

Babeş-Bolyai University

Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Science

PH.D. THESIS

– Summary –

(Scientific Domain: Philology)

The Explosion of Interactive Digital Media in Postmodernism.
Virtual References and Digital Fictions in Postmodern Video Games

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Cluj-Napoca
2013

Keywords:

Video games, postmodernism, referential speech, self-referential speech, narrative discourse, interactiv narrative, digital fictions, mass-media, internet, computer, wirtual worlds, artificial intelligence, video game types, usefulness of video games, digital simulations, paradigm schift.

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In our work we analyze the phenomenon of video games, their impact on art, media and society. At the beginning of our studies we sadly realized that most articles dealing with “new media” phenomenon starts with the hypothesis that video games are a new form of media - called in English: *new media* – which has not yet found a place on the multicolored palette of interactive multimedia and that is why they are misunderstood and unsupported by academic forums. Our research shows that disciplines that deal most video games are psychology and sociology, but also deals only with cases of addiction, excessive use or use to the detriment of useful activities.

In return for this negative attitude we have proposed an approach based on science art, history and mass-media theory by showing and proving that interactive digital world of the games are actually an organic continuation of ancient communication media of the modern era mass-media. In our chapter „New media and antiquity” we treat this issue in details, reflecting the fact that all the „explosions” of media find their roots in culture, but the technical solutions developed in the West propelling the global trajectories of East (for example: printing was invented in China, but Gutenberg used it for the first time in works with emphasized cultural impact). It is the same with video games: the first popular „actors” of these popular worlds were created by designers from Japan, Korea, etc. (For example Mario, one of the most popular figures in the video games industry, was designed by Japanese Shigeru Miyamoto), but they are successful thanks to the technical solutions developed in the West (especially the United States of America).

In light of these fact we can deduce that video games are a media phenomenon still "unsettled", which still has not found its place in global culture, but it has been over commercialized and therefore it is created a huge amount of video games that cannot be counted in real-time inventory – so it is understandable that relevant scientific analysis are in delay and that these *new media* „species” are viewed with disfavour by fans of art, literature and traditional media.

Through our work we demonstrate that interactive digital fiction can be used with beneficial purposes as games, but also in serious mediums – for example automotive simulators, flight simulators, and simulators for therapeutic purposes (for instance: „Virtual Cube” complex from Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, where, in 2011, within the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences was inaugurated this interactive, three-dimesional projection base, for the treatment of phobias, trauma, depression, etc.).

We believe that video games should be viewed much more nuanced than they are now, should not be judged, but should be recognized as potentially huge mediums that - well managed - can be a valuable new paradigm of media.

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Our thesis consist of 9 main chapters (see: „Content”).

In chapter **I. Introduction** we clarify our subject, but do not give a final definition – we give an explanation of this type of *new media* in chapter: „III.3.c.β. The concept of video games”. We give detailed argument on the causes why we chose this unusual topic. The biggest reason that we invoke is that so far no study has been published in Hungarian, similar to ours, which has as theme video games. The only monographic book which uses a different perspective (technical and scientific) appeared in 2010 and was written by an analyst and video game tester: Tamás Beregi. This author approaches the mass-media subject from another angle and only enumerates a chronological order without narrative or aesthetic look in the deeper layers of these creations. Through our philosophical and historical introduction, we want to put the video games in the context of postmodernism, the new media, and show that they can be perceived as developed artistic creations.

In our thesis we start with the description of the first computer models that run applications that can be called also games. For example we can mention the first attempts that have been developed at Massachusetts Institute of Technology: Mouse in The Maze, digital maze game, published in 1959, or Bouncing Ball, the same year that video games have become archetypes. We notice, however, that from the beginning most of this type of media had violent content. This phenomenon is explained by Georges Ifrah, who in its comprehensive volume devoted to the history of computers, found that first digital calculating machines were used for military purposes (from construction of Bletchley Park, England, which was used to break Enigma code used by the Nazis in world War II). Ifrah believes that Alan Turing and John von Neumann were the first to set up a universal computing machine, which then could be used to process images, sounds complex to simulate the movements and effects of plausible physical forces.¹

First 'entity' that can be called simple video game was called "amusement device with cathode ray" (Cathode Ray Amusement Device), this was used as part of an exhibition in 1947, and used to simulate the trajectory of a rocket. This installation was an analogue construction and did not work based on a computer program. Andrew Hammond has a possible explanation of the "militarism" of video games, that defined them since the beginning and we can see easily – also today it characterizes them, namely the Cold War, which was caused by western propaganda and communist propaganda, creating enormous tension in Western civilians, who could find relaxation through these fight simulations.² This „bellicose legacy” of the past haunts the video games. Many leading psychologists believe that these games can induce violence in children and adolescents,³ but there are researchers

¹ See Ifrah, 2001. 96. 280–281.

² See: Hammond, 2006. 6–8.

³ See: Anderson, 2006.

who believe that rather violent kids, with behavioral deficiencies are those, who choose with predilection the aggressive Games, and the behavior of the more conservative kids is not affected by the evil in virtual worlds.⁴ We believe that it is not recommended to consider video games as the causes of harmful behavior, but rather to consider them as symptoms of frustration, trauma life of players, who have no other ways to express themselves, so children choose unconscious refuge in virtual worlds that are expressions of trauma. So in our opinion the use of video games by the children should not be judged, but rather closely monitored.

But not only psychology and sociology have judged these digital games: the first important conference about video games with international participation was held only in 2001, in the UK⁵, while they were established since the 1970s - for example, game Pong, published by Atari in 1972, or Space Invaders, released by Taito Corporation in 1978. Space Invaders can be considered a successful remake of the first game with great impact: Spacewar!, Developed by Steve Russell, appeared in 1962.

But since the 2002, a global conference of video games is held annually called Games Convention, based in Leipzig. On this forum worldwide gamers with developers, designers and publishers of video games meet each other, that's why this is one of the most important events in the "life" of video games.

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In chapter II. **Hypothesis**

a) Firstly, we assume that video games are the most representative mediums of postmodernism - namely: the dissemination of meaning, the release of discourse of this paradigm

b) Secondly, we assume that video games are the culmination of a media convergence trends, but also as the beginning of a new multimedia paradigm.

After postmodernism focused on rhetoric has lost momentum, science and art oriented towards new possibilities of infinite spaces contained in video games, to the boundless resource exploitation lying in the interactive digital media. Science also had to realize that video games can not be characterized only by their rhetoric, but involves many other meanings for which no precise definition found. Given the fact that most books on video games are presenting actually only their simple history in which they are presented in different social and historical contexts, has not yet coagulated a science of video games, that go beyond the summary of psychology or sociology, set about this new type of media.

⁴ See: Kutner – Olson, 2008.

⁵ See: Kutner – Olson, 2008.

c) Thirdly, we assume that interactive digital environment creates a new framework for Dasein described by hermeneutic (Heidegger, Gadamer). The specialized literature calls this phenomenon cathartic: Immersion (English: immersion). We assume that the video games have created new ways to engage in artistic creation, and the confrontation with artificial intelligences included in more elaborate games can cause the illusion of participation itself.

d) Our last assumption is that video games are not only objects of escapism, but can "deliver" genuine aesthetic experiences, and this feature can be called among the most influential new media type products on the planet.

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In chapter III. We define the concepts and the research area is delimited.

În subchapter III.1. We analyze the connection of **postmodernism** with the video games and arrive to the conclusion that **hypothesis a)** is true. We start from WJT Mitchell's findings: pictorial turn can be interpreted⁶ as the first phase of transition from postmodern rhetoric discourses to the video games focused on images. Given the fact that the postmodernist discourse tends to be self-referential, it is the premise of the Worlds "self-sufficiency" of video games. The fact that the player can be a part of internal time of their domestic new media creations, and can influence the pace of the interactive world, it creates a state of Dasein differently by those that are induced by traditional media. We don't say that video games would provide superior sensations as other interactive media (eg interactive novels, poems or paintings interactive, interactive museums, etc..), but only say that the reception of video games are conducted involving more senses and more stimuli than in the "old" media. Paul Crowther believes that after the dissolution of legitimizing discourses, postmodernism has not been found, and losing pragmatism of power to describe causality, little by little it has "deconstructed" itself, but not entirely.⁷ We have to mention the book by Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy: L'écran Global. Culture-Médias et Cinéma à l'Age Hypermoderne, published in 2007, which states that postmodernism as such did not exist, but I actually experienced modernism led to extreme.⁸ But we cannot agree with these authors, because in our opinion exactly this "excess modernism" without limits and objective with exuberant difficult to analyze can be called postmodernism.*

In subchapter III.2. we analyze the our days multimedia phenomena and the birth of video games, and position them in the contemporary media. Supporting on the researchers of journalism history, the electronic media said, that media have always fascinated interactive and intelligent people,

⁶ Mitchell, 1995. 15–16.

⁷ Crowther, 2003.

⁸ Lipovetsky – Serroy, 2007. 51.

so we can identify elements of video games run even ancient Greek legends ("bots" from the workshop of Hephaistos). In modern times some "fictional prototypes" of artificial intelligence can be found in the novels of Mary Shelley, Jules Verne, HG Wells, Karel Čapek, Isaac Asimov, etc. Almost all the ideas and theories about virtual worlds, parallel worlds distant worlds, robots rebel, human monsters, and artificial consciousness, possible feelings of digital entities, etc, were further processed in very elaborate video games.

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In subchapter III.3. **Video games:** we start by determining the place of video games in new media, we continue with analyze the role of of video games piracy phenomenon. The positioning of the game in the human culture is done through the works of Johan Huizinga,⁹ Roger Caillois¹⁰ and Hans Georg Gadamer.¹¹ The conclusion of these chapters is that games, or, as Huizinga calls "play activity" is deeply embedded in human evolution, and most likely has a role in the socialization of the individual. Anthropology volume edited by Tim Ingold states that, in addition to the pragmatic aspects, the game may also have sacred dimension, which no trace can experience "real" transgressions limits imposed by society - especially by children, the mentally ill and shamans.¹²

Researching specialized literature, we found with amazement that the words "video game" has usually very brief and short definitions in specialized lexicons (Chapter III.3.c.β. examples of our thesis)

We analyze video games following Grant Tavinor's definition, the author of a book about the art of video games:

X can be considered a video game that is an artifact made in the digital environment and is designed for fun. These works should be used to allow us time to objective games, following rules or / and as interactive fiction¹³

The premise of objective rules rhymes with play category identified by Caillois called *ludus*, which defines in opposition to the type of game defined by him and called *paidia*, which has no established rules or purpose to be achieved.

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In chapter **IV.** we review two research methods used by us:

In subchapter IV.1. we review research on the history of video games. We follow the evolution of hardware sites and impact of these changes on the experience immersive. We found that the most

⁹ Huizinga, 1980.

¹⁰ Caillois, 2006.

¹¹ Gadamer, 1994.

¹² Ingold, 2003. 343.

¹³ Tavinor, 2009. 26. Translated by P. Á.

elaborate 3D games "provide" the most complex experiences, but also the simple, repetitive games can provide sensations that can degenerate into dependency. The most striking example is the Tetris game, developed by Russian engineer Alexey Pajitnov, published in 1985, which is now in the charts preferences of casual players - so those who use these types of new media to deal with at the moment, and not undertake long campaigns in virtual worlds. Next to *Tetris* we find *Mario*, whose first game was published by Nintendo in 1981, and became one of the most successful video game of all time. The volume edited by Straubhaar et al. states that in 2012 Super Mario Bros. was second in overall sales charts.¹⁴

In this chapter we say that in some extreme cases the simulated space and time in these virtual mediums can function as a replacement for reality, so some people using excessive gaming can lose sense of reality, they sometimes resort to violent acts inspired by the digital worlds. We can mention the case when a young Taiwanese 18, who died of heart failure after 40 hours of uninterrupted video game,¹⁵ also here we should mention the Columbine school massacre (in USA) - the authors were addicted minor violent video game players.¹⁶ Also the said event before the premiere of the *Batman movie: The Dark Knight Rises*.¹⁷ Unfortunately such extreme cases happened in Western Europe as well – in the school in Winnenden, Germany, where it was established a direct relation between the use of aggressive video games and the crimes author's violence.¹⁸ We can find another example of unethical use of video where the infamous Anders Behring Breivik, the Norwegian terrorist attack author, perpetrated in the summer of 2011, where the Norwegian police determined that the killer had used video games to practice target shooting,¹⁹ but the specialist psychologist established that this wasn't the real reason for aggressivity of Breivik's,²⁰ but used this video games only as tools to prepare for the attack.

However, apart from violent video games, there exist "peaceful" genres games, which cannot be named game in their strict sense, but may be used as such: professional and semi-professional simulators. In our work we treat in more details the case of CXC Simulations Company,

¹⁴ Straubhaar – LaRose – Davenport, 2012. 393.

¹⁵ <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/breaking-news/taiwan-teen-dies-after-gaming-for-40-hours/story-fn3dxix6-1226428437223>.

¹⁶ Authors: Dylan Klebold (18 years) and Eric Harris (17 years). See. <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/columbine-high-school-massacre>.

¹⁷ 20 July 2012. The Aurora masacre. Author: James Eagan Holmes (25 years). The specialist considers that he has organized his attack as in the popular video games. See Holmes, 2012.

¹⁸ 11 March 2009. Author: Tim Kretschmer. See. Kaiser, 2009.

¹⁹ Pidd, 2012.

²⁰ Parkin, 2012.

which produces plausible interfaces, identical with the real ones, obviously with the related programs. In this gaming area only Sega developed an arcade cabinet-complex motion effects like an airplane, called Sega R-360, which was put on the market in 1992, but could not be used as a simulator with a total value, remaining only in the games zone.

Near simulation applications, with plausible interface for professional and/or simple use, in our work we also treat the "Watson case" (made by IBM) is the smartest computer on the market yet that can beat humans at quiz games, maybe to overcome the tests of intelligence, and can simulate also creativity, but on this computer, which - at least until our days - may be termed the most human machine interface mattered not by its nature (being improvised for each test case in different mediums), but the complexity of the "thinking" machine.

Computer Watson was tested for the first time in front of public in 2011 is actually the successor of supercomputer Deep Blue – also made by IBM – which in 1997 beat world chess champion title holder, Garry Kasparov – this case is also treated in our work - only that Deep Blue was developed for a specific task (chess), but Watson was designed to be as versatile as possible (has been tested in gastronomy and also in medicine or banking environment).

These trends show that computer games are becoming more and more serious, so we can call that the first phase simulations missiles began in the 1950s and lasted until the Sega R-360, Deep Blue and Watson era of experimentation with this new environment. We assume that in short time there will be a new generation of interactive programs that can interact intelligently with people around them, and not just using predetermined algorithms or variables generated by chance - as they have done before. In our thesis we analyze the case in which the computer works on quantum physics, developed by Canadian company D-Wave, which - if it will be sold in large quantities - may induce a paradigm shift in the interaction with intelligent programs.

We assume that this change - if it happens - will enable intelligent editing of video games that will allow more complex interactions, and also eliminate these products prejudices surrounding the new media. Until then we must prepare effective and complex approaches for analyzing video games and we have to stop judging after the unfortunate events mentioned above, but to appreciate the aesthetic and dramatic potential of these creations.

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In subchapter **IV.2.** we present the **types and genres of video games.** We use the classification system proposed by Mark JP Wolf,²¹ we have reduced to 13 categories:

²¹ Wolf, 2008c. 261–264.

- V.2.a. Abstract / Puzzle video games
- V.2.b. Demo's of the video games
- V.2.c. Capturing / Catching / Collecting video games
- V.2.d. Combat / Fighting / Shooter / Target video games
- V.2.e. Adventure / Interactive Movie video games
- V.2.f. Educational / Quiz / Simulation video games
- V.2.g. Platform video games
- V.2.h. Rhythm and Dance video games
- V.2.i. Sports / Game / Activity / Gambling Adaptation video games
- V.2.j. Strategy video games
- V.2.k. Escape / Dodging / Obstacle Course / Maze video games
- V.2.l. Role Playing video games
- V.2.m. Driving / Flying / Racing video games

We chose 3 games from each category (except V.2.d. category, where we analyzed 4 games) which we illustrated and the technical development of interfaces and their hardware, but also the change in the interaction of the various possibilities immersion.

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In chapter **VI. We draw the conclusions of our thesis:**

a) In subchapter III.1. we have already arrived to the conclusion that hypothesis a) is true: video games are the most representative mediums of postmodern media.

b) In subchapter III.2. and III.3. we proved that video games are the culmination of the media convergence trends, but also the beginning of a new multimedia paradigm.

c) In subchapter III.3. and chapter V. we proved that interactive digital medium creates a new framework for cathartic dasein described by hermeneutic (Heidegger, Gadamer).

d) In subchapter III.3. and chapter V. we proved that video games are not only escapism objects, but can "deliver" genuine aesthetic experiences, and this feature can be called among the most influential new media type products on the planet.

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Chapter **VII. is the epilogue of our thesis**, in which the author presents brief encounter with this "species" of new media, recalls some subjective experience and proofs again that we need to treat video games more carefully because, it is possible to develop highly interactive applications, which are useful and very aesthetic.

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Chapter **VIII. contains our thesis bibliography.** We used about 200 books and printed articles, over 30 articles from the internet with identified authors and over 100 articles with unidentified authors. (See attached bibliography at the end of the summary.)

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Chapter **IX.** it contains **the list of cited video games in this work.** In thesis we refer to over 200 video games, from which we analyzed 40 in detail.

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The last chapter number **X.** it contains illustrations by which we showed some interference between video games and film, we looked for some pictures telling the world famous video game characters and brought another argument to our assumptions c) and d) on aesthetic and pragmatic value of the produced video games.

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