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Gamers' remorse: decision-making in story-oriented video games in the context of socialization and social awareness

In the world in which information technology develops rapidly, we should take a look at the problems it generates. Pedagogues should not only be able to perceive the new, but they should also endeavour to apply a research approach to it.

An increasing number of children play video games. Their initiation in this field takes place sooner than before. Game-playing is also a significant activity of youth and adults. It is worth asking oneself whether we should curse the spirit of our times or rather better take the effort of studying the potential benefits that can be brought about by this form of entertainment.

Pedagogues associate video games with evil, with metaphorical demons tempting especially students and talking them into abandoning learning for the benefit of empty, not intellectually developing fun. In this context, the contemporary technological progress gives rise to concern – just as if anything new had to be related to fear and danger.

In my opinion, technological novelties are equipped with considerable educational potential, opening up new learning opportunities. Apps making educational processes more attractive are used during various classes, and in our daily lives we witness the appearance of tools of inculturation in the form of video games, which not only introduce gamers to 21st century culture, but also tell stories which often require analysis from the recipient. Video games contribute to the development of culture and science. The mechanism of gamification uses the game mechanics to encourage people to do things they normally do not want to do or which they do not know they can do in a different way – by making them more attractive, supporting internal motivation, and fostering creativity. Systems known from games can be used to make work on projects or education more efficient, but they are also successful in more direct activities – as socializing messages or tools making people more aware of today's social problems.

In this text, I shall have a look at the potential of story-oriented video games in the context of socialisation, raising awareness and education; I shall present results of preliminary research aimed at making pedagogues aware of their possible impact on gamers and, at least partially, capture the relationships between players and story-oriented video games. I performed my study on a sample of

171 subjects of various ages. It was based on a short internet survey concerning decision-making in story-oriented video games. The survey consisted of both closed and open questions aimed at the gathering of deeper answers and adding value in the form of concrete examples of games, situations and reflections, and it was distributed owing to the support of social media portals and internet fora. Since my survey was carried out in the Polish language, my subjects were mostly Polish.

Before I present the results and my reflections on the issues under discussion, I wish to make it clear that this paper does not aim at acquitting story-oriented video of all suspicions; it is not a question of a sacralisation of this kind of cultural text, but an attempt at yet another look at this type of games as a new phenomenon with its own possibilities and impossibilities.

The age of the development of and research into story-oriented video games

Video games research is relatively young, especially in Poland. The subject of games was marginalised – in particular in pedagogy – and often perceived as an impediment to effective learning, although the field called pedagogy of video games is responsible for a certain change in this scope. A research breakthrough was recorded when Jerzy Zygmunt Szeja's work entitled *Gry fabularne – nowe zjawisko kultury współczesnej* [*Role-playing games – a new phenomenon in present-day culture*] (Szeja 2004) was published. In his book, the author reflects that video games – along with story-oriented games – are a new phenomenon of present-day culture. At the very beginning of his work, Szeja calls video games texts of culture (Szeja 2004: 8), which is a significant observation as well as an attempt at a departure from the infantilised approach to all kinds of games. Unfortunately, it is commonly believed that games (be it video games, board games or parlour games) are the domain of children. If they are at all associated with adults, then only with those who are not very serious. Calling the game a text of culture breaks the vision of a “non-serious product”. Szeja does not approach the text in a way that is separated from the market – he mentions titles and gives examples. His book is not entirely abstract, since the author put up a bridge – everyone is aware of what to look for and where, and can check a given product, thus encouraging researchers to explore the subject of games.

Szeja was followed by new, usually young video game researchers. There is a visible tendency to carry out studies into massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) which allow gamers to play together in an extended world divided into regions in real time. The games raise a lot of interest, since they are largely easily available and free – although there are also popular MMORPGs requiring payable subscriptions. Popular MMOs include *World of Warcraft*, *Ever-Quest*, *Rappelz*, *League of Legends* (the popular *LoL*, which actually is more related to the genre referred to as a multiplayer online battle arena, which consists in online battling) and *Neverwinter* published in 2013. A considerable number of social researchers focus on MMO games because participation in them demands interaction with others; the games were developed with tournaments of play-

ers from all over the world in mind. Examples of research into MMO games and generally online games as such include Mirosław Filiciak's *Wirtualny plac zabaw. Gry sieciowe i przemiany kultury współczesnej* [A virtual playground. Online games and transformations of contemporary culture] (2006) and texts by young researchers such as Dominik Porczyński's *Komputerowe gry fabularne – pogranicze światów rzeczywistego i wirtualnego* [Computer role-playing games – a borderland of the real and virtual world] (Porczyński 2013) or Paweł Olejniczak's *Wirtualny Teatr. Koncepcje Ervinga Goffmana w świecie gier sieciowych* [Virtual theatre. Erving Goffman's concepts in the world of online games] (2012).

I shall venture to say that despite the growing interest in the subject of video games, the social sciences – and particularly pedagogy – fail to analyse story-oriented games or look at them as a text of culture picturing certain social needs and visions, as well as developers' ideas of what a good video game is. In their productions, the authors of games provide us with constructs gamers encounter almost on a daily basis. The 2014 *Game Industry Trends* report (*GIT: Kids 2014*) shows that according to parents, their children spend the following amount of time playing games (on a weekly basis): 9% play for less than an hour, 45% play for between 1 and 5 hours, 30% play for between six and ten hours, 10% play for between 11 and 15 hours, 6% play for more than 16 hours. The results show how much time children (and let us remember that adults also play video games) spend with this kind of products. Since games are designed with the visual reception of textual constructs in mind, they transmit content, which generally largely depends on the authors' beliefs. Games – just like literature – transfer constructs, discuss them, and create phantasms. Therefore, it would be difficult not to claim that since games are a fusion of their developers' beliefs about people (game actors are created on the basis of their ideas of human behaviours, anxieties, desires, views, minorities, etc.) and the recipients' vision (developers always keep in mind the target players), a certain cultural content is transmitted. The sort of content – be it stereotypes, emancipatory thoughts, or the other way round – depends entirely on the creators of a given title. Is this not in itself a sufficient reason to analyse the content of games in terms of the constructs they contain?

Going further towards the main topic of this text, it is the posing of problems – via the plot, characters, events or anything taking place between these game elements – which is the way to engage the player to the point of immersion, to transmit thoughts through the game. The users solve problems by taking decisions – either in the form of dialogues, strategic elements (which can also be found in story-oriented games), or actions (for example who to kill, who to save or rescue). Making choices is of key importance and it is this element which is the gist of the recipient-game interaction.

It is on the basis of this thought that I carried out a study aimed at the determination of the players' attitude to decisions taken in video games. Are decisions perceived as indispensable? What do the players base them on? In what way do they immerse themselves in the virtual world? What does one's conscience have to do with all this and does it play a significant function when we deal with a virtual thing such as a video game?

Virtual decision-making – the dreamt-of challenge

An exceptionally significant question which is worth asking concerns the players' attitude to decisions in games. I made it my goal to get rid of my own opinion and ask players whether they are happy about such a possibility and whether they like making choices. I decided to attempt to break one question into two separate ones, but this is for a reason. Gamers may value an opportunity to make decisions in games, but we must not exclude the possibility that they consider the decision-making process itself difficult, frustrating or tiring. However, I discovered that from the statistical point of view, their answers coincided ideally.

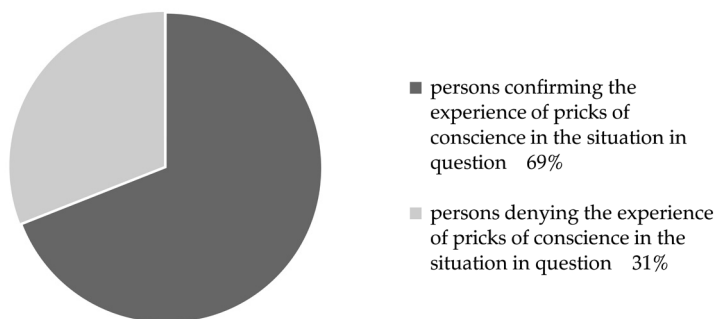


Diagram 1. The number of gamers happy about the possibility of taking decisions in games who like this aspect of story-oriented video games

Interestingly, not every person happy about the possibility to take decisions in games declared that he/she liked it, but the votes finally coincided.

As can be seen, a considerable majority of players appreciate the possibility of taking decisions in story-oriented video games. Is this a significant finding? Yes, it is. The making of choices has always belonged to significant actions. Here, I wish to refer to Zygmunt Bauman and Tim May's text:

There is no shortage of questions that arise within our daily activities. Some may occur fairly regularly and not preoccupy us for very long, while others may be prompted by abrupt changes in our circumstances and lead to further and deeper reflections. These types of questions concern matters that do not, ordinarily, preoccupy us, but which still inform issues about who we are and how we make sense of the world around us. Sometimes these inquiries will raise questions about why something happened? (Bauman, May 2004: 59).

Just like in daily life, decision-making in games is meaningful. In many story-oriented games, players are faced with difficult choices, with unclear results. Before deciding, they have to think, since decisions are related to consequences – including the ones which cannot be seen immediately after the choice is made. In some cases, the result of a decision can become prominent as late as towards the end of the game or even in its continuations (as is for example in the *Mass Effect*

series published by BioWare – the decisions taken in the first part of the game affect events which take place even in its third part). What are the consequences of the above? Well, it leaves almost no possibility for loading the save files and changing the path taken. Obviously, this is acceptable in the case of less significant tasks, but nevertheless the players are forced to take responsibility for those significant and often most difficult choices. The immersiveness of video games is understood here as a sense of permeation into another reality – in this case to the reality of the world of the game (Filiciak 2006: 62). Immersion consists in the temporary stopping of disbelief; it is the subject's immersion into a fictitious world to such a degree that it seems to be more real than the real one. Also, decisions seem to be more important – we know that we deal with a game, but feel a growing responsibility for the virtual world we shape with our own choices. Conditions for immersiveness include the interactivity of the product (the player must be able to influence the world of fiction) and the cohesiveness of the reality presented in the product; the recipient's expectations of the product must also be consistent with its conventions (Filiciak 2006: 63). Immersion can be easily explained on the basis of an engrossing book – while reading, we accept its conventions, its form; we enter into interactions with it, since when we read it, we imagine characters, events, scenery – we are no longer just passive recipients, but owing to our imagination, we create a universe presented in the work; we must find the characters, plot, and other elements of the novel credible – on discovering inconsistencies, logical errors, or flat psychology of the characters, we are knocked out from the world of fiction, we no longer believe it.

Is the type of the taken decisions important? Yes, it is, since treating them seriously and calling them appropriately begins to count even more owing to immersiveness, and through the nature of decision-making, idiosyncratic sensitisation can take place – the person-specific (here: gamer-specific) feeling which builds in a given (and not other) way both the gamer's personality and the elements which embody him/her (metaphorically or literally, the game recipient's reflections and opinions as well as the vision of the virtual equivalent of the gamer – avatar – in the sense of building his/her personality in the game on the basis of his/her actions and decisions). Games may put gamers in unclear situations – perhaps in the same way as life, demanding reflections and decision-making – the taking of a single decision characteristic for a concrete person. Obviously, the number of decisions in games is limited, but it is often varied. When you can answer a given problem in three or four ways, knowing that your choice will affect the game, you must react. The gamer can do it within a few seconds, but it often takes more time than that. The player becomes a kind of judge deciding about the further course of the story. Here, we may refer to Philip Zimbardo's theory described in the book *The Lucifer effect: understanding how good people turn evil* (Zimbardo 2008), which is also familiar to fans of psychological films owing to the film *Das Experiment*. The theory assumes that through the creation of the appropriate environment/conditions, a person taking on a role takes it on almost totally, to the degree that people considered good begin to behave in an evil, despicable, ruthless manner. How does this relate to video games? Let us take the example of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* published in November 2014. Here, we take on the role of a character (a woman or a man), who is the only survivor of an attack of evil creatures using a new tear in the sky

to enter the world of the living – and it is the main character who is blamed for the invasion. After a relative exemption from the charges, we join the Inquisition and subsequently become its leader. Being the leader, we are not only responsible for all the strategic decisions, alliances, and combat with the evil, but we also become a sort of a judge. Therefore, we are obliged to listen to the characters' stories, charges and testimonies. Obviously, it is also our task to deliver judgement (one of the several available ones). The very high interactivity of the game guarantees immersion, we feel as if we really were the character (or just the other way round – we put ourselves in his/her position instead of taking on the role suggested by the game). At the same time, providing its concrete (and not any other) environment, the game makes us listen and decide. While under the influence of the immersion, the player accepts his/her role and must take a decision – it is impossible to adopt an indifferent attitude. Just like in Zimbardo's theory, the gamer is thrown into a predetermined situation in which certain behaviours are provoked. He/she must become a judge and reflect on whatever happens around. When finishing the game, the player abandons his role, but the experience and memory remain – just like sensations, conclusions and reflections.

Games, similarly to literature, are able to leave one with what I shall refer to as a "sensation". Sensation is like memory, but it awakes one in a specific way. Fictitious events offer developing experiences – such as the experience of taking a decision, the feeling of giving one the sense of reality and empowerment. Paradoxically, owing to their references to fiction, people interacting with it – be it in the form of games, books or other interactive products of culture – acquire elements of real competences which, put together, create them as human beings. Simplifying the theory, by interacting with a fictitious universe, people undergo "cultural training". And here I would like to refer to some observations made by Michał Kruszelnicki – a researcher studying another fragment of culture (literary horror to be more precise):

Both the onlookers of a tragedy and readers of horrors consciously desire to deal with protagonists who are in danger, suffer, and get into a variety of troubles the recipients would not like to face themselves (Kruszelnicki 2010: 70).

I am not referring to this quotation without a reason. Just like in the case of a horror, the players can experience challenges, problems, sufferings, and, naturally, decision-making from the space of "their own safe armchair" – owing to playing the game. All this is in a controlled, but at the same time immersive and relaxing way, which however requires their attention. When adding such an attitude to the problem, we may call a game with even more certainty "training". Players have an opportunity to "touch" the gist of the decision, without any personal consequences. In a sense, the "touching" is a symbolic bringing of the potential of the game to life. Let me quote Antoni Kępiński:

The external world is changeable, while the internal world, the body, is constant. Among the constantly changing surroundings, living beings must maintain their *constantia*, their "truths", if it is unchangeability which is believed to be the core of truth. One's own body is "real", and the surrounding world is an "illusion", because illusions are marked by constant changeability. The touchable, the things we can have physi-

cal contact with, acquire traits of true reality. [...] The things which are not in direct touch with our bodies are always marked by traits of illusion, abstraction, unreality (Kępiński 2012: 32).

I believe that Kępiński's words can in a way be related to the players' interaction with a video game. The latter in itself is fiction, the mentioned "illusion", but through interactions with players, the game and its fragments become increasingly realistic, or true. A game offers challenges, we get more and more familiar with its mechanics, plot, and characters. Is this the reason why games are so attractive to so many people? Or is it because the players themselves make the game an immersive environment when they like its structure, plot and idea? Does the game make the unrealistic real owing to its interactions with people?

Without any doubt, many people will ask themselves whether gamers make decisions consciously when playing. In my study, I was trying to determine which choices are the most difficult ones for them and which ones made a deep impression on them. Many players discussing their decisions in games mention their result. It is natural that in our daily lives we try to anticipate the consequences of our actions and words; in the majority of situations, we are aware that every action brings about certain consequences. Gamers stressed the importance of this aspect a number of times and they repeatedly stated that the hardest decisions were those the consequences of which could not be anticipated:

The toughest decisions in games are those the consequences of which cannot be predicted, and which have a significant impact on the further course of the plot.

I consider the lesser evil decisions (when both choices bring about some losses) difficult; the same goes for decisions having consequences which cannot be easily predicted. And the decisions which go out of control when the choice is made.

The hardest decisions are made when you have to choose between two opposite sides (Kenny and Jane in *The Walking Dead*) or those the consequences of which are unclear.

As can be seen, the consequences are important and it is often due to them that players find it hard to accept entertainment going along the tracks of a "wrong" decision and reach for a virtual-psychological defence in the form of loading the save file dating to the moment before the decision was made. The gamers themselves confirm that it is frequently caused by the consequences of a decision. Here are a few statements explaining the gamers' return to the previous save file:

Direct consequences burdened my character's conscience :)

Too heavy remorse or my favourite character's death as a consequence.

It is normally my pure curiosity of checking what the other path offers. Sometimes, rarely, I am very unhappy about the consequences of a decision and I prefer to take another one, which does not fit the character so well, just to avoid them. Examples include some choices made as a part of the tasks from the *Baldur's Gate* series, causing the leaving of some valued character.

It happened twice in *Planescape: Torment*: after talking to Ignus I decided that he did not deserve to be freed and that he should be still frying in fire, although I had lost

access to mighty spells because of that. On another occasion, a decision which initially seemed to be the right one had much too great consequences – the guilty one was disproportionately punished.

Obviously, decisions taken while gamers play video games do not have the same power as those made in real life, where if a tragedy happens people cannot “start anew” or “try once again”, but, rather than this, it is the showing of the results of one’s actions which is the matter here. In life, just like in games, it is difficult to predict many consequences.

At the same time, it is worth pointing out that the first statement was marked by humorousness, which shows the respondent’s distance to his/her own words. Obviously, this can be understood in many different ways.

What are other similarities between games and the reality? Does the very decision-making process have the same course as in daily life? And how about the gamers’ remorse featured in the title? I shall discuss these questions further on, at the same time disclosing what gamers are guided by when taking their decisions.

Gamer’s remorse and motivations or what decisions taken in video games are based on

In the previous part of my article, I largely discussed ways in which different elements of games can be interpreted, I mentioned titles and talked about the gamers’ attitude to making decisions in video games and to their consequences. It is the gamers’ attitude to video games which makes the entire discourse significant. While conducting my research, I decided to check four different aspects of decision-making in search of the one gamers consider most important. They were to determine the significance of the particular aspects which motivated their choices. Table 1 shows the percentage-based breakdown of answers provided by 171 respondents (only valid answers, i.e. ones provided in correctly filled forms, were taken into account)¹.

As can be seen, the moral aspect proved to be the most significant one, which shows an important and interesting phenomenon consisting in making the game not only a space of entertainment, but also a virtual universe, in which gamers may create their super-ego, a representation of morality, and conscience and decision-related possibilities. Given this power, video games turn out to be a challenge area. Interestingly, it is gamers themselves who have shaped this area – they demand (as indicated in the earlier parts of my text) that productions contain a considerable number of decision-making opportunities; they want to decide about the fate of their characters and the world in which they live; at the same time, however, a specific transfer of the gamers’ morality to the fictitious world of the game takes place, making it an arena of fights for beliefs, doubts and moral problems. When additionally looking at the role-playing aspect – which is considered very important – we might wonder whether gamers perhaps desire conflicts. They simultaneously

¹ The table shows results as at 2014. There are plans for the continuation of the research, collection of responses and analysis of the results

Table 1. Aspects gamers take into account during decision-making in story-oriented video games

| | Unimportant | Of little importance | Important | Very important |
|--|-------------|----------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Moral aspect (according to one's own hierarchy) | 4.1% | 13.5% | 25.1% | 57.3% |
| Rewarding aspect (according to awards for taking the particular decision) | 11.1% | 36.8% | 34.5% | 17.6% |
| Role-playing aspect (according to what the character played by the gamer would do) | 9.4% | 15.8% | 24.1% | 50.9% |
| Challenge-decreasing aspect (simplifying further the game) | 36.8% | 35.1% | 19.9% | 8.2% |

Source: author's own work

highly value the possibility of importing their own morality to the world of the game and the possibility of playing a given character, which in the case of a conflict – a mismatch between the creation enforced on the character and the gamer's morality – in a sense leads to a dichotomy, the fight between the gamer's morality and the construct in the form of the character developed by the authors of the game. The results presented in the table below show that the challenge-decreasing aspect and the rewarding aspect are the least interesting aspects of gaming.

Since the sample was small and respondents were limited solely to Poles, it would be difficult to refer the results to the entire community of gamers. However, what is worthy of attention is that the gamers' morality is already emerging as a significant element of a game – along with the possibility to play a role developed by the authors. This shows certain scientifically interesting tendencies.

It would be difficult not to link morality and decision-making with pricks of conscience. To maintain clarity of understanding about what conscience actually is, let us refer to its most popular definition – the one offered by the *Encyklopedia PWN* [PWN *Encyclopaedia*], and then proceed to a slightly different formula:

conscience, Gr. *syneidesis*, Lat. *conscientia*, a notion in the area of moralistics, ethics and moral theology (marked by a very broad meaning), usually understood as an internal instance of moral judgement, individual differentiation between the good and the evil, interiorized values accepted by the individual and shared by a social group (*Encyklopedia PWN* 2013a).

As is commonly understood, conscience is to help us differentiate between good and evil, and it is often described as an internal voice prompting, judging, reminding us how we should act. The definition from the encyclopaedia refers to the value accepted by an individual – for the conscience to truly have its classic potential, one needs to accept the content. During their lifetime, people deal with other people, live in a social group, which in a way develops individuals.

Principles and values are transmitted by our guardians, through the impact of the social environment characteristic for a given individual; an individual becomes socially conditioned, acquires certain competences, his/her undesirable behaviours are hampered and traits necessary for the existence in a group are developed. It is not without any reason that Lech Witkowski describes consciousness – referring to Sigmund Freud – in the following way:

[...] Freud “identified the sense of duty with the internalisation of a host of idiosyncratic episodes” related to accidental events present even in the case of memory disturbances. Therefore, conscience is the “memory of idiosyncratic events” (Witkowski 1993: 237)

Here, consciousness is understood in a different way – as sensitisation to and awareness of certain issues, behaviours, and phenomena owing to internalized experiences. Owing to events, human beings acquire the possibility of a more-detailed insight; they are forced to reformulate and overwrite their feelings. Can the above be related to story-oriented video games? Yes, it can. It has already been mentioned a number of times that games offer a broad range of stories, characters, relationships and graphic representations of places, conflicts or simply events. Games create a special, closed, and created virtual environment or arena of training allowing gamers to experience quasi-accidental events.

They are quasi-accidental because they only pretend to be accidental – they had been developed or programmed by their creators, but from the point of view of a game recipient, they cannot be anticipated. This is why the events are both accidental and planned. What is more, they are food for thought. Does not the structure of story-oriented games develop the human way of thinking? Does it not sensitise us and make us develop our ability to make judgements?

In my study, I asked gamers whether they felt pricks of conscience after taking specific decisions in a video game. The results are presented in Diagram 2.

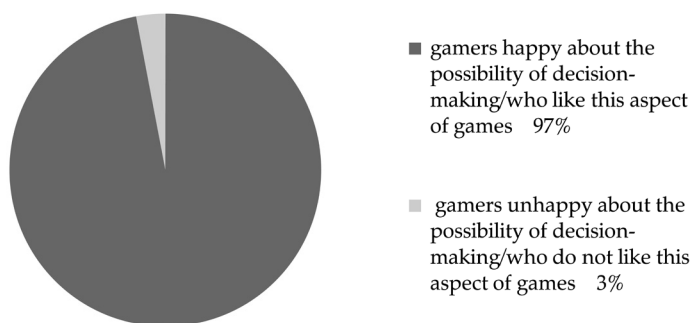


Diagram 2. The number of gamers feeling pricks of conscience due to a “wrong” decision made while playing a video game

It results from the data shown in the diagram that a considerable number of gamers provide a positive answer when asked about their experience of pricks of conscience due to virtual decisions. It is a surprising example of the way in

which phantasms and imaginings find their way into the reality. This confirms that the imagined world can influence the real daily world. Although the imaginings, graphics and texts influencing the player are a part of an unreal context, the emotions, the feelings, and the sense of the appropriateness (or inappropriateness) of the taken decisions which they stir are absolutely real. Obviously, in the case of a game, it is possible to do the thing impossible in the real world – load the previous save file in virtual-psychological mental defence; it is possible to change one's decision (with the exception of some cases when the decision and the result are so distant that such loading seems senseless – the time distance can stop some players from using an old save file). As much as a return to the previous save file makes the moment of decision-making less meaningful, the appearance of pricks of conscience sensitises; it is an experience. We can go a step further and ask whether games can therefore develop emotional intelligence, understood as an "ability to understand and control one's emotions" (*Encyklopedia PWN* 2013b). Decisions – both those made in games and in real life – put us in specific situations, enforcing our responses, also emotional ones. Gamers are given a challenge of interpretation of their feelings and their control. Do the emotions stirred by the game really have such a great potential? It is difficult to answer this question, but seeing how they can evoke one's remorse or pricks of conscience, we may risk to answer: yes, they do. Another question which follows is whether people have the need to feel emotions? We do not have to think long before giving an answer, but as to avoid being guided solely by my subjectivism, let me quote the psychologist Daniel Goleman:

[...] our deepest feelings, our passions and longings, are essential guides and (...) our species owes much of its existence to their power in human affairs. That power is extraordinary (Goleman 2007a).

Feelings and emotions play a significant role not only in the development of art, but the whole of humankind. Was it the need for feeling which led to the taking of emotions and challenges (which also stimulate anger) into account in video games? The need for excitement, anger, love, sadness, for being moved? We can probably say so. People often talk about brutality in video games, about the fact that they make it possible for gamers to play aggressively. This takes into account the need for taking it out, experiencing a "brutal catharsis" – for releasing one's frustrations, anger, or unhappiness. Without the need, no such opportunity would be created. However, as a balance, many games – especially cRPG ones – include romantic plots. In the *Baldur's Gate*, *Mass Effect*, *Dragon Age*, or *Never-winter Nights* series we can find romance (mainly heterosexual in the past, now also homosexual and bisexual) – some special romantic dialogue paths available to the gamer and the possibility to develop a love relationship with one of the characters developed by the authors. My study shows that romance has also become an important element of this genre of games and that it also has the potential of causing pricks of conscience. When asked about the most frequent reasons behind the decision to load a save file, one of the respondents recollected:

I was not happy about the effect the decision had (e.g. DA – selecting Alistair to become king, and he then breaks with my character ;D).

Naturally, this statement is humorous, but it still stresses that romances are taken into account and that gamers remember them. They are also considered important by the very creators. During a teaser advertising campaign of the *Dragon Age: Inquisition* the topic of romances in the new part of the popular series was very often undertaken. An attempt at the building of a virtual relationship is also a certain choice – dialogues are a series of text lines and the gamer chooses what he/she wants to tell the character he/she has a romance with. And it is not only about this, since the characters have their own specific personalities and sketched past, so during the game they react to the players' decisions with approval or disapproval, and the players must either be ready to face the consequences of a decision or remember who they travel with (with which characters they perform their tasks) and choose answers consistent with the players' beliefs – which, by the way, is an interesting simulator of empathy, as the player must remember who a given character is and what their past is and owing to it anticipate his/her reactions to decisions.

Apart from romances, games also include romantic relationships sketched entirely by their creators: Corvo and Empress (*Dishonored*), Alan and Alice (*Alan Wake*) or Sarah and Kaim (*Lost Odyssey*). Characters whose emotions, experience and understanding are of key importance are yet another type. Fall-from-Grace from the popular game *Planescape: Torment* can be one example. Psychological development, and emotional intelligence, are related to social competences and functioning. In the introduction to another of his books, Goleman pointed out:

Our social interactions operate as modulators, something like interpersonal thermostats that continually reset key aspects of our brain function as they orchestrate our emotions. The resulting feelings have far-reaching consequences, in turn rippling throughout our body, sending out cascades of hormones that regulate biological systems from our heart to immune cells. [...] To a surprising extent, then, our relationships mould not just our experience, but our biology. (Goleman 2011).

Further on, the author mentions that relationships with other people may have both a good and a bad influence. Of course, games cannot replace relationships in real life, but by showing us virtual constructs, they give us an opportunity to analyse, play roles, and become familiar with different points of view – what the gamer obtains is a real simulator, which can also interest one and force one to reflect, feel joy, anger, wrath, or think.

In this way the entire potential discloses itself – the potential of making decisions, their relationship with conscience, and the need for emotionality, which at the same time mingles with social intelligence. Gamers are not indifferent to what games offer. They want to hear stories, to simulate life. Many people will certainly say that this is not real life, and that therefore it is not valuable, but I have tried to show that what games evoke is transferred to the real world. Do not books offer a similar potential for human development, with their immersiveness, storytelling, references to reality, their ability to teach, relax, interest and develop the readers? As one of the respondents recalled:

Games are probably the only medium, which makes it possible for us to acquire life experience without bearing negative consequences in real life. They have the potential, which is rarely used, of being like sensoria from *Planescape*.

A brief explanation of what a sensorium is in the above-mentioned game:

Guide to sensations: The man nods. "This is the public sensorium, whose chambers hold (...) sensory stones. Each of the stones contains a particular sensation - or set of sensations - which a user can experience for himself or herself. A Sensate is free to use them at their leisure, while visitors must pay a small fee. Does this answer your questions?"

Lady Thorncombe: "The sensory stones provide me with all things that my considerable wealth cannot buy. (...) each stone has recorded within it one experience or another. When I first came to these halls, I spent little time with them. Only now do I realize what I had been missing... (...) Why waste time (...) when I could remain here among these precious stones, living one hundred new lives each day?" (*Planescape: Torment* 1999)

The fragments quoted above are dialogue lines from *Planescape: Torment*, and I decided to treat the game as a book, because games are also a text.

Sensoria, just like games, offer experiences, make it possible to provide sensations. They can be addictive just like literature, but when used in an appropriate way, they will tell a story and offer a gift of experiences, they will grasp the plot using the method of virtual impressions, they will make it possible to return to that plot and read dialogues again. They make it possible to "relive a hundred new lives", and, after all, human existence is based on experiencing something more than just the real world. Since primeval times, people have listened to stories – they presented them in the Lascaux caves, they then read, started to watch stories and tales on the screen, to finally experience them also virtually. Of course, these are by no means the only ways of reading meanings – since this is what fiction really is – the reading of meanings: we may refer to stories hidden in photographs, paintings or even music. The quoted statement shows that gamers sometimes notice that games tell stories, that they provide experiences. Actually, it is best to ask the gamers themselves what they think of games, why decisions in games are important for them and what their guesses concerning games are:

Games forcing us to take difficult decisions are more mature, they may be food for thought, and they are an argument against the belief that games are a primitive and thoughtless entertainment.

Games not only provide entertainment, but also teach; if inexperienced gamers start taking important decisions early (obviously in games), this may have an impact on their life, perhaps it will be easier for them to take more logical and better decisions. [...] that is why we develop as persons and test our morality in safe conditions. We can learn more about ourselves and put our moral code to the test.

By being able to load the save file, you can always check "what would happen if..."; you just have to remember that such a possibility exists only in games and that it is rarely possible to start everything anew in life.

I decided to quote these different statements in order to give the gamers an opportunity to talk about themselves and their feelings. Be it even only because of the significance that people – from various backgrounds, of different ages, with

different beliefs – attach to games, it is worth analysing them from the pedagogical point of view, especially in the context of criticism against video games, because critical remarks, like the one below, were also uttered:

Decisions in games are an illusion of a choice trying to mask the immaturity of the medium.

I have not written this text to sacralise video games, and that is why critical views should be considered particularly important: they can raise doubts which may become an impulse for further action. This can be considered a specific attempt at falsification, doubt in the question concerning the potential of story-oriented video games.

In the social sciences, it is desirable to doubt theory, the formulated hypotheses – doubts enforce further research, which is indispensable in particular in the case of video games in the pedagogical context. Although they are sometimes the subject of research as a part of other branches of the social sciences, they are still scarcely represented at the level of education, socialisation, interaction with children, youths or adults.

Educational use of story-oriented video games – in search of further potentials

While looking for the possible applications of story-oriented video games, I decided to ask the gamers about their educational potential, since it is impossible not to learn something new when one plays games many hours a week. This could be compared to taking additional virtual classes in something – the question is: in what?

The answers disclosed the gamers' opinions in this matter and I shall review and analyse gamers' selected observations and theses in this last but one part of the text. I shall try to reflect on some of them in the pedagogical context. I wish to start with the following statement:

The necessity to bear the consequences of one's decisions taken in the virtual world can teach responsibility and discourage hastiness in making choices in real life. It can also make one aware that it is not always possible to make the right decision and thus help tackle the sense of guilt and disappointment when we failed to anticipate some consequences of a decision and we made a wrong choice. It would be good if parents remembered to make children conscious of the fact that there are no save files or respawns in real life...

As I have already pointed out, every game has a different potential to show the importance of decisions – just like in the domino effect, they lead to subsequent events and incidents. This potential is considerably lessened by the possibility of returning to an earlier moment of the game, but this is not so for each game. This is the question of the coding of the game, as there are already games in which the consequences of decisions do not show up immediately after the choice is made, but much later, which discourages gamers from replaying a sequence and en-

courages one to accept their choice and to play the game again and to familiarize themselves with the plot "from the other side".

There is also the important issue of the difference between the real and the virtual life – should people, in particular children, be made aware that there is and will be no possibility of "loading the save file" and making the decisions once more in real life? People always want to strive to realise their ideal self. People copy each other, just like films, books, and other inspiring texts. However, the procedure of behaviour should remain the same, focus on self-awareness. I do not think that games should be considered media which particularly encourage dangerous behaviour. The same can be said about the daredevils from other media creations, while it would be difficult to say that television is bad in itself only because some people could go as far as to copy dangerous behaviours and effects as a result of overestimating their abilities. However, can we entirely forget about the very possibility of such behaviour? No – just like in the case of books, films, comic books, tales, etc..

I mentioned that video games have the same inspirational potential as other products of culture. One of my respondents said:

A game which is simple and lacks the necessity to make decisions, one which leads us straight as the crow flies, will not give us an opportunity to reflect on other options of plot development. The "what if..." aspect stirs the imagination and makes one think.

Firstly, the very inspiration to speculate develops imagination, the ability to create an alternative path of events, anticipate and combine the particular events into cause-and-effect chains. It is an extremely useful ability improving the perception of relationships between actions, behaviours, questions and answers. However, I would go further in my analysis of the potential – towards literary development. The question "what if" is the basis for the creation of stories representing the fanfic genre – texts discussing adventures of characters (also those from games)². Fanfic authors place their favourite characters in new roles, new adventures, new places or situations. Owing to the inspiration they feel, the young amateurs create texts for themselves and for others, which leads to the development of their literary and linguistic abilities. FanFiction (www.fanfiction.net/game), featuring more than several dozen thousands of stories, is an example of a portal with fanfic stories based on motifs and characters from games.

Referring to further statements, it is possible to find the possibility of picturing the real in games:

Above all, video games are greatly useful for the picturing of different non-banal conflicts (e.g. political or social ones) and offer the possibility of making an in-depth insight into them by decision-making. I think that this allows a better understanding than just the reading/listening to the parties' testimonies.

Story-oriented games can inspire people not only to create new fiction, but they also encourage players to understand the reality. Games are fiction pretend-

² More broadly understood, these are stories created by fans, focusing on places, stories and events from their favourite games, films, serials, books, etc..

ing to be reality. In disguise of what seems non-real, one can show real conflicts. Some names, and also the actors of events, will change, but the ideas often remain the same. Games show the ideas of war, love, treason, secrets, adventure and many other things. Obviously, the extent to which they do this depends on the game creators, so once again I wish to highlight the significance of writers and developers facing the difficult task – both from the artistic, and the moral and marketing points of view.

Interestingly, many gamers point out that games raise their awareness and that they help them understand themselves:

[...] People who are more sensitive will have a chance to reflect on their own reactions and motivations.

Putting themselves in fictitious situations, the gamers may simulate themselves in the circumstances which did not take place in their life. The players must ask themselves how they would behave in reality. This question leads to an increase in one's awareness, but such challenges also facilitate the development of concrete principles in people – as much as they are able to find an answer to the question why they behaved in the particular way they did.

Of course, the above quotations and inspirations are only single voices, but they are the voices of gamers – persons experienced in playing games. Their statements on games are based on their own experience or their desire showing what games should be like, what traits they should have. There were also many answers negating any educational values in games, and this should also be said.

Conclusion

This article has a rather non-typical task – it is not to explain or determine what video games are like, what their potential is, what gamers are like or what their expectations of games are. Games exist and there is an increasing number of new players; games tell stories – sometimes new, and sometimes old ones, but always in a new form. All of these stories are told by game creators, who enforce – totally or partially – certain interpretations, behaviours, and ideas on the recipients. Many story-oriented games offer a possibility to make decisions. This all adds up to socialisation processes – cultural content is transmitted, pictured; decisions are made, and reception competence is shaped along with the ability to deal with virtual reality, etc..

Is there a place for sensitization in all this? For touching universal topics? Yes, indeed, because games – just like books, films, and stories in other forms – are mostly based on archetypes and on playing them.

This article has one more, extremely important task to fulfil: it is to assist in the formulation of new questions concerning the potential of games, their functions and future in informal education. Video games are still a hardly explored ground in the context of pedagogy due to pedagogues' minor interest in the field despite the unquestionably high amount of time children, youths and (not only young) adults spend interacting with the medium. Games are a cultural text, they carry

content, signs, symbols – everything which is drawn from culture. Games are a world of fiction becoming reality through cooperation with the player, through the raising of emotions or even the titular remorse. Can we therefore deny the significance of a medium, which, through imagined worlds, affects the daily and the real life?

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Summary

Gamers' Remorse: Decision Making in Story-oriented Video Games in the Context of Socialization and Social Awareness

The aim of this article is to analyse the potential of video games in the context of socialization and social sensitivity and awareness towards marginalized topics or those considered a taboo. My analysis and conclusions are based on a research of video-games players, and their opinions and thoughts about this unique medium. I am mostly interested in the effect of remorse caused by some decisions in video games and the effect of immersion that allows players to gain real experience through fiction. This text is also to show video games in a "non-alarmist light" and to describe (often omitted in pedagogy) the different interactions between gamers (children/teenagers/adults) and video games.

Keywords

video games, games studies, pedagogy, socialization, new media

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