

Fall of Humans: Interactive Tabletop Games and Transmedia Storytelling



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Abstract

This paper illustrates how transmedia storytelling can help introduce players to interactive tabletop games. To do so, we developed Fall of Humans (FoH), an experience that takes place over two games: Meat factory, a physical card game where players compete to create different zombies; and Uprising, a interactive tabletop game where players can get to see the zombies they have created come to life.

Author Keywords

Transmedia storytelling; game design; tabletop games.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

Transmedia stories are stories told across multiple platforms such as movies, video games or comic books [3]. There are many industries that make use of this in their Storytelling universes. The Movie industry often elaborates the universe of a movie across different medias in an effort to make it more engaging for the viewer. An example of this are the Star Wars [4] and Star Trek [5] franchises, where often the universe expands in form of books, comics, videogames and card games, which serve as a tie-in to full feature film



Figure 1. Top: the *legs* card for the zombie type *Bad Ass*. Bottom: the back of the same card, which can be used as input in *Uprising*, the interactive tabletop version of FoH.



Figure 2. Top: the physical token representing a human soldier. Each of these tokens includes a fiducial marker on the bottom so as to be recognized by bespoke interactive tabletops. Bottom: one of Uprising's playtests.

stories or spin-offs for new characters. Pokemon [6] or Yo-kai watch [7], are examples where the universe is born in video games and expands across media such as cartoon, arcade games and comics. In specific markets, such as the Japanese, these franchises use physical artifacts that connect the card and arcade games to make the experience even more attractive to the players (e.g., cards in the Pokémon arcade machine, tokens in the Yokai-watch). These are just a few examples of the commonly used strategies of various media corporations, as transmedia storytelling expands the potential market of an intellectual property by creating multiple points of entry that are suitable to different audience segments [2].

In this paper we rely on this strategy to explore how transmedia storytelling can be used to introduce interactive tabletop games to a wider audience. To do so, we created the Fall of Humans Universe, a transmedia story that takes place over two games: a physical card game and an interactive tabletop game.

Fall of Humans

"Year 2XXX – Earth. A global catastrophe wipes out most of the human race, leaving just pockets of healthy humans and millions of Zombies. Soon the humans take advantage of the zombies and started to enslave and mass-produce them to do menial labor work. Eventually, over a period of a couple years, the Zombies start to get smarter, stronger and in the end, in the shadows, a rebellion begins brewing..."

This is the starting point of Fall of Humans (FoH) a transmedia story that occurs over two games: *Meat Factory* and *Uprising*.

Meat Factory

In Meat Factory the players start their journey in the world of FoH. This is a fast paced game where each card represents a body part of four different types of zombies (*Fresh*, *Puker*, *Bad Ass* and *Scout* – see Figure 1), and the goal of the game is to be the first to create one of the four zombies. Players achieve this by discarding cards to the player to their right as fast as possible, until they have gathered the four body parts. The first player to achieve this can grab a head token that sits at the center of the game, prompting the other players to do the same (there is one less head token than the total number of players). Finally, once the game is over, players can place the cards of any of the zombies they have created during the game on an interactive tabletop game named *Uprising*. Doing so unlocks these zombies as characters in the latter game.

Uprising

Set ten years after the events of Meat Factory, Uprising is an interactive tabletop game where zombies try to break free from human oppression. Inspired by Tower Defense games [e.g. 1], Uprising pits three players controlling two zombies each, against a solo player controlling four human characters (two *soldiers* and two *builders* – see Figure 2). Each zombie and human character is represented by a physical token that can be placed at strategic positions on a digital map. Once positioned, zombie tokens continuously spawn digital zombies that move in one direction, destroying everything in their path and ultimately capturing all the meat factories across the map. Human tokens, on the other hand, delay the progress of digital zombies by firing in multiple directions (soldier) or building walls that delay their progress (builder). The zombie and human team play alternatively, and each turn is over

when the player moves one of his characters to a new location. At the end of 10 minutes, if the zombie team has not succeeded in capturing all of the meat factories in the map, the game is over and they lose the game.

Implementation

Uprising was implemented using conventional technologies: the Processing language; the reacTIVision tracking software; and the TUIO messaging protocol. Furthermore, the game runs on an interactive tabletop of 120x70 cm based on the Diffused Surface Illumination (DSI) method (see Figure 2).

Preliminary User Testing

Both games were developed over three game testing sessions with selected test players. A final fourth session was conducted with members from the general public during a public presentation. The first three tests were an integral part of the development process, and contributed several changes to the original gameplay so as to improve user satisfaction during play. One example of this was how the head tokens would support the connection between the two games. Originally, there was no relationship between player performance in Meat Factory and Uprising. As a result, when a card game was over, players would tally their scores and return the head tokens back. After observing how some participants displayed a strong sense of ownership over these, a new gameplay rule was defined that would allow these tokens to be kept in the player's possession so as to allow to carry on their zombies to the interactive tabletop game.

Preliminary Results

During the public game test session, players were invited to first play Meat Factory, followed by an Uprising gaming session on the interactive table.

The first observation was that participants indeed demonstrated a sense of ownership over the won head tokens from the card game. The second was that participants understood the implications of creating a specific zombie for the follow up interactive game. As a result, many would extend gameplay with Meat Factory until they had unlocked their favorite zombie character.

During play on Uprising, players were observed slowly developing group tactics to defeat the human team. Furthermore, the spin presented by the FoH universe (humans are the villains; zombies are the heroes) did not seem to affect gameplay or player enjoyment.

Conclusion & Next Steps

Our test sessions have gathered very positive feedback about the potential of gameplay links across different media. This seems to facilitate a game's story telling, and to better support user enjoyment and engagement.

For the next steps, we envision exploring different gameplay options to improve the connection between media. For example, how to support bidirectional links by having the interactive tabletop empower certain cards that can be then transferred back to Meat Factory. Another example would be to support card gameplay directly in the interactive tabletop, supporting quicker and effortless transitions between the two games by supporting digital animations based on events in the card game on the tabletop.

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