Perezhivanie and the study of role-playing games

Wagner Luiz Schmit
University of Tsukuba, Japan

Abstract
We propose the use of the concept of perezhivanie, from Cultural Historical Activity Theory, in the analysis of analog role-playing games. In the first section, we present perezhivanie as phenomena and as a concept in Vygotsky’s theory, then we relate the concept of perezhivanie to the theory of the higher mental functions development, and end up articulating perezhivanie to the concept of performance. In the second section, we identify the phenomena of perezhivanie in Role-playing games and its relation to the phenomena of immersion and bleed, proposing the use of the concepts from the first section to better understand role-playing games.

Keywords
Role-playing games, perezhivanie, performance, immersion, bleed

Introduction
In this theoretical review paper, we will propose the use of the concept of perezhivanie in Vygotsky’s Cultural Historical Theory in the study of analog role-playing games (RPGs), such as tabletop RPG (TRPG) and larp. In the first part we present perezhivanie as both a phenomena and Vygotskian concept by demonstrating the problems to its study, its definitions, relationship to human psychological development, and its relation to the concept of performance based on the works of Vygotsky and those of his commentators. In the second part, we propose the use of perezhivanie to the analysis of analog RPG, first by defining what are RPG, then showing a relationship between perezhivanie as phenomena and the ideas of immersion and bleed, and finish by proposing some qualitative methodologies to the study of perezhivanie in analog RPG.

Corresponding author:
Wagner Luiz Schmit, University of Tsukuba, Ibaraki ken, Tsukuba Shi, Tennodai 1-1-1, Human Sciences Building B Room B334 Postal code 305-0006, Japan.
Email: wagner.schmit@gmail.com
Our main argument is that perezhivanie as an experiencing emotional development phenomena is present on analog RPG, like TRPG and larp, and that the concept of perezhivanie as proposed by Vygotsky in his later works can be used to better understand these phenomena. Not only that, but it can also be expanded and clarified by analog RPG researches, seeking a conceptual system to understand the playing experience in an original contribution to game studies and the Cultural Historical Theory.

We believe that investigating these phenomena is fundamental to comprehend the impact of RPG in a player’s development and can have deep implications in entertaining (Montola, 2014) and educational game design (Balzer, 2011).

One of the motivations to write this paper is that there are an increasing number of studies on RPG and its use in education (Hitchens & Drachen, 2009; Mason, 2004; Schmit, 2008). While some of these are based on Vygotsky, most of them rely only on the concept of “zone of proximal development” (ZPD), and sometimes on his understanding of creativity and imagination, but are taken out of context and in a nonsystemic manner (Schmit, 2008). This can lead to a more reductionist cognitive and traditional approach for both development and education, with RPG being just another “technique” to be applied by teachers without really tackling the nondevelopmental traditional education (Schmit, 2010).

So why propose the use of perezhivanie to go beyond a reductionist use of ZPD regarding the study of RPG? Since his early works, Vygotsky points out that the object of study of Psychology is “consciousness,” but his manner of study and of understanding consciousness has changed over time, especially regarding its unit of analysis. In his later works, perezhivanie is defined as the “unit” of consciousness (Zavershneva, 2014, p. 78). This is important for the connections between perezhivanie and Vygotsky’s theories of development and Psychology of Art, as an unit of cognition and emotion as well as an unit of environment and personality (Veresov, 2014), making possible a systemic study of RPG. So, should we just throw out ZPD? Not at all, since it is through this concept that we understand the development of the higher mental functions (HMFs) and the psychological system that is the personality.

In this sense, another motivation for this paper is the proposal of the use of RPGs to explore the complex phenomena of perezhivanie as well as, dialectally, clarify and expand the concept of perezhivanie proposed by Vygotsky, providing a new understanding in this systemic approach to human psychology.

This paper is justified by the problem of the relationship between a person and her character, in a theater play for example, is not a new one (Vygotsky, 1999), and recently, this got even more complicated in improvised play, such as analog RPGs. To try to tackle this problem, ideas like “immersion” and “bleed” emerged in the field of game studies, and although some RPG scholars use Vygotskian concepts, they do not address the “immersion” and “bleed” phenomena, focusing instead on the development of skills or curricular content (Schmit, 2008).
Part I: Perezhivanie

Problems to study perezhivanie in Vygotsky

Before defining what perezhivanie is, we must inform our reader that reaching this concept has its difficulties. The problems of translation, edition, and even censorship are some of the difficulties of studying Vygotsky’s theory (Veer & Yasnitsky, 2011; Zavershneva & Osipov, 2012) and this affects directly the study of the concept of perezhivanie. Nonetheless, recent papers and studies are helping to overcome these difficulties through the analysis of the works in English and Russian, comparison of published works with notes and manuscripts, and so on (Kellogg & Yasnitsky, 2011; Yasnitsky, 2009).

Also, perezhivanie was a “hidden” concept in Vygotsky’s works due to its multiple and difficult translations in other languages like English, Spanish, and Portuguese (Delari Junior, 2009). It can appear in English as “experience,” “emotional experience,” “lived experience,” “experiencing,” and others (Blunden, 2015b, p. 2). Although experiencing seems to be a more suitable translation for perezhivanie, since it implies a process and demands a context, it does not have the personal change process denoted by perezhivanie.

In order to try to deal with these problems, we draw our paper not only on Vygotsky’s works, but also on the works of his commentators. Blunden (2009) made a survey about this concept in the Cultural Historical Activity Theory tradition in English, Delari Junior (2009) did a more profound analysis in the works of Vygotsky by comparing different uses and the presence of the word perezhivanie in some of Vygotsky’s texts, and Ferholt (2009) has a thesis on the subject of perezhivanie and Playworlds.

However, after the review of these works, we decided to base this paper mostly in the work of Veresov (2014), for he better clarifies the concept of perezhivanie and its relation to the human development. He does this by differentiating perezhivanie as phenomena, present in most of Vygotsky works, and perezhivanie as a concept in Vygotsky’s late works, relating this concept to other concepts in human development such as “social situation of development,” the “general genetic law of cultural development,” and “unit of consciousness” (Veresov, 2014, p. 4).³

At the same time, there is a certain controversy regarding its scientific validity, because regarding the perezhivanie concept as a unit of analysis for consciousness:

(…) during roughly the last year of his life, Vygotsky was considering a notion that would take into account the person as a whole, in the unity of all psychological processes. Vygotsky discussed such a unit of analysis and, using a Russian word, referred to it as perezhivanie (…). However, this line of theorizing remained at the level of mere speculation, and Vygotsky’s theory of consciousness was not developed any further than a sketch of a promising future theory. (Zavershneva, 2014, p. 78)

So here, Zavershneva points out a limitation to the concept of perezhivanie in Vygotsky’s works, but at the same time, opens up a very interesting line of research
following the direction left by Vygotsky, and that we hope to push forward with this work.

**Definitions of perezhivanie**

According to Varshava and Vygotsky (1931, p. 10), it is both the process of experiencing something and the content of this process, which makes it very difficult to properly translate into English. In this paper, we will use perezhivanie without translating it, as this is the trend in recent papers on the subject (Veresov, 2014, p. 2).

But this is the “phenomena” perezhivanie, and must not be mistaken by the concept of perezhivanie present in Vygotsky’s late works. So we have indeed two perezhivanie, one is the perezhivanie as phenomena presented in the Psychological Dictionary by Vygotsky and usually used in Russian language (or P1, as Veresov likes to call it4) as the process of experiencing something (P1.1 as to say) and at the same time the content of the process of experiencing something (P1.2).

Also perezhivanie as a concept in Vygotsky’s theory5 (P2) and understood, also at the same time, as a “prism” that “refracts” the social environment (P2.1), the unit of personality and the environment (P2.2) and the functional unit of consciousness (P2.3) (Veresov, 2014, p. 10).

(…) perezhivanie is indivisible unity6 of personality and social environment (personal characteristics and environmental characteristics) on one hand, and the complex unit of different psychological processes including emotions, understanding, awareness, insights, thinking, memory, attitudes, addictions, inner conflicts, and even dread and fear, etc., on the other hand. (…) perezhivanie is viewed not as an empirical fact, it is understood from developmental perspective. (…) Perezhivanie “is a prism through which the influence of the environment on the child is refracted” and this is not a pure metaphor. It means that the character of perezhivanie defines the social situations of development and indicates the type of interactions between developed (ideal) and real forms. (Veresov, 2014, p. 10, italic on the original)

This developmental perspective is essential to understand perezhivanie as a concept in Vygotsky’s theory (P2) and its aspects, for it must be understood in a historical dialectical process (Vygotsky, 1997a). Without this perspective, we incur the risk of the “internal vs external” divide and even the “nurture vs nature” false dichotomy. This becomes even more clear if we take the idea of “unit of analysis” from Vygotsky: to explain this he gives us the example that to study water we must look for the unit that still has the characteristics of the whole, so although we can decompose water to its basic elements, oxygen and hydrogen, they would not be helpful to understand the characteristics of water, indeed they would be misleading. Therefore, in order to study water Vygotsky suggests that we must look at the water molecule (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 45).

It is in this sense that perezhivanie is understood, at the same time, as the unit of personality and environment (as the water molecule is the unit of water, but
composed of hydrogen and oxygen), unit of emotion and cognition and the unit of consciousness (Veresov, 2014, p. 10).

We believe it is interesting to think of those “units” as “gestalten,” or as “wholes” that are more than the simply sum of its elements (Blunden, 2008) and as “urphänomen,” or as the “archetypal phenomenon in which all the essential features of a whole complex process are to be found” (Blunden, 2015a).

For dialectical thinking, there is nothing new in the position that the whole does not arise mechanically by means of a sum of separate parts, but has specifically unique properties and qualities which cannot be deduced from a simple combining of the qualities of the parts. (Vygotsky, 1997b, p. 83)

These definitions of perezhivanie are important for us to avoid overextending the concept, as alerted by Vygotsky himself that “the extension of the concept grows and reaches for infinity, and according to the well-known logical law, its content falls just as impetuously to zero” (Vygotsky, 1997a, p. 245).

So P1 is the process and content of experiencing something that changes the person and P2 is the theoretical concept to understand this process and content, being the unit of personality and environment and unit of analysis of consciousness.

**Perezhivanie and development**

Since it is important to understand perezhivanie in a dialectical historical process, we need to make clear its role in human development. So first, Vygotsky states that the environment determines the development through P2.1 or perezhivanie as a prism:

To state a certain, general, formal position, it would be correct to say that the environment determines the development of the child through experience of the environment; (…) the child is a part of the social situation, and the relation of the child to the environment and the environment to the child occurs through experience of the child himself; the forces of the environment acquire a controlling significance because the child experiences them. (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 294)

We can also see P2.2, perezhivanie as the unit of personality and environment, and its connection to development, indeed this gestalt is the concept of “social situation of development”:

(…) at the beginning of each age period, there develops a completely original, exclusive, single and unique relation, specific to the given age, between child and reality, mainly the social reality, that surrounds him. We call this relation the *social situation of development* at the given age. The social situation of development represents the initial moment for all dynamic changes that occur in development during the given
period. It determines wholly and completely the forms and the path along which the child will acquire ever newer personality characteristics, drawing them from the social reality as from the basic source of development, the path along which the social becomes the individual. (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 198, italic in the original)

It would appear that, to Vygotsky, perezhivanie has a central role in the human development, since every HMF, according to Vygotsky’s genetic law of cultural development, appears first between people as social relations and then internalized as HMF (Vygotsky, 1997b, p. 106), and this happens in the social situation of development.

However, if personality, that will compose the prism of perezhivanie (P2.1), is so important to understand development, what is personality to Vygotsky? It is not innate, it is the child’s personal cultural development encompassing what is supernatural and historical in humanity (Vygotsky, 1997b, p. 242). In other words, personality is the gestalt result of the history of the HMF, and as such, it must not be understood as some kind of ahistorical “essence” of “natural” innate factors of the individual, but in a historical dialectical way.

Based on this definition of personality, we can extrapolate some interesting ideas regarding perezhivanie, personality, and development that will be useful in our later approach to RPG. If, according to Vygotsky, the HMF are reorganizations of elementary mental functions (EMF), the qualitative jumps in development are changes in the relationship between HMF in a psychological system and, if those HMF are internalized social relations, then personality is the product of this history of development and also vector of development (Vygotsky, 1998, pp. 167–168). This same process can be applied to emotions (Vygotsky, 1999, p. 244), and emotions are part of the prism of perezhivanie themselves. So, it is not the environmental factors by themselves, taken without reference to the child, that influence the course of development (Vygotsky, 1994, pp. 339–340), but the reorganization of the psychological system that happens through perezhivanie dialectics. Moreover, the “prism” that refracts the environment in the perezhivanie would be the personality, enabling us to understand the social situation of development (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 198) and to design developmental games.

Perezhivanie and performance

Since Vygotsky relates the development of the HMF with the mastery of one’s own behavior (Vygotsky, 1997b, p. 207), it is important for us to understand how this “mastery” relates to perezhivanie. Since P1 is the process and the content of a lived experience, the ability to affect and to alter the social situation of development is probably related to altering the social relations in a given environment.

Actually, all contemporary psychophysiological investigations of emotions show that the path to mastery of emotions, and, consequently, the path of voluntary arousal and artificial creation of new emotions, is not based on direct interference of our will in the
sphere of sensations in the way that this occurs in the area of thinking and movement. (Vygotsky, 1999, p. 243)

For this reason, we believe that the concept of performance by Holzman (2009) can be helpful when we later try to understand the relationship between RPG and perezhivanie. Holzman (2009) does not give a precise definition of performance, maybe due to her Wittgensteinian approach to definitions, but some quotes may help us, such as: “In the theatrical sense of the word, performing is a way of taking ‘who we are’ and creating something new (...)” (Holzman, 2009, p. 31) and “Performing as someone else (being oneself and other than oneself) is the source of development (...)” (Holzman, 2009, p. 32).

Holzman’s practice of performance and the idea of becoming seems to stem from Vygotsky’s ideas about the ZPD and creative imitation (Holzman, 2009, p. 30), and also from Wittgenstein’s “language game” (Holzman, 2009, p. 38). The main idea is that through group social relations permeated with theatrical techniques, especially improvisational theater techniques, people can create new meanings for themselves.

This meaning-making process of performance can be related to perezhivanie, for “Meanings are not psychische Gestalten, but sozio-Gestalten: consciousness is a relation, [i.e.] my relation to my environment” (Vygotsky archive, unpublished record, “The role of semantic field,” 1933; underlining in the original notes; from Zavershneva (2014, p. 82)).

So meaning making in performance can be related to dialectical changes through perezhivanie in the social situation of development. However, meaning usually leads us to a more cognitive divide, and both Holzman (2009, p. 29) and Vygotsky (Veresov, 2014, p. 10; Vygotsky, 1987, p. 282, 1994, p. 343; Zavershneva, 2014, p. 91) sough for a unit of cognition and emotion.

In our view, becoming through performance is consciously changing the social situation of development, or if we take the prism reference from Vygotsky, refracting the environment in different ways (P2.1). It seems that performance, and improvised performance in particular, promotes perezhivanie (P1), and gives people some control over their social situation of development (P2.2), and mastery of the behavioral process itself is the mark of the development of the HMF (Vygotsky, 1997b, p. 86).

Interestingly for Holzman “Performance is the activity by which human beings transform and continuously reshape the unity that is us-and-our environment” (Holzman, 2013), what in our interpretation is a way to be aware of P1 and is exactly the mastery of one own’s behavior that we described above, but related to P2. This enables the use of performance and P2 as tool and result for understanding and promoting human development.

Unfortunately, although Vygotsky uses the word perezhivanie (Delari Junior, 2009, pp. 27–29) when approaching the problem of the creative work of the actor through performance in a play (Vygotsky, 1999), he uses it in the sense of
perezhivanie as phenomena (P1) and not yet perezhivanie as a concept, as a unit of analysis.

There is also the problem of the difference between performing arts and RPG, as the focus of the two is different since in the stage the focus is an aesthetic for the audience and in the RPG the focus is an aesthetic for oneself (MacDonald, 2012), in that there is a “stage aesthetic” in performing arts, like improvised and participatory theater, and an “immersed aesthetic” in RPG, like larps. “Stage aesthetic” is “beautiful to watch,” has a “directed story,” is “designed to elicit responses,” implies “performative excellence,” has “low demand from the audience,” and has a “more cohesive message.” “Immersed aesthetic,” on the other hand, is “beautiful to do,” has a “developing story,” is “negotiated to create situations,” implies “quality of engagement,” has “mid to very high demand of input,” has a “scattered message” and both have very different time durations (MacDonald, 2012). When Vygotsky discuss perezhivanie (P1) in the actor’s work, he is doing so in a “stage aesthetic” perspective:

We must understand the psychology of one actor or another in all his concrete historical and social circumstances; then the normal connection of the given form of stage experience with the social content that is projected through this actor’s experiences to the audience will become clear and understandable for us. (Vygotsky, 1999, p. 241)

Holzman’s proposal of performance can have both stage and immersive aesthetics depending on the context. Our personal experiences playing RPG (larp) with people of improvisational theater in Japan has shown that even through many improv exercises are done without an audience, this esthetic difference is present. One of the players said that when she was doing improv, she always had in mind if it will be interesting for the others watching, while she realized that in larp, the preoccupation was if the experience was interesting for those playing, in other words, there was a difference in the refraction of the experience (P2.1). Therefore, we believe that the articulation of perezhivanie as a concept, with Holzman’s concept of performance, can help us to understand those esthetic differences since, for us, they are differences in the perezhivanie as phenomena that can be better understood through perezhivanie as a concept.

**Part II: Perezhivanie and RPG**

Many times, when Vygotsky’s theory is used in the study of RPG, the concept used is that of ZPD, and sometimes, Vygotsky’s ideas on imagination, creativity, and HMF, but usually out of context his overall theory (Schmit, 2008). This can lead to a more cognitive approach to development (Holzman, 2009) and a more technicist approach to education (Schmit, 2010). We understand that a more systemic approach is better suited to understand human development and, in doing so, what happens when people play RPG.

But first, what is this RPG we are discussing about? First we need to define play and game, for Walther: “Play is an open-ended territory in which make-believe and
world-building are crucial factors. Games are confined areas that challenge the
interpretation and optimizing of rules and tactics-not to mention time and
space” (Walther, 2003).

There is play in games and games in play, what Walther will call as “play-mode”
and “game-mode,” being both game and play complex activities.12 “(...) in the
play-mode the deep fascination lies in the oscillation between play and non-play,
whereas game-mode presses forward one’s tactical capabilities to sustain the bal-
ance between a structured and an un-structured space” (Walther, 2003).

Also, there is a long discussion on the definition of RPG (Hitchens & Drachen,
2009), for the purposes of this work we will take into account the critics made by
Arjoranta (2011), regarding these definitions and point out the characteristics of
the Wittgensteinian “language game” definition of RPG as having the following
defining characteristics: a “game world,” an imaginary setting where the fictional
actions happen; “participants” in the form of players or the organizers of the
imaginary world through computers or books, and “shared narrative power,”
where all participants have agency over the actions and events on the game
world through various forms of “interaction” (Arjoranta, 2011, p. 14). Since
even RPGs with few rules like the “freeform” are still rule bound, RPG are
games but with a strong “play-mode.”

With these definitions we can move on to the relationship of perezhivanie and
RPG. There are many subjective experiences in RPG like exerting imagination,
creativity, developing cognitive and social skills (Schmit, 2008). In our experience
as a RPG player, perezhivanie as phenomena (P1) is not uncommon in RPG and
was probably happening before the advent of RPG as a commercial product in
1974 with the title Dungeons and Dragons (Tresca, 2011, p. 62). This is important
because one way of experiencing, and P1, began with RPG: We can see one of the
“ancestors” of today’s “avatars” in tabletop RPG characters, since it was in RPGs
that we see those characters as representations of the player in the imaginary world,
with defined characteristics and development over time through experience. Today
this concept is present in many electronic virtual worlds, such as games and social
media, but it started with TRPGs (Barton, 2008, p. 19; Schick, 1991, p. 18; Tresca,
2011, p. 62).

One of the first studies on RPG by Fine (1983) gives us the impression that P1
happened in RPG, from his indication of players getting annoyed, depressed,
angered, and bitter when playing (Fine, 1983, p. 218). This kind of relationship
between player and character was discussed as “engrossment” by Fine (1983,
p. 196), but in most texts on the subject, it is discussed as “immersion”
(Lankoski & Järvelä, 2012, pp. 18–19), and more recently also as “bleed”
(Bowman, 2015). Because of the commercial success of Dungeons and Dragons,
a new prism to refract the environment (P2.1) emerged in culture, and also another
unit of personality and environment (P2.2), for not only the player has a P1, but
also the character that also develops in the game. We believe that the understand-
ing of these phenomena is important to better understand the playing experience
since, “(...) if the actor’s experience also differs from everyday life experience by
the fact that it comprises a part of an entirely different system, then its explanation must be found in laws of the structure of that system” (Vygotsky, 1999, p. 243), and to understand P1 we should do it through P2.

Perezhivanie and immersion

So it seems that P1 is a recurring phenomenon in RPG, but it has many other names among players and RPG scholars and seem to be indicating new ways of experiencing in modern times, like the “avatar” in the internet, the “characters” in RPG, the cosplay and so on. In the previous sections we talked about “immersion,” but although there is growing discussion on the topic (Lankoski & Järvelä, 2012), it is difficult to define its meaning, and as such we could say that it is still a developing “everyday concept” toward a scientific one, and in such a state it is more a collection of descriptions of phenomena, having the shared idea that immersion is a state where the fiction of the game, in some extent, takes over the playing experience (Lankoski & Järvelä, 2012, pp. 18–19).

A game master, mix of organizer, referee, and director, describes immersion in this way in one of our interviews:

Some players put themselves in the situation as if they were there. (…) They end up being themselves but in that situation, they feel it more than just solving a problem. (…) They feel the weight of taking a decision (…) It gets close to the player despite the fact that the reality of the character and of the player to be totally different.

As we can see by the example above, all immersion is the player experiencing something, but if that denotes a change in the player’s development, it is another question. In our experience this immersion can lead to P1, and the higher the immersion, we have more perezhivanie.

We also can make a relationship between “immersion” and the concept of “social situation of development,” for despite the fact that the scenario in the game and the context of the game are the same for players and characters, the impact of both in the players, and or, the characters will be different. This difference is closely related to the player’s personality, and can be better understood through P2.1, and the same can be said of the story of development of the character, in other words, the character’s perezhivanie.13

Because of this, the way that people perform and how the play world is organized may have deep impacts in the immersion, and this immersion may also be a requisite for the pedagogical effects of RPG (Balzer, 2011). Of course, the separation of player and character is a fictitious one and that leads us to the idea of “bleed.”

Perezhivanie and bleed

As with immersion, bleed is more of a description of a plethora of phenomena than an established concept. Lately in some game studies, especially regarding a type of
RPG called larp, this kind of perezhivanie (P1) has gained the attention of scholars.

According to Bowman, "(...) role-players sometimes experience moments where their real life feelings, thoughts, relationships, and physical states spill over into their characters' and vice versa. In role-playing studies, we call this phenomenon bleed" (Bowman, 2015).

Still for Bowman (2015) bleed is largely an unconscious process when it happens, and is neither inherently positive nor negative, and although bleed is not something that players directly control, the conscious act of the player to alter the course of the character is known as "steering."

Therefore, a player can steer toward greater bleed by pushing factors that are likely to cause a bleed response, but bleed is not guaranteed. Alternately, players can steer away from potentially emotionally impacting factors, but end up affected by them nonetheless. (Bowman, 2015)

So, some players try to avoid bleed and others seen to seek it.

The same can be said of some games, which are designed to induce strong emotions on players, and or, make them contemplate their own lives (Bowman, 2015).

But how to know if bleed is a kind of P1? When interviewing a Russian larp player about important moments for him when playing, he responded like this:

Russian larper: You know the meaning of catharsis?
Researcher: Yeah
Russian larper: I have catharsis about four times. I played since 1999. About 200 games and only four times. Three times is a game with about 300 people and the other one was in a game with about 1000 people.
Researcher: And what causes the catharsis in these games?
Russian larper: I think matching reality and virtuality. You lose border, and when you lose border your brain feels like strange. (...) I was very tired, and it kind similar to some kind of wax. Your mind is divided, I do not know, it is really hard to explain it.
Researcher: Would you call this catharsis as perezhivanie?
Russian larper: I think it is very similar.
Researcher: What is very different?
Russian larper: Catharsis is the final goal. Perezhivanie is one part of path to catharsis. You have a moment of perezhivanie when you are going to catharsis.

So here we have a strong indication that bleed is a kind of P1 but also that perezhivanie as P1 is a process of experiencing something in personal change, or we can say in a Vygotskian way, human development.

An example of bleed in tabletop RPGs from our interviews with one player:

A member of the party died, was a Paladin, and we had a lot of affection for him. Some players cried, one player left the room asking for some time for himself, but
there was nothing we could do to save him (the Paladin) because he was poisoned. I felt the tears falling through my face and I was sad as if it was I and not my character that lost a friend.

Here we can see that the situation affected the immersed players, and more, it deeply affected the player through the character P1. “Bleed” is the unit of player’s and character’s P1. We believe that perezhivanie as a concept in Vygotsky’s theory (P2) can help understand the phenomenon of bleed through the dialectical historical analysis of the performance of the player, the play world, and the social situation of development, but mostly with perezhivanie as the gestalt and unit of analysis. At the same time, games designed to promote bleed can be used in the study of perezhivanie as a phenomenon (P1) and its implications, like positive and negative bleed involving the player’s personality, a phenomenon that Bowman describes as “ego bleed” (Bowman, 2015), but that for us is better understood with Vygotsky’s definition of personality and through the application of perezhivanie as a concept in the analysis.

In her book on RPG, Bowman also approaches the phenomenon of “Alteration of Identity,” which, as with “steering,” approach the use of RPG with the mastery of one’s own behavior, through what we see as social relations characteristic of the development of HMF, in a very similar way to “performance.”

But this “steering” and “alteration of identity,” for the reasons explained in the first part of this paper, should be understood in an historical dialectical way, and this is one of the objectives of our current research.

There is another phenomenon in which there seems to be two kinds of P1 in RPG: P1 related to the player and P1 related to the character. This is interesting because we can then apply perezhivanie as a concept (P2) to understand the character development in the same way we use it to understand the development of personality. The possible nodal point of the history of development, of both player and character, is the performance, in other words, who we are and who we are not at the same time, an active transforming unit of person and environment, be it real or virtual.

In addition, it seems that P1 for the character do not necessarily means P1 for the player. Bowman hints at this when relating “alibi” (the separation of player and character) and bleed:

(...) alibi, in which players accept the premise that any actions in the game are taken by the character, not by the player. (...) Alibi has a direct correlation with bleed: the stronger the alibi, the weaker the bleed. Alternately, playing close to home provides an inherently weaker alibi. (Bowman, 2015)

This is also not new, as is hinted also in the research from Fine, when he writes on “Awareness Contexts” (Fine, 1983, pp. 187–203).

We believe that the use of P2 for analysis can help us understand these phenomena and use them, through the concept of performance, to promote one’s master of behavior and awareness of emotions.
There are still few studies on bleed, such as the one from Montola (2014), and there are at least two other psychological approaches to these phenomena in RPG (Bowman, 2010; Lankoski & Järvelä, 2012). It would be interesting, and close to Vygotsky’s way of work, to compare those approaches in a future research.

So the ideas of immersion and bleed show the possibility of application of P2 to better understand these phenomena and also as a site to study P1.

**How to study perezhivanie in RPG?**

In our current study on perezhivanie and RPG, we are focusing on interviews and observant participation, in order to understand the “prism” and “refractions” (P2.1) that happen in game sessions that we observe, during which perezhivanie (P1) may occur. We understand that it is only by having some access to both the person personal history and sense of the situation, that we can get an explanation on P1 in a dialectical historical way, i.e. P2.

Ferholt (2009) studying perezhivanie in playworlds and Montola (2014) studying bleed in emotional extreme role-playing have also used qualitative methodologies; more precisely, they also used interviews and observant participation to gather data. In her article on Bleed, Bowman (2015) suggests briefing, pregame exercises, in game signaling (like “safe words” and hand signaling) and debriefing to help in the process of P1. Those activities, especially the debriefing, can give us more data on the perezhivanie.

But as well put by Toomela (2011) when criticizing qualitative approaches to research, it is necessary to go beyond description of the phenomenon being studied and give causal explanations in a systemic way. So this article is more of an introduction and provocation to other researchers.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, we proposed the use of “perezhivanie” from Vygotsky’s late works as a way to better understand the practice of RPG, and at the same time, potentially expanding the Cultural Historical Theory in game studies.

Through the concept of social situation of development, we can not only shed new light on why perezhivanie as phenomena happens or not in a game, but also, with the idea of perezhivanie as a prism that refracts the environment, better comprehend phenomenon regarding the relationship of a person and her character in a play, like “immersion,” “bleed,” and the difference between “stage” and “immersed” esthetics. For example, perezhivanie of the character, as a unit of personality and environment (P2.2), can be used as an explanation of why people that only watch RPG games usually do not understand what is going on.

This is important to understand the emerging new ways of experiencing like in “avatars,” “cosplay,” “furry fandom,” “otaku,” “nerd,” and so on. Also, the articulation of practical concepts, such as “performance,” with perezhivanie as a concept (P2) can help the design of games that promote the development of HMFs
and mastery of one's own behavior in a more systemic way, at the same time it promotes a deeper articulation of Vygotsky’s theory with educational RPG and game studies.

We believe that perezhivanie facilitates the understanding of the player’s experience, but there is still research needed to be done. On the Cultural Historical Theory front, a deeper integration of the concept of perezhivanie to the understanding of human development and consciousness it is still needed. On the RPG studies front, more research is needed in the phenomena of “immersion,” “bleed,” and its impacts on game design, especially in the design of educational games. We understand that perezhivanie as a concept alone cannot, and must not, be used to understand RPG, as it happened with ZPD (Schmit, 2008), but it opens up connections through Vygotsky’s theory with art studies, neuropsychology, especial education, paedology, psychology, and other fields present in Vygotsky’s works.

Acknowledgments

This paper could not be written to its fullest without Professor Yuji Moro, who served as my supervisor, and for that I am deeply grateful. I also want to thank Professor Nikolai Veresov, Professor Ekaterina Zavershneva, and Professor Andy Blunden for their precious help with material. And my thanks to Professor João Batista Martins, Professor Alexey Fedoseev, and Professor Julia Rocca for their critics and comments that helped so much in the draft of this paper. Also I want to deeply thank my English reviser Thales Ferreira for the awesome work. Finally, I want to thank the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan for the scholarship that allowed me to do this research.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Sponsorship by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan by the MEXT scholarship that allowed me to do this research.

Notes

1. Although we intend to contextualize these concepts with research data, due to space limitations, in this paper we will present the concepts and do the analysis in a forthcoming paper and thesis.
2. Eirik Fatland claims in his presentations at Solmukohta 2016 some relationship between improvised theater, psychodrama, and role-play by Jacob Moreno, Viola Spolin improv and what would become RPG, but there is no paper on the subject at the moment.
3. This reference is not directly of the French text, but an English translation provided by the author himself. Some differences may exist due to this translation process.

5. Perezhivanie is present in many of Vygotsky works, at least since 1917 (Delari Junior, 2009), but it is not the focus of this paper to present how Vygotsky changes his use of the word over his work.

6. This is probably an error in the translation and the word here was supposed to be unit. In e-mail exchanges with the author and in his lecture quoted above, he clarifies this stating clearly that it is unit and not unity.

7. “Переживание,” i.e. perezhivanie is used in Russian original (Vygotsky, 2001, p. 5 in Veresov (2014)).

8. perezhivanie (Ibid.).

9. Переживаем (Ibid.).

10. It is interesting to note that Vygotsky seems to treat EMF as elements of the “unit” HMF in the same way that he works with elements and unit of analysis.

11. From the process of who we are (being) and who we will be (becoming). (Holzman, 2009, p. 18).

12. We strongly recommend the Reading of the work of Walther, as there he properly does this discussion over the differences between play and game.

13. We know that in fact the only perezhivanie happening is that of the player, but we believe that this can be an interesting approach to game designers.

14. A RPG where the players dress and enact the character in a venue that represents physically the scenario.

References


Author biography

Wagner Luiz Schmit is a Psychologist with a master degree in Education by the State University of Londrina and student at the Doctoral Program in Psychology at the Graduate School of Comprehensive Human Sciences of the University of Tsukuba.