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Keywords: video games, transmedia, immersion, flow, gameplay, crowdsourcing, political engagement, cultural industries.

Summary

This thesis is an introduction in the study of video games, examining them as an independent and mature communication medium, and trying to bring out the characteristics that determine the specificity of the medium. To accomplish this, we have taken a multidirectional approach, to offer a wide perspective on the subject.

The first chapter clarifies the basic terms used in the paper, defining and developing the concept of games, at first in the traditional sense and then narrowing (or, in certain cases, expanding) the discussion to determine what video games are, in particular. In this process we bring together established theorists of games, such as Johann Huizinga, Roger Caillois and Brian Sutton-Smith, with new voices, directed especially (but not exclusively) towards the digital space, represented by researchers such as Jesper Juul or Espen Aarseth and designers including Eric Zimmerman and Chris Crawford, to offer as complete a view as possible.

Next is a presentation of the historical context in which videogames developed, starting with the researches in computer science after World War II, through their escape from the academic environment and the boom at the beginning of the 1980s, up to the seventh generation of consoles, digital distribution and the spread of mobile devices. The way in which the global developments, with the USA and Japan as forerunners, have reflected in Romania is also discussed. Following past trends, we then attempt to outline a brief estimation of future developments.

The third chapter introduces video games as part of the current media industry, starting from the phrase “cultural industry” coined by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer to describe the state of culture in the first half of the 20th Century. The term, initially a cynical remark, came to represent the media system, of which video game production is a part. The integration in this system allows for a discussion on common grounds of video games in parallel with other cultural artefacts such as films, television productions, music or books. In this context, we open the debate on transmediation and media convergence, approaching

the new tendencies to extend universes previously present in a single medium into several media, to take advantage of the specific characteristics of each one, and to develop new business models to maximize the impact of any single intellectual property.

The following chapter outlines the need for a new way of looking at the use of interactive media. The player has a much more active role and, as such, a much more important one, in the process of meaning-making, than the viewer of a film or the reader of a book, for example. Even if the meaning is generally shared between the creator, consumer and community, in games, the player partially becomes a creator, influencing the shape of the final product. This complicity between the two roles leads to an analysis of the cultural artefact not as a static text in a fluid context, but as a fluid text in a fluid context. From this perspective, games can be analysed only as experience, as interaction between player and content. To facilitate this type of understanding, theories that bring into view the details of the relationship of the user with the product are presented, introducing terms such as gameplay, flow, immersion and presence.

In the fifth chapter we direct our attention more towards the production process, but from a less common angle: game creation by players. More concretely, we discuss the phenomenon of crowdsourcing, the way in which communities are built around video games, and what the motivation of these voluntary producers is for offering their resources for free.

The final two chapters examine video games as a communication medium more closely. The sixth chapter looks into the use of online games as instruments for political communication, in a society in which involvement in political debates is lower and lower. Recent attempts to engage people in the political process have had to use new communication media, infiltrating the virtual spaces in which more and more people spend their free time, to be able to start a conversation. The nature of online content and of online consumption, however, determines new ways of political engagement and a new paradigm, in which video games can be a central element. In our research on the most popular political games online we identified a set of characteristics of games that makes them suited for use in political communication, but which, in their turn, direct the tone of the conversation towards playfulness.

The final section of the thesis is dedicated to an in-depth analysis of the transmedia project *The Walking Dead*. A very successful franchise at the moment, with a lot of products in multiple media, offers a very good opportunity to identify the position and specific characteristics of videogames in comparison to other media, and to see the relationship between them. Concentrating on the main three products in the franchise, the comic book, the television series and the adventure game, the research applies an analysis grid meant to bring out the way in which similar contents behave differently when translated across media, the way in which media can communicate between themselves and what the role of the consumer is in each instance.

Beyond the conclusions of the studies and analyses in this paper, uniting these different perspectives and methods of approaching video games in the current media landscape, we create an image of the importance of the subject that is discussed, and contribute to and encourage new research directions in the Romanian space.

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