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**From the Action-Packed Film to the Stealth Strategy:
A Controlled Revolt against the Tradition of the Western
in *Desperados III***

Desperados is a series of story-driven strategy games set in the Wild West. The origins of the series are traced back to 2001. The third entry – called by the producer Jonathan Riedler from THQ Nordic “not just a prequel, but... also a kind of reboot” to the series (Riedler) – was developed by the studio Mimimi Games in 2020. The game tells the story of six outlaws undertaking various tasks on the American frontier; blowing up a bridge and defending a ranch are just a few activities.

Mimimi Games gained popularity due to their previous work: a stealth-based tactics *Shadow Tactics: Blades of the Shogun* (2016). In the title Japanese warriors use techniques of espionage and sabotage to assassinate opponents of the shogun. Despite a totally different setting and time, *Desperados III* bears a strong resemblance to *Shadow Tactics*; this covers the same mechanics, perspective and – above all – genre. In *Desperados III* the formula of the western is adapted into the combination of a stealth and strategy. The aim of the article is to prove that in the process of this adaptation the western game breaks away with the conventions of the genre established by the classic literature and – above all – film. The analysis begins with the delineation of a history of the kind under discussion; then such elements of *Desperados III* as its gameplay,

temporality, perspective and environmental design are examined in the context of the transmedia relocation of the genre.

The western traces its origins back to the 19th century. In 1840 Alexis de Tocqueville writes of “books which may be easily procured, quickly read, and which require no learned researches to be understood” (Tocqueville). As a result of the increased productivity of printing presses and the spread of literacy, popular literature emerges in Great Britain, taking shape of penny dreadfuls – inexpensive novels of doubtful quality. Penny dreadfuls, Judith Flanders acknowledges, “told stories of adventure, initially of pirates and highwaymen, later concentrating on crime and detection” (Flanders). The American equivalents for penny dreadfuls are dime novels. As stated by Anne-Marie Pope, they “typically told the dramatic adventure stories of a single hero or heroine who often found himself or herself in the midst of a moral dilemma” (Pope). This dilemma was expressed by means of the mystery, crime, romance – and, what is of special interest for this article, the western (Pope).

Both dreadfuls and dime novels were illustrated and they appeared sequentially in magazine installments and booklets, which evokes some associations with TV series. Catherine Sheldrick Ross asserts that “as a widely-shared source of popular stories, stereotypes and social mythology, dime novels were the nineteenth century equivalent of television in the second half of the twentieth century” (Ross: 196). Formulas shaped by the popular literature of the 19th and 20th century have directly impacted the contemporary ways of storytelling, such as films and, at least to some extent, video games.

The Western is usually situated in the vast regions of the American frontier; the main character is an individual who takes revenge on villains or revolts against social rules. Fast-paced action – including shootings and horse pursuits – is also indispensable here. Rapid events and picturesque areas of the uncultivated West seem to make a perfect material for a film. And perhaps this explains so happy a marriage between the western and cinematography: nowadays a mention of the genre brings to mind film, not literature, although the latter is a native medium for the kind. Novels and short stories describe events, yet they are unable to present fast-paced action – film seems to be more adequate for that.

The problem of the video game is more complex. It is more similar to films than to written works, as it uses visuality and sound; what makes it unique is interactivity. *Desperados III* opens each level with the background story in the form of the text displayed on a loading screen. This narrative has some events, characters and setting, which seem to be extremely conventional – and up to this point the title behaves as a model representative of the formula western. Things become complicated when the game stops loading and it launches, turning the genre into a stealth-based strategy.

In his book John A. Dinan speaks about the western this way: “it is usually a fairly straightforward action-adventure story [...]. The story moves at an agreeable pace, providing a quota of vicarious armchair thrill that add up to relaxation and entertainment” (Dinan: 93). This passage relates to fiction, yet it can be applied to film as well. The fast-paced action and suspenseful events seem to stand the core of the genre: without them, it would cease to exist. It is highly unlikely that a slow-moving, almost static image would satisfy the audience that has specific expectations regarding the formula. *Desperados III*, however, seems to take great attempts to rebel against this principle. This involves its general mechanics and the characters’ individual skills, as well as temporality and spatial design. The revolt against the fast-paced action has no other roots than in the process of adapting the formula western to the game’s genre.

Gameplay

The title by Mimimi is a combination of a stealth and strategy. Usually westerns do not have much to do with sneaking around or strategic planning. The game gives the player a choice as to how to complete a level: he can either open fire, causing commotion and inviting the general attention, or make every effort to remain silent, resorting to stealth and tactics. However, one may quickly realise that the first – fast-paced, and thereby comparable to the action of traditional westerns – technique is not the best choice, for at least two reasons: 1 – in the case of an alert enemies call for reinforcements, and then the player’s gang is outnumbered, which usually ends in the desperados’ failure; 2 – killing an enemy with a gun is not as satisfying as eliminating him in a more sophisticated

manner, such as luring him into a secluded place to get him entrapped or dropping a brass bell on him.

In other words, *Desperados III* reveals its full potential only when the player resorts to the mechanics of stealth and tactics. It seems that the title by Mimimi is more appealing and rewarding when it is played as a representative of the output genre rather than when one looks for some elements of action in it. It may therefore be concluded that the western in the game rejects its native environment, which is that of dynamic events, gunshots and turmoil, and turns to the mechanics which involve undertaking opposite activities.

Going further, not only does the transmedia generic revolt against the pace of the action on the level of gameplay cover the general gameplay rules, but also it affects the characters' individual actions. The mechanism of disguising is very common in stealth games; it, for example, plays a crucial role in a popular action series *Hitman*. This element is not missing from *Desperados III*. The skill of disguising is exclusive for Kate O'Hara, who can change an outfit to camouflage or seduce enemies. She thereby diverts their attention from her fellows sneaking in through the map (they can fall on a seduced man from behind and eliminate him). If one has Kate O'Hara at one's disposal during a mission, her help becomes invaluable; although she is the worst-armored character in the gang, her skill in disguising provides a way-out from the most complex and seemingly unsolvable situations.

This mechanism seems to be generally absent from both traditional westerns and action-based video games set in the Wild West, such as *Red Dead Redemption 2* or *Call of Juarez*. One of the possible explanations is that, again, disguising and seducing enemies halt the pace of action: romances and affairs are rather static, as opposed to rides and pursuits. What is also important, in order to be able to camouflage and control an enemy, Kate needs to steal clothes first, which consumes some additional time and traces the story off from the main trail.

Apart from disguising, *Desperados III* uses some other mechanics canonic for stealths: the bait. As Alexandra Heather plainly explains, coins, which have been an integral part of the *Hitman* series, "serve a very simple purpose: toss them near any computer-controlled characters and they will turn to investigate the sound" (Heather, 2018). In *Desperados III* one may, for instance, toss a coin

or whistle to lure some types of enemies into particular places, where they can be got rid of without any witnesses. Such an action involves some planning, which again decreases the pace of the game.

These cases are just examples of the stealth mechanics applied to the title by Mimimi. It is worth noting that in each case the process of the enemy's elimination takes several steps; before an opponent is killed, the player needs to do something else, such as stealing a dress or tossing a coin into a particular location. Killing enemies by means of these tactical tools consumes more time than eliminating them in a straightforward way, for instance by shooting. The fact that the mechanics in *Desperados III* consists of activities that delay the progress of action gives evidence of the game's breaking up with the core rule of the western genre.

Time

The concept of time in the title by Mimimi is yet another field of the game's battle with the principles of the traditional western. As it goes for the medium of film, the genre under discussion is the one which should be watched at one turn, from the beginning to the end, without any pausing. The situation when the action film is stopped in medias res is unconceivable. This is but another rule that is broken in *Desperados III*: not only does the game enable the player to stop time, but also it encourages him to do so, which stems directly from the principles of the genre to which the western story was adapted.

Desperados III is a real-time strategy, which can be clearly defined as the kind of strategy where "all movement, construction, combat etc., are all occurring in real time" (Sethy et al.: 257). However, on all difficulty levels (except the hardest) the game offers the showdown mode, which lets the player stop time to plan each character's actions in advance. Having arranged the movements, the player returns to the real time, observing the desperados performing pre-planned actions. It is not difficult to guess that the mode makes the play satisfying – the action that is carefully planned is very often spectacularly finished. Yet, on the other hand, the showdown suspends the flow of action. The narrative cannot move on, because the player – affected by the vision of the stunning

complementation of his tactical planning – stopped the in-game time to think about the next movement.

If *Desperados III* were “just” an RTS, the problem of its temporality would not be much complicated: the game would probably remain happy with the imitation of real temporality. Yet it is also a tactics that involves arranging and foreseeing, which usually entail time’s suspension. The showdown mode therefore serves as a useful tool in the game. However, sitting and planning does not have much to do with the western genre, where going and doing is more appreciated. The action-focused games set in the Wild West, such as *RDR2*, imitate traditional westerns to a great extent, not only in terms of the types of tasks one does, but also in terms of the understanding of temporality. Time in these titles just is – it passes and that is all. It is by no means self-reflexive; it is pointless to focus on it. The situation is quite different in the game by Mimimi, where time demands the player’s constant attention.

Tasks in *Desperados III* are challenging – the smallest mistake may end tragically. The developers were aware of this; thus they applied quick saving to the game. Significantly, the player is from the very beginning encouraged to take this option as a habit: if he does not save his progress for more than one minute, the program informs him about it and advises to do so as soon as possible. In case something goes wrong, one may quickly retrieve the status from before the last save, instead of starting the whole mission from scratch. The player may save and load the game countless times, repeating the sequence he spoilt over and over again. This implies that some additional time is needed to beat the game: the mission may be completed relatively quickly, if no mistakes are made, but if sequences are repeated, it takes much longer to finish it.

The mechanism of the quick returning to saving points is fully justified for the kind the game represents and it works perfect, especially if one plays on the highest-difficulty level, whereon mistakes are very common. At the same time, it is difficult to imagine an action-based film working this way. Events need to go smoothly here, which makes going back in time unacceptable. As regards the traditional western, the main hero never does mistakes: if he is to blow up the railroad, he achieves the goal at the first attempt; if he chases a villain, sooner or later he captures him – and if he takes part in shooting, he never misses.

The character in the formula western is perfect – as opposed to the outlaws in *Desperados III*, who are allowed to repeat sequences in their tasks endlessly.

Environmental design

Western films are typically set in uncultivated areas. A natural place provides a perfect background for the character's rebellion against civilisation. As Max Westbrook states, "the West provides an ideal setting for the American hero's revolt and search. Urban rebels must take on characteristics of the very institutions they oppose, for it is difficult to convince readers that an unsophisticated outcast could reshape New York" (Westbrook: 233). Moreover, the author says, in the coarse, uncultivated West "cowboy heroes can perform courageous acts on the basis of what they are as individuals. They can creditably be very crude of speech and even be praised for it" (Westbrook: 233). What is also of importance there is the fact that westerns are associated with open spaces. Jack Schaefer opens his novel *The Big Range* with such words: "I like to write about the wide open spaces when they were still open and their wideness could enter into the people, some of the people, who left life's footprints on them" (qtd. Westbrook: 234).

Similarly to the wilderness of the setting, the boundlessness of space in westerns complements the characterisation of the hero, who embodies freedom and limitlessness. John A. Dinan asserts that "the fictional pulp cowboy had no family life and no permanent relationships" (Dinan: 15). This stems from the fact that, according to Dinan, "the bulk of Western pulp fiction was written by males for males" (Dinan: 15); the exception was the "romance westerns", which were created for the female audience (Dinan: 15). Yet most representatives of the traditional genre are characterised by the "complete masculine freedom and a total absence of the personal and domestic problems" (Dinan: 38).

In terms of its setting, *Desperados III* uses the genre's convention to the full: the action is placed in coarse areas, grassy ranchos and small towns with saloons; railways and monumental bridges are also not absent from there. However, playing the game, one quickly realises that its seemingly vast and boundless environment does not have much in common with the liberty manifested by the construction of space in western films and fiction. The setting in

Desperados III may look conventional, but in fact it is the world in which the freedom of the player's movement is strictly limited, which is a consequence of the adaptation of the western story into the stealth-based tactics.

Each location in the title has clearly-established boundaries. This arises from the specificity of the game's kind: usually objectives of missions in stealths and tactics involve eliminating particular opponents and getting from one point of the map to another, in the way – or one of several ways – pre-planned and predicted by developers. To achieve such types of goals, the player does not need an open, spacious world, in which he can lose himself, as it goes, for example, for *RDR2*; contrastively, the virtual environment in a stealth or tactical strategy has clearly marked boundaries, which help one accomplish the mission's goals in the most organised and satisfactory manner possible.

Coming back to *Desperados III*, the boundaries that define each location in the game are most often wild – the setting is limited by steep cliffs, high mountains or rivers. Nature thus serves as a boundary here. This puts the western by Mimimi Games in opposition to traditional principles of the genre's setting, whereupon the natural space – with open, limitless landscapes, such as prairies and vast fields – stands for the character's freedom and independence. In the course of the adaptation of the formula to the stealth tactics the essential principle of the setting in the western is thereby broken.

Moreover, in *Desperados III* there are some elements of the environment that suspend the flow of action in the game. The rules of the stealth game entail hiding – either of oneself or somebody or something else (for instance, an enemy's corpse). And if it is so, then the virtual world must be designed in the way that such an activity be possible. Locations in *Desperados III* are therefore crammed with places where the player can conceal the members of his gang and their victims. Moreover, in some cases the character must wait before he can leave his hideout, as for example an enemy stands too close to let the desperado leave unnoticed. And waiting is a natural enemy of the progress of action.

The same situation takes place when it comes to using some other interactive elements of setting, namely objects or constructions that may prove useful in killing opponents (movable stones, a brass bell and so on): the player needs to crouch and observe walking enemies for some time to be able to finally reach

an object without detection. This is yet another situation where the space of the game facilitates the inhibition of the flow of events.

As regards the setting, again such title as *Red Dead Redemption 2* seems to be closer to what is postulated by the western's conventions: the game has a vast open-world map, wherein the player moves freely, which directly relates to the setting presented in traditional westerns. The "vastness" and "boundlessness" of the environment in *RDR2* results from the fact that this game belongs to a different genre than the title by Mimimi.

Perspective

The perspective of storytelling is yet another aspect of *Desperados III* that bears the evidence of the title's divorce with the tradition of the western at the point of its adjustment to the stealth-based tactical game. Regardless of whether of a higher or lower quality western films are, their popularity stems from the fact that they offer much action and as much participation in the events, using the tools available for the medium. Apart from what is shown on the screen, in the film it is also important how it is shown. Some perspectives and camera shots are so characteristic for the genre that they are named by its terminology.

The camera shot called the cowboy shot frames the character up from his thighs. This perspective was associated with westerns as they applied it to frame a gun by a hero's hip. Going further, the cinematographic representatives of the genre very often use the close-up and extreme close-up camera shots, showing action in a detailed way. Classic examples of films using this technique are *The Good, The Bad And The Ugly* (1966) and *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), both directed by Sergio Leone. Such a detailed perspective creates tension and it gives the viewers a chance to know characters by themselves. The western hero does not need to be talkative – he can remain silent for the most of the film, yet the audience knows each and every change in his mood due to the camera's showing his face in a close-up. The mechanism of an unspoken dialogue derives from real life, where the most of interpersonal communication is based on nonverbal signs.

The western film often lets the audience look at events from the eye-level perspective. Engaging and natural, this technique is used in the FPP

(first-person perspective) games, wherein the player sees the world with the eyes of the character and, to some extent, the TPP (third-person perspective) games, in which the camera is set right behind the character's back. The FPP and TPP are used in action and role-playing games, as such views provide the player with the combat and interaction with the world in the most detailed way. Again, the good examples are the series *Call of Juarez* and *RDR*. It is far easier for one to identify with the character if one looks at the world through his eyes – or at least stands near him.

The close-ups and the eye-level perspective seem to have disappeared from the western in the process of its adaptation to the tactical strategy. In *Desperados III* developed by Spellbound Entertainment, where some activities – such as shootings – are presented in TPP. However, this element was widely criticised by the fans of the series, which proves that the western game by no means has to follow in film's footsteps to be successful. Learning by their predecessors' mistakes, Mimimi Games completely abandoned the close-views – they are absent even from the cut-scenes, which show action from the isometric perspective.

Not only cut-scenes, but also the main gameplay is presented from this viewpoint. The classic representatives of the genre of stealth, such as *Hitman* or *Thief*, are at the same time action games, and they offer the most suitable perspectives for their kind: the former the third-, and the latter the first-person view. *Desperados III*, in turn, is – apart from being a stealth – a combination of a tactics and strategy, which fully justifies the use of the perspective “from above” that is applied broadly to strategies (*Civilization* or *Age of Empires* are just examples). The fact that the western-themed title is put into such a view has several implications for this genre.

The isometric view is by no means a recent innovation. In 1988 Will Brooker wrote in a magazine *CRASH*:

the player in these [isometric] games is 'positioned' somewhere up in the air, outside the playing area, so any game using the technique looks forced, like a technical drawing. Though its representation of object and rooms may be highly effective, if we're going to nit-pick we can't say isometric perspective gives a *realistic view*. But the technique has proved perfectly satisfactory for countless games, and it's pointless to damn them all for lack of realism.

The gaming industry has undergone a considerable development since these words were written; however, this observation is still exact, in so far as the isometric view remains satisfactory for many games of various genres (from action RPG-s, such as *Wasteland* to simulations like *The Sims*) – and that the perspective gives the impression of artificiality. In *Desperados III* the player can rotate and – to a limited extent – zoom-in the camera, which gives him some freedom, but the view remains schematic. Moreover, the camera is equipped with the elements of inventory, which, indispensable and comfortable though, enhances the sense of the perspective’s artificiality.

However, the view under discussion seems to be more objective than any type of close-up: a broad perspective which covers the substantial part of a map and embraces many characters all at once resembles God’s outlook. From this perspective the world and characters are very little; one sees roofs and people’s hats. And moreover the distance between the player and his characters is clearly perceptible.

In western films cinematic techniques facilitate the audience’s participation in the story. Thanks to close-ups and the eye-level perspective the player is engaged into what he sees – he appears to be thrown into the world of the western, where he observes events with his own eyes and reads characters’ inner states from their mimics and gestures, as it takes place in real life. This perspective makes the relation between the audience and characters personal – they bond on equal terms. The view in *Desperados III* is, in contrast, artificial. There are not so many occasions to look at real life from the isometric perspective; such an outlook is restricted for technicians and their paper projects. Furthermore, the insight into facial expressions of the characters in the game is not permitted, even in the cut-scenes – therefore the relationship between the player and the group of outlaws remains remote, and it is more the “God vs. creation” type of alliance rather than any personal kind of “face-to-face” acquaintance.

The perspective in *Desperados III* is another field where the game takes a controlled revolt against the tradition of the western genre. This comes to pass under two conditions: the artificiality of the view and the distance between the player and the world. Shots used in western films aim to show the action in a natural and straightforward manner, as if viewers saw it with their own eyes. In western films – as well as in action-based video games set in the Wild

West – the techniques used to present events aim to engage one in the course of action and make him feel a part of the fictional world. The perspective in *Desperados III* expresses something totally different. The “dishonesty” of the isometric view stems from the fact that this perspective is not very common in everyday life, being assigned to the technician’s works. What improves this artificiality is the appearance of gameplay tools on the screen. In addition, the use of the camera in the game creates the distance between the player and characters, suggesting that the communication between them takes place on unequal terms. The main principles of the western genre are thereby again twisted.

Conclusions

Desperados III is something more than just a western. In the course of its adaptation to the environment of the stealth-based tactical strategy game, the work by Mimimi Games acquired some new qualities. To create the game, the developers used the same engine as in their previous title about the group of Japanese experts on espionage. The attempt to teach the outlaws from the Wild West the art of sabotage and surveillance resulted in the revolt of the game against the classic formula of the western film and fiction. As a result of the generic transformation, the game about five desperados is characterised by a controlled, slow-paced action with the possibility of moving backwards in time and repeating each sequence of gameplay, and a distanced, artificial perspective.

The analysis in the paper has proved that it is possible to preserve the features of the formula western in the process of its adaptation to the interactive medium. To do so, the game needs to have devices that allow these principles to develop. One of such devices is the specific gameplay mechanics that does not inhibit the course of events; another is a close perspective, which enables the player to observe the action and its agents in detail, as if he was inside of the virtual world. What is also characteristic for the representative of the formula western is that it has an open environment with much of roomy landscapes – and this is also possible to attain in a video game. The ideal output genre to maintain these formulaic principles is the action game. This kind seems to perfectly mimic the means of expression applied to the western film. *Desperados III* has none

of the tools mentioned, as the game belongs to the genre wherein gameplay, perspective and environment are constructed in a totally different manner.

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**From the Action-Packed Film to the Stealth Strategy:
A Controlled Revolt against the Tradition of the Western in *Desperados III***

Summary

Desperados III is a stealth-strategy developed by Mimimi Games in 2020. The game tells the story of five outlaws who undertake hazardous activities in the Wild West. As regards its plot, setting and types of characters, *Desperados III* seems to follow the principles of formulaic western fiction and films. Yet the process of the western's adjustment to the genre of tactical stealth has serious implications for the formula. The aim of the article is to discuss the game's rebellion against the tradition of the genre. The paper is divided into four sections. They examine the game's mechanics, its temporality, perspective and the construction of the virtual world in the context of the western's adaptation to the stealth-based tactical strategy.

Keywords: western, film, computer game, stealth game, real-time strategy

Słowa kluczowe: western, film, gra komputerowa, skradanka, strategia czasu rzeczywistego