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Video games and new media: on one of the methods to cooperate in creating a brand

Although the video game market is one of the most dynamically growing markets in the world (in 2015, it recorded an income of 82.4 billion USD with an 8.9% increase in relation to the previous year [Geotrek S.A. 2016]), many people unrelated whatsoever to market or multimedia research still perceive games as an ordinary form of entertainment, functioning independently of the media market and having no impact on it.

On a daily basis, we can easily point out people who, despite being users of new media, play video games very rarely or do not play them at all – they would not call themselves players. And although video games are the same mass medium as the press, film or television, they continue to be placed in the position of “teen-age entertainment”.

Even many media researchers seem not to notice the role video games play today. It is all the more strange as games left game parlours years ago and are available to almost every user of the new media. While reading the press, watching television, using cell phones or browsing through social media, we may spot advertisements or even entire applications enabling one to play a more or less demanding game. Video games are therefore not only a medium in their own right, but they also affect the development of other media.

Changes in forms of interpersonal communication

In the Polish language, the word “medium” and its plural form – “media” – has many meanings and is used in various terminologies. In colloquial understanding, media are means designed for communication – in particular on a mass scale. Therefore, we refer as media to the radio, television, press, film, photography, music, internet portals and almost all their offshoots (Pisarek 2008: 79). However, the above media emerged in human life relatively recently, while interpersonal communication has existed almost since the very beginning of human existence. Initially, communication was only based on a face-to-face contact – first, using non-verbal signals. Only later, did the development of common tongues enrich

the primitive forms of communication and allowed interpersonal communication to flourish (Dobek-Ostrowska 2006: 71). After the appearance of writing – first the pictographic, and then the phonetic script – communication took on another meaning. Writing was durable, and the written form prevented messages from being distorted or forgotten (for example by the messenger). The invention of print significantly extended the circle of recipients of the written word. These three symbols of communication (speech, writing, and print) are called revolutionary, but this is a very special kind of revolution. This is because it does not destroy the previous solutions, and increases the reach of the particular media, i.e. improves them further (Pisarek 2008: 87).

At the beginning of the 17th century, the first weeklies appeared, which developed mass communication. The nature of this new model – in contrast to *face to face* relations – is indirect: between the provider and the recipient there is an intermediary in the form of a mass medium. The harnessing of electricity allowed the development of subsequent media – Samuel Morse's telegraph and Alexander Bell's telephone. The beginning of the 20th century witnessed the broadcast of the first radio programme, and the first television transmission followed in 1929 (Bajka 2008: 195 and further). The fast development of television was strongly hampered by the outbreak of the Second World War.

The cold war period and the launch of a sputnik by the Soviet Union forced the Americans to invent a new form of communication. In the 1960s, Paul Baran presented a concept of communication between computers. Its virtue lay in the fact that the destruction of a single computer did not break the functioning of the entire network. By 1980, the network (called the ARPANET) already consisted of more than four hundred servers, while in 1983, the army provided the ARPANET to civilians, leaving a part of it for its own purposes. Since 1990, ARPANET has been existing as the internet. Network communication is a type of interpersonal communication whose participants have no physical contact. It combines the features of direct interpersonal and mass indirect communication (Dobek-Ostrowska 2006: 76), since just like in direct communication, it involves concrete (most often two) persons. However, feedback is delayed, and the very process of communication requires the presence of an intermediary (a medium), such as a phone or the internet. The latter enables a much broader communication – it may take place on a *one-to-one*, *one-to-many*, or *many-to-many* basis, with the users being able to talk and listen in turn (Jakubowicz 2007: 120).

Transmedia storytelling

Transmediality or transmedia storytelling is a relatively new concept, used for the first time by Henry Jenkins in his book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* in 2006. Its assumptions and the conditions in which it takes place emerged in public debates as early as in 1999 on the occasion of the premiere of

the film *Blair Witch Project* (Jenkins 2006: 101). However, if we have a closer look at what transmedia storytelling is, we will be able to easily provide examples dating back even to before 1980.

The discussion on the transmedia product began after the first showing of *Blair Witch Project*, which became a great phenomenon. Its budget amounted to 60,000 USD, while the profits reached 240 million USD (IMDb 2016). This has happened, since the perception of *Blair Witch Project* solely as a film prevents us from seeing something much larger (Jenkins 2006: 101). As early as a year before the premiere, the producers carried out several activities aimed at an authentication of the film in the eyes of the viewers. First, a website was launched with the legend of the witch of Burkittsville (the current name of Blair town). The film itself was supposedly an amateur recording made by three students following the legend of the Blair witch – they died, leaving behind only the filmed material. The production was made in such a way as to convince the audience that what the creators invented before the premiere of the film, was true. The result exceeded the wildest expectations of the film's authors. In an interview with Henry Jenkins, director Eduardo Sánchez said something that could be considered the gist of a transmedia product:

[...] if you give people enough stuff to explore, they will explore. Not everyone but some of them will. The people who do explore and take advantage of the whole world will forever be your fans, will give you an energy you can't buy through advertising.... It's this web of information that is laid out in a way that keeps people interested and keeps people working for it. If people have to work for something they devote more time to it. And they give it more emotional value. (Jenkins 2006: 102).

Similar solutions were used to promote the film *Artificial Intelligence: AI* (Jenkins 2006: 123–124). An online game – *The Beast* – was created and its successful conclusion enabled one to learn the three main secrets of the production. As a part of the game, more than 4,000 messages were disseminated through several media devices such as websites, phones, faxes and e-mail. The puzzles were not banal – the participants had to complete such tasks as translation from the German and Japanese languages, the decryption of Morse code and Enigma and many other things (Jenkins 2006: 124). Fans quickly created a group, sharing their results and findings. It was assumed that the puzzles would be solved within three months – actually, all of them were solved already on the very first day. The combination of the powers of 7,000 users brought about unexpected results (Jenkins 2006: 124).

Inseparably connected with transmedia storytelling is the notion of the culture of participation, which consists in the diverse use of the created brand (Filiciak 2006: 177). It is perhaps easiest to picture the above through the example of the film industry. After the premiere of a given film, we often see various references, such as fan projects or parodies. Gadgets appear in shops. On the one hand, these include ones that are close to the spirit of the original, such as figurines of the

protagonists or vehicles. On the other hand, gadgets unrelated to the production at first glimpse, including backpacks or beer openers with scenes from the film, begin to mushroom. This is because the creators assume that – apart from the huge marketing campaign in the media – consumers can be flooded with gadgets and other products directly related to the brand. Apart from the obvious assets from the marketing point of view, the culture of participation prevents brands from dying. The sixth part of *Star Wars – Return of the Jedi* – was released in 1983, while the first part of the new trilogy – *The Phantom Menace* – in 1999. During the intervening sixteen years, consumers could become bored with *Star Wars*, forget about them and recall them anew only on the occasion of the premiere of *The Phantom Menace*. This has not been so, since the original novels, comic books, music, etc. produced in the meantime, generated profits, while maintaining brand awareness among the consumers (Filiciak 2006: 144).

Following this direction, Henry Jenkins identified several elements which determine the existence of a transmedia product:

- World building: both from scratch and as enrichment of the existing worlds. It is one of the most important features, since the world building ability provides a story with sense;
- seriality – consists in dividing the story into parts and disseminating them to different media. According to Jenkins, the ideal form of the transmedia product exists when we allow every part to develop in the sphere that is best for it. In such a way, the story is introduced for example in a book, and is then developed in games, comic books, and films (Filiciak 2006: 111);
- subjectivity – individual discovery of the world by every recipient. Recipients expect a new part of a given product to shed a new light on the presented story. If this is so, consumers will strengthen their bond with the brand. Failing that, an entirely different result may take place;
- reproduction – a feature allowing one to participate in the story. Examples include fan fictions taking place in a given universe or modifications created by players.

Transmedia storytelling and video games

How does all this relate to video games? Are they able to – just like films – create a strong transmedia brand? Definitely so. Suffice it to recall – what I believe is a flagship example – the phenomenon of the *Tomb Raider* brand. The beginnings of the series go back to 1994, when an idea was born to develop “a new adventure game with shooting and puzzles” (Mańkowski 2010: 243). Two years later – before the game was completed – it was presented during the European Computer Trade Show in London. The three-dimensional world and the third person view were basically nothing new, while Lara herself had rather cubical

shapes and was hardly full of sex-appeal. However, there was a trick to the presentation of the game. The *Tomb Raider* stand included a motorbike with a model dressed in latex clothing, with her hair braided in a plait. Every few moments, she would get off the bike to have a photo with the show's guests. The mascots and robots present at the show could not compete with a live model, whose photos soon showered the industry press. In 1996, the game was premiered. Among her assets, mentioned were the music, graphic design, original plot, and, above all, the main protagonist. That was the beginning of the cult of Lara Croft. Players started to ask about Lara's past, her family, and even personal data such as her birthdate. Eidos, which took over Core Design (*Tomb Raider's* developers) before the premiere, seized an opportunity and created Lara's official biography. Interestingly, the protagonist appealed not only to men's tastes. Girls wanted to be just like her – strong, wise, and independent. Lara's fanclubs started to be founded, followed by websites where girl fans presented their photos dressed up as the female game protagonist (*Historia najslawniejszej bohaterki gier. 10 lat z Lara Croft* [The Story of the Most Famous Female Game Protagonist. 10 Years with Lara Croft] 2006: 44).

The authors of the game did not slacken in their efforts to produce subsequent parts of Lara Croft's adventures. The second part of the game, issued in 1997, was as successful as part one, but on the occasion of the release of part three (1998), the fans' mood dropped slightly. Many players decided that in comparison to the previous part, too little was changed. The subsequent fourth part (released in 1999) showed that the authors treated the fan's criticism seriously. It was intended as the last part of the series, since the game ends with an animation showing Lara dying under a tumbling pyramid. It could have been a successful ending to the story if it was not for the fact that a year later *Tomb Raider V: Chronicles* was published. The fifth part of the cycle was based on recollections of Lara's dear ones, who gathered at her funeral. Hence, players participated in several retrospections. This time, the reviews by players and industry journalists were not that positive, so the developers gave themselves more time to create yet another part. Three years later, in 2003, the sixth part of the cycle reached the shops – it was called *Tomb Raider: The Angel of Darkness* and failed to make a good impression. The number of errors effectively prevented players from enjoying the game. Voices announcing the fall of the series were increasingly heard.

In 2004, Eidos entrusted the production of the game to the US studio called Crystal Dynamics. Two years later, part seven – *Tomb Raider: Legend* – saw its premiere. The game had great reviews, with critics praising not only the fantastic graphic design, but also the animation and interesting plot. The series experienced a revival. 2006 was also the tenth anniversary of the release of the first part of Lara Croft's adventures. To mark the occasion, a refreshed version of part one was published. In 2008, a direct continuation of part seven of the series was launched – it was entitled *Tomb Raider: Underworld*. Sadly, the game included many errors, which affected the reviews. Nevertheless, it still scored 7–8/10.

Table 1. Mean scores of the games from the *Tomb Raider* series (PC) on the 1–10 scale in the most popular game-reviewing portals

<i>Tomb Raider</i> games	Portal			
	Meristation.com	IGN.com	GameSpot.com	Gry-online.pl
<i>Tomb Raider I</i>	9.4	9.1	8.5	9.0
<i>Tomb Raider II</i>	9.2	8.1	8.2	8.6
<i>Tomb Raider III</i>	9.3	7.7	6.9	8.3
<i>Tomb Raider IV: The Last Revelation</i>	8.5	7.0	7.4	8.4
<i>Tomb Raider V: Chronicles</i>	7.9	6.3	6.3	6.4
<i>Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness</i>	5.6	5.3	6.1	6.4
<i>Tomb Raider: Legend</i>	8.2	8.2	7.8	8.5
<i>Tomb Raider: Anniversary</i>	9.1	8.0	8.0	8.2
<i>Tomb Raider: Underworld</i>	8.1	8.0	–	8.2

Source: author's own research

In 2009, the Japanese company Square Enix purchased Eidos Interactive together with the rights to *Tomb Raider*. The future of the series was put into question, but finally the new brand owners announced the production of a new game in the cycle. However, the creators believed that the Lara thread was overloaded and decided to entirely resign from the heritage of the series (Kono 2010). Darrell Gallagher, the studio head, said: “Forget everything you knew about *Tomb Raider*” (Robinson 2010). 2013 witnessed the launch of a totally new *Tomb Raider* game. Although much awaited, the game was shrouded in doubts. After all, instead of a brave acrobat with a couple of guns in her hands, we were given a born and bred girl, who together with her friends was stranded on an island on the Sea of Japan. We witnessed a frightened girl become, as a result of various events, a seasoned woman. The game was very warmly received and the development of its sequel was soon announced. *Rise of Tomb Raider* was launched on 10 November 2015 to be played on Xbox One and soon scored very good reviews.

The *Tomb Raider* series is now twenty years old. As described above, it experienced both ups and (very painful) downs. Each time, however, the release of a new game in the series caused a huge excitement among the players. This is because *Tomb Raider* is not just a game series, and Lara Croft herself has long ago ceased to be just a game protagonist. Finally, Lara was noticed by Hollywood. In 2001, the film *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* with Angelina Jolie playing the main role, was premiered. However, the production failed to delight either critics or Lara's fans (Rotten Tomatoes 2016). Still, this does not change the fact that despite unfavourable reviews, the film earned almost three times its budget (The Numbers 2016a). In 2003, part two of the film, subtitled *The Cradle of Life*, reached the cine-

mas. Again, it was not a top quality film and it earned “only” 35 million USD (The Numbers 2016b).

Several writers decided to write a book to shed some light on the events that took place between the particular parts of the game. We first witnessed the publication of Mike Resnick’s book *The Amulet of Power* discussing the adventures that happened between the games *The Last Revelation* and *The Angel of Darkness*. The book was continued by E. E. Knight, who wrote *The Lost Cult*. The trilogy was closed by James Alan Gardner’s *The Man of Bronze*. Apart from the above trilogy, several other books referring to the series and collections of single stories were also published (Elrond 2007).

Lara also appeared in comics, although not initially as the main protagonist. She had her debut in the *Witchblade* series published by Top Cow. She was first featured as an assistant of the main female protagonist of the comic and was a bait which was to increase the popularity of the comic book following the game’s success. The expectations proved to be successful and it was soon decided that Lara would obtain her own comic. Each adventure was agreed with the game’s publisher, owing to which fans could better acquaint themselves with Lara’s traits of character and her emotions (Elrond 2007). All this made it possible to identify even more with the character.

Tomb Raider is an excellent example of transmedia storytelling. Games, films, books, and comics create a huge story we, consumers, may experience to a different degree, depending on the medium we choose to use. Among them, other aspects of the culture of participation connected with the brand they sustain – gadgets, fan fiction, cosplayers, parodies, references, etc. – ceaselessly circulate.

On this occasion, it is worth mentioning some other brands developed as a part of transmedia storytelling. The flagship product by Blizzard Entertainment – *Warcraft* – is a series which was initially produced as a game for a single player (Blizzard Entertainment 1994). Then, in 2004, it offered players the possibility to explore the world in the MMO (*Massive Multiplayer Online* – a game with many players playing via the internet at the same time) *World of Warcraft*, books (including *Warcraft: Day of the Dragon*, and *Warcraft: Lord of the Clans*), card and board games, as well as the 2016 film *Warcraft: The Beginning*.

It is similar in the case of a Japanese series of survival horrors *Resident Evil*. Since its 1996 debut, we have been offered eleven games from the main canon (including reeditions) and eighteen games from offshoot canons (including games available for portable consoles), six live action films and two animated films (Wikipedia 2016). Additionally, the *Resident Evil* brand includes numerous novelisations (Resident Evil Wiki 2015) and comics (Resident Evil Wiki 2016).

The above are only a few examples of huge brands which have evolved from games to become a symbol of pop-culture recognizable all over the world.

However, computer games are not the factor guaranteeing the success of a transmedia product. A transmedia product may successfully build a brand without the help of video games and the other way round – a product promoted with the help of video games does not necessarily guarantee brand success. Howev-

er, video games influence the player's emotional sphere, and are not an ordinary story presentation. Owing to this, players may become immersed in the game, i.e. become "transmitted" to a different reality (Filiciak 2006: 62). Immersion can also be experienced, when we read a book or watch a film. The possibility to control a character's choices, i.e. to decide about the course of the story, considerably deepens the immersion.

The Polish *Witcher* is an example of a transmedia product initially built on a written medium, and only then promoted via a game. As much as Andrzej Sapkowski's short stories and his saga about the witcher enjoyed great popularity almost from its very beginning in Poland and the neighbouring countries, in the West the title remained unappreciated and was read mainly by connoisseurs of fantasy novels. In June 2015, the first collection of stories of the Witcher – *The Last Wish* – was featured on the New York Times Best Sellers list (sol//plw 2015). Without any doubt, the above was related to the premiere of the game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* for PCs, and Xbox One and PlayStation 4 consoles, which was released on 13 May 2015. The game was very warmly received by critics and players alike and just six months after its premiere won many awards, including the most important one: Golden Joystick's Game of the Year (Woldański 2015).

Final remarks

The examples I have discussed above are just a few products of the entire several billion dollars worth market. It turns out, however, that video games are not only purely entertaining products, but also (if not above all) an excellent engine driving brand promotion. What is the most easily perceivable asset of transmedia products is the huge profit they generate. The consumers who will allow themselves to be immersed in the world offered by creators will not only buy and recommend a given product, but will also search for the development of the story in other media.

The second asset is the sustaining of the awareness of the brand. Gadgets, cosplays, fan modifications and fan fiction prolong the life of the brand and prevent its vanishing from the consumers' awareness. Owing to the above, it is possible to release another product even several years later, keeping going an unflagging demand for it.

Finally, transmedia products also provide advantages to consumers themselves, who are not offered a closed story which is finished when the game ends. Transmedia storytelling tells the story in various ways, but also asks many questions, which in a way force consumers to seek answers among the other media available.

On the basis of the *Tomb Raider* brand, we may conclude that video games are able to develop a very strong brand that will not only be recognisable globally, but – more importantly – will be loved by millions and will strongly influence pop-culture. Lara Croft has become a symbol joining, through various media, ab-

solutely different people all over the world. If it was not for the media, how many people would have heard about the character?

Tomb Raider is only one example showing very clearly that games should not remain solely in the game market area. The intermingling of the virtual entertainment market with the media market is actually desirable. Video games provide a possibility of greater immersion, at the same time being an impulse for the unification of apparently separate mass media. The internet, television, film, press (comics), literature, and even music tell one great story using different ways that are typical for them. An interesting story better attracts interest in other media, which in turn translates into money and the development of the media. Owing to this, the presented story does not end with game/film credits, but lasts as long as there are people ready to participate in a given universe.

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Summary

Video Games and New Media:

On One of the Methods to Cooperate in Creating a Brand

Computer games have been considered as a purely entertaining product for teenagers which has no connection to other media like television, film or even books. As customers, we keep looking for new thrills. Transmedia storytelling is one of the methods allowing us to experience something new and fresh. The aim of the text is to show what a strong impact computer games have on the development of new media and brands.

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