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## Phenomenon of Videogame Culture in Modern Society

**Słowa kluczowe:** gra; kultura; gra wideo; zjawisko; kultura gier wideo; grywalizacja.

**Keywords:** game; culture; videogame; phenomenon; videogame culture; gamification.

### Introduction

The game is a constant companion of human society since its emergence. Game creates a special form of social reality with its own rules, ethics, specific subject-object and subject-subject relations. In the epoch of digital reality, when virtuality becomes the main space of people's communication and cooperation, videogames become the dominant type of games. Today, there is every reason to claim that a videogame has been phenomenalized into a special type of culture, the study of which is of significant scientific interest.

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## Presentation of the main research

The scientific discourse is represented by a variety of approaches to defining the culture. This multiplicity predetermines the polydefinability of the researched concept and its irreducibility to a single conceptual definition. Often “culture” is applied so broadly, merely as “social pattern”, that it means very little (Surber J.P., 1998). Highly specific, idiosyncratic definitions also abound where the term is used in various contexts in support of any agenda.

When the term “culture” first appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary around 1430 it meant “cultivation” or “tending the soil”, following the Latin tradition of defining this term. Into the 19th century “culture” was associated with the phrase “high culture”, meaning the cultivation or “refinement of mind, taste, and manners” (Tharp B.M., 2009, p. 2). Definitions of this term existing in modern scientific discourse have similarities, what allows analyzing components of culture. In article ‘*What is culture? A compilation of quotations*’ (Spencer-Oatey H., 2012, p. 2) several key definitions of culture were given. We analyzed definitions given in this article and revealed next common features: culture is a complex of values, orientations, beliefs, behavior etc.; it is shared by individual as a member of society and by whole society.

In 2001 the UNESCO noted that culture should be regarded as “the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, [that] encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs” (UNESCO, 2001).

The term “culture” has different associations according to whether we have in mind the development of an individual, of a group or class, or whole society. The culture of individual is dependent upon the culture of a group or class, and the culture of the group or class is dependent upon the culture of the whole society to which that group or class belongs. The culture of individual cannot be isolated from that of the group, and the culture of the group cannot be abstracted from that of the whole society (Eliot T.S., 1949, p. 19, 22).

Culture is dynamic because ideas and values change, often very quickly, over time. Culture is multiple because it contains the activities of different classes, of different races, of different age groups. It is conditioned by political and economic forces: government policies, corporate research and development, market competitions. It is full of oppositions (Murphie A., Potts J., 2003, p. 7–8).

A digital culture is, like every culture, constructed according to norms, rules and traditions (Digital culture, Play, and Identity, 2008, p. 3). There are some differences between different types of culture, caused by the differences of basis of culture forming. So, to understand the essence of culture, we should disclose main features of its central phenomena. In case of videogame culture such phenomena are videogames as objects of culture and people who are connected with videogames (gamers, players, spectators, participators) as subjects of culture. Interaction between subject and object form ethics, morals, lifestyle etc. which are applied inside videogame culture and sometimes intersect with common culture. These moral features, as well as material features created in process of interaction, also are significant part of videogame culture.

Videogame culture is not identical with the digital culture and is not a part of the digital culture. In our opinion, they are two different types of culture that intersect with each other, have both common and specific features. Therefore, *the purpose* of our article is to analyze the videogame culture as a special phenomenon of modern society that demonstrates its uniqueness in relation to other types of modern culture.

The difficulty of analysis of videogame culture lies in fact that there is no common definition of the videogame. It is also worth noting that currently there is no common approach to defining the videogame in scientific discourse (Horban O., Maletska M., 2018, p. 29–33). In 2017, famous videogame researcher Raffaello Bergonse proposed the complex definition of videogame that was based on its five essential properties. He defined videogames as “a mode of interaction between a player, a machine with an electronic visual display, and possibly other players, that is mediated by a meaningful fictional context, and sustained by an emotional attachment between the player and the outcomes of her actions within this fictional context” (Bergonse R., 2017, p. 253).

However, this point of view was widely criticized by scientific community. In 2019, Finnish philosopher Jonne Arjoranta published critical remarks, stating that R. Bergonse ignored several previous researches that did not fit in his conception, and other essential features related to defining videogame. For example, the definition of R. Bergonse excludes zero-player games and games that are not played on “electronic visual displays”, like Johann Sebastian Joust or games in the Audio Game Hub. Bergonse also failed to consider the fact that videogames are games at least to some extent (Arjoranta, J., 2019, p. 1).

Many existing videogame definitions are based on the “game” concept. Analyzing problems of defining, J. Arjoranta noted that “there is no final definition of games as long as there are people capable of both

playing games and thinking about them” (Arjoranta, J., 2019, p. 7), because the world, people and their culture are changing. New examples of games or new practices around games need new definitions. In order to demonstrate it, J. Arjoranta used an example of the board game Mehen, that was played in Egypt over five thousand years ago. Mehen was somehow connected with burial rituals, but its exact purpose and rules have been lost. J. Arjoranta stated that “even if the original rules of this game were found, playing it as part of a funeral now would be equally odd and possibly offensive. Mehen might have not changed, but the culture around it has” (Arjoranta, J., 2019, p. 7).

The approach to defining the game, proposed by some modern philosophers, conceptually based on the Wittgensteinian “linguistic turn” in philosophy (Wittgenstein L., 1922), can be named the “language-game approach” (Arjoranta J., 2014). At the same time, this approach refers not to the analysis of the games themselves, but to the direct defining of the “game” concept. This direction of scientific researches is of undoubted interest, however, it goes beyond the scope of the purpose and objectives set by the authors of current study.

Defining games, many scientists try to find a common core for different games. Videogame culture is formed from different types of games that may have too few common features to be compared, however they all are games. So-called Zero Player Games (ZPGs) and Massive Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games (MMORPGs) serves as an example of this difference. These types of videogames are different not only in their mechanics, but also in player actions, attitude and behavior about the gameplay – process of playing.

Zero Player Games require no player to be played. The player acts as spectator and in some ZPGs can influence on the process of playing, but does not participate directly. One of the popular ZPGs is *Progress Quest*, which is indeed well-known as the progenitor of idle games – games with simple and minimal interactions. It was developed by Eric Fredricksen as a parody of fantasy-themed massively multiplayer online role-playing games like *Ever Quest* and released in 2002. It has been upgraded many times since then and is available for all platforms today. Setup the initial character, and the game progresses on its own. A set of progress bars is accompanied with lines of text describing the character activity. First a prolog, and then combat acts. The artificial character goes on a monster hunt. In time, some loot is accumulated, and the character goes to a market to sell it. The earned money is used to buy equipment, and then the hunting continues again (Top 10 Zero Player Games, 2017). The game is independent of player’s actions, player simply starts the game and then it

works without any participation. Other examples of ZPGs, as *Godville*, may propose short list of actions with the help of which player may change the situation on the game. However, these actions are randomized, and they may have no influence on the process of game. Some actions should be repeated several times to show certain results, some actions may have different impact after each repetition. ZPGs would not be interesting for players who want to interact with game process directly.

Another mechanics are offered by so-called MMORPGs. Massive Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games (MMORPGs or MMOs) are often considered highly social gaming spaces. Thousands of players share the same persistent game environment and control a single character, often in a fantasy of science-fiction scenario. As roleplaying games, they usually follow the hero's journey narrative with the development of the players' characters as the main goal of MMOs. They start out as nobodies and become stronger as they advance through the narrative. During their travels, players typically face challenges that force them to cooperate and create social ties. Most games also force players to choose a specific role during character generation to either deal damage to opponents (damage), support other players by healing (healer), or draw enemies away from them (tank) (Pietschmann D., Liebold B., Valtin G., 2017). Such games require player's skill, attention to the process of play and continuous interaction to be played.

One of the most famous MMOs is *World of Warcraft*. It was launched in November 2004, and by March 2007 it had 8.5 million active subscribers spread across four continents: Europe, North America, Asia, and Australia. The game is played online on servers run by Blizzard Entertainment. Hundreds of servers run independent copies of the game, each server allowing several hundred players to be online at the same time. Servers are designated for different geographical regions and run different languages (Digital culture, Play, and Identity, 2008, p. 4). In 2015, when Activision Blizzard last reported on *World of Warcraft's* subscriptions, the game had 5.5 million global subscribers (*Estimated number...*, 2019). This game forms complicated world with in-game mythology, ethics, social system. These parts of the space of this game influence on player's worldview and behavior, attitude to actions in this game and other games.

Differences between types of videogames may come from different manifestations of play in culture. Human culture has been connected with games since the beginning. Games in culture have different forms and levels of engagement. In his book '*Homo Ludens*' Johan Huizinga describes the play-element in culture and specifics of games in different types of human activity. According to his concept, play is elder than culture

in general. Many cultural phenomena, as, for example, religious rituals, are based on play. Play-forms can be found in philosophy, in art, in poetry, even in law and war.

J. Huizinga marks several characteristics of play in culture. *The first main characteristic* of play: that it is free, is in fact freedom. He notes that “Play to order is no longer play: it could at best be but a forcible imitation of it. It is never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty. It is never a task. It is done at leisure, during “free time”. Only when play is a recognized cultural function – a rite, a ceremony – is it bound up with notions of obligation and duty”. *A second characteristic* is closely connected with this, namely, that play is not “ordinary” or “real” life. It is rather a stepping out of “real” life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own. Play is distinct from “ordinary” life both as to locality and duration. *The third main characteristic* of play: its secludedness, its limitedness. As J. Huizinga says, “It is “played out” within certain limits of time and place. It contains its own course and meaning. Play begins, and then at a certain moment it is “over”. It plays itself to an end. While it is in progress all is movement, change, alternation, succession, association, separation. But immediately connected with its limitation as to time there is a further curious feature of play: it at once assumes fixed form as a cultural phenomenon. Once played, it endures as a new-found creation of the mind, a treasure to be retained by the memory. It is transmitted, it becomes tradition. It can be repeated at any time, whether it be “child’s play” or a game of chess, or at fixed intervals like a mystery. In this faculty of repetition lies one of the most essential qualities of play. It holds good not only of play as a whole but also of its inner structure” (Huizinga J., 1949, p. 8–10).

Videogames may be characterized the same way with some differences. Similar to other games, videogames may be leisure or hobby, players are free to decide whether play or not. Sometimes, however, videogames become some kind of obligation – if we speak about earning money with the process of playing. Videogames may be connected with ordinary and real life more than simple games. Videogame may show ordinary life of a person or simulate ordinary actions. For example, in *Botanic Balcony* player is able to plant him or her own virtual garden and tend to it, much like a real-life balcony in the house. Real and virtual stop being opposite categories and increasingly become parts of a single continuum, in which we find people, their communication practices and their acts of social life. Players are more than users, they become spect-authors, themselves producers of the game’s contents, and the game becomes more and more experience (Nardone R., 2017, p. 52). Videogames also may have no proper en-

ding. Some games are limited and have moment when they are “over”, but this does not pertain to the entire range of videogames. The videogame *Slime Rancher* may serve as one of examples of limitless videogames. The game tells the story of a woman looking after the special rancho with so-called “slimes”, however, the game does not end after the end of the narration. Player may continue playing and the gameplay does not change in this case. However, there also are videogames that cannot be repeated or that change with each repetition. For example, different ways of playing *Undertale*, role-playing game, change the narration in it. There are also genres that suppose one-time playing of the game or certain levels of the game. One of such genres is so-called *Roguelike*. In Rogue games each level of the dungeon is initially unknown and is progressively discovered as the rogue advances in the dungeon. Rogue has been one of the earlier examples of procedural generated levels, which was one of the main novelty when the game was introduced: every time a game starts or the player dies, a new level gets generated, every time different from the previous ones (Asperti A., Pieri C., Pedrini G., p. 146–147). So, once played, the level cannot be replayed again, game become different from its previous appearance that since the moment of change exist only in memory of a player.

We should also mark some difference between play and game. In ‘*Homo Ludens*’ J. Huizinga analyses language aspects, but he does not mark “play” different from “game” in English. He only notes that “playing is no “doing” in the ordinary sense; you do not “do” a game as you “do” or “go” fishing, or hunting, or Morris-dancing, or woodwork – you “play” it” (Huizinga J., 1949, p. 37). He examines words with meaning “play”, “game” in other languages, including Greek and Latin. Similar analysis was conducted by G. Frasca. He showed parallel between Greek, Latin and English words: *paidea* as an equivalent to the English noun *play*, and *ludus* for the noun *game*. *Paidea* is “Prodigality of physical or mental activity which has no immediate useful objective, nor defined objective, and whose only reason to be is based in the pleasure experimented by the player”. *Ludus* is a particular kind of *paidea*, defined as an “activity organized under a system of rules that defines a victory or a defeat, a gain or a loss”. Among videogames we can find examples of both *paidea* and *ludus*. *Ludus* have a defined set of rules. These rules can be transcribed, and easily transmitted among different players. Frasca mentioned Pac-man, Doom, Mario Bros., Myst as *ludus* examples. (Frasca G., 1999). Mentioned above *Botanic Balcony* is the game that belongs to *paidea* type. There are no conditions of victory or defeat in it, it is played for relax and pleasure.

We focus on the substance of videogames because the diversity of them creates the complex structure of videogame culture. Being different in so many characteristics and being partially different from games in common culture, videogames have formed special space with norms, rules and traditions, lifestyle and way of thinking, art and literature based on them. The common culture produced videogames; now culture is reflected and reproduced by videogames.

J. Huizinga also pays attention to a membership of play-communities that are formed in process of play, contest etc. A play-community generally tends to become permanent even after the game is over. As J. Huizinga says, "Of course, not every game of marbles or every bridge-party leads to the founding of a club. But the feeling of being "apart together" in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game" (Huizinga J., 1949, p. 12). In case of videogames the process of community forming is also present, people in these communities are united not only by process of playing, but also by similar worldview, values and moral norms, that often form in the process of interaction with the game. Videogame communities also serves as places to teach newcomers and share experiences. In our opinion, they are more stable than play-communities that were described by J. Huizinga.

Videogame community consists of people connected with videogames directly and indirectly, and also norms, ethics etc. of them. People who are directly connected with videogames are often named gamers. However, this term may refer to people who simply play the game or to people for whom videogames are more than entertainment or hobby. According to *'Cyberculture. The Key Concepts'* a gamer is one who plays computer games as a hobby. This is a term of self-identification used by those who make heavy use of games. Gamers can have negative attitudes to what they describe as 'casual gamers'. The industry and some individuals use the term 'hardcore gamers' to describe those who are most committed (Cyberculture. The Key Concepts, 2004, p. 73). In our article we use this term in relation to people who play videogames equally with the word "player".

The following statistics are very descriptive of quantitative parameters of the subject of videogame culture. The gaming market has been growing steadily for a couple of decades, and in 2018 it has reached historic numbers. China, the world's largest gaming market seems to be leading the way in terms of revenue generated through video games. In 2017, China produced one-quarter of all gaming income worldwide, more than USA and Germany combined. Currently, the Asia-Pacific region is



home to nearly 1 billion of gamers, a half of the entire gaming population in the world. Although gaming is often associated with younger generations, an approximate 15% of gamers worldwide are aged between 51 and 65. In addition, 63% of all gamers in 2018, are from 21 to 50 years of age (Digital Video Game Trends..., 2019). In the U.S. alone, 64% of the general population are gamers (10 Interesting 2018 Video Game..., 2018). These statistics show that videogames cover many people and spread widely in modern society. They are, in one or another way, bearers of growing videogame culture.

The subjects of videogame culture are not only gamers. People who are involved in videogame culture without direct interaction with videogames are also a significant part of it. They participate in social interaction inside the culture and influence on the forming of ethics and morals. Such people interact with user-generated content, are often interested in videogame characters, music, artworks etc.

User-generated content comes from regular people who voluntarily contribute data, information, or media that then appears before others in a useful or entertaining way, usually on the Web – for example, restaurant ratings, wikis, and videos (Krumm J., Davies N., Narayanaswami C., 2008, p. 10). User-generated content on videogames is a significant material part of videogame culture. It also serves as the way of social interaction between gamers and videogame communities. One of the most widespread forms of user-generated content that influences much on videogame culture is so-called “streams”.

Streaming is the process of real-time transmitting the video on the streaming platform. In case of videogame culture, it is the process of transmitting real-time virtual game environment and the process of playing. The phenomenon of streaming involves both people in the process of playing and people outside of it. Researchers have identified three types of streaming communities: eSports, Let’s Play, and Speedrunning. The most popular live-streaming community is the eSports community, where viewers watch highly competitive matches or tournaments, often played by professional video game players who belong to professional leagues. eSports and professional gamers are often the center Twitch (streaming platform) featured channels, where larger organizations broadcast tournaments, league games, or a daily show. The second most popular streaming community is Let’s Play. Let’s Play videos are often more casual than eSport, where the skill level of the player is not as important as the experience the streamer provides for viewers. Lastly, the third most popular streaming community is Speedrunning, which consists of players racing to beat a game in as little time as possible (Foster L.B., 2016, p. 15).

Let's Play is also considered as phenomenon separated from streaming. In this case it comprises non-narrative 'animated filmmaking within a real-time virtual 3D environment'. It is a contemporary social, productive and creative form within video gaming culture, where hacking and modifying content (modding) is often observed in the presumptive practices of its community. There is a significant social value of Let's Play. Comments and replies to specific comments indicate social engagement with the Let's Play community and reinforces the connection between the Let's Play player and their viewers. (Boomer J., Harwood T., Garry T., 2018, p. 239). Let's Play may also be considered as pre-recorded videos, while streams are always live. These phenomena determine the development of videogame communities and create space where norms, values and game ethics are formed.

Intellectual and emotional features of videogame culture are ethics, morals and values formed by game. They may correspond to similar features of common culture or be different from it in the case of rules of behavior, norms etc. inherent in game social space.

Being highly social gaming spaces, MMORPGs may be used as an example of videogame ethics, its features and forms. Miguel Sicart notes the following about World of Warcraft as an example of ethics in videogames: "Why is World of Warcraft a good example of how computer games' ethics are constructed? Because through time it is possible to see the different instances that create the overall values of the game. In the design of the game, both in the rules and in their implementation as a fictional world, we can see the designers initially affording certain kinds of gameplay, pvp, and leaving its constraining to the community. When playing this game, players constructed an implicit code of values that controlled the values of the game" (Sicart M., 2005, p. 16). When we speak about *World of Warcraft* in particular, we can note that social interactions are obviously affected by virtue ethics since they revolve around character development in the virtual world. Analyzing personal and social experience of playing, researcher Gustav Oqvist noted the following about it: "...the importance of individual acts has a much larger impact as they affect other players. The overall consensus seems to be that if you are nice to others, they will be nice to you. This is not very far from Kant's Categorical Imperative, e.g. for an act to be morally right, one must act in the same way as one would want any other to do in one's place. The game mechanics encourage players to seek help from each other, but since these are real persons, it is up to them to value the help they get. The feedback they give also fosters other players to play better" (Oqvist G., 2008).

However, MMORGGs are not the only example of specific ethics. Videogames form various types of ethics, for example, so-called PvP ethics. *Dark Souls*, videogame of action/RPG genre, had many rules of player combat from the start. When the rules were changed as a result of changing the game mechanics by developers, the community of *Dark Souls* changed too. This example shows the importance of in-game norms and values for the videogame community, its solidarity and stability. As M. Sicart points out, "Players are morally accountable, just like computer games are. As a matter of fact, the game as being, the actuality of the game, is a moral object and experience because its two main elements, the player and the rule/fictional systems, are ethical entities responsible for the well-being of the whole experience of playing a game" (Sicart M., 2005, p. 17).

## Conclusions

The modern world is characterized by the process of gamification. The gamification is a phenomenon of spreading of games in all spheres of human life, starting with various professional activities and ending with educational process. Society made the game more serious, meaningful for the social life of a person and included it in all possible spheres of activity. Among the various types of gaming activities, videogames are becoming more common and influential. The authors of current study provided an analysis of a special type of modern culture created by videogames and their subjects. Phenomenization of the videogame culture lies in the fact that videogames form a special space and community, specific rules and ethics, contribute to the extension of the language through specific terminology inherent to gamers – players constantly interacting in a videogame, create their own unique material and virtual artifacts. Becoming part of the culture, videogames have a significant impact on the socialization, worldview and value orientations of the individual.

## ZJAWISKO KULTURY GIER WIDEO W NOWOCZESNYM SPOŁECZEŃSTWIE

(STRESZCZENIE)

W artykule podjęto analizę dotyczącą zjawiska gier wideo jako szczególnego rodzaju rzeczywistości społecznej z jej specyficznymi relacjami podmiot-przedmiot i podmiot-podmiot. W epoce cyfrowej rzeczywistości gry wideo stały się dominującym rodzajem i tworzą pewien fenomen kulturowy. Wyjątkowość kultury gier wideo polega na tym, że budują one specjalną przestrzeń i społeczność, wytyczając specyficzne

zasady i etykę, tworzą własne unikalne materiały i wirtualne artefakty. Kultura gier wideo ma znaczący wpływ na socjalizację, światopogląd i orientację wartości człowieka jako poszczególnej jednostki.

## PHENOMENON OF VIDEOGAME CULTURE IN MODERN SOCIETY

### (SUMMARY)

In given article the philosophical reflection of the game as a special type of social reality with its specific subject-object and subject-subject relations is conducted. In the epoch of digital reality, videogames become the dominant type of games, which has been phenomenalized into a special type of culture. The phenomenon of videogame culture lies in the fact that videogames form a special space and community, specific rules and ethics, create their own unique material and virtual artifacts. Videogame culture has a significant impact on the socialization, worldview and value orientations of the individual.

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