else but sheer fun. [...] That the plot of board games should be pretextual, flat and shallow so that it won't draw the attention away from the rules, mechanics and simply having fun. And if something more serious was to appear, it should only be presented by an interpretation of some serious medium such as a book or a movie (Wiśniewski and Oracz 2017a).

5   In the past, serious themes tackling and teaching contemporary societal issues[12] were sometimes mapped onto (literally screen-printed or pasted onto the surface of) racetrack-style games with simple roll-and-move mechanics. Political, satirical and moral variations of the popular *Game of the Goose* were used to gently introduce difficult subjects to children or cash in on current affairs[13].

6   More often than not, genuinely thought-provoking content has ended up being simplified to the point of meaningless abstraction (*Snakes and Ladders*)[14], pushed into the background (*Cluedo*) or eliminated entirely to meet the needs of the mainstream marketplace. The prime exemplar of the latter is Elizabeth Magie's taxation board game *The Landlord's Game* (1904)[15]. This was acquired by Parker Brothers in 1935 and immediately shelved to make way for their hyper-capitalist *Monopoly* (1935), which almost certainly plagiarised Magie's concept but excised the anti-capitalist content (Orbanes 2006: 9-10).

7   In the 21st century, artists, academics and designers are increasingly embracing the enormous narrative potential of boar games: "[t]he fact that a certain trend is emerging, one that carries expanded and serious stories, is undeniable and heartwarming" (Wiśniewski, Oracz, *et al.* 2017a). Focusing more on what players carry away with them when they return to the real world[16] than on short-term, in-game thrills, creators such as Brenda Romero in the US and 11-Bit Studio in Poland have completely transformed how we think about the medium, creating visceral experiences[17] which force players into

paradigm-shifting moral dilemmas in scenarios that haunt them long after the game is over. It is designers like these who inspired me to create *Black & Blue*.

8   This article is neither a history of child safeguarding in Ireland nor a suggestion that board games can generate such a history. It does not aim to contribute to the intellectual or conceptual architecture of domestic violence history. It is, rather, a report on a single experiment and an exposition of how the thinking and problem solving that takes place in the game design process might transfer over to the early stages of domestic violence historiography. As such it is concerned with "the improvement of practice, and new epistemologies distilled from □...□ understandings of action in context." (Haseman 2006). I will begin with an exploration of the immediate literary source for *Black & Blue*, a brief but persuasive depiction of domestic violence against a child in R. F. Kuang's 2022 novel *Babel.* Part two will survey a game and a game system which generate the experiences and understanding I am aiming for. In the third part, I will apply Frederic Jameson's conception of 'cognitive mapping' to board game design and argue that it is in the capacity of games to create navigable itineraries through complex and painful realities and potentially create preliminary roadmaps for research that their historiographical value lies. And finally, in part four, I will describe and analyse *Black & Blue*. Historical analysis will be offered throughout where relevant, particularly in the last section.

1. Conversations with the future

> Professor Lovell [...] did not look like a man in the throes of a tempestuous rage. He was not shouting; his eyes were not wild; his cheeks had not even turned red. He seemed simply, with every hard and deliberate blow, to be attempting to inflict maximum pain with the minimum risk of permanent injury. For he did not strike Robin's head, nor did he apply so much force that Robin's ribs would crack. No; he only dealt bruises that could be easily hidden and that, in time, would heal completely (Kuang 2022: 39-40).

9   R. F. Kuang's account of an adult coldly and efficiently beating the orphaned child in his care has the ring of truth about it. Many of those who have suffered physical maltreatment as children will re-

cognize some or all of the elements of the scene. The fact that this is
speculative fiction set in an alternate version of 1830s England rather
than a work of empirical-analytical history will not diminish the force
of this recognition. Nor should it negate its value as a means of un-
derstanding our past. Academic historiography, or the structuring by
university-trained specialists of the bits and pieces of the past into
their preferred narratives, is not the only way to engage with that
past. As Deluermoz and Singaravélou have argued, "the study of past
possibilities and counterfactual analysis may open one's eyes and
provide new opportunities for action in the present [enabling] an ori-
ginal form of exchange between academics and the larger public that
breaks with a traditional vertical diffusion of knowledge". (Deluermoz
and Singaravélou 2021: x). As a form of non-academic knowledge,
board games also have the potential to establish "a more horizontal
relationship between the historian and his or her public". (Deluermoz
and Singaravélou 2021: x).

10   The content of this short extract may very well strike us as true, but
it is a type of truth that is generally invisible to historians. Unless
either of the people in the room leaves a personal documentary trace
of the encounter (in a diary or a letter), or talks to a journalist who
then includes it in an article, or an eye witness (implausibly looking
through a window) produces an affidavit which is included in a police
file or court report, or a doctor writes up the child's injuries in a re-
port, there will be no archival material for historians to engage with.
Furthermore, the police file and doctor's report will not necessarily
be easily accessible to the researcher if they are not part of a larger,
more public archive such as a court or commission report. The incid-
ent might become oral history or testimony 'spoken into the record'
in the child's future if he chooses to share his memory with a re-
searcher, a commission, a police investigation or an investigative
journalist. Such memory, however, is often treated with suspicion by
investigators, especially in situations where it is one person's word
against another. When one of them was a child at the time, the suspi-
cion is considerably amplified[18].

11   Three aspects of Kuang's text signal the sources of this historical in-
visibility: 1) the professor is fully aware of the potential scrutiny of his
peers and seeks to manage the risk of patterns of maltreatment
emerging into the light by controlling the force of his blows; 2) he is

also fully aware and takes advantage of the layers of silence and in-defensible[19] physical space which insulate the maltreatment of children from external oversight; and 3) he has a long term strategy in place which balances the pursuit of his objectives with the avoidance of discovery by anyone capable of creating a scandal. I will unpack these observations below.

12   Firstly, patterns of maltreatment are crucial. Since ancient times, societal perceptions of children have evolved significantly—from viewing them as miniature adults to recognizing childhood as a unique and protected stage of life (Ariès 1960), and from silencing to amplifying their voices (Shier 2019; Archard & Uniacke 2021). By the 20th century, children's rights gained global attention, influencing measures to address abuse (Staunton 2025). But, crucially, it is only when these patterns are recognized and communicated to agencies with the authority, means and will to intervene that child protection measures and/or procedures for punishing malefactors are triggered. What has become clear since the late 20th century is that while family members, friends of the family and neighbours are often aware of ongoing maltreatment, this knowledge is not always passed on to or heard by the right agencies (Skehill, O'Sullivan & Buckley 1999). Even when knowledge does successfully penetrate into the system it does not automatically lead to action. Until the 21st century[20], police, medical practitioners, educators and social services did not effectively share resources, to the extent that the knowledge of maltreatment that did enter each individual agency was sometimes only a small piece of a larger unseen picture and did not trigger the response that a more holistic, inter-agency vision might have provoked.

13   Secondly, what we learn in the aftermath of the beating is that while this violence is surrounded by silence, it is far from secret (Kuang 2022: 41-2). Bruises and swelling on the child's face are visible to certain adults as they heal but none of these adults is in a position to intervene. The boy is an orphan brought to England from Canton in the 19th century and, as such, already has less protection than the average child. Subsequently, he is kept away from neighbours, and outsiders and educated at home. The staff of his guardian see his bruises and know how he got them but do not challenge their master.

14   Thirdly, this beating opens two separate conversations with the future. One is with the victim of the violence. According to Friedrich Nietzsche, punishment burns memories into the body, (Nietzsche 2007: 37-9). In other words, bodily pain buries the memory of the law and a promised adherence to social order deep inside (Draz 2018: 4). This is a clearly considered a good thing by both Nietzsche and the professor. In the case of Kuang's orphan, the boy's future self, behaviour and, crucially, his unquestioning respect for the system are being shaped by the brutal beating in the present. His body will remember and he will submit.

15   The second conversation is with future researchers and investigators (including historians) who might interest themselves in the case of this child. The adult is being careful to leave no evidence. We are almost a century before Kempe, Silverman *et al.* published their research on the 'battered-child syndrome' (Kempe *et al.* 1962: 17-24) and there is as yet (in the 1830s) no way to identify repeated physical abuse in a living child. Arthur Danto argues that we cannot know what historians will say about us in the future (Danto 1985: 155-81) but Jacques Derrida locates a loophole in the methodology of historical practitioners: our understanding of how archives will be exploited in the future influences how we produce and stock archives in the present (Derrida 1995: 17). If we know that historians (and other researchers and investigators) are coming, we can keep them in the dark by leaving no trace of our activity. We can know what they will say about us by making sure they have nothing at all to say.

16   Writers of imaginative literature as diverse as Kuang, Fyodor Dostoyevsky (*The Brothers Karamazov*), Ursula K. Le Guin ('Those Who Walk Away from Omelas') and J.K. Rowling (the *Harry Potter* series) have allowed us to penetrate into similar spaces, forging a visceral connection to the past so that we witness domestic violence from an otherwise impossible perspective and experience the emotional and psychological dimensions of past events. This artistic work is part of our intuitive understanding of the moral principles of our society (the natural law) which is developed collectively, as C. Fred Alford argues, in the socially and culturally negotiated narratives we weave as communities over time (Alford 2010: 14). These narratives give meaning and direction to our lives, benchmark good behaviour and provide cautionary examples of what happens when humans lose

their way (Alford 2010: 64). They permeate our artistic creations and keep our statutory legislation from stagnating. As Alford puts it, "the best answer to those who are not sure that it is wrong to napalm babies is to tell stories," (Alford 2010: 121).

17   He also argues that it is "important to consider whether all who are participants in the story have had a role in telling the story. Is the story told, at least in part, by everyone concerned, and not just for and to them?" (Alford 2010: 19). Children have long been excluded from this story-telling process and it wasn't until the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 that the child's right to express their views and have them taken seriously in accordance with their age and maturity was recognized (on paper at least). Arguably, the voices of children were always audible in the work of artists, including the authors of fiction listed above, who can look through any window, insert themselves into any room or dismantle the walls of the house altogether to get at the truth of what is happening inside. This is also true of board game design and in my second part I will consider a game and a game system that force us into moments of visceral understanding.

2. Visceral Gaming

18   Happily, in the 21st century, the environment, working conditions and expectations of game designers have greatly improved. Easier access to design, production and marketing tools has made it possible to bypass large corporations and distribution networks, and publish 'independent' games treating serious, non-mainstream themes. Thanks to crowdfunding opportunities and the networking of geographically dispersed consumers, it is now possible to publish games which avoid trivialization and stereotyping. Online platforms such as itch.io [21] have allowed designers to share non-commercial games [22] and foster a gregarious community of like-minded gamers and designers working outside commercial channels. There is increasing enthusiasm for making and sharing games that allow players to engage in playful but meaningful ways with the real world via non-commercial interactive storytelling experiences that delve into social themes, provide educational insights, or invite them to engage with their surroundings creatively. In this section I will consider designer and player experiences

which reflect this more ambitious, inclusive and narrative-rich approach to game design.

2.1. *Train*

19   I have not yet had the opportunity to play Brenda Romero's *Train* (2009). Few people have. It has the status of an art object rather than a commercial product. The only copy is generally kept in Romero's house in California but sometimes makes appearances at exhibitions, conferences and game design courses in universities. And yet, the ideas it embodies are so strong that simply reading about other people playing it has influenced my own practice more than any other game.

20   *Train* is part of a growing series of games called 'The Mechanic is the Message' launched in 2008, which, according to Romero,

> captures and expresses difficult experiences through the medium of a game. Much like photographs, paintings, literature and music are capable of transmitting the full range of the human experience from one human to another, so too can games. Due to their interactivity, [...] games are capable of a higher form of communication, one which actively engages the participant and makes them a part of the experience rather than a passive observer. (Romero 2019a)

21   Experience (which Romero mentions three times in this short extract) is the key to understanding what these games are all about. As Wolfgang Leidhold has taught us, experience is "the way in which we are part of the world" (Leidhold 2023: 9). When we become conscious of our participation (objectively via our senses or subjectively via our imagination) with something in the world (i.e., when we become aware of our grasp of a part of reality), this consciousness transforms participation into experience. (Leidhold 2023: 9-13). Romero, as we will see below, creates opportunities for moments of intense awareness. Her games are, therefore, generators of experience.

22   'Participants' (the rules make no mention of 'players' or even a 'game') who sit down without any foreknowledge of *Train* are faced with what looks like a straightforward racetrack game for two or three players. A board with three parallel train tracks sits on top of a glazed window frame with several broken panes of glass. 60 yellow, stylized,

wooden passengers wait in line and participants are given one boxcar each to transport them. According to the rules, each passenger "is worth 100,000" and the goal is to get them "to the station until no more passengers can be delivered" (Romero 2009). Play is determined by rolling a yellow 6-sided die and drafting action cards. Die-rolls translate into either the number of passengers that can be loaded onto a boxcar or the number of stages the boxcar can be moved along the tracks towards its terminus. Action cards offer possibilities such as derailing cars, switching a car from one track to another, combining cars into a single train, blocking a line or doubling movement speed (Romero 2009).

23 There are hints that something dark might be going on here: the components include broken glass, an optional part of the set-up process involves breaking glass panes with a hammer, the value of 100,000 doesn't seem to indicate a currency or a number of points, there is an old German typewriter on the table, and the colour yellow (of both the die and the passengers) is surely trying to tell us something.

24 When the first boxcar arrives at its terminus, what has only been hinted at suddenly leaps into the foreground, completely changing the nature of the game. With the flip of a hitherto face-down card, the first destination is revealed to be one of 12 historical death camps [23]. This means that each of the 60 wooden characters is equivalent to 100,000 Jews killed during the Holocaust. Players are, nonetheless, still tasked with transporting them as quickly as possible to their deaths. Reported reactions to this paradigm shift are often physical. "People become nauseated. Their faces flush. People have cried," (Brophy-Warren 2009). The jarring interplay between toy boxcars, tracks and wooden people and the anxiogenic awareness of being compelled by a matter-of-fact rule set to perform an utterly repugnant task provokes strong emotions and lasting memories.

25 At this point participants can, if they wish, continue to load boxcars and race to see who delivers the most passengers, but this is not what usually happens. Participants tend to immediately start negotiating with each other and with the rules, "metagaming, rules lawyering, hacking and modding" (Wake 2023: 50) and applying real-world moral principles to the in-game narrative. As Romero says, *Train* asks

two questions, "Will people blindly follow the rules?" and "Will people stand by and watch?" (Romero 2019b). For those who refuse to be "the well-mannered player, the player who accepts the contract instituted by the rules and components" (Wake 2023: 50), there are loopholes and ambiguities aplenty: participants can refuse to load passengers and just move empty trains along the tracks, boxcars can be derailed, lines blocked and positive outcomes inserted into grey areas or gaps in the rules. Officially, the game ends either when all the passengers have arrived at a terminus or it simply "ends when it ends," (Romero 2009). The latter possibility means that participants can put a stop to the game as soon as they learn its true nature or even, if they have discovered this in advance, as soon as the game begins.

26   *Train* is not a history of the Holocaust. It is an opportunity for participants to experience (i.e., become conscious of their participation with) a part of its reality. Collectively, they are forced into an awareness of the unexceptional (but nonetheless extreme) complacency necessary to continue the task after the truth has emerged. If the "mechanic is the message", if rules, components, systems and player interactions can transcend entertainment to generate epiphanies, then the message is embodied in the physical act of wrestling moral positions out of a repugnant system and many come away with an unexpected experience of the 'banality of evil'[24].

2.2. 'Wretched and Alone'

> This hurricane was always going to be unsurvivable for you. This isn't a game designed to be won. Only played, and remembered. So, here, at the end, take a moment if you wish to unspool your thoughts, take some deep breaths, and let the tension out of your body. Make any last notes you would like to in your journal or other notekeeping method. Clear up the tower and the cards. It's over. (Summerwood Games 2021)

27   'Wretched and Alone' is a roleplaying game system rather than a game. It provides the basic framework for designers to create solo tabletop gaming experiences which tend to explore themes of "resilience in the face of overwhelming odds"[25]. The system evolved out of Chris Bissette's solo, journaling game *The Wretched* (2020)[26] in which the lone survivor of a horrific attack must cling to life as long as pos-

sible on a failing spaceship while the player fleshes out the narrative around prompts supplied by the designer and records it in a written journal or voice-recorded log. As in Bissette's original design, 'Wretched and Alone' games use a standard deck of cards as an 'oracle' (i.e., each card corresponds to a story prompt), a die to introduce an element of chance, and an unstable tower of wooden blocks (similar to *Jenga*) to create tension by guaranteeing a sudden and dramatic but unpredictable end. Because of the structure of the game, the player is forced to focus on telling the story of their character's resilience rather than focusing on the predestined catastrophic ending. As the above quote from *Disaster* makes clear, this is not the sort of game that we try to win. It is an experience.

28   This particular style of narrative play emerged and flourished during the first Covid-19 lockdown period, resonating powerfully with gamers who found themselves isolated and vulnerable in the real world and took advantage of the simple mechanics of 'Wretched and Alone' to work through these feelings in-game or by creating their own game. So successful did this prove that there are currently more than 80 games using the system listed on the itch.io platform[27].

29   *Disaster* (2021) by Summerwood Games is an excellent example of the genre. The introductory text tells us how it was conceived and what the designer expects of players:

> This is a game about living through a natural disaster. Something is coming, something that may not be survivable, but you have no way to escape, not now. It is too late. […] I wrote most of the first draft of this game in the hours and days following Hurricane Ida, the category 4 hurricane (nearly category 5) that slammed into southeast Louisiana on August 29th, 2021. This game was written by generator powered flickering lamplight while I was feeling the relief of living through the eyewall of a hurricane passing just miles from my house […]. I wrote this game to process the fear, horror, relief, and grief that an event like this brings. I invite you to put your rain boots on and experience a little of the fear and horror of a hurricane barreling through your state towards you (Summerwood Games 2021).

30   Distinctions between designer, player and character are deliberately blurred here. The unstable tower of wooden blocks simultaneously represents both the designer's real house and the character's fictional

house. If the player has faced real-world extreme weather events in their own lives, the experience may well include real memories. The designer is curating a composite experience. This involves compressing an image of their own real-world experiences into a series of prompts which will then be unpacked and expanded into a unique and intimate narrative by the player. Both the real experience of the designer and the imaginary (or memory-inspired) experience of the player pass through the prism of the game mechanics. Designer and player face each other from their positions at either pole, structuring each other's vision, learning about each other's lives as they contemplate their own via the imaginary connection of the game.

31   While *Disaster* invites us (in the present) to write a real personal journal of a fictional event, it is also clearly the fictionalisation of a real event in the past. Or, as I will argue below, it is like a map of a personal itinerary through a complex, alienating space handed to a stranger so that they can begin to navigate through the space themselves and have their own experiences.

3. Cognitive mapping

32   Kevin Lynch begins his classic 1960 study *The Image of the City*, with the observation that to become completely lost in the modern city in which "at every instant, there is more than the eye can see, more than the ear can hear, a setting or a view waiting to be explored", can provoke anxiety and even terror (Lynch 1960: 1-4). This reveals the extent to which "our sense of balance and well-being", our sense of emotional security and individual growth is linked to our ability to maintain a clear image of our surroundings in our heads (Lynch 1960: 4). He describes how this image is built as follows:

> Environmental images are the result of a two-way process between the observer and [their] environment. The environment suggests distinctions and relations, and the observer—with great adaptability and in the light of [their] own purposes—selects, organizes, and endows with meaning what [they] sees. The image so developed now limits and emphasizes what is seen, while the image itself is being tested against the filtered perceptual input in a constant interacting process (Lynch 1960: 6).

33   Obviously, each individual subject will have their own mental picture and this will significantly vary between observers.

34   Lynch was an urban planner and his ultimate objective was to create cities that would be more easily 'imageable' and less alienating for those who moved around in them. Marxist theorist Frederic Jameson broadens the scope of Lynch's idea from the relatively narrow framework of daily life in the physical city to an Althusserian "representation of the subject's imaginary relationship to his or her real conditions of existence" (Jameson 1991: 50) so that it can enable "a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole" (Jameson 1991: 51). For Jameson, this is a potential response (or a preparatory gesture before attempting a response) to the impossibility of conceiving our situation within the global network of multinational capital (or postmodern hyperspace). In his view, Lynch's model produces personal diagrams or itineraries "organized around the [...] existential journey of the traveller" (Jameson 1991: 51). These are the 'pre-cartographic' ancestors of a broader practice of cognitive mapping that combines the coordination of existential data (via compass and sextant) with "unlived, abstract conceptions of the geographic totality" (Jameson 1991: 51).

35   My intuitive response to Lynch and Jameson is to read *Train* or *This War of Mine* as cognitive maps of absent, unrepresentable and ungraspable pasts. To repurpose Jameson's metaphor, they are 'prehistoriographical'. They are mental images centred on the experiential encounters of the designers with the bits and pieces of the absent past which have survived into the present in the form of archival material, objects and stories. These images are encoded in the rules and components and making the games available to players is like drawing a map of the neighbourhood for a stranger who asks for directions. Armed with the map (the game), this person can have their own (in-game) experiences and fill in the gaps on the map with their own stories as they move around.

4. Black & Blue

36   Now that I have introduced the notion of board gaming as a form of cognitive mapping and, potentially, a historiographical tool, I will

focus on my own experimental game design for the remainder of this article.

37   *Black & Blue* combines some of the game mechanics and concepts we have seen above into a solo board gaming experience. Similarly to *Train*, *This War of Mine* and the 'Wretched and Alone' system, it offers structured, thematic play without any expectation of fun. The mechanics of the game will (hopefully) shed light on the interlocking real-world systems in which domestic violence was perpetrated and give players something to grasp, experience and remember so that they can generate their own cognitive maps of this reality. These maps can then become pre-historiographical prologues to historical research and production in this domain.

38   The game is played with custom-made cards and a stock of coloured wooden cubes. The cards depict stylized drawings of adult and child characters, contexts (either inside or outside the family home), institutions (school, police, hospitals etc.) and events. Together, these cards create an image of the social environment in which domestic violence occurred. The cubes are a visual and tactile representation of the different currencies of this environment: black and blue for bruises and injuries, yellow for social influence and red for stress and anger. The economy of the game revolves around the accumulation and exchange of these currencies in and between contexts, characters and institutions. Bruises build up on the person of a child, for example, until they are transferred to the doctor's surgery or the hospital and translated into medical files. Stress and anger are exchanged for bruises and injuries inside the home and social influence can cancel out the perception of this violence when it becomes visible in the legal system.

39   It should already be clear that the work of conceiving and designing the rules, components and mechanics (i.e., of getting a playable prototype to the table) involves a process of cognitive mapping. Together, the elements I have just presented constitute the equivalent of a hand-drawn 'map of the neighbourhood' of domestic violence, not a blank page on which to draw a map from scratch. This is the sort of intuitive knowledge we bring into the archive with us before we begin our research in earnest. I have done the preliminary imaging work of isolating key 'landmarks' around which players can nav-

igate and (hopefully) discover itineraries and landmarks of their own. Finding the most efficient way to explain how the game works and presenting it (as I am now doing), also contribute to the production of my own personal map.

4.1. Theme

40   Thematically, I have chosen to situate the action of the game in Ireland in the early 1980s. My cognitive map is specific to this place and time. This has important implications for how violence is perceived in-game. Perception, as Kuang's professor is aware, is the linchpin of societal engagement with domestic violence. When the pin is pulled and violence is hidden from sight, the machinery of history, law and social services grinds to a halt.

41   Because the game is set in the early 1980s, the characters exist (as we do today) in a world which has digested the pioneering work of Kempe, Silverman *et al.* on the 'battered child syndrome'. This means that medical practitioners know how to detect the signs of repetitive physical maltreatment in living children[28] by collating x-ray results and medical files. But this can only happen when the child is examined, so keeping children away from medical practitioners can short circuit the process of protecting children from harm.

42   The geographical context is just as important. If we are in Ireland then we are in a centuries-old common law jurisdiction with a 1930s constitution heavily influenced in its articles on fundamental rights by Roman Catholic social teaching. Anne McGilliway has traced the infiltration of the Roman doctrine of *Patria Potestas* (the source of a parent's power to physically chastise their children) into the English common law system in the 12th century (McGilliway & Durrant 2006) and Paul Brand has pinpointed the arrival of this system in Ireland not long afterwards (Brand 1992: 445). Compatible with the natural law and the family values of the Roman Catholic Church, this power remained in force until it was criminalised by statute in 2015[29]. In *Black & Blue*, then, physical chastisement is still a constitutionally-protected[30] natural and civic duty for parents. More importantly, the rights of children inside the family unit are beyond the reach of statutory lawmakers and all choices concerning the health, education and upbringing of children are left to their parents. Unless the family

is in serious distress or evidence of extreme neglect or abuse spills
out into the street in spectacular fashion, the State will be reluctant
to intervene (Staunton 2025).

4.2. Contexts

43   To reduce Irish society to the scale of a small game with few rules
      and only a handful of components, I had to decide which elements
      were absolutely essential (the landmarks) and which could be safely
      left out of the frame.

44   I chose to create anonymous parent and child characters in the form
      of stylized images of people printed on cards, each with a distinct
      personality composed of numerical values. In the case of the parent
      characters, the two most important of these values indicate the po-
      tential for stress and anger. These values interact with environmental
      stressors and the personalities of the child characters multiplying
      and adding together until a breaking point is reached and violence
      erupts.

45   The environment is represented by 20 context cards. Ten of these are
      typical domestic situations like bedtime, homework supervision, get-
      ting ready for school or having dinner. The other ten are external
      contexts such as using public transport, shopping, visiting the park,
      going to church or walking in the street. All of these contexts contain
      stressors but it is only in the non-domestic sphere that this violence
      can be seen by witnesses. What happens inside the home is always
      invisible to outsiders.

46   These spatial contexts reflect the results of an exceptional survey
      published in the UK in 1998 by Save the Children and the National
      Children's Bureau, in which 76 five- to seven-year-olds were asked
      about smacking (Willow & Hyder 1998). "Where do children usually
      get smacked?" was the fourth question on their list. The researchers
      assumed "participants would begin answering this question by talking
      about where on the body children are usually smacked, but almost all
      of them immediately answered in terms of place" (Willow & Hyder
      1998: 40). The places listed by the children include "when parents are
      shopping", "kitchen", "in a car/taxi", "dining room", "in the bedroom"
      and "on the street/road". What emerges from the survey is a definite

pattern of stressed parents, often pressed for time, reacting with violence to environmental stressors, their impatience to be elsewhere and the behaviour of their children [31].

4.3. Mechanics

47 Inspired by the unstable tower mechanic in 'Wretched and Alone' games, I articulated the game around three sources of tension: 1) the tension generated by the growing stress/rage and anger of the parent; 2) the fundamental socio-legal tension between inside and outside the domestic sphere which is at the heart of common law and constitutional visions of maltreatment; and 3) the tension between the documentary traces of violence and the efforts of adults to hide their behaviour and avoid the legal repercussions of being found out.

48 The central mechanic of the game is an unstable tower of red cubes piled one on top of the other to visually represent growing stress/rage and the imminent eruption of violence. Depending on the steadiness of the player's hand, this tower can grow quite tall. During playtesting our record was 15 cubes. When the tower collapses, all cubes which fall outside a designated perimeter are translated into bruises and injuries on the body of the child character. The higher the tower the greater the chance that the violence will be serious and over a certain threshold, the child is hospitalized.

49 As in 'Wretched and Alone' games, the collapse of the tower is inevitable. We can sometimes slow it down with event cards but it will always fall in the end. The child will always be beaten. As with *Train*, then, the objective of the game is entirely repugnant according to real-world moral principles: the player's goal is to manage the narrative of violence in the public sphere and avoid the socio-legal repercussions of being convicted of child battery. This means that violence must be kept as much as possible inside the home and all external traces neutralised. Trips to the swimming pool and schooldays might need to be cancelled so that bruises do not come to light. Events which imply interaction with potential eyewitnesses (the park, the street, public transport) might need be tackled earlier in the day than certain stress-inducing household events so that the risk of public displays of violence is reduced. But certain events (breakfast, for example) cannot be displaced so there is always a risk that even a walk

in the park can turn ugly because of stress/rage caused earlier in the day.

50 As the game progresses, traces of violence inevitably build up in the public sphere which is symbolized by the doctor's surgery, the two hospitals, affidavits produced by anonymous eyewitnesses, the police station, the family lawyer and a circuit court judge. Despite the players best efforts, a narrative of violence will emerge in the form of medical files, eye witness statements and police investigation files. If the book of evidence is filled up, it will be presented to a judge. At this moment, the character can take advantage of any social influence points they have not already used up to cover their activities to get evidence thrown out with the help of a lawyer and have the case dropped.

51 At any time during the game, players can push their luck and draft an event card. Sometimes, this will allow the character to manipulate circumstances to avoid detection and better control the narrative by intimidating a witness or getting corrupt police officers to make compromising files disappear. But there is also a change that the character will damage their reputation by beating their child with an exceptional level of violence or by attracting the attention of a police officer in the street.

Debrief and Next Steps

52 As with the games discussed above, *Black & Blue* is not a board game that we play to win. Characters almost always get convicted and the game ends there. But it is sometimes possible to identify an ugly strategy that allows a character to avoid ever being found out by balancing the algorithm (the structured sequence of rules and procedures, the flow of the game, how players interact with the components, how outcomes are achieved) and essentially 'beating the system'. During playtesting, I 'discovered' something that I had intuitively built into the game myself—that a regular rhythm of controlled, low-level violence can be sustained for far longer than the unpredictable explosions of extreme rage which occur when a tower with 10-15 cubes in it collapses. By deliberately knocking over the tower before it gets too high, the player can make sure that the adult character inflicts less serious harm on the child and leaves no physical evidence

to accumulate in the different agencies outside the home. This is the sustainable violence that Kuang's professor practices in his suburban household. By wrestling dark solutions out of the game like this, the player 'stress tests' the system and identifies its failings. The repugnant work of protecting a violent character eventually pays an experiential dividend. This is the real 'win' I am looking for.

53   Postmodern philosophies of history such as (Munslow 2007; 2020) and (Jenkins 1991; 2003) have argued that history is a "substitute for the past authored in whatever 'form and content' the historian wants" (Munslow 2020: 2). Any form that can be made to hold a narrative, from a stained-glass window to a puppet show, can be a history. Munslow includes "the 'written' and/or 'spoken' and/or 'danced' and/or 'built' and/or 'dug up' and many other forms that can legitimately claim to be a (re)presentation of 'the past'" (Munslow 2020: 2). I am satisfied that board games too can make excellent histories. This was not my objective in creating *Black & Blue*, however. The choices and compromises necessary to compress the complexities of domestic violence in the absent, ungraspable past into a playable game in the present are pre-historiographical in nature. *Black & Blue* is not a history of child maltreatment or violence. As with *Train* (which is not a history of the Holocaust), I wanted to create a cognitive map that would facilitate an initial, intuitive understanding of the mechanics of real-world maltreatment. My hope was that during the conception phase, these mechanics would start to coalesce into map coordinates which could later be explored in detail, leading to the discovery of new sites, pattern and networks. Histories might ultimately emerge from the augmentation of cognitive (pre-historiographical) maps via research.

54   While working on the game I learned to pay particular attention to the strict binary structure imposed on children's lives by constitutional, natural and common law. From its position outside the family, the Irish State chose to continue the ancient practice of relying on the spontaneous and natural benevolence of family members bound together by mutual affection, and did not attempt to impose rules on how they should act. Love is natural, after all, and does not come with rights and duties attached (Kleingeld & Anderson 2014: 320-36). The obvious problem with this (optimistic) arrangement is that without being able to see what is going on inside the household, the State

cannot easily verify if all is well and determine if intervention (which has always been possible if absolutely necessary) is justified. This created an indefensible ideological and legal space into which any sense of external responsibility for individual children could not penetrate.

55 In the common law jurisdiction of the Irish Republic, the sensitivity of judges to context and the (over-)protection of the family unit tended to incentivize those who physically maltreated children to do as Kuang's professor does and keep their violence hidden behind closed doors (Staunton 2025). If challenged by outsiders (or potentially faced with criminal charges) they attempted to manipulate the perception of their actions, foreground any mitigating circumstances and control the narrative. In a system where the voice of the child was (and is still in many instances) rarely heard, patterns of behaviour which produced neither eyewitnesses nor hard evidence were prioritized.

56 In *Black & Blue* players must develop similar in-game strategies to avoid detection. An important insight that emerged during playtesting is that knowledge of maltreatment—the black and blue cubes symbolizing police and medical files—can be allowed to build up here and there in different sites because this knowledge is not automatically shared between agencies. It is only when a pre-defined threshold of cubes in any one site is reached that files become evidence of wrongdoing and it is only when the police have accumulated enough of this that is it entered in the 'book of evidence'. When this, in turn, is full, legal action is triggered. It is, therefore, possible to exploit knowledge of how the system works and disperse necessary medical interventions between the doctor and the two hospitals, thus fragmenting the narrative and preventing any one agency from seeing the whole picture.

57 This is a compressed cognitive map of an urgent real-world problem. "[F]ailings in multi-agency 'communication' and 'information sharing' have haunted professional child welfare practices for over four decades" (Thompson 2016: 2). Since the 2010s, this has resulted in information sharing becoming "a moral and political imperative for improving the welfare and protection of children" (Thompson 2016: 11) and the creation of multi-agency safeguarding hubs (MASH) in which agencies in health, welfare, education, criminal justice and housing

work more closely together to support families and safeguard children.

58   Designing and playing games can generate pre-historiographical images of violence in the past, offering us something to grasp with our imaginations and emotions while we manipulate symbolic objects in the real world with our hands.

59   I am optimistic that memorable experiences such as these can be channelled into historical research. I have described such board games as cognitive maps of difficult territories. I will conclude with a note on what is not yet clearly marked on my maps—the illegible, redacted, blurred, as-yet-unexplored, out-of-the-frame, *terra incognita* and *terra nullius* which cry out to be included in future itineraries and pencilled into the black spaces. I caught sight of four of these potential coordinates while playing *Black & Blue* and I will finish by pointing you in their direction before I fold away my map.

60   The first is the strategies adopted by children to protect themselves. In the game, the child characters have no agency. Their identities are restricted to those numerical values which interact with the stress/rage of the parents and designate their physical resilience. In the real world it would not be until the end of the 1980s that children's voices would begin to be heard in the legal system. What did children do to balance the 'algorithms' (the economy of rage, bruises and visibility) in their own households and manage, in their own way, the dangerous situations in which they found themselves?

61   Second is the complexity of the causes, triggers and behaviours which lead to violence. In the game I combined anger and stress into a single unstable tower of red cubes. I added a mechanic for alcohol consumption as a possible in-game multiplier of violence. But beyond these simple patterns there is much territory to explore.

62   Hidden from view in a frustratingly blank spot on the map are the whistle-blowers in the school system and the police officers, medical practitioners and other agents who persevered in the face of systemic failings and institutional self-defence mechanisms to protect children. Often, they were shunned and silenced for their trouble.

63   And finally, although I have mentioned it several times above, the role of English common law and the natural law in making children more

vulnerable is a whole other country to discover.

64   And now I'll fold the board and put away the pieces.

65   Game over.

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1 In this article "domestic violence against children" will refer to physical maltreatment only.

2 The legislative framework for child protection in Ireland is largely provided by the Child Care Act (1991) which obliges the Health Service Executive (HSE) to promote the welfare of children not receiving adequate care and protection. Prior to the 1990s, laws concerning child protection and welfare in Ireland had remained unchanged since the enactment of the Children's Act of 1908.

3 In Ireland, Tusla was set up in 2014 by the Child and Family Agency Act (2013) to centralize child safeguarding functions previously distributed among the HSE and Family Services, the Family Support Agency, and the National Educational Welfare Board. In the UK, Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH) started to emerge in 2010.

4 I am grateful to author, composer and gamer Michel Jovet for his invaluable assistance with the development of the mechanics of the game and the playtesting.

5 Many thanks to Hélène Cottet, Hélène Lecossois and Hélène Quanquin for this invitation.

6 Such a project might, for example, be compared to ethically dubious practices such as dark (slum, disaster, human safari, war zone) tourism, the Stanford Prison Experiment (1971), the Milgram Experiment (1961) or the creation of gratuitously violent video games such as *Hatred* (2015). I hope to convince the reader that this should not be the case.

7 I am talking about the last two decades here. There are older exceptions but this is essentially a 21st-century phenomenon.

8 From classic games like *Battleship*, *Risk* and *Diplomacy* to modern titles like *Gloomhaven*, *Scythe*, *Dune* and *Blood Rage*, combat is omnipresent but almost never problematized.

9 Death is glossed over surprisingly quickly and discussion avoided even in historically-themed games about death on a massive scale such as *Messina 1347* (a game dedicated to the black death), or treated in a ridiculous, comedic way as in Richard Garfield's *The Hunger* and *The Bloody Inn* treat (both about serial murder). Often, death involves simply removing a piece from the board (as in *chess*) and leaves no space for discussion.

10 Richard Berg's monumental 10-player game *The Campaign for North Africa* (1979) reportedly takes 1500 hours to play and contains detailed rules for every aspect of the military campaign, including (notoriously) the cooking of pasta.

11 See also the pioneering work of Roger Caillois (1958) to whom Malaby is clearly indebted.

12 For example, Pierre Marriette's *Jeu Chronologique* (1638) was designed to teach history. Later French variants covered subjects such as geography, the art of war and heraldry. Anne Abbott's *The Mansion of Happiness* (1843) promoted ethical values based on Christian morality. *Reise durch Deutschland* (1933) explored the division of Germany after the Treaty of Versailles.

13 The *Game of the Goose* is a race game symbolizing progression through the years of a human life and generally arranged in the form of a spiral. Dating back to the 15th century, it was one of the first board games to be commercially manufactured.

14 Originally a pedagogical game representing the progression of a human life complicated by virtues (ladders) and vices (snakes), *Snakes and Ladders*

became a simple race game for children based on luck when it was imported from India into the UK in the 1890s.

15   This game was based on the economic principles of Georgism to demonstrate how rents unfairly enrich property owners and impoverish tenants. Magie hoped that playing the game would provoke children's natural suspicion of unfairness and lead to better political choices in adulthood.

16   This is exactly the goal of Narrative4, a global educational organization founded in 2012 by Lisa Consiglio, Colum McCann *et al*, which "uses personal storytelling to build empathy between young people so they can improve their communities and the world together", or as McCann says, "to step into the shoes of others in order to be able to step back into our own." https://colummccann.com/narrative-4-main-page/

17   My personal encounters with the physical spaces of Daniel Libeskind's Jewish History Museum Berlin (2001) and the interior of Christoph Büchel's *Spider Hole* (2006) convinced me that the design/curation of visceral experiences is a powerful means of generating understanding and empathy.

18   American psychologist Elizabeth Loftus, for example, has focused the latter part of her academic career on weaponizing skepticism about the validity of memory in her publications and as an expert witness for the defense in more than 300 court cases. See Loftus and Ketcham 1991 and 1994.

19   This is space into which people do not project a sense of responsibility and, therefore, do not feel compelled to act if they see something wrong happening there. See Newman, O (1972). *Defensible Space: People and Design in the Violent City*. London: Architectural Press.

20   The need for Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH) became widespread in the 2010s after a succession of high-profile child protection failures forced agencies to begin efficiently sharing resources and knowledge. See Thompson, K., *Strengthening Child Protection: Sharing Information in Multi-Agency Settings*. Bristol: Policy Press, 2016.

21   itch.io is an 'indie game hosting marketplace' and discussion forum for independent game designers and players.

22   Many of the tabletop games on the platform have a suggested minimum price but consumers can opt to download the game instructions for free or pay more if they wish. There are also a limited number of 'community copies' available for players who do not have the means to pay even a small amount.

23   I have reconstructed gameplay from reviews, interviews and reports such as (Brophy-Warren 2009), (Totilo 2010) and from consulting Romero's own website.

24   Introduced by Hannah Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, (1963), the concept of the 'banality of evil' refers to Adolf Eichmann's claims during his trial for violating the Nazis and Nazi Collaborators (Punishment) Law that he bore no guilt or responsibility for his actions because he was not thinking for himself and was simply "doing his job", obeying orders and obeying the law.

25   In the 'Here's what you need to know' section of the 'Wretched and Alone Jam' page at https://itch.io/jam/wretched-jam.

26   https://loottheroom.itch.io/wretched. (Retrieved 7 September, 2024).

27   https://itch.io/c/862577/wretched-alone-games. (Retrieved 7 September, 2024).

28   Before this development, chronic maltreatment was generally only detected post mortem.

29   The Children First Act 2015 (Act No. 36 of 2015) abolished the common law defence of reasonable chastisement and amended the Non-Fatal Offences Against the Person Act 1997.

30   During the process of Irish independence, transitory constitutional provisions in the *Constitution of Saorstát Éireann* (art. 73) and then in *Bunreacht na hÉireann* (art. 50) allowed it to continue unaltered into the legal system of the new State.

31   To be clear, I am not suggesting that the children are to blame for their own maltreatment. Rather, I am interested in exploring the patterns which emerge from talking to the children themselves about where it takes place.

English

This article details and analyses the process of designing a solo board game (working title: *Black & Blue*) in which players assume the challenging role of a perpetrator of domestic violence[1] against children. Players draft cards to navigate potentially explosive domestic contexts which force them to add cubes to a tottering tower representing the imminent eruption of violence. Placed in the uncomfortable shoes of a malefactor, they must manage reputational damage (and ultimately conviction) by dispersing evidence of this violence across hospitals, courts, schools and police stations so that it never

builds up in any one location. Inspired by Brenda Romero's 'Mechanic is the Message' board game series, *Black & Blue* is a tangible thought experiment which lays out and works through the interrelated societal systems structuring, responding to and obfuscating domestic violence. After an overview of relevant historical and contemporary games, the article will frame the methodologies employed in such performative, practice-based research as an experimental and experiential prelude to conventional qualitative historiography, pairing Frederic Jameson's cognitive mapping strategies with Romero's visceral epiphanies.

Français

Cet article détaille et analyse le processus de conception d'un jeu de société (titre provisoire : *Black & Blue*) dans lequel un.e joueur.se assume le rôle problématique d'un.e auteur.e de violence domestique à l'encontre d'enfants. La partie se déroule à l'aide de cartes, qui placent les joueur.ses dans des contextes domestiques potentiellement explosifs, et de cubes qu'iels doivent empiler et ajouter à une tour instable représentant l'éruption imminente de la violence. L'auteur.e de violence doit gérer le récit public de sa vie en dispersant les preuves de cette violence entre les hôpitaux, les tribunaux, les écoles et les commissariats de police afin qu'elles ne s'accumulent jamais dans un seul endroit. Inspiré de la série de jeux « The Mechanic is the Message » de Brenda Romero, *Black & Blue* est une expérience inconfortable de pensée historique qui explore la structuration de systèmes sociétaux interdépendants invisibilisant la violence domestique. L'article passe en revue un échantillon de jeux de société passés et contemporains pour ensuite exposer la méthodologie adoptée dans cet exemple de recherche performative, recherche qui aborde la pratique comme un prélude expérimental et expérientiel à l'historiographie qualitative conventionnelle, associant les stratégies de cartographie cognitive de Frederic Jameson aux épiphanies viscérales de Romero.

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IDREF : https://www.idref.fr/178945927