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Video games and creativity: On the potential and narration of fear

Introduction

In the opinion of the public, video games are marked by a specific ambivalence. On the one hand, are slowly winning acceptance, becoming a permanent element of the mainstream culture. On the other, they are still connected with many negative stereotypes. For years, they have been associated with addictions, the promotion of aggression and cruelty, and accused of "stupefying" the young recipient (Prósinowski 2013). In 2009, Gamezilla.pl published a critique of an article whose author claimed openly that video games were related to sexual violence and presented negative models.[1]

The media – including the press, television, and information portals – more or less successfully build the image of games as "demonic toys". They often combine together single, context less cases of destructive social behaviours with electronic entertainment, basing themselves on more than logically dubious assumptions. Popular television programmes such as the paradocumentary series *Szkoła* [School] (Głowacki 2014) show video games – if they show them at all – as addictive and breeding aggression. The presentation of games in talk shows such as *Rozmowy w toku* [Conversations in Progress] (Hofer 2014)[2] or television series such as *Ojciec Mateusz* [Father Matthew] is similar – in the case of the latter, the presentation of games and gamers was so grotesque that industry portals reacted to it, issuing a commentary (Liebert, Łukański, Pitala 2014).

Practically speaking, productions such as the ones mentioned above fail to show the potential of games, not to mention their relation to culture or the social issues they discuss. If video games appear in popular public media (outside the games industry) in a positive context, it is normally incidental. They are presented as trivia, and are treated with a distance and very superficially.

We will also find strongly negative and (often) biased information in *quasi*-pedagogical portals. For example, the article *Wpływ gier komputerowych na zdrowie psy-*

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[1] An example of a statement from Gamezilla. pl: "[…] they find such models for instance in computer games the plot of which boils down to catching a girl and raping her collectively" (Olszewski 2011).

[2] We are referring here to an example – this topic was tackled several times in the programme.

chiczne i fizyczne dziecka [The Impact of Video Games on Children's Mental and Physical Health], includes the following accusations:

> On the other hand, this "modern form of entertainment" often terrifies with its huge load of violence and refined cruelty, stirring justified concern on the part of educators, psychologists, and pedagogues as to the negative impact of the content on children's development. […] The concerned parents seek psychological help, but often only when their children are strongly addicted to gaming: when they suffer from muscular dystrophy from sitting at the computer, when they cease to go to school or wash themselves, and when they do not eat for many days on end (Zielińska 2015).

Obviously, such an article is not supported by any research, names of organisations or other data – we are not provided much information about the author, either, apart from her full name. The reader is presented with an almost apocalyptic vision of addicted, famished children with disappearing muscles. The blame goes on the games – and there is no reflection on the condition of the persons experiencing the problem – on their mental history, or relationships with peers and family. It is hard not to feel that the symptoms are mistaken for the source of the problem.

Hence, one may arrive at a conclusion that the media image of video games is based on arousing fear and anxiety, thus marking games as extremely dangerous and leading to the annihilation of their users.

Simultaneously, in contrast to the vast narration focused on dangers, positive aspects are omitted. The contact with new media and information technology is often one of the first experiences introducing young people to participation in culture. Easy access and the attractive form may encourage them to explore also more conventional culture transmission channels. This also translates to a convergence between various areas of culture. Contact with an electronic medium may for example be an introduction to first reading experiences (Zając 2013). Modern devices increasingly offer an accessible and easily operated software interface facilitating access to the presented content. Owing to its intuitive nature, it allows one to overcome limitations resulting from physical fitness or barriers of knowledge and technical abilities (Bougsiaa 2013). Video games – just like all other cultural texts – introduce recipients to the world of many references to current problems of social life, history, and other forms of creativity. They enable an intermediated contact with more traditional works through active references to them. All this has a considerable educational potential, in particular in the area of the pedagogy of culture. Video games are also an extensive field of research and analyses for other social sciences, including psychology, sociology or the political sciences.

Games are products that may have both a negative and a positive influence on their users. Hence, a question appears concerning the ethics of media in relation to the creation of a unified image of video games – of a demonic, pathogenic power leading to the emaciation of the body – leaving aside their other possible influences.

Such an image of games is strengthened when pedagogical studies seem not to acquaint future teachers, educators and facilitators of social life with problems related to video games and their place in present-day culture.

This article aims at showing a different face of this part of culture rather than exculpating all games. We do not deny that there are games that may have a negative impact on younger players. Our goal is to show symbols, motifs, and archetypes used in games, and problems, around which games build their stories, as well as to highlight certain arguments in favour of a deeper and more reliable analysis of this genre of cultural texts – all this through the sketching of the possible dialogical situations between games and game users, their creative manifestations and attempts at creating paths of self-development. The showing of the other side of video games is important not only for pedagogy, but also for the social sciences themselves, which should not isolate themselves from the new and the digital, from what shapes contemporary culture and drives significant social discussions.

Interaction between the player and the video game

Describing the relations between people and games, we shall focus on role-playing games – both the latest and the older ones available on the market. We assume that video games are a form of cultural text (Szeja 2004: 8). This means that they are a specific reflection of social beliefs and expectations, since they are written on foundations made by authors and developers: the beliefs of creators and alleged desires of the players. During the process of creation, two elements are combined: the developers' expectations of their game on the one hand, and the elements developers consider desirable and expected by the potential recipients which they use to enrich their ideas on the other. The tension between these aspects takes on various forms. Nevertheless, it is difficult to deny that along with the development of electronic entertainment, the preferences of players themselves also change, and developers try to adjust their works to them, so as to generate better sales results. The subject of the relation between the developers' intentions and their beliefs concerning the players' expectations is complex and could be the topic of a separate analysis. Let us, however, concentrate on one of the aspects resulting from it, i.e. the type sof interactions with the game environment.

One of the most characteristic features of role-playing games is their immersiveness, i.e. the ability to make the players feel as if they are immersed in a fictitious world (Filiciak 2006: 62). This world is constructed on the basis of the developers' conscious and unconscious beliefs, expectations, and ways in which they perceive the world, as well as their assumptions as to the expectations of future users. Therefore, the game universe is structurally related to our reality and its elements. It corresponds to them, maintaining a certain amount of joint parts. Games aim for example at reflecting the dynamics and nature of the decision-making process at various levels – such as the selection of objects for characters or solving plot-related dilemmas (one of the main elements of the cRPG genre). Zygmunt Bauman and Tim May (1990) point out that decision-making and attempts at solving problems shape us and make us who we are. Similarly, in games, decision-making and the related dilemmas and challenges often seem to constitute the gist of the entertain-

ment. Acting immersively, games throw players headlong into problem-solving and tackling challenges, forcing them to acquire experience related to becoming familiar with fictitious stories, characters, events, and places.[3] Just like authors of novels tell stories and teach based on the example of their worlds closed within the book framework, game developers offer – via virtual reality – certain ideas and concepts (constructs, events, features), including even the basic understanding of gender and the related stereotypes (Prósinowski 2015). Examples include pro-equality practices in some of the BioWare games, as well as the popular 2014 game *The Sims 4* allowing the development of single-sex relationships and bringing up children as a part of them. We may risk saying that the placement of such contents in games is an attempt at making players (including children and youth) accustomed to the existence of similar phenomena or events in daily life.

Here, we would like to refer to the previous research concerning the mechanisms of decision-making in video games (Prósinowski 2013). Let us pay attention to a certain special aspect. One of the respondents pointed out that decisions taken in games are not treated with the same seriousness as decisions concerning real life. Nevertheless, the dilemmas that must be resolved still make one think over the decision – in particular when we know that it will have long-lasting consequences (for example decisions in the 2007 game *Mass Effect*, which affect the plot of the 2010 *Mass Effect 2* and the 2012 *Mass Effect 3*). Preliminary research showed that taking a wrong decision in video games makes some players feel pricks of conscience (Prósinowski 2013). As much as the actions taken and their consequences were not real events, the players' related emotions were definitely authentic. Interestingly, although the possibility of autonomous decision-making and tackling the consequences of such decisions exposes the player to a kind of emotional discomfort, moral doubts and regret resulting from the actions taken, a definite majority of players value such a chance and are happy about it.

Players were also asked what they take into account, when taking decisions in games. The respondents could choose moral beliefs, role-playing, making the gameplay easier, and gratification in the form of, for example, gold or objects. They most often selected their own moral beliefs, with role-playing coming second.[4] This suggests that video games not only foster creativity, but also – by making the players take a decision and challenging them with moral dilemmas – may increase their sensitivity to various social and philosophical problems. When asked about the educational values of games, the players themselves indicated for example the "development of consciousness, building the hierarchy of values" and pointed out that "[…] decision-making in games teaches you to take responsibility for your actions and makes you deeply ponder on the problem".

It is not, however, the only possible aspect of a video game's influence on the players. As results from Daphne Bavelier's work (2012), games may cause concrete

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[3] Although they are often created on the basis of real locations, sometimes places from games are more or less modelled on the real world.

[4] This research should be further developed (the text in question covered the sample of 171 persons) so as to reach more players. However, already at this stage one may notice a considerable importance of morality in the process of decision-making in games.

changes in the recipients' cognitive mechanisms (such as the speed of switching between various tasks or an increase of attention in the observation of many elements at the same time).

Can the above, however, be called an increase in creativity or creative attitude? It is certainly an introduction to what may come next.

Creative responses to video games

By acting in immersive environment, players participate in the co-creation of the encountered *quasi*-open reality. They explore images, places, characters, and the story, and actively react to them. Analysing the above in the context of the field of research of the pedagogical sciences, games have the potential to be considerably successful where many qualified tutors and educators tackle problems.

Children's creative attitude is developed for example by teachers. Wincent Okoń describes children's creativity in the following way:

> 1) children's fine art; 2) in a broader understanding, multilateral activity resulting in new and original works in the area of cognition, art, and technology; it may include solving a scientific problem, constructing an original technical device, designing an original competition, writing a poem, composing a song, or painting a picture (Okoń 2001: 413).

Therefore, creativity applies to the process of the construction of something in response to a specific task or need. It involves creativeness in the scope of the generation of new ideas and concepts (Maciuszek 2002). Undertaking new activities and collecting the related experiences answering concrete needs (cognitive, emotional) and problems is a form of a developing creative activity.

Another important step is pointing out what is creative (from the users' point of view) while being directly related to video games. Let us omit the didactic aspect of discussing and expressing opinions on games, plots, and characters, which fosters the development of communication skills.[5] Let us focus on the phenomenon of the creation of the so-called fanfiction (abbreviated to fanfic), fanart, and fan games modifications. We shall analyse them in the above sequence.

The term fanfiction applies to textual responses to various products – including video games – typically taking the form of short stories, descriptions, continuations of events – the so-called spin-offs, etc. Fans, motivated by their interest in or fondness of fictitious characters (or other elements of a given universe), create their own texts inspired by the world of a concrete video game. Normally, this is a grassroots activity that is not profit-oriented and generates a new quality of a given production. As a result, the players' expectations and needs begin to shape the final form of the product. Teachers are often unaware that pupils enjoy writing and that they actually engage themselves in this activity. Fanfiction is clearly

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[5] Although even here, teachers forget that material in the form of games may be used to teach the construction of statements while addressing the pupils' interests and fascinations.

differentiated from the problematic "school writing" perceived as an unpleasant necessity. Let us have a look at the number of fanfics. One of the most popular websites devoted to this genre of creation – www. fanfiction. net – features more than 300,000 (more than 340,000 including texts concerning the twenty most popular game titles[6]) short stories devoted solely to motifs from video games.

Fanart – just like fanfiction – is a social form of reaction to popular culture productions: series, films, and games. A response to them comes in the form of fine arts in a variety of techniques – photographs and photo manipulations, drawings, collages, paintings, etc. . The diverse forms of fan art also include cosplay.[7] Many authors of art works can be found dispersed throughout the internet, for instance on the popular website deviantArt (www. deviantart. com), where various artists share everything we may classify as art.

Fanart varies in terms of its technical quality and artistic value. Some works represent a high professional level, while others are just the opposite – they can be the results of the first artistic efforts, a step towards the development and improvement of artistic means and technique. The involvement resulting from one's fondness for a given game increases the motivation to improve the effects of one's work. It would be hard to deny that in some cases works produced in this way astonish with their aesthetic value. The graphic work *BG: Friendly Arm* as presented below is an example of an interaction between an improvement of the author's graphic technique and her individual interest in video games (in this case *Baldur's Gate*). The combination of professional knowledge and passion is a starting point for the creation of a new artistic form.

Research focused on fan art seems to confirm the thesis on the creative potential of this type of activity (Manifold 2007). It is worth highlighting that when asked about the learning and development of their artistic abilities, the respondents (authors of fanarts and cosplay costumes) recall that they learnt to create independently, in their free time, owing to their internal motivation directed at their particular field of interest.

Another form of creativity is writing modifications to video games (the so-called mods). Feeling that they "still want more" and inspired after the completion of the game, many players of different ages decide to create their own modifications, adding new locations, characters, dialogues, objects, graphic solutions or other elements. Here, we are already dealing with a multimedia message combined with the ability to code new works – in this way, authors express themselves not only through text or arts, but they also develop their technological competences, challenge themselves with their own problem tasks, and work with the engine of a concrete video game. Examples of websites grouping "modders" include Spellhold Studios, Gibberlings3, and Pocket Plane Group (for the series *Baldur's*

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[6] The number of texts as at 18 June 2015.

[7] An initiative consisting in dressing up as characters known from comics, games, films, animations, serialsand other products of popular culture. It often combines imitation of the character's manners, including the manner of speech. A frequent element of various convents and festivals. Sometimes fans (persons who dress up) create all the costume elements themselves.

Il. 1. *BG: Friendly Arm* by artastrophe – an example of fanart.
Source: http://artastrophe.deviantart.com/art/BG-Friendly-Arm-437523349
[accessed on 12.03.2015].

Gate [1998, and 2000] and *Icewind Dale* [2000, and 2002]) or Nexus Mods for games representing various genres. In the case of the creation of expansions-mods, the creators are simultaneously the recipients of a given production. Writing an extension, they are guided by their own experience with the game, draw conclusions, and generate new content on their basis.

The three above-mentioned forms of creative activity can be applied to video games. Therefore, it seems justified to say that games may in certain conditions inspire their users to engage in creative, innovative activity, thus constituting a valuable field of exploration for pedagogues.

The forms of activity described herein are responses to players' internal needs andare something new – being created directly by the authors (owing to inspiration from games and other cultural texts). As a part of the creative process, games are reinterpreted by the players – fan works will never have the same quality as the content represented in the original game.

It is also worth mentioning the social aspect of this type of creativity – on the occasion of creation (fanfics, fanart or mods), authors come together, making more or less complex communities, as a part of which they exchange opinions, works, ideas, and reflections. Owing to this – along with the creative techniques – they improve their social competences. These communities also build the sense of a common goal and interest. The developing fan groups are referred to as fan-

doms. They are related not only to concrete fora or portals, but also convents and less public meetings combined with the entertainment aspect – more or less oriented towards the joint passion. Fandoms witness a spontaneous, informal education based on the development of creativity and collaboration, joint reviewing of works created as a part of the group and sharing reflections and information concerning both the circle of interest and (often through digression) aspects from outside it. What is more, through the social bonds and attractiveness of the groups – as pointed out by Piotr Siuda (2008) following Henry Jenkins – members of the group learn more actively and with more involvement. The development of virtual communities and the dissemination of one's works results in the emergence of new spaces of existence of known social discourses. Examples include the subject of sexuality and the coming-outs of homo- or bi-sexual individuals – by creating homoerotic fanart and making it public, some authors may become accustomed to their sexuality or make others aware of their sexual preferences (Dennis 2010). At such a moment, fanart becomes a sort of work with the awareness of one's own corporeality, and transforms into a message and a confession. Jeffery P. Dennis writes as follows:

> Also, creating and posting [on websites – P. P., P. K.] homoerotic pictures and then responding to fan comments (including questions like "Are you gay?") seems to be in itself part of the process of "coming out" of the cultural presumption of universal heterosexual desire (Dennis 2010: 11).

Dennis believes that fandoms become socially significant places of discussion, since they are a space in which voices and confessions of real people can be heard like a digitized echo of their extra-virtual life.

This becomes even more significant through the prism of Polish culture. Marek Sokołowski (2012: 251–252) says that:

> Homosexual motifs in Polish media continue to be a taboo, are rare, and are very often marginalised. Social awareness concerning the image of gay people in Poland […] is created by television series […]. In Poland, the image of homosexuals in the media is mainly based on stereotypes and schemes.

Therefore, we may say that artistic coming-outs, the creation of homoerotic images, sharing the works, and discussion – although in a slightly closed community – become a noticeable (and worthy of mention) counterweight to the tabooization and marginalisation of homosexual motifs in Poland.

Obviously, homoerotic content is not the only important issue of virtual flirts. Romances (and relationships as such) between game character soften become an inspiration for the creation of artistic illustrations or colourful fantasies.[8]

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[8] The issues of erotics are also developed by Magdalena Cielecka (2014), and I included additional information in the text concerning constructs of gender and sexuality (Prósinowski 2015), but both these texts require an extensive continuation.

Concluding remarks

All the manifestations of creativity discussed above largely function on the sidelines of education. Here, a question springs up whether it is at all possible to introduce initiatives in the area of fanfiction, fanart and fanmods to education? Many pupils create, draw, and write in a way which is invisible to the school (teachers, instructors, and educators), leaving their achievements unnoticed. What is more, in some cases support from teachers or pedagogues could help develop talents. Going a step further, the tasks of schools should include the offering of the possibility of pupils' creative and personal development and expression, and the above-described forms are such a possibility, a potential most facilities are quiet about. Therefore, it would be difficult to find a reason why pupils should not be allowed to create fanfiction during language classes (Polish, English, etc.), to draw and paint fanart (both classically and virtually, with the help of graphic design software) during art classes, or engage in fan modifications during IT classes. At the same time, it would be tantamount to responding to some pupils' interests.

Obviously, we need to remember that not all games have the same impact on players. It is true that there are games full of violence, logical games without a plot and games reproducing stereotypes, but they all have their own potential.

Among the many game titles, we may also find ones based on the players' creativity already at the level of entertainment. We may mention such titles as the popular *Minecraft* (issued by Mojang AB in 2011), or the less popular *Cargo! Quest for Gravity* (Ice-Pick Lodge, 2011) – a game, in which – apart from following the plot – we may play a "little engineer", and build all sorts of road, air and water vehicles from elements we find in the virtual world. There are also games aimed at sparking the imagination or developing writing skills and story-telling ability – as in, for instance, the 2014 game *Elegy for a Dead World* (developed by Dejobaan Games, LLC).

Just like literature, role-playing games exert influence on their users through the stories they tell. They can sensitise even the youngest users, offering colourful, emotional histories. The latest examples include the relatively recently (2015) published platform adventure game *Ori and the Blind Forest* (targeted at children at least seven years old, but also playable for some younger players). Apart from the manual skills development, the game also offers a story rich in sadness, joy, and compassion. It satisfies the need to experience an extensive range of emotions, and allows the players to become familiar with feelings – in this case from the safety of an armchair – while entertaining at the same time.

Importantly, games stir discussions, which are so significant for the development of the social sciences and for turning attention to those things not yet explored, interesting, and controversial. As far as the topic of video games is concerned, there are still many areas pedagogy has not yet explored – despite the fact that we know that children begin to play at a very young age. Video games are a new challenge requiring a different attitude and putting aside one's fear of phenomena related to virtual entertainment: to cultural texts, which are easily

read by everyone, including children, youth, adults, and seniors. They can exert an influence on all these groups, but not the same one on everyone – still, the very possibility is important. Here, a new task emerges for pedagogues (and social researchers as such): to thoroughly understand the phenomenon on the basis of reliable research – both qualitative and quantitative.

Let us reflect on the players' desire to exist in virtual worlds full of diverse stimuli. Let us then focus on what Tomasz Kalbarczyk said in his text devoted to the thought of Richard Rorty:

> The author of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* recommends that to promote pupils' imagination and tolerance, they be provided, as a minimum, with many diverse sources of information so that moving among books, images, and films, they find the inspiration to create. […] we are entitled to expect that they will finally find a way to describe both themselves and their community anew. The most talented of them will introduce changes to the canon of knowledge proposed by Hirsch and his likes, introduce new elements to the process of socialization of their children and will even better prepare them for autonomous development after maturity (Kalbarczyk 2007: 59).

In our times, in the era of seeking justice, freedom and development, it is worth pointing out that also games – along with books, pictures, and films – exist as a separate, fully-fledged element that is important in the context of sources of information, the provision of opportunities for new experience, and thus development and philosophising, since it is also video games which discuss morality, social life, freedom, and knowledge.

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Summary

Video Games and Creativity: On the Potential and Narration of Fear

There is a massive amount of pedagogical literature about video games, constructing a negative image of the medium.

There are many texts about both real and hypothetical dangerous influences of games on those who play them. In our text we discuss a specific potential of video games – the ability to support creativity and social awareness (which in some situations may break taboos). In the article we also discuss other potentials of video games along with their connotations with culture and education.

Keywords

video games, creativity, social awareness, education, emotions, culture

English translation: Anna Moroz-Darska