
CONTEMPORARY DIGITAL ROLE-PLAYING GAMES AND THEIR CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

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Abstract

Digital role-playing games are a kind of late-modern media production which seems to be closely related to global cultural trends in the 21st century. The article works with a basic assumption that digital games, also called computer RPGs or RPG video games (depending on their different understandings and communication platforms they use), need to be seen as a powerful cultural element associated with specific emotional as well as cognitive experience. This type of experience is, according to the current scholarly discussions on the given issue, able to offer its users not only entertainment and pleasure, but also deeper emotional engagement. Digital role-playing games can, along with their cultural value, influence the processes of perceiving everyday reality and our reactions in various communication situations. The author aims to contribute to these discussions and opinions by offering a set of theoretical outlines which put emphasis on various cultural processes related to digital role-playing games and their current understandings in different contexts – mostly in the context of so-called media culture.

Keywords: digital games, culture, genre, industry, media entertainment

1. Introduction

Digital role-playing games are currently one of the most popular forms of virtual media entertainment. Increasing tendency of the users (players) to experience the stories of role-playing games in all their complexity, i.e. through transmedia narratives, strengthens the cultural and economic value of these games, along with their technological perfection, graphics and visuals. During more than two decades of its existence the digital role-playing has manifested itself through many different forms. These games are able to appeal to the fans of massively popular literary and film genres of late-modern fiction (mostly fantasy, science-fiction and horror), offering them opportunities to experience game environments that are based on free exploration of one's own imagination and co-creation of one's own heroic stories. It seems that digital role-playing games are so attractive for contemporary media users thanks to their ability to express thematic variability and universal human values, to portray spectacular

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fictional realities, to communicate with their users interactively in order to reflect on their individual emotional needs. In our opinion, it is reasonable to see the contemporary virtual forms of role-playing as one of the most progressive game genres.

Genre characterisations of digital role-playing games have to consider variability of their different forms – some of them are designed to be played by massive amounts of participating users, in extensive environments that allow the players to move freely and cooperate in order to create individualised adventures and stories (massively multi-player online games, i.e. MMOG). Other role-playing games offer heroic stories which unveil within previously determined schemes that may be, to some extent, personalised (single-player digital role-playing). J. Malíček's definition indicates that a digital role-playing game is a kind of digital game based on controlling a story and adventure of a group of characters (a party). The player, who is also personified into the main character (the hero), assumes the position of 'someone watching above' and leads the small team (the group or party) while experiencing different stories, circumstances, worlds, and surroundings. The pre-established teams frequently engage in physical, psychological and magical (or technological) fights against enemies. These games also tend to involve solving puzzles and riddles, acquiring rewards, trophies and information that is necessary to access the next part of the story [1]. It follows that heroic stories and scenarios are the key feature and the driving force of digital role-playing's significant popularity.

Most contemporary digital role-playing games involve heroic stories that are based on wholly fictional worlds or alternative realities. However, a few of them also offer various imaginations and pessimistic views of the past, present or future (dystopias) or, eventually, experiment with entirely different themes and motives and are therefore hard to categorise. Such complex and visually compelling fictive realities, thanks to dynamic development of computer-generated imagery, three-dimensional modelling, motion-capturing and game design, seem to be utterly real – mainly in the moments of playing the games. The imaginary realities associated with digital role-playing games and their narratives are often highly developed and convincing. These fantasy worlds have their own rules and laws, history, geography, often even language and mythology that make the storylines seem very authentic and comprehensive [2].

2. Digital games culture and its parallels with media culture

Looking back into the history of mass media and modern communication tools, we have to mention that many once new communication forms have been discussed critically for many years since their emergence and society-wide establishment. It is no surprise that digital games – of course, not only the genres which tend to employ role-playing elements – have faced the same (perhaps even more intense and serious) critical remarks and doubts related to their overall cultural value. Ian Bogost claims that many initial scholarly discussions on digital (computer) games have pointed out their childish nature – older

opinions of interested theorists and researchers have labelled digital games as trivial, entertaining, but hardly educational; as forms of entertainment children and adolescents would eventually grow out of. However, the author argues that even if the digital games were children's entertainment (they were not and never had been), it would be hardly acceptable to treat them as insignificant in terms of media research and scholarly discussions [3]. However, the current situation in the field of media studies and related scientific disciplines indicates that the older opinions have changed entirely. Digital game studies are one of the most progressive and inspirational fields of media studies – especially in Anglo-Saxon academic environment, but also worldwide.

It is necessary to mention here that the term 'digital game' seems to work as a compromise between 'computer game' and 'video game', turning attention to similar or identical aspects of these virtual forms of game experience. For example, in case of Slovak media theories it would be more appropriate to work with the term 'computer game' since media recipients in Slovakia traditionally tend to prefer playing digital games on personal computers than on specialised video game consoles. However, the gaming consoles function as multimedia entertainment devices too and are no longer meant for playing digital games only. On the other hand, research documents and theoretical frameworks related to digital games and their use in, for example, the United States of America, have to distinguish between 'computer' and 'video' games more thoroughly. Data included in the document published by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) titled *Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry 2015* clearly indicates that top devices the most frequent gamers in the USA use to play digital games are personal computers (62%), dedicated game consoles (56%), 'smart' phones (35%), wireless devices (31%) and dedicated handheld systems (21%) [Entertainment Software Association, *Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry 2015*, <http://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/ESA-Essential-Facts-2015.pdf>]. It also means that the North American digital games market has to take into consideration two equally important segments – computer games and video games which are played on game consoles such as Xbox or PlayStation.

As we have stated above, playing digital games has been seen as an activity which lacks opportunities to social and cultural ascension, either offering escapist experiences in exchange for money and one's free time or even degrading the players' ethical and moral values. However, such simplifications are neither able to react to the current cultural trends appropriately, nor they are capable of explaining the fact that most players today have been in direct contact with digital games since early childhood and still tend to spend their free time playing games on consoles or computers. So-called 'Millennials', people who were born later than in 1982, grew up playing digital games and do so as adults too. The Entertainment Software Association claims that the average American game player is now 35 years old [Entertainment Software Association, *Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry 2015*, [157](http://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/ESA-Essential-Facts-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

2015.pdf]. The ‘Millennials’ are, according to Neil Howe and William Strauss, unlike any other youth generation in living memory. They are, beside being more numerous and affluent, also better educated, and more ethnically diverse [4]. Taking into account this fact, we presume that digital role-playing genres, as specific kinds of gaming experience, are able to offer impulses, entertainment experiences, emotions and stories that are attractive for children and teenagers (however, it is necessary to mention that many of them are not suitable for minors due to involving violence, sexual content or strong language) as well as for adults.

As suggested by Jaroslav Švelch, contemporary digital games are able to communicate simple entertainment, military training, complex situations and artistic visions. They are implemented into everyday communication through their themes, work as a source of metaphors, inspire many artists, and are useful in terms of educational processes, advertising and propaganda. Moreover, the author places emphasis on the fact that digital games are, most of all, cultural artefacts that may be studied regardless of their technological determination [5]. The above-mentioned notions claim that new trends in discussing digital games – whether theoretically or empirically – are also related to game development as such and reflect demographic shifts in their audiences.

The digital games industry has changed significantly as well. According to Aphra Kerr, “the digital games industry is now an important part of the wider cultural industries” [6]. The industry is far from uniform; it includes a number of competing technologies and business models, and while the console segment currently dominates in terms of sales, massively multi-player online games and mini games provide interesting alternative business opportunities as well. The digital games industry is one of the most globalised segments of media production. The international media communication is a source of practically unlimited amounts of information and entertainment, offering us various elements of spiritual and moral values, role models, stories, and their heroes. Media producers focus on publicly promoting explicit and implicit suggestions related to lifestyle, providing us with a space to present and discuss political opinions and economic trends [7]. Digital role-playing games have quickly adapted themselves to the ways media communicate social, cultural and economic reality of our everyday lives as they include diverse, attractive variations of media fiction.

Seeing digital role-playing as an artefact of media culture, as an integral part of the current late-modern communication situation, we have to necessarily mention one of the key definitions of media culture proposed by Douglas Kellner. The author states that it is industrial culture produced for a mass audience, which follows types (genres), conventional formulas, codes, and rules. Its commercial nature results in producing commodities which function as sources of private profit. All large media enterprises typically aim to accumulate capital. Moreover, media culture is a high-tech culture – it uses the most advanced technologies, merging culture and technology effectively [8]. Taking into account the previous definitions and remarks related to digital role-playing

games and Kellner's concept of media culture, it seems that digital role-playing games are, in fact, not that different from other (more 'traditional') kinds of media production. David Myers says that playing digital games is also not so different from, for example, reading books – it similarly involves a predetermined set of basic rules and the reception processes result in transformation of stories into highly personal experience that may be different for all players [9].

J. Radošínská and J. Višnovský see the notion of media culture as semantically more 'neutral' in comparison with the concepts of 'mass culture' and 'popular culture' [10]. Discussing the culture of digital role-playing, we need to acknowledge that the spectrum of gaming platforms and reception activities related to the contact between players and digital games complicates distinguishing between mainstream digital games and gaming artefacts that are meant for alternative (subcultural) audience groups. Two decades ago digital role-playing games were hardly a part of blockbuster game production meant for mainstream gamer audiences. However, the situation has changed because nowadays the mainstream cultural products (including digital games) as well as the forms of alternative culture are produced and disseminated through the exact same production and distribution procedures and communication channels. Moreover, Martin Solík and Martin Klementis point out that popular culture is typical for its ambiguity, which is a result of ongoing social inequalities in the society [11]. That is why it seems to be appropriate to look beyond the traditional distinctions between 'mass' and 'popular', i.e. through perspectives associated with media culture.

3. Digital role-playing game as a culturally significant form of popular entertainment

All processes of creating cultural environments and texts can be fully understood and analysed only in the contexts of social systems within which they exist. The key notion here is the word 'popular'. As John Fiske observes, popular forms of culture and entertainment cannot be manufactured since the popularity as such is generated through media audiences' emotions, opinions, and cultural experiences. The author's remarks related to popular cultural forms are terminologically anchored thanks to seeing the concept of popular culture as the culture of the people [12]. The members of contemporary media audiences – especially those who are interested in mainstream, globally available media products – belong to various social groups and live in different cultural circumstances. All forms of media culture in the 21st century, no matter how much standardised or unified they really are, strive to appeal to their audiences by emphasising their own uniqueness, by encouraging them to create their own (individual) cultural experiences. Digital role-playing games, which allow their users to assume virtual identities and explore them within story-driven, visually rich fictional environments, may offer personal emancipation as well as

opportunities to fulfil one's own tastes and preferences to mediate desired emotional fulfilment through unique, individually created meanings.

According to Janet H. Murray, one may argue that digital games (especially those that are significantly story-driven such as digital role-playing games, the remark added by J. R.) are "becoming the assimilator of all earlier forms of media culture" by allowing players to take on the characters of print fantasy literature or popular films. As the author continues, "they incorporate cinematic characterization, lighting, camera angles, and even allow players to make their own movies within the game environment (a new narrative format called machinima)" [13]. Digital games of the 21st century include music, graphic design, and dialogue, and widely use popular narrative elements and genres such as adventure, romance, and superheroes.

Digital role-playing games are no exception as they are strongly influenced by the key aspects of modern and late-modern culture and by the current development tendencies of media culture. They typically appeal to audiences which are generally interested in late-modern fiction and fantastic genres, themes and motives. H. Pravdová, Z. Hudíková and E. Habiňáková state that these matters are closely related to the cultural imperatives of being 'IN' or 'OUT'. Cultural imperatives create and shape 'the cult of image' by supporting the processes of uncritical worshipping and imitation. The cult of image (as a part of 'IN' imperatives supported and disseminated by the media industry) seems to be one of the most effective marketing strategies [14]. Mainstream digital role-playing games use those strategies quite effectively – all of their thematic elements, stories, characters and fictional environments refer to currently popular (IN) cultural spheres and aspects of the everyday reality, popular leisure activities, tastes and ways of life.

Role-playing forms are quite diverse, even in the digital environment. Even single-player digital role-playing games (moreover, many of them do include also multi-player modes, i.e. online modes) tend to explore the possibilities of genre hybridisation in order to meet various expectations of potential players. Although being formally so different from many other kinds of mediated cultural production (e.g. television shows, Hollywood blockbusters, literary fiction), computer role-playing games gain their popularity under the same circumstances – the contemporary trends in media production routinely employ genre hybridisation, innovative elements of interaction, spectacular visuals and heroic stories in order to attract the audiences (or users) and keep them engaged [2]. In our opinion, the cultural significance of digital role-playing games is directly connected with consequences of the shifts in 'Western' cultural paradigm that started to resonate significantly in the middle of 1960s. Their current popularity in the Western world builds upon the general changes in cultural tastes, leisure preferences and individual lifestyles (e.g. youth movements, countercultural values, subcultures, sexual revolution, increasing interest in mysticism and mythology as a form of substitute neo-spirituality).

In case of digital role-playing games, creative and emotional engagement of players can be divided into various phases. Sarah Lynne Bowman's

categorisation work with four different stages of ‘evolution’ of a virtual hero (as we have stated above, the key aspect of digital role-playing is related to experiencing heroic stories through self-identification with their heroes, the remark added by J. R.). The process starts with choosing a basic profile of one’s virtual avatar – e.g. race, class or specialisation (different game genres offer different profile classifications). The virtual hero, i.e. the player’s role, is next given a set of psychological traits and moral choices by picking one of the available ‘origins’, past experiences or talents. These features are often inspired by motives and story elements of the player’s favourite literary fiction and other forms of popular culture texts. They also take into account the game story’s setting and genre (e.g. fantasy, science-fiction, horror, etc.). The third phase is based on interactive communication between the player and the game environment as well as on establishment of symbolic relationships with the hero’s companions and support characters which include love, friendships, sympathies, but also antipathies. The last phase may be defined as self-identification – building upon own preferences and imagination, the players identify themselves with the heroes, assuming the given ‘roles’ [15].

The phases outlined above are, however, rather associated with emotional experience than cognitive mechanisms. Although digital role-playing is generally seen as one of the most interactive forms of gaming, interactivity is not, at least by itself, a process of reasoning. Alexander Plencner remarks that interactivity is rather engagement, investment of our attention and time and cannot be automatically considered as a critical practice [16]. It is thus reasonable to presume that the mentioned processes of self-identification with a virtual hero are based mostly on emotions and intrinsic impressions.

People who may be categorised as the most frequent players of digital games or those who play them intensively tend to adopt very specific types of communication practices and mutual interactions that manifest themselves in their everyday reality. Even massively multi-player online role-playing games (*World of Warcraft* is probably the most popular role-playing title which has been created so far), which are based on cooperation between players, do not offer unlimited and complex forms of their in-game interactions. Strong emotional investment typically results in need for communicating about the favourite game in the ‘real life’ too. Even though some digital role-playing games were released years ago and their technological (formal) aspects are now considered as outdated, they still enjoy cult followings. Their fans keep them ‘alive’ via websites and social networks, videos or texts that offer impeccable gaming strategies and walkthroughs, and fan-made fictions which expand the original stories, i.e. by producing so-called works of fan fiction.

Emergence of such a metaculture (fanbases, communities on online social networks, discussion forums, and fan conventions) brings a lot of opportunities for media producers and advertisers. In accordance with typical communication strategies of media culture, these cultural elements based on emotional engagement and stirred feelings of self-realisation go through ‘materialisation’ – popularization of ‘cult’ role-playing games results in organising massive (and

commercially oriented) fan conventions, creating new instalments of the original stories and re-shaping the primary fan communities. Social networking seems to be one of the most effective ways of spreading awareness of digital games. Even though the term ‘social network’, as J. Višňovský points out, is certainly not new (Social sciences and Humanities such as Sociology, Anthropology or Psychology have been using it for quite a while), its current understanding – based on virtual communication practices and easy creation and sharing of user-generated content – makes the social network a unique, highly attractive communication channel [17]. It is not surprising that many contemporary fan communities related to digital role-playing games have emerged mostly on social networks.

Hana Pravdová observes that new scientific and scholarly discourse in the areas of gaming activities, functional dimensions of the digital games and game industry principles offers a new space for addressing this issue through Philosophy, media and cultural studies, social and cognitive Psychology, media sociology or Informatics [18]. This argument seems to be especially relevant in case of digital role-playing games – these full-fledged heroic stories and visually compelling environments, along with available alternative endings and optional features, offer the players many opportunities to interpret human relationships and fatal events as well as to explore their own reactions to diverse kinds of crisis situations.

4. Conclusions

Digital role-playing games represent new trends in popular culture and their strengthening connection to virtual reality and cyberspace, as well as long-lived ways of ritual behaviour which is, in many different forms and versions, natural for the whole humankind. We may even assume that all kinds of role-playing, whether digital or experienced physically, allow participants (users, players, actors) to fulfil their need for engaging in late-modern forms of rituals which react to contemporary social and cultural reality [2].

As well as other types of digital media and virtual environments, these highly interactive digital games are currently subject to intense academic discussions and researches. While respecting the older arguments and empirical data offered by psychologists and sociologists that may have once been accurate and now are outdated, digital gaming forms including role-playing have ‘grown up’ to become highly popular forms of media culture. They may, although just in a small number of cases, aspire to be seen as artistically and aesthetically valuable. Many scholarly studies and discussions on digital games focus on their potentially negative influence, mostly because of the fact that they involve explicit portrayals of violence, brutality and (causing) someone’s death without consequences, even if this ‘someone’ is just a virtual character.

However, such images are not related just to digital games – other forms of portraying violent spectacles have been, in many different forms, parts of the timeless cultural cores (e.g. archetypes, myths, religious motives) defining our

individual and collective identities since the earliest periods of human existence. Various drastic 'scenes' may be identified in mythology, archetypal heroic stories, fairy tales, as well as in religious texts. The same seems to be true in case of art – brutality is an expression tool which is typical for artistic creation and cultural interaction at all levels, from the lowest forms to the most elite ones. On the other hand, portrayals of explicit violence in digital games are – just like in case of blockbuster movies or other media products based on 'strong' (spectacular) visuals – definitely communicated as banal and routine.

All kinds of digital games and problems related to their omnipresence in the contemporary society have been transformed into tentatively accepted but nevertheless highly important discussion topics in the academic circles all over the world. The above-mentioned virtual forms of brutality and destruction included in digital games may or may not influence their audiences negatively. Thematic principles of digital role-playing games are strongly intertwined with fictional genres, mostly with science-fiction and fantasy. The expressivity of specific story elements thus may or may not be criticised in terms of the ethical values of good and evil. Many digital role-playing games offer a lot of options how to solve critical situations and not all of these choices are violent. Different virtual 'situations' result in diverse emotional ordeals; they can be experienced symbolically, within safe virtual environments.

One of the most attractive elements of digital role-playing is its socialising potential. Players are able to become 'leaders' of groups which cooperate in order to achieve desired outcomes. This opportunity to experience the feeling of 'being the leader' is based on decisions about what to do next, on tactical coordination of the virtual 'team'. Such experiences are perceived as highly liberating and emancipative. However, the virtual gaming environments, no matter how refined and visually complex they really are, are still limited in terms of choosing one's own decisions since all situations are solved in accordance with one of the available pre-set outcomes. The processes of decision-making are therefore in the hands of game developers and screenwriters rather than being associated with playing the game.

Nonetheless, all types of digital role-playing games offer experience with solving conflicts or critical situations. Being able to solve a problem successfully brings many benefits to the stories or the hero's attributes, while failures tend to have negative consequences, although only in terms of the game. Their narrative features also involve feeling of leadership, team work, dealing with problems from various points of view, observation and exploration, encountering alternative cultures and sometimes even elimination of cultural prejudices. Unfortunately, these communication processes may (and sometimes do) result in reducing one's ability to distinguish between the virtual environment and the ordinary (real) world and their different rules. The consequences can be severe, psychological, social or both. Man is a social animal; the experience of possible social isolation caused by excessive engagement with unreal (virtual) narrative is hard to cope with and therefore highly dangerous.

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