

Communication with Video Games as a Process of Semiosis

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Summary

Communication as a process of interpreting signs has always existed in people's life. In post-information society, the communication between a person and a technological system through the specific sign-attaching process becomes widespread. Moreover, it somehow replaces usual communication between people. One of the means of communication in the digital space are video games. They not only play an important role in communication processes, but also are a special case of sign-creating and interpreting. The purpose of the article is to examine video games as a space of sign-based communication between a person and a game as a specific digital system. With the help of general scientific and hermeneutic methodology, the analysis of video games as a post-information society phenomenon which people communicate to has been conducted. The process of semiosis as attaching special meanings to signs has been traced in both manipulating in-game objects and characters and understanding rules of an in-game world.

Keywords:

Video games, post-information society, semiotics, digital communication.

1. Introduction

Today's society is called "information" or even "post-information" one. It is usually characterized with the importance of information and processes of its permanent exchange, i.e. communication between different people and systems. Communication, however, has always been one of the key aspects of our life. Since the active implementation of the so-called information and communication technologies started, many of ways of people's contacts have been transferred to the digital and cyber spaces since the emergence of social networks and virtual worlds. And, with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemics, network technologies have occupied one of the prominent places in everyday life. Art performances, education, even public services exist both in the real and digital spaces. Many phenomena of cyber world have become widespread and quite useful for solving tasks humanity faced with the beginning of pandemics.

One of the phenomena the impact of which has been reevaluated in last decade is the video game phenomenon. Having been previously considered as a media useful solely

for entertaining purposes, during last years, video games have attracted attention of scientists in different area, especially after they started to be used in education.

The urgent need for studying video game phenomenon lies in fact that it forms a significant part of contemporary society, especially when we talk about the area of communication and, consequently, information exchange. Video games are a part of the cyberspace and virtual space, which "constitute extraterritorial space, with a post-(national) cultural form of knowledge circulating through its networks" [15]. They influence both real and virtual worlds, creating their specific digital communication space and transforming the real one. Video games have a significant educational potential connected with such important features as interactivity and procedurality. In times of the COVID-19 pandemics, the interest to video games has grown rapidly because of the need to consider different means of communication in order to choose the most appropriate and effective ones.

Video games unite people inside virtual spaces consisting not only of the text and images; they may include music, video content, and all this it manipulated with the use of a controller or, in case of PC video games, keyboard and mouse. While playing, a player is involved into a complicated process of learning how to interact with a game world. This process is a form of communication between a person and a kind of digital media. During this process, interpretations occur, for the correct understanding of which proper it is necessary to read in-game signs properly. However, due to the complexity of video games, the following question arises: are signs in video games read similarly to signs in perceiving texts and videos?

To answer this question, we have to consider the communication in post-information society and new ways of attaching meanings to signs. Thus, the purpose of the article is to examine video games as a space of sign-based communication between a person and a game as a specific digital system.

2. Methodology

To achieve the stated purpose, we see it important to use both general scientific and hermeneutic methodology. The analysis and synthesis have been used to consider the concepts of information and post-information societies and understand the changes in the communication processes which are the result of transition of societies from information to post-information society. The synthesis of the existing knowledge on communication in the era of information and communication technologies has become the ground for further analysis of video games as complicated systems.

The practical interpretation of a gameplay process through the use of hermeneutics is also an integral part of our research. Only the experience of playing different video games and understanding ways of interaction with them leads to proper conclusions on the communication with them and the process of meaning-making occurring while playing.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Peculiarities of Communication in Post-Information Society

Human society has always been dependent on information. With the revolution of information technologies, economy, politics and culture have been rapidly transformed and the importance of information has grown. Today's globalized world can be characterized with different terms, such as "postmodern society", "network society", "knowledge society" etc. In our study, we have considered contemporary society as post-information society due to its focus on information, knowledge and technologies that facilitate information exchange, and steps done to move from information to post-information era.

The concept of "information society", which is widely used to describe the state of society that was formed with the development of information and communication technologies has developed gradually and today there are several definitions of information society in scientific discourse. Many of them are based on the concept of information/knowledge and its use in different areas of social life and institutions, such as: politics, economic reality etc. Some of definitions are centered around resources or products, institutions, activities, some of them mention global dimension, political control. Different models of information society demonstrate the importance of producing information and emphasize on shift to information industry and change in nature of work [11], however, the central place of information is the main similar characteristic in these models.

Talking about post-information society, considerations about the transition of the society from information to post-information one can be described with the same phases as the general transition to information society. These phases are delineated in F. Webster's book "Theories of Information Societies", where he delineates the changes necessary to form the type of society focused on information and communication as a way to transfer it.

The transition to post-information society happens after the spread of the so-called implementation of placeless connectivity. This means that in the post-information society, users will always be connected to the internet. There are also other characteristics that manifest the transfer to the post-information era, namely greater chances for the rapid development of countries, rising attention to the individual and moving the focus from interaction with people to interaction with technical means and with people through technical means [12].

All of this leads to the specific role of communication in post-information society. As it can be seen, the concept of (post-)information society is closely connected with new information and communication technologies (so-called ICTs). Along with mass media, they have transformed the communication process because of the changes in communication levels or types. Information and knowledge are transmitted through the different types of communication, which influences all spheres of social life. New technologies lead to the communication revolution, which has resulted in forming several levels of communication:

1. Communication between humans and machines linked by a technological system,
2. Communication between persons through the agency of technological systems,
3. Communication between technological systems through the agency of persons, and
4. Communication between groups and social systems [9].

We can state information culture is closely associated with the communications culture – the culture of communication between people, organizations, even technical means. Today, information culture requires the formation of a new type of thinking, the ability to adapt to the rapid changes and to analyze information rather than to know something by heart. The internet and its peculiarities have changed the communication processes the most. The main features of the internet are global many-to-many scope and reproducibility. Many-to-many scope can eliminate different physical barriers in the communication process. The same thing is with reproducibility, which facilitates communication [10]. The internet, as well as virtual reality technologies, makes it possible to communicate with people all over the world. This communication may happen not only with the help of messengers, websites and social

networks. There are different phenomena that form new communicative spaces for communities online.

As we can see, the development of ICTs added non-human agent of communication to the communication processes, in addition to the communication between people and social groups. As the communication can be understood as a process of interpreting signs, we see it

Video games are closely connected with ITCs, using all their means and combining new types of technologies. Consisting of narrative, video- and audio-components, video games combine them with different purposes, which places them on the at the intersection of different forms of art and media. There are also all mentioned levels of communication within the video game culture: communication between people and a machine (when a person interacts with a computer, mobile phone etc. to play a game), communication between people inside of video game world (through the game chat, streaming platforms), communication between organizations through interpersonal communication (e.g. communication between producers and developers), communication between a group of players of developers with social system (in this case, both internal social system of video game world and external society can be seen). Such complexity of communication levels inside of one phenomenon is of a great interest for contemporary science and philosophy, because video game phenomenon can be determining in all communication levels that it involves.

To describe the peculiarities of communication related to video games, we should consider the video game phenomenon and analyze specific features of interaction with it on different levels.

3.2. Video Games as a Specific Phenomenon of Post-Information Society

As we already mentioned, despite the growing interest to the video game phenomenon, there is no unified, generally accepted definition of a video game in game studies or the video game philosophy. There is, however, a significant number of defining characteristics of the video game concept in scientific discourse. Despite some differences in vocabulary definitions of the terms “computer game”, “digital game” and “video game”, they are usually used to refer to the same phenomenon and are considered interchangeable. We even can say that a “video game” is an umbrella term for digital play on different devices, including a personal computer, console, smartphone etc. (greig).

The problem of definition and conceptualization is discussed by J. Arjoranta [2] in his article “How to Define Games and Why”. He notes that defining games and video games is still relevant and will remain so, because people and their perceptions of games are changing simultaneously. He also points out the reasons why a researcher may need a

new definition of the game for research. Arjoranta does not offer his own unique definition of a video game, but analyzes and criticizes the previous ones.

In particular, he criticizes the definition given by Raffaello Bergonse [5] in the article “Fifty Years on, What Exactly is a Videogame? An Essentialistic Definitional Approach”. In this article, Bergonse tries to cover the existing approaches to the definition and concepts of video games, and then formulates his own definition, a synthesis of previous works, which, in his opinion, most widely covers video games as a complex phenomenon. After analyzing the approaches proposed by scientists who formed the basics of game studies, Bergonse synthesizes the definition and describes, in his view, five main features of video games.

Thus, according to Bergonse, a video game should be defined as a way of interaction between a player, a machine with an electronic visual display, and possibly with other players, mediated by a meaningful fictional context, and supported by an emotional connection between the player and his performance in that fictional context.

Arjoranta’s disagreement with this definition is reasoned as follows. He points to a false statement about the lack of preliminary definitions, which makes Bergonse’s statement erroneous in general. Bergonse presented an analysis of previously formed concepts, but did not take into account most of them in his conclusions. This led to the fact that the definition, which the author presented as general was reduced to technical characteristics and erroneous due to the use of erroneous principles. Later in the article, Arjoranta points out that new definitions still need to be formed, but they should meet certain conditions, in particular, not to lose the concept of the game, which is the basis of the video game concept.

We agree with Arjoranta’s point that there is a need to define a video game in the framework of the research conducted. In our research, we have chosen the description of video game through its main characteristics that are present in almost all definitions of video game rather than defining. In most definitions, video game is described as a game; it is played with the use of specific technical means; it is mostly interactive; it can consist of audio- or video-component, narrative; it is determined by some rules, especially on the technical level; it has different levels of subjects and provides specific communication between them; as other works of art, video games form their culture, however, it is unique due to mutual influence of different subjects in it. These components are united in the video game phenomenon; they made it unique in comparison with other works of art and media. That is why video game phenomenon as the ethical and educational determinant should have separate consideration – it is impossible to measure it the same way as other media. The most important difference between video games and other forms of art and media is their interactive nature. This feature makes it

possible to receive instant feedback on player's actions. Video games are interpreted by gamer in process of playing, and this interaction changes the process of further interaction.

There are various types of "real-time" interaction in video games. It can be both instant and terminated. Game world can be perceived and interpreted step by step, if the game is built accordingly, or instantly, in so called "real time". It changes the way how video games are interpreted by players [13], and, therefore, change the way of their impact on the player. The nature of game time changes the attitude towards the game – the game with "real time" which cannot be "stopped" requires more attention than "step-by-step" game. Some games are synchronized with the real time even when PC or console is turned off, and it also changes the way the game is played.

The influence of video games changes due to the change in subject of video game phenomenon. To understand how video game phenomenon appears as the determinant of information society, we should remember that in case of video games, there are three important categories of subjects that have mutual influence on understanding and evaluating video games.

The main focus of video game interactivity is a player, who is one of the subjects of video game culture. It is the player that directly plays the games and evaluates it, therefore, video game developers often focus on player's further interpretation of video games, their game experience. At least to some extent, the player is the one who determines the game culture: buys or ignores the latest releases, writes "walk-throughs" for online distribution, creates and distributes cheats, modifications and patches, and this activity undoubtedly blurs the gap between producer and consumer [7]. It is the players who are the central category studied in game studies.

The main difference between a player and a passive interpreter was described by E. Aarseth. The player and the spectator have different purposes of interpretation, and therefore different understandings of what and how they interpret [1]. The reader does not have to understand certain mechanics, to study the response to his actions – even in the case of an interactive book, this can change the order of the narrative, but not the narrative itself. The reader does not need to think about how to win over the books he reads; the viewer of the film does not require learning how to watch the film to watch it to the end. Due to this difference of purposes of perception and interpretation, the role of video games as a determinant also changes. Works of art determine the behavior and worldview of reader/spectator; at the same time, the interactivity of video games means that not only video game influences player, changing his or her worldview and determining behavior, but player also can change video game world. The way player makes decisions inside the game world often influences the development of narrative, transforms the game world. All the possible

actions that the player is able to do in the process of playing and all responses that a video game space can produce are usually called "gameplay". This term unifies the interaction between a player and a game, and namely in this process, the reading of meanings by the player occurs to learn how to play the game.

3.5. Act of Semiosis During Interaction With Video Games

Semiosis is the process of constituting a sign, connecting an entity with some meanings by an interpreter. It is believed that the philosophy of studying signs in general, or what we call semiotics, was formed by C. Peirce who began the work on studying signs and meanings in 1860s. In Peirce's view, semiosis is the process of forming a link between a sign as a signifier and an object [3]. It occurs both directly and through attaching characteristics and indirect senses to signifiers,

As we can see, the process of attaching a meaning to a sign is partially close to the hermeneutic triangle. However, while in hermeneutics, there are changes in main concepts describing the interpretation process (namely, there is possible transformation of the hermeneutic triangle and, in some games, even the "magic circle" itself) [14], the semiology of video games is different in terms of the specifics of attaching objects and actions to signifiers.

The very gameplay may be called the process of assigning and reading meanings. In terms of semiosis, it starts from the use of a controller to manipulate an in-game character. As J. Blomberg notes, the interaction between a video game player and game controller is a basic process of semiosis. He highlights three semiotic grounds for considering the relation between a game and controller, namely resemblance, contiguity and convention, which demonstrate the assignment of a symbolic meaning to buttons analogically to attaching objects to signifiers [6]. Another type of semiosis exists in many video games, and the more interactive they are, the more a player is involved in the process of sign-creating and interpreting. As A. Salin states in his hermeneutic analysis of video games, it is important to be able to interpret signs and means by which a video game teaches a player to communicate with it to understand and interpret its general meaning correctly [16]. The most common example is a "savepoint", a place or another way to save the game progress.

Some video games save the progress automatically, while other propose a player to find a safe place or a specific item for saving. For example, in old JRPGs, player often could save progress simply by finding the necessary section on the game menu. Other games, like "Resident Evil" series, have the so-called "save room", a room in which the player can save the progress and rest for a while. This place is usually free from enemies. In "Dark Souls" series, the bonfire which is a place to rest does not save progress as

usual, however, it is a player safe for the character. Savepoints may look differently according to the setting, but they all are signifiers of one and the same object. However, all of the signifiers used to mark savepoints have previously attached objects in real life. Thus, the attachment of the additional meaning that may replace the initial one occurs.

In video games, the replacement of meanings to signs is usual thing. When a player sees an object, he or she may interpret it mainly not according to the real meaning and object, but according to the in-game way of interaction. This also differs video games from other media, where signifiers are similar to their real analogues.

4. Conclusions

In contemporary society, which can be called post-information society due to the transfer of the most part of key social processes to the internet, digital and cyber spaces, the communication and interpretation becomes different too. Today, communication is organized mostly through technological systems. The COVID-19 pandemics facilitated the use of social networks and virtual spaces for speaking and meeting each other. Many phenomena differ while working in real and cyber spaces, and the process of attaching and interpreting meanings is not an exception.

Video game spaces change the process of semiosis, replacing the “real” meaning with the meaning, object or function needed for gameplay. The very process of playing a video game with the use of a controller is the process of semiosis itself. Therefore, we can talk about the specific feature of a video game phenomenon among other media: their interactivity important for understanding both the plot and the gameplay consists in the constant attachment of meanings and replacement of real objects linked with the signifiers. This feature underlines the uniqueness of the video game philosophy among the contemporary media. The analysis of in-game signs and their classification may be useful for further formation of the ground for unifying the theoretical knowledge in the area of game studies.

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