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## The potential of video games: on the assignment of meanings, discussion, enculturation and the literary development of young gamers

### Introduction

Fiction and daily life – pedagogical basis for the exploration of games  
and other cultural texts

Video games – just like literature or films – are a type of a variety of cultural texts (Szeja 2004) and, similarly to literature (Nikolajeva 2014) together with other incarnations of culture, accompany children from their earliest years. It is in their context that children grow up, learn, develop, and become familiar with the world. It is in these incarnations that we seek the power of enculturation and socialisation.

Fiction – also in the form of games, films, and literature – is significant. Fiction helps bring us up (Miller 1977; Rodziewicz 2011). It helps us become familiar with reality in a variety of ways. Firstly, fiction places certain beliefs and convictions concerning the world in front of the child. Secondly, it encourages us to analyse the world, to undertake a difficult attempt at its understanding. Thirdly, when familiar, the fictitious world is a construct which the recipient may compare with the world in which they live; the readers, becoming acquainted with the universe of a book or game, relate them to the reality they know, and compare them. We may use fictitious examples – also ones taken from pop-culture – to teach and show that education does not have to be distant from the phenomena, products, and cultural texts that are important to young (and not only young) people (Wierzba 2015).

Games, being ludic products, are closely related to play, and, quoting Johan Huizinga “All play means something” (Huizinga 2002), even though it is understood as the antithesis of seriousness (Huizinga 2002). A ludic work is a construct with which one may work, which may inspire, put problems and theses before the recipient, and encourage further activity owing to its ability to involve. In video games, involvement has a special meaning, as it is often an effect of the immersiveness (Filiciak

2006) of the medium. Such immersiveness allows a special experience of the fictitious universe, the acquisition of experience “from a safe distance”.

Video games are also a ludic opportunity to act and experiment. Again – games mean something. Owing to their form, they metaphorically refer to the daily and the familiar; they allow a specific dialogue of the player with the posed theses and pop-culture allegories. The dialogue is by no means idle; rather, it enables familiarisation with significant phenomena, interaction, and, with appropriate conditions, a development of the ability to analyse what is presented, facilitating a training of the allocation and understanding of meanings.

Video games are cultural texts formed by way of enculturation. They discuss issues that are universal and significant, such as gender and gender roles (Prósiniowski, Ranachowska 2014; Prósiniowski 2015), *ergo* participating in the shaping of one’s understanding of the world (the social world in this particular case) or at least present certain constructs, offering cognitive challenges. Games are also polysensory. They engage one’s sight through images, a visual creation of the universe. They shape atmosphere owing to sounds (giving voices to the protagonists, and through music, and sounds of the surroundings). They require our touch and movement (through use of the mouse, keyboard, pad, and motion controllers) for example to navigate the character. We must not forget about the developing VR (virtual reality) technology, owing to which the sensory experience is stressed even stronger. Can they stimulate us to engage in something else? Creative behaviours? Creative writing?<sup>1</sup>

Trying to answer this and other questions, and discussing issues that are important for education, upbringing, and human development as such, I shall reach for a concrete example of a video game – *Elegy for a Dead World* – developed by Dejobaan Games, as well as other productions of other game developers.

### The game *Elegy for a Dead World* as an example of a ludic educational opportunity

Video games are complex constructs, with their specific features, possibilities, and limitations. To show the possible potentials of games as such, I shall mainly use a concrete example of a video game – *Elegy for a Dead World* – keeping other productions in the form of digressions or additional examples, since I very much want to show that, generally speaking, games, due to their popularity, ludic nature, or attractiveness, deserve attention on the part of pedagogues, teachers and psychologists. At the same time it is worth pointing out that there are also other valuable, interesting and potentially helpful games (both as educational tools, and materials

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<sup>1</sup> I understand creative writing as voluntary, engaging writing activities, performed willingly, being significant for the author (gamer), bringing satisfaction, manifesting creativity, and having a potential for contributing to the writing person’s broadly understood development.

for discussion), which can be used in education, and which can be useful for many pupils of any age; here, *Elegy* is used as a very good example of the educativeness of games.

### Product characteristics

*Elegy for a Dead World* is a video game released by an independent US studio – Dejobaan Games. The game has been classified as an exploratory, artistic, indie production (an abbreviation for ‘independent’). It does not have any special age limitations or labels informing about vulgar language, fear or other content that may raise the concern of some recipients. The developers describe their product in the following way:

In *Elegy for a Dead World*, you travel to distant planets and create stories about the people who once lived there. Three portals have opened to uncharted worlds. Earth has sent a team of explorers to investigate them, but after an accident, you are the sole survivor. Your mission remains the same: survey these worlds and write the only accounts of them that outsiders will ever know. [...] We created *Elegy* so that everyone can write. As you explore, the game helps you create the narrative. [...] Each world offers multiple sets of prompts, each intended to inspire you to write a different story about it. *Elegy* might ask you to write a short story about an individual’s final days, a song about resignation, or a poem about war. In the more advanced levels, you’ll sometimes get new information halfway through your story which casts a new light on things and forces you to take your story in a different direction. We like to think of those as puzzles — writing yourself out of a corner, so to speak. (Dejobaan Games 2014)

As can be seen, the game has been created intentionally to raise creativity; it seeks to inspire various stories, without guiding the gamer to the one and only appropriate interpretation of the audiovisual universe. This is also facilitated by the writing prompts (or rather the available forms of writing). Choosing one of the worlds, we will receive the following suggestions: *The Four Ages of Byron’s World*, *Freeform Writing*, *Darkness by Lord Byron*, *This Vacation is Terrible*, *10 Choices We Made*, *War of the Worlds*, *Plundering Byron: A Musical*, *This Was My World*. As results from the above enumeration, the proposals are diverse (and each of them can be additionally modified – even if we choose an option of prompts of the “end sentences” type, one may modify whatever is before or after the gap), building a rich offer for gamers-writers at different levels of ability. There are also clear references to a writer: George Byron.

The game is constructed in a way which is open enough for gamers to take decisions, and provides a liberty of choice of various writing forms. The availability of a large number of styles/formats is not without significance. It resembles a support of linguistic development, an intentional and extremely important creation of positive conditions (multiple proposals and offers) for individuals to undertake linguistic activity (Stawinoga 2007: 53) which is essential in the development of creativity.

Many researchers perceive this particular activity – writing – as a manifestation of creativity, and an opportunity to practice it (Cheung, Tse, Tsang 2003).

A very significant feature of *Elegy for a Dead World* – from both the theoretical and the practical point of view – is the simplicity of sharing one’s stories. The game also has an option of making the novels created with the thought of concrete worlds in mind available, and every act of sharing will be illustrated owing to a generated picture (if, for example, a fragment of the text was written when the protagonist was standing with a mountain in the background, the illustration will feature this particular “virtual landscape”). The options include the possibility to export stories to files that can also be printed out and made available in the physical form, which is to encourage the gamers to “exchange” their stories.

#### Digital tales, exploration of the world and Freinetian inspirations

Analysing the structure of *Elegy for a Dead World*, we came to a conclusion that in a way we may see it as an incarnation of Freinetian thought. What I mean is the free text method marked by “spontaneity, creation, connection with life, close and permanent contacts with the environment, and deep expression of the child’s experience” (Freinet 1976: 393). It was in terms of the presence of the aforementioned features that we assessed the game as strongly related to Celestin Freinet’s pedagogy. In the game under analysis, the above features manifest themselves in the following way:

- **s p o n t a n e i t y** – play as such is often connected with spontaneity (Paleczny 2012: 19). In the case of video games, it also manifests itself in a different way. Whatever we see on the screen and hear owing to loudspeakers, is a stimulus. It is often something new – an order or a “nudge” to react, as we want “our character” to develop; the player wants to explore the story he/she reacts to on an ongoing basis. A person with a video game also plays spontaneously, activates it “here and now”, as he/she has a free moment, has finished work, and can have fun; during the gameplay, he/she is surprised by the medium and encouraged to react. Without a reaction, without the presence of the player, the video game loses its sense, it ceases to be significant, because what gives it any sense and meaning is its reception, dialogue and reaction;
- **c o n n e c t i o n w i t h l i f e** – video games are connected with life – be it, and here we are returning to Huizinga (2002), owing to their culture-creating potential. We may definitely say that expressive activity is closely connected with the dailiness, often with the satisfaction, of one’s internal needs. In the 21st century, video games became a part of daily culture, are present in human life from the very first years of life, and they later “age and change” together with their recipients – such conclusions can be drawn from the GIT KIDS (Game Industry Trends 2014) and *Jestem Graczem* (I Am a gamer, 2015) surveys. Games picture social expectations (e.g. towards social groups, women, men, organisations) by presenting figures/phenomena and stimulat-

ing related discussion. At the same time, as an element of pop-culture, they are inscribed in the life “now and here”, as Paulina Wierzba argues (2015), and are significant for youth (and not only this group) and education. Ignoring pop-culture and everything it entails is nothing else but ignoring youth and children growing up in its spirit (after Wierzba: Melosik 2012: 18);

- close and permanent contacts with the environment – video games are often accused of a negative influence on the gamers’ contact with their environment (Braun-Gałkowska, Ulfik-Jaworska 2002: 221–222); it is commonly believed that games “isolate people”. However, this issue is more complex. As much as spending one’s time on playing games and performing game-related activities (being active on internet forums, and creating fanart<sup>2</sup> and fanfiction<sup>3</sup>) indeed takes place at the cost of time not spent in front of the computer (*ergo* sometimes at the cost of time spent with one’s family and friends), this is not always tantamount to isolation from people. Often, communication begins to take on a different shape. For example, there are fandoms – groups of people creating fanart and fanfiction; such groups exchange beliefs and findings. It is often the case that owing to fanfiction or fan art, fans experience life breakthroughs (or at least significant events) – for instance, they share their first artistic works, begin life-lasting friendships, meet life partners, or come out<sup>4</sup> by sharing works marked by homoeroticism (Dennis 2010). *Elegy for a Dead World* allows communication with other creators through text. The notions of “creator” and “recipient” become mixed; it is sometimes the case that immediately after publishing their version of a story of their selected world, players check how much their vision differs from a short story shared by someone living on the other side of the continent or even planet. In contrast to social expectations, gamers also engage in close and permanent contacts with the environment, although they are sometimes “invisible” to the guardians and parents existing here and now: the internet environment rich in other experiences and other kinds/qualities of relations and acquaintances. It is worth stressing that in the course of creation, some of the game recipients establish cooperation and begin to work jointly on their projects – therefore, further development of acquaintance is possible;

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<sup>2</sup> *Fanart* – art inspired by games, TV series, films, or books, normally involving the drawing of places, characters and events related to them. It also often expresses the support, admiration, and recognition of a concrete work. The last stage of the creation of fan art normally involves sharing it with other fans by publicizing it on a web portal (e.g. deviant Art).

<sup>3</sup> *Fanfiction* – similarly to fanart, it is a manner of paying tribute or showing support or recognition to a concrete product of culture by writing texts (mainly short stories). The last stage of the creation of fanfiction is usually sharing the text with other fans by publishing it on a web portal (such as fanfiction.net).

<sup>4</sup> *Coming out* – (implicitly: from hiding, a closet) – a disclosure of one’s non-normative (homosexual, bisexual, pansexual) sexual orientation.

- the creation and deep expression of the child's experience – we have decided to discuss these two features together as a single subsection as they are closely connected with each other. Writing is creative (Cheung, Tse, Tsang 2003). It offers an opportunity to express oneself, one's needs, desires, thoughts, and fears (and many other conditions) through fiction, through creation. It is a creativity training preparing for the daily challenges. *Elegy* is designed to inspire, to provide the already mentioned “nudges” and „grasps” so that the inner life of the audience can be externalised, in order for the work to become not only an author's work, but also material that others (here: gamers, recipients) can become acquainted with; a material with which one may work, which may further inspire others already as a new quality. A video game is to become an opportunity to “feel the need to express whatever fills us in writing” (Freinet 1976: 393). It is the video game which becomes the context and provides the space necessary for new texts and free expressions to come to life. It becomes a unique event to the author – a creative experience. Neil Gaiman – a well-known writer – described this feeling in the following way:

The best thing about writing fiction is that moment where the story catches fire and comes to life on the page, and suddenly it all makes sense and you know what it's about and why you're doing it and what these people are saying and doing, and you get to feel like both the creator and the audience. Everything is suddenly both obvious and surprising and it's magic and wonderful and strange. (Gaiman 2007).

Obviously, this is a very subjective description drawn up by a professional writer, but it shows how the process of the creation of texts (novels, stories) is associated with a unique, in a way cathartic process. Although Gaiman refers to his own experience (and he is a well-known writer, an author of many books and comics), we cannot deny the possible experience of similar emotions by young writers fulfilling their creative acts – also ones supported by games.

Freinetian thought, exerting considerable pressure on the independent construction of written statements by pupils, seems to be a theoretically close ground for the analysis of the potential of games such as *Elegy for the Dead World* – of course, taking into account the specific context of the digital world of the setting. Here, the connection with the individual experience of the pupil adopts a specific form of an immersion in the virtual world of the game (Filiciak 2006). Freinet, paying attention to the practical uses of the ability to read and write, referred not only to their instrumental function in contact with the material reality, but also to their ludic function (Legrand 1993). In the case of video games, reading should be understood more broadly – not only in the literary sense, but also as the reading of other elements of this concrete medium: its graphic and sound layers, and symbolic references to other elements and works of culture.

Also the filling-in or creation of texts on the basis of data has its specific meaning here. In learning to write, Freinet turned attention to the important element of communication through text understood not only as writing – an act isolated from other social practices – but also directed at sharing the generated information with others (Legrand 1993). As much as in his and his continuators' case the above took the form of the creation of small newspapers and the pupils' work through the physically existing printing press, sharing the effects of one's writing effort via the internet may constitute an excellent equivalent of the practice, reflecting the vast possibilities of the 21st century.

### Potential of video games

Video games – even the ones that have not been classified as educational ones – have a teaching and culture-creating potential. They are a “variation on the dailiness”, a proposal to understand meanings, and they therefore inspire discussion; they encourage observation, construction (also the technical one as in *Cargo! The Quest for Gravity* by Ice-Pick Lodge), immersion in details, and, as in *Elegy for a Dead World*, the interpretation of images, meanings, and atmospheres. They encourage one to answer, create, and sometimes destroy. It is true that they are not perfect, but they are a possibility.

An unquestionable shortcoming of *Elegy for a Dead World* on the Polish market is the absence of its Polish version,<sup>5</sup> but could not we offer the game to the children who have learnt the language and thus combine artistic, educational, and linguistic contents?

Video games are a part of pop-culture – a bombarding culture that is full of stimuli, ubiquitous, and close to the pupils of the 21st century (Melosik 2015). Sometimes, it is worth to remind pedagogues, teachers, and tutors of the above and to educate them about the potential of video games. Without any doubts, the school should not taboo video games, provide them with the features of “stupidity”, unaccepted childishness, or as the antithesis of learning. By doing so, other cultural texts, including cinematography and literature, are also questioned. Video games have been changing over time; they have become more comprehensive, discussing a larger number of issues; today, they offer many different forms of experience and learning. This is a fact pedagogues should be aware of.

In this place, it is worthwhile to say that video games as an element of the cultural reality in which we function, have some unique properties allowing them to support educational processes. As results from psychological research in this scope, playing games may bring about concrete effects in the scope of the development of cognitive mechanisms (Bavelier 2012). Additionally, the above-mentioned mechanism of immersion (Filiciak 2006) makes experiences resulting from playing games

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<sup>5</sup> State as at 28.02.2017.

closer than the ones that may be offered by other, more traditional media. Another significant factor in this area is the development of a creative attitude through phenomena and forms of activities related directly to games. Probably the most obvious examples of such a social practice is the creation of the so-called mods, i.e. unofficial alterations to games created by users themselves.

Modding is a very specific form of grassroots activity having its source in the voluntary work of the involved users of a given app. It is normally an unpaid activity. It seems that, by nature, it has a compensatory nature: gamers usually focus their efforts on improving the elements of the entertainment which they consider deficient, imperfect or one that could be extended (Prósiniowski, Krzywdziński 2016). What is of particular significance here is the fact that the creation of such alterations is inseparably connected with their publication and making them available to a broad public. This makes modding fit the Freireian idea of social communication via the created text as a significant element of the teaching process.

### Final thoughts. On pedagogy, game studies and further challenges

Video games can be marked by ideas close to pedagogy. They have an enculturating, educational, and sometimes behaviour-shaping potential. They may stimulate reflection, although they also may treat various subjects very superficially. This is the reason why we need game studies researchers – also among pedagogues, as who is closer than they are to upbringing, education, inspiration, activities with children, youth, and sometimes also adults?

There are games, such as *Elegy for a Dead World*, which act in a variety of ways, offering a form of play that also educates. There are games requiring reading, decision-making, and analysis (such as cRPGs, for example *Planescape: Torment*<sup>6</sup>). There are also games resembling fables, offering interesting characters, creations, and graphic solutions (e.g. *Ori and the Blind Forest* or *Seasons after Fall*).

In pedagogical practice (but also psychological, sociological and the one connected with cultural studies), we are often asked by parents, caregivers, educators, and students about video games, their possible impact, and the related risks. Therefore, it is worth remembering that apart from the frequently discussed game-related risks (content inappropriate for pupils/children of a certain age, discrimination within the game plot, the stereotypical presentation of a character/phenomenon, excessive time spent in front of the computer/tablet/console) and risks in the times of the digital technology as such (Prymak 2014), games also have a great potential

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<sup>6</sup> Planescape Torment is classified as a game for more mature gamers of about 16+. A large share of cRPG is addressed to older individuals due to more difficult content, complexity, and more literal imagining of events, which may be inappropriate for young, beginning recipients. At the same time, however, they become an interesting material for analysis in the context of older gamers; they provide context for a discussion of more complex issues.



and may help where the school fails (with the possibility of expression, relaxation, learning/practicing languages, becoming familiar with topics that are normally tabooed, meeting people from outside one's closest circles – people from other continents, who are active on the same web portal as the child/pupil), while the times of the digital development also have another face – the face of perspectives and achievements which were impossible until recently due to technological limitations.

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### Summary

#### *The potential of video games: on the assignment of meanings, discussion, enculturation and the literary development of young gamers*

Discovering, naming, reading and giving meanings to objects/phenomena is one of the most significant activities a child may engage in. A child's way of discovering the world and experimenting are a key to socialisation and mental development. Learning about the world also helps to realize how complex reality is; it aids in the development of seeing and the ability to analyse our cultural environment. In the beginning, the pattern of discovery is simple, but as they develop, children become able to perform more advanced experiments. They begin to learn differently. It is obvious that there are many ways of supporting the development – performing acts with different children/human beings, engaging in artistic processes, playing etc.. There are many different types of cultural texts that may support children in their development: different animations, music, literature. Video games are mentioned as a possible support of a child's development only rarely. The aim of this text is to present how video games can aid, teach, and educate children. The text specifically focuses on the game *Elegy for a Dead World* (which has features similar to Freinet's free text method) by Dejobaan Games, and some other examples of video games.

### Keywords

child, video games, game studies, education, new media, ludology

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