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Oneiric incarnations:
The construction of dreams in selected video games

Introduction.
Dreams, culture and media

Dreams are an inexhaustible source of inspiration for cultural texts. Fascination with them seems to be not only equivalent to an interest in the alienness and otherness of the oneiric experiences in comparison to the ones we are familiar with in reality, dreams are also shrouded by the belief – deeply rooted in culture – that they have their own, unique function of providing us with knowledge which is otherwise unavailable to us; archetypical dreams show that by immersing ourselves in their world, we acquire access to new forms of self-reflection, prophetic abilities or truths, which remain concealed in other circumstances.

Dreams are discussed by various cultural texts. We may provide examples from the plastic arts (such as Francisco de Goya's etching *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* or Johann Heinrich Füssli's oil painting *The Nightmare*), literature (George Gordon Byron's *The Dream* or Susanna Clarke's contemporary fantasy novel *Jonathan Strange & Mister Norrell*), and cinema (*Inception* directed by Christopher Nolan or the interesting use of dream in Stanley Kubrick's production *Eyes Wide Shut*). Science – in particular psychology (Freud 1913) and cultural studies (Topp, Fereński, Nahirny 2014) – also often reach for dreams.

In this article, we want to show how video games use dream-related imaginaries rooted in culture. We will simultaneously show mechanisms of their adaptation to the mechanics of games and the plot and describe how games use the stylistic means available to them to show dreams in a new form. We will also analyse examples of games in which dreams are a particularly vital aspect. Additionally, we will indicate in what kind of situation the above puts the recipient (player) in relation to concrete imaginaries related to dreams.

We believe that this topic is important not only from the perspective of knowledge of the contemporary culture, but also those social sciences which are interested in the social transmission of knowledge, imaginaries and symbols, with a particular focus on sociology and the pedagogy of culture.

Dreams in video games – expositions and constructs

Video games have been changing and developing along with technological progress for a very long time. While many adult players associate this type of virtual games with productions such as *Mario*, a large share of the game market offers products that are more extensively constructed, involve many topics, are more complex, and have varied quality.

The operation of oneiric constructions is one of the means of expression used by games (and their authors) – and these very constructions are the main object of our interest. Choosing several examples of productions, we want to show the means allowing video games to adopt complex symbolism, and the manner of perception of the special human experience of the dream.

Grandness and self-destruction – prophetic dream visions in the *Baldur's Gate* saga

Baldur's Gate I and *Baldur's Gate II* are games classified among the classical titles that helped define the cRPG genre, and determined the direction of its development for years to come. Together with two extensions (one for each of the parts), they tell the story of a young protagonist who learns that he is a descendant of a deceased deity – Bhaal, a local patron of murder and treacherous assassination.

In both parts of the saga, dreams are a very significant element of the plot. They are a commentary to the current situation of the main protagonist, present his fears and doubts, and relatively often herald future events. They ask what we will do in the deciding moments of the game, and they present the real and imaginary consequences of our choices.

The dreams of the main protagonist are often prophetic; they contain a rich variety of symbols, and to be able to read and understand them, one needs knowledge about the universe in which the game takes place. In particular in part one of the cycle, dreams often show images of statues (sometimes broken ones), a bone dagger (an attributive weapon of the protagonist's godly ancestor) or visions of being swallowed up by the ground. The dreams accompanying the main character are usually bleak, restless, filled with anxiety and sometimes also more or less expressive of aggression. They are sometimes fatalistic – imbued with the sense of the inevitability of the forthcoming events, the final fall, and the impossibility of a change of our fate.

In his dreams, the protagonist reconfronts the enemies he had previously beaten – and, to his amazement, he discovers a new dimension of the already taken actions – one, which is often much more momentous and bleak than outside the dream.

Wherever the reality of the game forces a given character to fight – whether we want it or not – the act of violence and aggression may be shown as a voluntary choice in the dream. As if our consciously undertaken actions were an illusion constituting an attempt at a moral justification of the evil we inflicted. This topic also appears in games outside the sphere of dreams.

Sometimes it looks as though the game asks the players themselves about the fairness of their actions. Even when it seems that the decisions were good and noble, are they not sometimes just a smoke screen for Bhaalspawn to be able to satisfy his desire to fight, murder, and destroy?

What is characteristic is that the dreams – especially the ones featuring violence and destruction – are accompanied by visions of the ultimate self-destruction. Therefore, it is not rare to be absorbed by the evil, which – being the protagonist – we ourselves released.

In the game, dreams herald significant changes about to happen to our character. As a result, we open access to new abilities, we learn more about ourselves and our situation, and we open paths of plot interpretation or additional dialogue options with our companions.

The space of dreams seems to be a mystical reality. It is not only a symbolic representation of what we experience, but an autonomous space which has its own laws, allows one to act and has a strong influence on the protagonist. It seems that such experience has a special role to play: to facilitate a mystical transformation of the character, who acquires new features by gradually moving away from his initial condition. In these dreams, death and destruction go hand in hand with the recreation and transformation as if in an alchemical symbolism (Eliade 2013). The horror of these visions lies in the awareness that the final result of the transformations is unknown (and probably far from desirable). The transformations bring the main protagonist nearer to his grim, godly legacy marked with destruction. The development and acquisition of new powers – which initially may seem positive – creates a sense of inescapably heading towards the final failure and balancing at the borderline of an existential abyss (Bogost 2007). In the case of the intentionally evil protagonists, the direction determined by visions satisfies their bleak fantasies.

Dreams as intimacy and phantasy –
on the basis of the video game *Neverwinter Nights 2:*
Mask of the Betrayer

The action of the game *Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer* takes place in the same universe as the one described for the games from the *Baldur's Gate* series, but here, a new region is revealed for the player. It is Rashemen – a land strongly associated with ghosts, nature, magic, and dreams. Both in the game and in the books, the action of which takes place in Rashemen, the protagonists are highly attached to dreaming and dreams. A character called Fyodor of Rashemen, known from *Tangled Webs* (Cunningham 2004b), is one such example. The man would often say that "There are those who think and those who dream". This saying shows that he perceives dreaming as something different than thinking, something cognitively special. Rashemen is also associated with dreams because they are connected with some significant events from the novels (*Tangled Webs* or *Daughter of the Drow* [Cunningham 2004a]) and *Neverwinter Night 2: Mask of the*

Betrayer – in particular in the location of Coveya Kurgannis, where the player visits the Slumbering Coven.

The game strongly displays the constructions of dreams – largely through the character called Gannayev, who is also referred to as Gann-of-Dreams. The man often talks about things related to dreams, and discusses their meaning, and his own experience of having dreams. He often associates them with intimacy – in particular while talking to the main character (especially if the protagonist is a woman). For example:

> Then so be it – we will share dreams and awareness together. That was all I needed to know. We shall be each other's anchor when all around us is in turmoil… when chaos floods over us, our strength shall shield us against it. And even should I fall, this sharing of our feelings shall remain – and I will be with you, even if my physical self is destroyed. […] My dreams are of you and I surviving this, with a tale of how two lovers braved death and returned. I think we deserve a happy ending, don't you? That is my dream. I think it is not too much to ask.

This is a direct connection of dreams with passion and other essential values that are close to people. Here, three elements are combined: mysticism, oneirism, and love. However, it is worth remembering about the fact that games – in contrast to the dreams of concrete individuals – are created largely intentionally, often with clear inspirations and cultural influences, thus largely presenting popular gender-related and sexual constructs and operating with socially-present discourses (such as the inclusion of non-normativity, or presentation of the tabooed) (Prósinowski 2015; Prósinowski, Ranachowska 2014; Cielecka 2014). Expectations related to women, men and sexuality are also presented through games and their constructions of dreams, romances, mysticism, and connections with social imaginaries. They can be related to the concept of differentiating between anima and animus, i.e. archetypical features and behaviours attributed to women and men (Hall, Lindzey, Campbell 2010). This shows that oneirism, dreams and sexuality are not alien to digital, ludic social representations such as games. They present elements typical of our collective imaginaries concerning social groups and roles, and the expectations they are attributed with at a level which is much deeper than the very presentation of specific behaviours. Here, they achieve the ideal level – that of imaginaries lying at the basis of our understanding of the world and ways we think about it in concrete categories (Busse-Brandyk, Chmielewska-Łuczak 2009).

Therefore, *Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer* offers fantasies – both about adventures, and ghosts – and contact with dreams and romanticism, in a way transforming dreams into something mystical, mysterious, strongly connected with magic, experience, and intimacy – similarly to the better known Shakespearean literary incarnations, where dreams were also mixed with phantasy and love. Can we therefore say that video games materialize erotic dreams?

If games touch sexual archetypes, the expected – if they show the tabooed, the sexual, the exciting, – we can no doubt say that they sometimes become erotic and intriguing representations – especially taking into account their romance-related

contents (the possibility of virtual plot-related romantic conversations between the protagonist and a character created by the authors) present in games (including such extensive and well-known series as *Neverwinter Night*, *Baldur's Gate* or *Dragon Age*). This is yet another form of talking about dreams, fantasies and love. Culture knows many incarnations of such stories – they are presented in literature, cinema and the plastic arts. The presence of such elements in video games provides the players with an access to new forms of expression of their own sexuality. Remembering that the players are not just passive recipients, but – through the avatars they control – also active participants in the events, they can actively refer to them. They can become behaviourally and emotionally involved or consciously distance themselves to the experience. The romance-related contents in games therefore remain a field open to choices – and whether and how the players will use the opportunities offered largely depends on their conscious decisions, which makes the game a space of relatively free expression. With whom a romance will be developed (if it will be developed at all), depends entirely on the players' preferences, on which characters will sparkle an interest in them, will intrigue them, or which ones they will consider attractive.

Apart from the topics concerning Gann and romantic dreams, *Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer* also features other dream representations, such as collective dreaming rituals: again, dreams are shown here as something specifically intimate, something shared with one's dear ones. In this case, we are dealing with nine hags belonging to the Slumbering Coven, who sleep and never wake, who are also referred to as the "unending dream", talking in one voice through one of their members. The Slumbering Coven sustain themselves with dreams, taking them out "from its [the mind's – P. P., P. K.] deepest places, yes… where dreams mingle with hidden and forgotten things", and putting them together to make a whole in order to control them. This is how the women describe their role, dreaming, and dreams themselves:

> From the dreams of mortals, we salvage much… visions and hopes and memories. We take these things and gather them here, before mortal minds can forget them. […] We walk in their dreams, and we take what they will only lose. […] We hoard, collect, preserve. To us, dreams are things to be treasured, torn from those who do not know their worth. […] If you end our dream, all that it contains is lost. Imagine… the dreams of a thousand, thousand souls, the knowledge of wizards and kings centuries dead, the hopes and loves of men and women and beasts… all contained within our unending dream.

In their role, the hags are cruel in their own way, and the meeting of the player with them is marked not only with magic, an intriguing mysticism, but also the macabre. The Slumbering Coven do not hide their sternness, as they are willing to talk about punishments awaiting those who break their rules – and one of the punished ones included Gann-of-Dreams' mother.

While talking, one may peer into the so-called Dreamscape, become familiar with its form and see the true nature of the Slumbering Coven. The land is

described as "a vast tapestry upon which the hags crawl, greedily snatching up dream fragments from weaker mortals, and sewing them into their vast, sprawling web". Also, the intimacy, fantasies and memories in the form of dreams may be accompanied by a specific horror – here, one taking the form of irreverent and stern hags guarding bits of dreams and visions ripped away from mortals.

The creation of space for the finalization of the gameplay is yet another intriguing aim of dreams in the game under analysis. It is there that we reach the aforementioned Dreamscape – it becomes the place in which, just before the final clash, we visit the dream versions of the locations known to the player. Therefore, the dreams become an intimate, but also – in a way – distorted memory. What is shown here, again, is the double nature of dreams: their fanciness, but also the horror and the doom of the past approaching the protagonist. The double nature generates yet another question: are erotic fantasies, dreams, discussing "the possible future", that far from what has already taken place and the thanatic visions of the possible end?

Dreams – whether sensual, erotic, or disturbing, ominous ones – are marked by strong emotions and feelings. They leave a deep impression or offer promises related to the dreaming person's expectations, thus facilitating the reflection and interpretation of not just the dream, but also elements of the life that has been lived so far or that remains to be discovered.

The art of poetic dreams –
on the basis of the game *Tension*, developed by Ice-Pick Lodge

Tension is a production of a small Russian studio called Ice Pick Lodge. The game is maintained in the convention of a survival horror, it is produced artistically and operates with eroticism. The action of the game takes place in the location called the Void – a surreal, oneiric world in which a colourful Lympha sprouts. The players are to collect it to open increasingly new hearts in their bodies (which is tantamount to the acquisition of new abilities), create gardens sparkling with colours, talk to the mysterious Sisters, learn the principles of the Void and, occasionally, fight with the characters of the Brothers.

The production is filled with dark artistry expressed in various forms – unusual ambient music, poems recited by some unspecified creatures, or the very construction of the world. The dreams in *Tension* (partly as in *Neverwiner Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer*, although via different solutions) are marked by a mysticism evoked through the pressure on secret knowledge (not actually referred to in this way, but determined as such by the identification of many taboo subjects) and the ability to create colours, or the names of abilities (for instance a glyph of ritual). Mysterious topics are accompanied by eroticism, which creates sensual experiences. Some players may therefore feel the atmosphere of oneirism during their gameplay as a result of the slow tempo of the game and the sense that the player's character levitates, moving through the land of the Void slightly suspended above the ground. The oneirism is strengthened by a visual presentation of places as if

from Zdzisław Beksiński's paintings – who also created "as if recording day and night dreams" (Beksiński 1978: 10). The authors also refer to dreams in the textual layer, for example quoting a poem by Luís de Camões:

> The dream of the future, you see, dissolves,
> and, with time, so does the apprehension.
> The world under sun is no exception,
> and all you see around you evolves.
>
> New traits, and things familiar, can be sensed,
> but futile is hope without fruition.
> The grief you knew begets no vision.
> The happiness you felt becomes regret.
>
> Winter fades, and takes its cold and storm.
> Spring revives the world with love and warmth.
> But still the law: all things decay and age.
>
> Vanity itself wont dry your tears.
> And so you fear as your time draws near.
> The world will turn, but never change.

The poem presents dreams as prophetic phenomena simultaneously related to the thanatic visions of destruction and the unavoidably passing time. It also talks about the task consisting in changing the world, which seems to be more than difficult; it is shown as something overburdening or even impossible. We can say that the atmosphere of the poem fills us with the senses of resignation, sadness, and even fear. It is also not without a reason that the lyrical subject mentions a certain regularity, thus underlining the unavoidability of death – "all things decay and age" in this world.

Therefore, *Tension* combines ludic elements and play with art, and indirectly also with philosophy, which is related to the artistic expression characteristic for a given period in human history, an analysis, and interpretation of the cultural and what is typical for the place and time. The placement of the dream in the context of such elements provides it with a clear artistic flair.

Sensitisation through dream and fear – on the basis of the video game *Among The Sleep*

The last game under analysis is *Among The Sleep* – an adventure game sometimes referred to as an interactive horror. It tells the story from the point of view of a child who is left alone (or almost alone – in the company of a helpful soft toy) in a room. When the night comes, everything begins to increasingly resemble a nightmare. The story and the locations are constructed in such a way that the player – despite their (presumable) maturity – feels fear evoked by strange shad-

ows, odd coats so long that they touch the floor, and many other daily objects. The fact that the authors chose the concept of a nightmare makes the player confused as to what is real and what is a dream.

The plot concerns the child's fears connected with the mother who appears episodically, to show herself as an oppressive and horrible power in the further part of the game. It turns out that the monster the child was escaping from was a nightmare about the mother and her alcoholism, shouting, and problems, and that everything the child saw on his way was an oneiric (or rather nightmarish) interpretation of the daily and evoking fear.

In the game, dreams are shown as sensitising visions which, just as literature (Nyhus 2012) (or other cultural texts) picture whatever stirs difficult emotions in people, breaks the taboo and simultaneously shows a certain problem to the world – inducing a discussion. From the pedagogical point of view, the above establishes conditions for the development of the discourse and detabooization. Breaking silence concerning such topics as alcoholism, suffering, and death allows one to work on the understanding or analysis of human, social weaknesses (Nilsson 2012). At the same time, the game steps outside a discussion on the taboo with children – it also proposes a discussion with adults, guardians, and members of the society, since it is the society who stigmatizes the phenomena as something difficult and raising concern.

In this place, it is worthwhile asking whether dreams are a taboo topic. In a sense, they are, since they are related to strong emotions. They raise fear (they picture it) – for example fear of losing one's safety, or losing something or someone. Hardly anyone readily shares strongly felt dreams that reflect their grandest fears. Tales about dreams and nightmares allow one to domesticate the fear, externalise the internal anxieties and get used to them – in a way. This is one of the basic forms of the reduction of fear – along with the contact with the object of fear and focusing on the course of the situation (Kępiński 2012), since it is tantamount to the performance of the activity of contact with the vision of the problem. Obviously, this requires time, and a single terrifying dream is not enough, although a multitude of occasions to face the taboo and fear may be an introduction, an opportunity to "work through" the problem – in particular if we come into contact with it from the perspective of a safe armchair (Kruszelnicki 2010). This seems to explain the popularity of various superstitions and conventions related to the interpretation of dreams. Chaos and anxiety are therefore clothed in conventionalised forms of interpretation of the content of dreams, and the interpretation itself becomes a domain of specific authorities (seers, spiritual authorities, fortune-tellers), or meanings consolidated by cultural practice, for example in the form of dream-books or orally-transmitted beliefs as to the concrete symbols and contents present in dreams. Already the Bible, telling the story of the patriarch Joseph, attributed his social advancement and the power he was vested with to his ability to interpret dreams allegedly being a gift directly from God. The ability to soothe fears and anxieties connected with the contact with the world of dreams becomes a synonym for wisdom and a talent appreciated by society. Even today, in many households

one may find various editions of books on the interpretation of dreams, while the internet has become a convenient platform of an exchange of information and beliefs on them. It is also in games that the understanding of dreams may become a significant part of the plot. The discovery of the oneiric meanings of visions may become as much as one of the key elements of the gameplay.

Therefore, *Among The Sleep* offers an oneiric restraint of the object of fear/problems. Dreams aim at highlighting (using overstatements, and presenting fears in the worst possible form) the significance of socially irritating, difficult issues. In this way, they attack the growing social tabooization.

Conclusion

The oneiric incarnations in video games make dreams immortal in a new way. They preserve them digitally and interactively, sometimes attributing to them functions and features known to the audience from other cultural texts and dimensions of their dailiness.

Just like in well-known works of culture, dreams are marked by prophetism, thanatism, horror, sensuality, erotics, intimacy, mysticism, and fanciness. This shows that in human understanding, dreams are sacred, but in their sanctity they are both beautiful and fearsome. Sometimes they can be understood as a phantasy, the destruction of which may end the current state of things or the perception of reality. Dreams are a form of compromise between the order and the chaos of human life (Caillois 1973). They answer the need to reconcile the sphere of social expectations and the emotional sphere of individuals – hence their dangerous charm.

Table 1. Summary presentation of functions and features of dreams
in the analysed video games

	Baldur's Gate series	*Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer*	*Tension*	*Among the Sleep*
Dream function	– prophetic – recollecting and reminding – commentary	– raising intimacy – creating opportunities and space for fantasising and recollecting	– strengthening artistic experience	– sensitising – raising fear by visual distortion of the reality while keeping the realistic fears – combining dreams and reality
Dream feature	– bleakness – unrest – fear – aggression – momentousness – mysticism	– romanticism – mysticism – sensuality – mysteriousness – thanatism	– bleakness – mysticism – slowness – thanatism	– bleakness – horror – fanciness

Source: authors' own analysis.

The dream space appears to be a place where the daily is connected with the elements of cultural life we would rather not see on an everyday basis; a sphere of the risk in which the best and the worst tendencies find their vent and are free to speak. But it can also be the other way round: dreams can be fantasy, they can be an exciting desired stimulus encouraging us to reach for the promising; a prophecy of fulfilment – either real or apparent, but nevertheless tempting enough for people to take the risk and try. Representations of dreams are ambivalent, as they can show fear, but also tempt with success. They are an unrestrained and free thought which can trouble, destroy, and build.

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Summary

Oneiric Incarnations: The Construction of Dreams in Selected Video Games

Humanity has always considered dreams and oneiric visions significant. Along with development, the image of dreams has been presented in different media: the plastic arts, literature, and films. Dreams appear also in video games. They are often presented as significant, in some situations even essential for a story to move on. Developers, designers, dialogue writers transfer their understanding of dreams to their productions; they include popular vision of dreams in their games. Developers also adapt both the everyday and mythical features of dreams, presenting games in a specific pattern; they elicit specific interpretations of their constructs. The aim of this article is to deconstruct the virtual exposition of dreams in specific video games, as well as to describe the meanings engraved in dreams inside the analysed games.

Keywords

video games, game studies, analysis of cultural text, virtual reality, dreams

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