

Procedural Rhetoric of Restorative Justice in Video Games: Punishment, Forgiveness, Reparation, and Reintegration as Game Systems

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Abstract

This paper explores the possibility that video games, through rules, decision-making systems, and interaction mechanics, can procedurally model a restorative logic of justice rather than a recurring penal logic organized around punishment, elimination, and victory through the defeat of an opponent. Drawing on Ian Bogost's concept of procedural rhetoric, the paper examines how video games convey meaning not only through narrative, imagery, or dialogue, but also through the structure of rules that determines what is possible, desirable, punishable, or morally relevant to the player. Within this framework, restorative justice is understood as an approach that shifts attention from wrongdoing understood primarily as a violation of law toward the harm caused to people, relationships, and communities, together with the responsibilities arising from that harm. The central question is whether video games can procedurally organize forms of justice based on recognition of harm, assumption of responsibility, empathic understanding, reparation, and reintegration. Through a qualitative comparative analysis of *Undertale*, *Disco Elysium*, *This War of Mine*, and *Papers, Please*, the paper examines how these dimensions become, or fail to become, part of the rules, mechanics, consequence systems, and possibilities for player action. The analysis distinguishes narrative restorativeness, in which restorative themes are represented at the level of story and characterization, from procedural restorativeness, in which restorative principles become relevant to actual gameplay decisions and their consequences. The paper argues that video games can model restorative justice procedurally when recognition of harm, responsibility, empathic understanding, reparation, and reintegration are incorporated into the designed possibility space rather than remaining solely narrative themes. The analysis does not establish psychological or moral effects on players; rather, it identifies a medium-specific capacity to organize justice as a system of relationships, consequences, responsibilities, and possible restoration.

Keywords: procedural rhetoric, restorative justice, procedural restorativeness, video games, penal proceduralism, reparation, reintegration

Introduction

Many dominant patterns in video game design have historically organized conflict and forms of justice through antagonism, sanctions, elimination, and victory over an opponent. In such systems, the player is frequently required to identify a threat, overcome resistance, defeat an adversary, and restore an expected state of order. Although video games can represent forgiveness, reconciliation, responsibility, redemption, or moral transformation at the narrative level, these principles are less frequently incorporated into the procedures through which players actually act and progress. The structural importance of action, conflict, and rule-governed interaction has been emphasized in game studies, particularly in approaches that understand games as systems in which rules organize player action and establish the conditions under which particular forms of behavior become possible, effective, or rewarded (Galloway, 2006; Sicart, 2008, 2009). From this perspective, many video games can be understood as procedurally reproducing

elements of what this paper terms penal procedurality: a system in which disruption is primarily addressed through threat identification, confrontation, sanction, defeat, exclusion, or elimination. This does not imply that games are inherently punitive, nor that violence is synonymous with penal logic. Rather, it identifies a recurring structural relation in which successful play is connected to the removal or neutralization of an entity defined as an obstacle or threat.

At the same time, a growing body of research has begun to examine restorative approaches to conflict and social interaction in digital gaming environments. Jonas-van Dijk et al. (2026), for example, examine restorative justice as a possible alternative to punitive and exclusion-based responses to interpersonal harm in online gaming environments, while other recent work has considered the potential of interactive systems to engage questions of dialogue, responsibility, conflict transformation, and restoration (Filipović & Kovačević, 2026; Wu, 2026). This emerging research can also be situated within a broader scholarly interest in the social, behavioral, ethical, and security implications of technologically mediated environments and information systems (Bjelajac et al., 2022, 2023). These studies do not address restorative justice directly, but they help situate the present inquiry within wider discussions of the consequences of technologically mediated interaction. Such developments provide a wider context for examining whether digital systems can do more than reproduce established forms of sanction and exclusion. They raise the question of whether alternative conceptions of justice can themselves become embedded in the procedures through which users or players interact with technologically mediated environments.

The theoretical starting point of the present paper is Ian Bogost's (2007) concept of procedural rhetoric, according to which computational systems can make arguments through processes and procedures. In video games, rules and mechanics do not merely determine how the game is played; they establish a structured field of possible actions and consequences and thereby give particular meanings to success, failure, responsibility, and desirable conduct. Previous research has similarly emphasized the ethical implications of games as designed systems and the role of rules and mechanics in organizing player agency (Filipović, 2013, 2016; Sicart, 2008, 2009). When these insights are brought into dialogue with restorative justice theory, justice can be examined not only as something represented by a game, but also as something organized through the game's procedural structure. This shift is important because a game may contain a narrative about forgiveness while simultaneously requiring the player to resolve every conflict through elimination. Conversely, a game may provide limited explicit discussion of restorative justice while nevertheless making responsibility, repair, dialogue, or reintegration consequential within its system of rules.

Restorative justice provides a particularly productive theoretical perspective for such an analysis because it shifts attention from wrongdoing understood primarily as a violation of law toward the harm caused to people, relationships, and communities. Zehr (1990, 2015) places questions concerning who has been harmed, what needs arise from that harm, who bears responsibility, and how those affected can participate in addressing the consequences at the center of restorative thinking. Braithwaite (1989, 2002) emphasizes responsibility, reintegration, and the distinction between reintegrative and stigmatizing responses to wrongdoing, while Marshall (1999) stresses the participatory character of processes through which those affected by an offense address its consequences and future implications. The implications for game design are significant. If a game treats an opponent merely as an obstacle whose removal

restores order, it procedurally reproduces a different understanding of justice from a game in which the position of the other, the consequences of harm, responsibility, repair, and the possibility of restored relationships affect the player's available courses of action.

The central research question of this paper is therefore whether video games can procedurally model a restorative logic of justice rather than relying primarily on penal procedurality. More specifically, the paper examines whether game systems can make recognition of harm, assumption of responsibility, empathic understanding, reparation, and reintegration relevant to player action, decision-making, and consequences. The object of analysis is the designed possibility space established by the game rather than the psychological response of actual players. The paper therefore does not claim that players necessarily become more empathetic, responsible, or restorative as a consequence of playing the analyzed games. Such claims would require empirical research involving participants, behavioral measures, interviews, surveys, or psychometric instruments. The present study instead asks what kinds of moral and social relations are made possible, constrained, rewarded, or rendered consequential by the design of the game system itself.

This distinction leads to a central conceptual differentiation between narrative restorativeness and procedural restorativeness. Narrative restorativeness refers to the representation of forgiveness, reconciliation, responsibility, redemption, or moral transformation at the level of narrative, characterization, dialogue, or fictional events. Procedural restorativeness, by contrast, refers to the extent to which restorative principles become part of the actual procedures through which players act, make decisions, encounter consequences, and pursue goals. A game may therefore be narratively restorative without being procedurally restorative. A character may forgive another character, for example, without the player's actions having any meaningful relationship to that forgiveness. Conversely, procedural restorativeness emerges when restorative principles become relevant to what the player can do and to the consequences generated by those actions. The distinction allows the analysis to move beyond the question of whether a game contains restorative themes and toward the more specific question of whether restoration is incorporated into the game's procedural architecture.

The principal theoretical contribution of this paper is the concept of procedural restorativeness, developed by bringing Bogost's (2007) account of procedural rhetoric into dialogue with established theories of restorative justice (Braithwaite, 1989, 2002; Marshall, 1999; Zehr, 1990, 2015). Neither Bogost develops a theory of restorative justice in video games, nor do Zehr, Braithwaite, or Marshall formulate a theory of procedural implementation of restorative justice in digital games. The conceptual bridge between these traditions is therefore developed here as an analytical contribution. Procedural restorativeness is understood as the capacity of a video game to model restorative justice through its rules, mechanics, consequence systems, and possibilities for player action. It is proposed here as a game-studies analytical concept and should not be conflated with restorative justice as a real-world legal, institutional, or community-based practice. It should not be understood as a binary property or as a universal taxonomy of restorative justice. Instead, it is treated as a multidimensional analytical concept through which different configurations of recognition of harm, responsibility, empathic understanding, reparation, and reintegration can be identified and compared. The concept concerns the procedural organization of restorative principles within a game system.

For the purposes of this study, these five dimensions constitute an analytical operationalization developed by the authors rather than a claim that restorative justice scholarship itself establishes a universally accepted five-part model. Recognition of harm concerns whether harm becomes visible and consequential within the game system; assumption of responsibility concerns whether player actions generate consequences that must subsequently be confronted; empathic understanding concerns whether the position, needs, vulnerability, or perspective of another actor becomes relevant to player decisions; reparation concerns whether meaningful procedures exist through which damage or disrupted relations can be addressed; and reintegration concerns whether the game provides a meaningful possibility of restoring participation, trust, status, access, or relationships after disruption. These dimensions are interconnected rather than independent. Recognition of harm can establish the basis for responsibility, responsibility can generate the need for reparation, and reparation can create conditions for reintegration. Empathic understanding can mediate each of these relations by making the position of another actor procedurally relevant.

The aim of the paper is therefore not to identify a fixed category of “restorative games,” but to develop an analytical framework for distinguishing between games that merely represent restorative ideas and games in which elements of restoration become part of gameplay procedures. The study combines qualitative game analysis with a comparative examination of four games selected for their contrasting approaches to conflict, responsibility, harm, and social relations. In doing so, it seeks to contribute simultaneously to game studies, restorative justice research, and the broader study of digitally mediated systems of moral and social interaction.

Methodology

Research Approach and Analytical Criteria

The study employs a qualitative comparative analysis of selected video games, focusing on rules, mechanics, consequence systems, and possibilities for player action rather than treating the games primarily as narrative or audiovisual texts. This approach is consistent with established methods of qualitative game analysis that conceptualize games as interactive systems and provide methodological tools for examining game elements, mechanics, player action, and systemic structures (Consalvo & Dutton, 2006; Malliet, 2007; Sicart, 2008). Consalvo and Dutton (2006), for example, propose a systematic but flexible analytical approach encompassing object inventories, interface study, interaction maps, and gameplay logs, while Sicart (2008) emphasizes the analytical distinction between rules and mechanics and their relationship to player agency. The present study adapts these traditions to a specific theoretical problem: the procedural organization of restorative justice. The fundamental methodological question is therefore not simply what a game represents, but what the game permits, prevents, rewards, penalizes, and makes consequential. The analysis consequently examines the relationship between player action and system response and asks whether restorative principles become part of that relationship.

The five dimensions of procedural restorativeness provide the primary analytical framework. Recognition of harm is identified when harm becomes visible and consequential within the game system, affecting characters, relationships, resources, communities, or subsequent possibilities for action. Assumption of responsibility is identified when player actions generate consequences that are causally

connected to those actions and require some subsequent form of engagement. Empathic understanding is identified when the position, vulnerability, needs, or perspective of another actor becomes relevant to player decisions and available strategies, without treating this as evidence of an actual psychological state in the player. Reparation is identified when the game provides meaningful procedures for addressing damage or disrupted relationships through actions such as restitution, assistance, dialogue, resource expenditure, effort, or behavioral change. Reintegration is identified when the game provides a meaningful possibility for restoring participation, trust, status, access, or relationships following disruption.

These dimensions are not treated as binary variables and are not converted into a numerical score. Instead, the analysis identifies their presence, form, procedural significance, and relation to other dimensions within each game. The framework also incorporates penal procedurality as a contrasting analytical category. This makes it possible to examine situations in which a game resolves disruption primarily through confrontation, sanction, defeat, exclusion, or elimination, as well as situations in which restorative procedures coexist with or challenge such mechanisms. The analysis therefore does not classify games as simply “penal” or “restorative.” Rather, it examines which procedural relations are established and how different forms of conflict resolution are structured within the designed possibility space.

A further methodological distinction is made between narrative and procedural restorativeness. A game is not considered procedurally restorative merely because it contains dialogue concerning forgiveness, redemption, reconciliation, or responsibility. Such elements become procedurally relevant only when they influence meaningful player action, available strategies, progression, or game consequences. The analysis is consequently guided by questions concerning the definition of conflict and harm, the procedural status of the opponent, the connection between action and responsibility, the visibility and consequences of harm, the relevance of another actor's perspective, the availability of meaningful reparation, the conditions attached to restoration, and the possibility of reintegration. These questions form a qualitative analytical grid rather than a quantitative coding instrument.

Corpus Selection

The corpus consists of four games selected purposively because they provide contrasting procedural configurations of conflict, responsibility, harm, and social relations: *Undertale* (Toby Fox, 2015), *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019), *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios, 2014), and *Papers, Please* (Lucas Pope, 2013). The selection is not random and is not intended to provide a statistically representative sample of video games. Its purpose is theoretical and comparative: each game makes a different set of procedural relations visible and therefore contributes to the development and application of the analytical framework. The corpus should consequently be understood as a set of contrasting cases rather than as four definitive examples of restorative or non-restorative games.

Undertale was selected because it makes the possibility of non-eliminative conflict resolution part of the core interaction system. Encounters can be approached through dialogue, interaction, and sparing rather than requiring the defeat of opponents, thereby changing the procedural status of the opponent from an entity that must be eliminated to an actor whose identity, behavior, and circumstances may become relevant to the resolution of conflict. *Disco Elysium* provides a different configuration in which dialogue, self-reflection, interpersonal relations, political and historical contexts, and character development are

integrated into the mechanisms through which the player navigates conflict. *This War of Mine* represents a borderline case because it makes harm, vulnerability, and the consequences of survival decisions highly visible and consequential without providing a comprehensive system for repairing all of the harms that emerge. Finally, *Papers, Please* provides a contrasting case in which bureaucratic rules, authorization, exclusion, resource management, and administrative consequences structure the player's decisions and demonstrate how morally consequential forms of sanction can be proceduralized without physical violence.

Theoretical Framework: Procedural Rhetoric and Restorative Justice – Toward a Theory of Procedural Restorativeness

Procedural Rhetoric and the Organization of Player Action

Bogost's (2007) concept of procedural rhetoric provides the principal theoretical basis for understanding how a game can communicate meanings through its rules and procedures. Whereas conventional rhetorical analysis may focus on verbal argument, visual representation, or narrative structure, procedural rhetoric emphasizes the persuasive and expressive capacities of processes themselves. In computational systems, rules establish what can happen, under what conditions, with what consequences, and with what possibilities for repetition or modification. In video games, these processes are encountered by the player through action. The player does not simply read a proposition about a particular form of behavior; the player operates within a system that establishes the conditions under which that behavior is possible, advantageous, costly, or ineffective.

This perspective is particularly significant for questions of justice because rules can encode assumptions about responsibility and appropriate responses to disruption. A game may, for example, establish a causal structure in which an opponent appears, the player attacks, the opponent is defeated, and progression follows. Such a system communicates a procedural relationship between threat, action, elimination, and restoration of order without requiring an explicit statement that elimination constitutes the appropriate response. Conversely, a game may establish a system in which the player must obtain information about another actor, negotiate, provide assistance, acknowledge responsibility, or undertake an action that repairs previous damage before progression becomes possible. In such a case, the procedural organization of the game embodies a different relationship between conflict and resolution.

Sicart (2008) emphasizes that game mechanics are methods through which agents interact with game systems, while his later work conceptualizes computer games as ethical systems in which rules establish conditions for ethical action and players function as ethical agents (Sicart, 2009). Flanagan (2009), through the concept of critical play, likewise demonstrates that rules can become a means of examining social norms, values, and relations of power. These approaches are important for the present argument because they establish that the ethical significance of a game cannot be reduced to the moral intentions of its narrative. The same fictional statement about forgiveness can have substantially different procedural meanings depending on whether the game's rules reward violence, permit dialogue, require restitution, or make the restoration of relationships consequential. Procedural rhetoric therefore provides a conceptual basis for examining justice as something that can be enacted through game systems rather than merely represented within them.

Penal Procedurality

The concept of penal procedurality is introduced in this paper as an analytical category for describing game systems in which disruption is procedurally organized primarily through the identification of a threat or opponent, the application of force or sanction, the defeat or exclusion of the designated opponent, and the restoration of an expected order through that removal. The concept does not imply that video games literally reproduce criminal justice institutions, nor does it suggest that all combat-oriented games are examples of penal justice. Rather, it identifies a structural analogy between particular forms of gameplay and a penal understanding of disruption in which an identified source of disorder is sanctioned and removed.

This distinction is particularly important because penal procedurality is not synonymous with physical violence. A system can be exclusionary or punitive through denial of access, surveillance, loss of resources, bureaucratic sanction, stigmatization, or other nonviolent mechanisms. Conversely, a game can include violent actions while also allowing responsibility, repair, or reconciliation to become procedurally meaningful. The analytical issue is therefore not whether a game contains violence, but how the game structures the relationship between harm, conflict, action, and resolution. The concept of penal procedurality is useful precisely because it makes it possible to distinguish between the presence of violence and the procedural organization of justice.

Within such a system, the opponent tends to occupy a narrowly defined procedural position. The opponent is a target, obstacle, threat, or source of disruption, and the principal successful action consists in neutralizing that entity. The restoration of order is consequently connected to elimination. The concept of penal procedurality allows this structure to be compared with alternative arrangements in which the other actor is treated as a morally relevant participant whose needs, vulnerability, perspective, or relationship to the player may affect the available forms of resolution. This contrast constitutes the conceptual basis for examining whether games can proceduralize restorative rather than primarily penal relations.

Restorative Justice as a Procedural Possibility

Restorative justice provides a different conceptual starting point from the conventional punitive response to wrongdoing. Rather than understanding an offense primarily as a violation requiring the imposition of a proportionate sanction, restorative approaches emphasize the harm caused to people and relationships, the needs generated by that harm, the responsibilities of those who caused it, and the participation of affected actors in addressing its consequences. Zehr (1990, 2015) places these questions at the center of restorative thinking, while Marshall (1999) emphasizes the participatory process through which those affected by an offense address its consequences and future implications. Braithwaite (1989, 2002) adds the important distinction between stigmatizing and reintegrative responses, emphasizing that responsibility can be acknowledged without permanently excluding the person who caused the harm from the social community.

The relevance of these principles to game studies becomes apparent when justice is considered as a relationship among player action, system response, and subsequent possibilities. If the player's harmful action produces no consequences other than an immediate numerical penalty, the game

establishes a particular procedural relation to responsibility. If the player must instead confront the consequences, understand the position of affected actors, undertake a meaningful act of repair, and restore a damaged relationship, the procedural organization of justice is different. The important point is not that a game must reproduce a real-world restorative justice conference or legal procedure. Rather, restorative principles must become part of the causal and interactive structure through which the player acts.

The central theoretical contribution of the present paper, procedural restorativeness, is therefore defined as the capacity of a video game to model restorative justice through its rules, mechanics, consequence systems, and possibilities for player action. The concept establishes a distinction between a game that merely represents forgiveness or reconciliation and a game in which those processes affect what the player can do and what outcomes follow. Narrative restorativeness can therefore exist without procedural restorativeness, whereas procedural restorativeness requires that restorative principles become part of the player's actual activity. A game may depict a character apologizing and being forgiven, but if the player has no role in the process and no procedural consequences arise from it, the restorative dimension remains primarily representational.

Procedural restorativeness should consequently be understood as multidimensional rather than binary. A game can make harm highly visible but offer no meaningful means of repair; it can make responsibility consequential without providing reintegration; or it can allow nonviolent conflict resolution without requiring genuine restitution. The concept does not require every dimension to be fully present. Instead, it provides a framework for examining the specific configuration of restorative procedures within a game and the extent to which those procedures displace, supplement, or coexist with penal procedurality.

Dimensions of Procedural Restorativeness

The five dimensions proposed in this paper constitute an analytical operationalization of procedural restorativeness. The first concerns recognition of harm. For harm to be procedurally recognized, it must have consequences within the game system that affect subsequent action, interaction, resources, relationships, or social structures. Narrative statements that an actor has been harmed are insufficient if that harm has no influence on the procedural possibilities available to the player. Recognition therefore becomes procedural when the game requires the player to encounter the consequences of harm as part of gameplay. The second dimension is assumption of responsibility, which concerns the causal relationship between player action and subsequent system response. Responsibility becomes procedurally meaningful when the player cannot simply move on after causing harm but must encounter or address consequences generated by the action. The third dimension, empathic understanding, requires particular conceptual precision. It does not refer to a psychological state that can be inferred from gameplay or attributed to the player. Rather, it refers to the procedural relevance of another actor's position, needs, vulnerability, or perspective. Understanding the other becomes a component of procedural restorativeness when information about that actor changes the player's available decisions, strategies, or consequences. The fourth dimension is reparation, understood as the existence of meaningful procedures through which damage or disrupted relationships can be addressed. Reparation may take the form of restitution, assistance, dialogue, expenditure of resources, behavioral change, or other meaningful player activity. A

symbolic apology can therefore be narratively restorative without constituting procedural reparation unless the apology has consequences within the game system. The fifth dimension is reintegration, which concerns the possibility of restoring participation in a social or relational order following disruption. Reintegration is not equivalent to automatic forgiveness. It requires a procedural structure in which trust, status, access, participation, or relationships can be restored or re-established as a consequence of meaningful actions. These five dimensions are interconnected rather than independent criteria. Recognition of harm may generate responsibility; responsibility may create the need for reparation; reparation may establish conditions for reintegration; and empathic understanding can make the needs and position of affected actors relevant throughout this process. The analytical value of the framework therefore lies not in counting dimensions, but in examining the relations among them.

Procedural Restorativeness and Ethical Game Systems

The concept of procedural restorativeness extends the broader understanding of games as ethical systems developed by Sicart (2009) and related work on critical play (Flanagan, 2009). If games can organize ethical possibilities through rules, then they can also organize different understandings of justice. The present framework narrows this broader ethical question to the specific problem of restoration following harm. It asks whether the game system establishes meaningful procedural relations among harm, responsibility, understanding, repair, and reintegration. At the same time, procedural restorativeness does not imply that games automatically produce ethical reflection or moral transformation. The concept concerns the design of possibilities rather than the measurement of effects. A game can establish a system in which the player's success depends on understanding the position of another actor without demonstrating that players actually become more empathetic outside the game. Similarly, a game can proceduralize responsibility without demonstrating a measurable change in players' attitudes toward punishment or justice. Such effects remain empirical questions. Procedural analysis can establish what the game makes possible; it cannot, by itself, establish what players subsequently think, feel, or do. This distinction is essential for maintaining the methodological boundaries of the present study. Procedural restorativeness is therefore used to describe a property of game design rather than a psychological property of players. Its purpose is to provide a conceptual vocabulary through which the relationship between game mechanics and restorative justice can be analyzed without making unsupported claims about player transformation.

Procedural Restorativeness as an Alternative Logic of Play

The analytical starting point is the hypothesis that video games can model restorative justice procedurally when recognition of harm, responsibility, reparation, and restoration become part of the relationship between player action and game consequences. This hypothesis does not require games to abandon conflict, competition, difficulty, or even violence. Rather, it proposes that the decisive issue is the procedural status of the opponent and the structure through which the game moves from disruption toward resolution. If the primary route to restored order is the defeat or removal of an opponent, the system approximates penal procedurality. If the game creates meaningful possibilities for recognizing harm,

assuming responsibility, understanding another actor, repairing damage, and restoring relationships, then elements of procedural restorativeness emerge.

A substantial tradition of video game design has connected successful play to the identification and elimination of antagonistic entities. In early arcade shooters such as *Space Invaders*, the fundamental relationship between player and opponent is organized around the destruction of approaching enemies. Later first-person shooters developed this relationship into increasingly complex systems of combat, weapons, enemy identification, and progression. *Doom*, for example, establishes a paradigmatic relationship among threat, combat, elimination, and progression, while the broader first-person shooter tradition has repeatedly connected successful play to defeating hostile opponents (Galloway, 2006). These examples should not be interpreted as direct implementations of criminal punishment. Their significance lies instead in the procedural structure through which the removal of a designated opponent becomes the condition for progression and restoration of the player's control over the game space. The concept of penal procedurality captures this structural relationship. The opponent is defined primarily through its function as a threat or obstacle, and the procedural response to disruption is organized around neutralization. In such a system, the moral or social identity of the opponent may be irrelevant to the mechanics of resolution. The player does not generally need to understand why the opponent acted, what harm the opponent may have experienced, or what obligations might arise from the player's own actions. What matters procedurally is that the opponent is identified and successfully removed. The restoration of order is consequently achieved through elimination rather than through a process of addressing relationships. The case of *Dark Souls* requires a more differentiated interpretation. Rather than treating the game as a straightforward example of procedural punishment, van Nuenen (2015) analyzes its gameplay through procedural surveillance, subjectivation, and empowerment. This distinction is important because it demonstrates that difficult, punitive-feeling, or failure-oriented gameplay cannot automatically be equated with penal procedurality. The analytical category must be grounded in the actual procedural relation between player action, system response, and the treatment of the other actor. The example therefore reinforces the methodological principle that the meaning of a mechanic should be established through its systemic function rather than inferred from the general emotional experience associated with difficulty or punishment.

Procedural Restorativeness in Practice: Comparative Game Analysis

The possibility of procedural restorativeness becomes more visible when a game changes the procedural status of the opponent. If the opponent is defined only as an obstacle, the most efficient route toward progression will generally involve neutralizing that obstacle. If, however, the opponent becomes a morally relevant other whose position, needs, vulnerability, or relationships affect the player's available decisions, the procedural structure changes. The conflict may remain difficult or adversarial, but the other actor is no longer reducible to a target. This transition is significant because restorative justice begins precisely from the recognition that wrongdoing takes place within relationships and that the effects of harm extend beyond the abstract violation of a rule. *Undertale* provides the clearest example of this transformation within the corpus. The game does not merely present a narrative argument in favor of nonviolence. It incorporates alternative modes of interaction directly into its encounter system. The player can approach conflicts through dialogue, interaction, and sparing rather than being required to kill

opponents, and the consequences of these choices extend beyond the immediate encounter. The opponent therefore acquires procedural significance as more than a target. The player may need to obtain information, recognize the character's particular situation, and select an action that allows the encounter to be resolved without elimination. Understanding the other consequently becomes relevant to the player's available strategies. The significance of *Undertale* for the present argument is therefore procedural rather than simply thematic. The game creates a designed possibility space in which defeating an opponent is not the only route toward successful progression. The player can pursue a different relation to conflict, and this decision affects subsequent interactions and outcomes. Elements associated with restorative justice, particularly recognition of the other, responsibility for the chosen mode of interaction, and the possibility of preserving or restoring relationships, consequently become mechanically relevant. Nevertheless, *Undertale* should not be described as a complete simulation of restorative justice. It does not reproduce the institutional, participatory, and social complexity of real-world restorative processes. Its significance lies in demonstrating that restorative principles can become meaningful determinants of gameplay rather than remaining exclusively within narrative representation. This case also clarifies why procedural restorativeness should not be understood as requiring a complete restorative justice system. A game can exhibit procedural restorativeness when specific restorative principles are translated into meaningful mechanics and consequences, even if other dimensions remain incomplete. In *Undertale*, the rejection of elimination as the only form of conflict resolution changes the player's relation to the opponent and establishes an alternative procedural logic. The importance of the example therefore lies less in its conformity to a complete model of restorative justice than in its demonstration that the procedural status of the other can itself become a design variable.

Disco Elysium represents a different configuration of procedural restorativeness because its central conflicts are not organized primarily around the binary opposition between killing and sparing. Instead, dialogue, skill checks, internal monologue, self-reflection, interpersonal relations, political history, and character development establish a more complex system in which the player must navigate situations whose consequences cannot always be reduced to the elimination of an opponent. Wu (2026) examines the game's conflict transformation mechanisms in the context of educational LARPs and identifies the relevance of dialogue, self-reflection, and interpersonal conflict to its design. These features make *Disco Elysium* particularly useful for examining the procedural dimensions of responsibility and understanding. The game repeatedly makes listening, dialogue, self-reflection, acknowledgment, and the recognition of other characters' positions relevant to interaction. This does not mean that the player is empirically demonstrated to become more reflective or empathetic. Rather, the game system gives these forms of engagement procedural relevance. Character abilities and internal states influence available interactions, while dialogue choices and the accumulation of consequences shape the player's subsequent possibilities. The system consequently expands the procedural meaning of conflict beyond the simple identification and removal of an opponent. Responsibility can become part of the player's navigation of social relations because the protagonist's previous actions, failures, and decisions remain relevant to subsequent interaction. At the same time, the restorative possibilities of *Disco Elysium* are structurally incomplete. The game represents social trauma, political conflict, guilt, humiliation, and interpersonal damage, but it does not provide a comprehensive mechanism through which all of these harms can be repaired or all relationships reintegrated. Some conflicts remain unresolved, some consequences cannot simply be

reversed, and the player's capacity to transform situations remains constrained by the designed structure of the game. This limitation is theoretically valuable because it demonstrates that procedural restorativeness does not require the successful restoration of every relationship. What matters is whether responsibility, understanding, acknowledgment, and possible repair become meaningful components of the procedural system. *Disco Elysium* therefore illustrates a form of partial procedural restorativeness. The game does not replace conflict with a complete restorative process, but it creates a system in which the player's relation to conflict includes more than confrontation and elimination. The case demonstrates how procedural restorativeness can operate through dialogue, reflection, and the social consequences of action even when the game does not provide a complete mechanism of reparation and reintegration.

This War of Mine occupies another position within the analytical framework because its principal procedures are organized around survival under conditions of war, scarcity, vulnerability, and morally difficult resource allocation. Decisions concerning food, medicine, shelter, theft, assistance, and interaction with other survivors have consequences for characters and their relationships. The game makes these consequences visible through changes in character states, available resources, interpersonal relations, and the continuing conditions of survival. Harm is therefore not merely represented through narrative exposition; it becomes part of the system through which the player must continue to act.

The significance of *This War of Mine* for restorative justice lies particularly in this procedural visibility of harm. The player's decisions can affect other people, and the resulting consequences remain relevant to subsequent gameplay. The system consequently provides a strong procedural basis for recognition of harm and assumption of responsibility, even though it does not necessarily provide the player with an explicit mechanism for repairing every harm caused. The player can encounter the persistence of consequences within the game system without necessarily being given a restorative route through which those consequences can be resolved. This limitation makes *This War of Mine* an important borderline case. A game may make harm highly visible and morally consequential without providing a comprehensive system of reparation and reintegration. The presence of suffering, guilt, or difficult moral choices is therefore not sufficient to classify a game as procedurally restorative. Procedural restorativeness requires that at least some mechanisms through which harm can be acknowledged, addressed, repaired, or followed by restored relationships become part of the designed possibility space. In *This War of Mine*, recognition of harm and the consequences of action are more strongly proceduralized than the later stages of repair and reintegration. The game consequently demonstrates why the framework should be understood as multidimensional. It would be analytically misleading either to classify the game as fully restorative because it makes harm visible or to classify it as entirely non-restorative because it lacks a comprehensive restorative system. Its significance lies precisely in the uneven distribution of restorative dimensions and in the fact that harm can be procedurally consequential even when repair remains limited.

Papers, Please provides a contrasting procedural structure in which the player performs bureaucratic border-control tasks under a system of rules regulating who may enter, who must be denied, and how administrative decisions affect the player's resources and personal circumstances. The game's significance for the present framework lies in the fact that the player does not merely observe bureaucracy or exclusion as narrative themes. The player performs administrative decisions within a rule-governed system, and those decisions have immediate consequences for progression, income, penalties, and the conditions of the player's own survival.

The game therefore demonstrates how punitive or exclusionary structures can be proceduralized without relying on physical violence. Denial of entry, administrative sanction, surveillance, and exclusion operate as mechanisms through which the system regulates individuals. The player is positioned as an executor of institutional rules, and the effectiveness of the player's performance is partly determined by compliance with those rules. The procedural logic is consequently very different from a system in which the player must repair harm or restore relationships. The central objective is administrative correctness under conditions of scarcity and pressure. At the same time, *Papers, Please* makes the tension between formal rules and human consequences procedurally visible. Individual cases can conflict with the general requirements of the bureaucratic system, forcing the player to negotiate between personal circumstances and institutional demands. The game's moral significance therefore emerges not simply from its narrative but from the player's direct participation in a system of exclusion. Nevertheless, the game does not establish a systematic mechanism of reparation or reintegration for the people affected by those decisions. The possibility of recognizing a person's difficult circumstances does not automatically produce a restorative procedure through which the consequences of exclusion can be repaired. For the present framework, *Papers, Please* therefore functions as a contrasting procedural case. It demonstrates that the proceduralization of justice-like decisions can take place through bureaucratic rules as well as through combat and that the moral character of a system cannot be inferred solely from whether it contains violence. It also demonstrates the importance of asking what happens after a morally consequential decision has been made. If the system provides no meaningful route toward repair or reintegration, the procedural structure remains fundamentally oriented toward administration, regulation, and exclusion rather than restoration.

The four games demonstrate different configurations of procedural restorativeness rather than a simple linear continuum from non-restorative to restorative. *Undertale* most directly incorporates alternative conflict-resolution procedures into its core interaction system, making the status of the opponent and the possibility of sparing consequential to gameplay. *Disco Elysium* integrates dialogue, self-reflection, responsibility, and perspective-sensitive interaction into a more complex system of interpersonal and social conflict, although its restorative possibilities remain incomplete. *War of Mine* makes harm, vulnerability, and the consequences of decisions highly visible and consequential while offering fewer systematic mechanisms for reparation and reintegration. *Papers, Please* places institutional rules, exclusion, and administrative consequences at the center of gameplay and demonstrates how sanction can become procedural without physical violence. These cases therefore represent different configurations within the multidimensional analytical space of procedural restorativeness. The comparison also demonstrates why the five dimensions should not be treated as independent checklist items. Recognition of harm can exist without reparation, responsibility can be made consequential without reintegration, and nonviolent interaction can exist without genuine restoration. Empathic understanding becomes procedurally meaningful only when the position of another actor affects player decisions or consequences. Reparation requires meaningful activity rather than merely a narrative declaration, while reintegration requires some procedural possibility of restoring participation, trust, status, access, or relationships. Forgiveness can be relevant to restoration, but forgiveness by itself does not constitute procedural restorativeness. In this sense, the analytical framework does not ask whether a game contains isolated restorative elements; it asks whether those elements form meaningful procedural relationships.

The comparative analysis therefore supports the central hypothesis with an important qualification. Video games can procedurally model elements of restorative justice, but restorative principles become procedurally meaningful only when they are embedded in the actual procedures of play. A game can contain a scene of forgiveness without making forgiveness consequential to player action; it can depict empathy without making the other actor's perspective relevant to decision-making; and it can represent reparation without requiring the player to undertake meaningful restorative activity. Conversely, even a game that does not explicitly identify itself with restorative justice may exhibit procedural restorativeness when its mechanics make recognition, responsibility, understanding, repair, or reintegration consequential. The central distinction between penal procedurality and procedural restorativeness can therefore be formulated as a distinction between different organizations of action, consequence, and restoration. Under penal procedurality, successful play is frequently connected to identifying and neutralizing the source of disruption. The opponent's removal restores order, and the player's responsibility is primarily associated with successfully carrying out the sanctioning action. Under procedural restorativeness, by contrast, the player's success may depend on recognizing harm, confronting the consequences of action, understanding the position of another actor, undertaking meaningful repair, and restoring a disrupted relationship. The difference is not simply thematic because it changes the player's field of possible actions and the consequences attached to them. Procedural restorativeness should consequently not be interpreted as a requirement that games become nonviolent, easy, or morally didactic. Its significance is instead that it provides an alternative procedural organization of conflict. A game can remain difficult, confrontational, or even violent while creating meaningful restorative mechanisms. Likewise, a peaceful game can remain non-restorative if it provides no procedures through which harm, responsibility, repair, and reintegration become relevant. The analytical category therefore concerns the organization of relations rather than the surface appearance of the game. The resulting shift can be described as a movement from the player as executor of sanctions toward the player as participant in processes of restoration. This does not imply that players actually become restorative actors outside the game. It means that the game positions the player, within its designed possibility space, in relation to a different set of procedural responsibilities. The player is not merely required to defeat the source of disruption but may instead be required to engage with the consequences of action and with the possibility that the relationship itself, rather than the opponent's removal, constitutes the object of resolution.

Discussion

The comparative analysis suggests that procedural restorativeness can function as a useful conceptual bridge between game studies and restorative justice theory because it shifts the analytical focus from the representation of justice toward the procedural organization of justice. Bogost's (2007) concept of procedural rhetoric provides the foundation for understanding how rules and processes can communicate meanings, while restorative justice theory supplies a substantive account of the kinds of relationships and responses that can be examined through that procedural lens. The contribution of the present framework lies therefore not in claiming that restorative justice was already contained within procedural rhetoric, but in demonstrating how the two traditions can be brought into analytical relation. Justice can be studied as a procedural organization of action, consequence, responsibility, and restoration

rather than exclusively as a narrative or thematic concern. This theoretical shift makes the distinction between narrative and procedural restorativeness particularly significant. A game may represent forgiveness, reconciliation, responsibility, or redemption while leaving the player's procedural activity unchanged. Conversely, a game may provide mechanisms that support recognition, responsibility, dialogue, repair, or reintegration without explicitly describing those mechanisms through restorative-justice terminology. The relevant analytical question is therefore whether restorative principles become causally and procedurally significant within the designed possibility space. This distinction strengthens game analysis by preventing the presence of a moral theme from being treated as sufficient evidence of a corresponding ethical structure in gameplay. The concept of penal procedurality provides a complementary analytical category by identifying a recurring organization of disruption in which sanction, exclusion, defeat, or elimination becomes the principal route toward restored order. Its analytical value lies precisely in its distinction from violence as such. As the cases of *Papers, Please* and *Undertale* demonstrate in different ways, procedural relations associated with sanction or restoration can be established without a simple correspondence to the presence or absence of physical violence. Penal procedurality may be bureaucratic, administrative, or exclusionary, while restorative procedures may coexist with conflict and difficulty. The relevant distinction is consequently between different procedural organizations of the relationship among the player, the other, harm, responsibility, and resolution.

The five dimensions developed in this study further indicate that procedural restorativeness is better understood as a multidimensional analytical concept than as a binary category. Recognition of harm, assumption of responsibility, empathic understanding, reparation, and reintegration can be connected in different ways and can acquire different forms and levels of procedural significance. The comparative cases demonstrate that the presence of one dimension does not establish a comprehensive restorative structure. Recognition of harm may occur without meaningful repair, responsibility may be consequential without reintegration, and non-eliminative interaction may exist without a mechanism for restitution. The analytical value of the framework therefore lies in examining relationships among dimensions rather than counting their presence. This multidimensionality also clarifies the role of forgiveness within the framework. Forgiveness may be represented or proceduralized as part of a restorative process, but it is not treated here as an independent sixth dimension. Its significance depends upon the procedural context in which it occurs. A game may represent forgiveness narratively without connecting it to player action, or it may make forgiveness consequential as part of a broader process involving responsibility, repair, and restored relationships. The present framework therefore avoids equating forgiveness itself with restoration and instead treats it as a possible mechanism or outcome within wider restorative configurations. An important implication of the framework is the clear separation between properties of game systems and effects on players. The present study establishes what particular mechanics, rules, and consequence systems make possible within the designed possibility space; it does not establish that players develop empathy, moral reasoning, restorative attitudes, or behavioral dispositions as a result of encountering those systems. This distinction is theoretically important because the procedural organization of a game and the psychological response of a player are analytically different objects. The former can be examined through qualitative game analysis, whereas the latter requires research involving participants and appropriate empirical measures. The framework therefore offers a possible foundation for subsequent player studies without incorporating claims about player effects into

the present analysis. This separation creates several directions for future research. Procedural restorativeness could be examined empirically through studies combining qualitative analysis with gameplay telemetry, psychometric measures, interviews, behavioral tasks, or longitudinal designs. Such research could investigate whether particular configurations of procedural recognition, responsibility, understanding, reparation, and reintegration are associated with differences in players' responses to conflict, punishment, responsibility, or restoration. Importantly, such studies would need to distinguish between different mechanisms and outcomes rather than assuming that exposure to restorative mechanics produces a uniform effect. The conceptual framework developed here can consequently serve as a basis for operationalizing game-system variables in future empirical research while preserving the distinction between design properties and player responses.

The framework also has implications for game design. If restorative justice is to be modeled procedurally, the addition of restorative dialogue or moral themes to an otherwise punitive system is insufficient. Recognition of harm must affect available actions or subsequent states; responsibility must generate meaningful consequences or obligations; understanding another actor must become relevant to decision-making; reparation must require meaningful player activity; and reintegration must be supported by the social and systemic structure of the game. This does not imply that every restorative game must reproduce a real-world restorative justice procedure. Rather, it suggests that restoration must have systemic consequences if it is to function as a procedural rather than merely narrative principle. The design challenge is therefore to make restoration a meaningful possibility within the structure of play. This issue is also relevant to contemporary research on digital social environments. Jonas-van Dijk et al. (2026) examine restorative justice in relation to online gaming environments, where responses to interpersonal harm may involve moderation, sanction, exclusion, and other forms of governance. The present framework addresses a related but distinct level of analysis. Rather than focusing primarily on the governance of gaming communities, it examines the possibility that restorative principles can be incorporated into the procedural architecture of games themselves. These perspectives are complementary: one concerns how harmful conduct is governed within gaming environments, while the other concerns how games can model relationships among harm, responsibility, repair, and restoration through gameplay systems.

The broader theoretical contribution of the paper is therefore a more precise account of how restorative justice can enter game studies without reducing either field to the other. Restorative justice provides concepts concerning harm, responsibility, participation, repair, and reintegration, while game studies provides concepts for understanding rules, mechanics, player agency, and procedural meaning. Procedural restorativeness connects these domains by treating restorative justice as something that can be represented not only through narrative content but also through the organization of player action and systemic consequence. Its analytical value lies in identifying the conditions under which restoration becomes a meaningful procedural possibility rather than merely a represented moral ideal. The concept nevertheless has clear limits. It does not establish that a particular game constitutes restorative justice in the institutional or normative sense in which restorative justice operates in real-world legal and community contexts. Nor does it establish that games organized around restorative procedures are necessarily ethically preferable to other forms of game design. Its purpose is more specific: to provide a vocabulary for analyzing how restorative principles are translated, partially translated, or omitted when justice is organized through interactive systems. Future research can further test the conceptual boundaries of

procedural restorativeness, refine its dimensions, and examine how different genres and game structures accommodate restorative forms of conflict resolution.

Conclusion

This paper examined whether video games can procedurally model a restorative logic of justice rather than relying primarily on penal procedurality. The analysis proceeded from the premise that games communicate not only through narrative, imagery, and dialogue but also through rules, mechanics, consequence systems, and the possibilities they establish for player action. From this perspective, the relevant question is not simply whether a game contains a story about forgiveness, responsibility, or reconciliation, but whether such principles become consequential within the player's actual field of possible action. The comparative analysis of *Undertale*, *Disco Elysium*, *This War of Mine*, and *Papers, Please* demonstrates that restorative principles can become procedurally meaningful, although they do so in different configurations and rarely as a complete restorative system. *Undertale* incorporates non-eliminative conflict resolution into its core interaction structure; *Disco Elysium* integrates dialogue, self-reflection, responsibility, and interpersonal conflict into a more complex system of social interaction; *This War of Mine* makes harm, vulnerability, and the consequences of decisions highly visible while providing more limited mechanisms for repair and reintegration; and *Papers, Please* demonstrates how exclusionary and sanctioning procedures can be organized through bureaucratic rules rather than physical violence.

The principal theoretical contribution of the paper is the concept of procedural restorativeness, understood as the capacity of a game system to model restorative justice through rules, mechanics, consequence systems, and possibilities for player action. The concept is analytically distinguished from narrative restorativeness, which concerns the representation of restorative themes without necessarily incorporating them into gameplay procedures. Procedural restorativeness is further conceptualized as multidimensional, with recognition of harm, assumption of responsibility, empathic understanding, reparation, and reintegration serving as the analytical dimensions developed in this study. These dimensions are interconnected and are not intended as a rigid checklist or universal taxonomy of restorative justice.

The paper also establishes a distinction between penal procedurality and procedural restorativeness. Penal procedurality organizes disruption primarily through confrontation, sanction, defeat, exclusion, or elimination, whereas procedural restorativeness reorganizes the relationship among action, harm, responsibility, consequence, repair, and restoration. The distinction is not equivalent to the opposition between violent and nonviolent games. A nonviolent game may remain exclusionary or punitive, while a game containing conflict or violence may incorporate restorative mechanisms. What matters analytically is how the game structures the relationship between the player, the other, harm, responsibility, and possible resolution.

Finally, the paper deliberately distinguishes procedural properties of game systems from psychological or behavioral effects on players. The analysis does not establish that restorative mechanics produce empathy, moral development, restorative attitudes, or behavioral transformation. Such claims require empirical investigation involving players and appropriate methodological instruments. The contribution of the present study is instead to identify a medium-specific possibility: justice can be organized in games not only as a narrative theme but as a system of meaningful actions, consequences, responsibilities, relationships, and possible restoration. Procedural restorativeness thus provides a

conceptual framework for further studying and designing interactive systems in which restoration itself can become part of the structure of play.

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Proceduralna retorika restorativne pravde u video-igrama: kažnjavanje, oprostaj, reparacija i reintegracija kao sistemi igre

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Sažetak

Ovaj rad istražuje mogućnost da video-igre, putem pravila, sistema donošenja odluka i mehanika interakcije, proceduralno modeluju restorativnu logiku pravde, umesto dominantne penalne logike organizovane oko kažnjavanja, eliminacije i pobeđe kroz poraz protivnika. Polazeći od koncepta proceduralne retorike Iana Bogosta, u radu se ispituje na koji način video-igre prenose značenje ne samo putem narativa, vizuelnih elemenata ili dijaloga, već i kroz strukturu pravila koja određuje šta je igraču moguće, poželjno, kažnjivo ili moralno relevantno. U tom okviru, restorativna pravda se razume kao pristup koji pažnju sa protivpravnog postupanja shvaćenog prvenstveno kao povreda zakona usmerava ka šteti nanetoj ljudima, odnosima i zajednicama, zajedno sa odgovornostima koje iz takve štete proističu. Centralno pitanje rada jeste da li video-igre mogu proceduralno organizovati oblike pravde zasnovane na prepoznavanju štete, preuzimanju odgovornosti, empatičkom razumevanju, reparaciji i reintegraciji. Kroz kvalitativnu komparativnu analizu igara *Undertale*, *Disco Elysium*, *This War of Mine* i *Papers, Please*, rad ispituje na koji način ove dimenzije postaju, ili ne uspevaju da postanu, deo pravila, mehanika, sistema posledica i mogućnosti delovanja igrača. Analiza razlikuje narativnu restorativnost, u kojoj su restorativne teme predstavljene na nivou priče i karakterizacije, od proceduralne restorativnosti, u kojoj restorativni principi postaju relevantni za stvarne odluke tokom igranja i njihove posledice. U radu se zastupa teza da video-igre mogu proceduralno modelovati restorativnu pravdu onda kada su prepoznavanje štete, odgovornost, empatičko razumevanje, reparacija i reintegracija ugrađeni u projektovani prostor mogućnosti, umesto da ostanu isključivo narativne teme. Analiza ne utvrđuje psihološke ili moralne efekte na igrače; umesto toga, ona identifikuje medijski specifičnu sposobnost video-igara da pravdu organizuju kao sistem odnosa, posledica, odgovornosti i mogućnosti restoracije.

Ključne reči: proceduralna retorika, restorativna pravda, proceduralna restorativnost, video-igre, penalna proceduralnost, reparacija, reintegracija