

VIRTUAL WORLDS AND LACAN. TRANSCENDENCE IN COMPUTER GAMES

1. Paul Virilio's remarks on passive/ active subject of virtual worlds

45

Social and/or philosophical critique of virtual worlds is marked by a certain paradox. Cyberspace is understood as “the falls approximation”, “degraded copy”, “seductive substitution of the real” (Virilio, 1995). “Computer-communication narco-economy”, claims Paul Virilio, is next to the illicit drugs-based narco-capitalism” (1995). At the same time Virilio notices different effects of cyberspace. He writes about “accident of reality”, violent effect of cyberspace as great” and “never-seen accident of the future” (1995). There is an obvious inconsistency in describing a subject and virtual worlds. Firstly, subject has been described as passive and narcotized, immersed in virtual world without any wish and strength to actively participate and understand his/her position and context. “Addiction rhetoric” (Cover, 2006) is not new in describing behavior of subject immersed in virtual worlds. There could be sad that there is a good reason for using such rhetoric. In Japan there is a term “otaku” generation that refers to a young people that tend to be locked in their rooms (usually playing computer games). Otaku generation is certainly showing symptoms of autism and/or drug addiction behavior. For that reasons we can say that even profane term “electronic fix” is rightly used when describing the socially unacceptable behavior related to longer playing, especially

in virtual social spaces and on line role-playing games. The most popular games are *World of Warcraft*, *Ultima Online* and *EverQuest* (that has been even named “EverCrack” in order to suggest the proportion of a problem). USA classification system included and described a disorder related to computer games as a part of the Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD). It is a psychological disorder that refers to gaming, social networking, Internet shopping and consummation of on line pornography. Psychologists such as, Kimberly S. Young therapist and author of a study *Caught in the Net* (1998), developed an method for curing IDA, and so one.

46 However, paradox is also presented in Virilio’s critique and classification system of mental disorders. Subject is described as narcotized and violent at the same time, being able of becoming a passive and destructive in real world as a reflex of his/her immersion in virtual world. Because of a strong engagement and participation in game narrative, which is often violent, psychologists fear of “translating attitudes and actions from virtual in real” (Sommerseth, 2007). Although this second description is not favorable, it is completely different from the first one. The best known example of the this is well known Columbine school massacre from 1999, where young shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, players of the *Duke Nukem* and *Doom*, killed twelve students and one teacher, after which they committed suicide. The fear of transfer (from virtual to real) resulted in moral panic and stigmatization of first person shooters (Sony, company that produced *Doom*, was faced with several low suits). However, if there is an congruence between those two worlds, as Alexander R. Galloway writes, than the final outcome of playing computer games could really be “a realization of André Breton’s dream of the purest surrealist act: the desire to burst into the street with a pistol” (2006: 104)¹. However, as Galloway notices there is something surrealist in comprehension of that transfer.

1 Moral panic expanded, on different representations of violence behavior, such as movie *The Basketball Diaries* (1995) in which the character played by Leonardo Di Caprio dreams of a school massacre. Even the broadcasting of the fantastic TV show *Buffy – The Vampire Slayer* was postponed because of the episode named “Graduation day” in which “hell mouth” opens.

The paper will elaborate three problems related to understanding of the virtual worlds and the possibility of the transfer from the virtual into real. The first is the problem of “content barrier”, the problem of focusing on gaming graphic and narrative. It is a common tendency to interpret the “influence” of virtual worlds through reading the content of that world. (The second and the third problem, that will be elaborated in separate paragraphs, are common technological determinism – the notion of the “impact” of (autonomous) technology; and a problem of dividing the Virtual and the Real.) The common interpretation of games is an interpretation of (violent) stories, while games are not only stories but also “algorithmic narrations” (Galloway, 2006; Wark, 2007; Manovich, 2001). Content barrier is common not only in popular psychologization, interpretation of transfer of virtual (often violent) content into the real world, but also in literary criticism and film theory. Both fields claim that computer games will never reach the artistic level of a novel or a film. Famous film theoretician Roger Ebert formulated this opinion in 2005. Ebert stated that video games can never be art (Choi, 2005). Theory of computer games, so called ludology warns about problems of interpreting games while using classical narratological apparatus (Aarseth, 2001; Eskelinen, 2004, Juul, 2001; Juul, 2006; Bogost, 2006). The role of narrative is almost the opposite from what critics are stressing as dangerous transfer of virtual violent narrative. The most vivid representations can have no or limited transfer. Alexander R. Galloway writes that content, story, is actually opposed to action defined by algorithm (Galloway, 2006). This is obvious in so called cut scenes, cinematic interludes which enrich a narrative by elaborating world of a game (characters, ambient, historical period, etc.), while gamers are not experiencing much, because they are forced to sit still and watch.

However there are also least two additional structural principles that are crucial for understanding the failure of interpreting the relation virtual/real in the games through the content. The first is the understanding of a transference. Ludologists already warned on the importance of a non-diegetic elements in building a pleasure of a game. But such pleasure is nevertheless related to a sort of transference – congruence between virtual and the real. Traditionally, transference is seen as a concept applied to a literature or cinema, but there are no works on the role of

transference in computer games. It is strange neglectance, taking into account the moral panics and proliferation of different types of answers related to the same question “what does gaming practice do to a subject”? In classical psychoanalytic sense, transference is a process of “actualization of unconscious wishes” (Laplanche/Pontalis, 1973: 492-493). Transference emerges in the psychoanalytic treatment in a form of both positive or/and negative attitudes towards the analyst, who in Lacanian terms is put in the place of the Father (Symbolical order that is trusted). Crucial mistake of classical understanding of the transfer virtual/real arises from the fact that the game transference of attitudes, wishes, or feelings does not emerge from the graphical, visual realism, but (similar to a psychoanalytic treatment) transference is an outcome of the structure, communicational process in which structure of a game allows transference to occur. Game is a profound structuration of gamers activity, qualification of his/her every move.

48

For example, the structure of a activity in a highly controversial game *Carmageddon* (1997), where the role of a player is to run over pedestrians, is not much different from the role of the player in the platform game *Giana Sisters* (1987), where player must collect mushrooms. (The same thing is with the *Super Mario Brothers* (1985)). There can be argued whether there is difference between the pleasure of experiencing Giana changes her hair into colorful “Mohawk” or in getting an extra live while slaughtering in a combat game, but there is certainly an experience of pleasure in both actions. Such pleasure is not related to a story, but to a structured algorithm.

From this emerges another structural dimension of relation virtual/real. The games are stories run by algorithms, which allow players to interact with the program. Those are not fictional worlds of distinct realms of story and the algorithm. The crucial point is a process of transforming an algorithm into a story. Second principle of content barrier is than of the articulating the dichotomy story/algorithm in form of contextualization, and accompanied decontextualization. If the first, which is already defined in ludologist theory, principle accents the importance of algorithm, and insists on analyzing the elements that are important in the game (and possible transference of attitudes and actions from virtual to real), the second, here proposed

principle insists in understanding a relation, dialectic between the two elements.

Ted Friedman summarizes what at first sight seems as strangely simple rule. Although we might think that we are collecting things, driving, playing the role of the mayor, etc. when playing game we are mastering the game.

“The way computer games structures of thought - the way they reorganize perception - is by getting you to internalize the logic of the program. To win, you can’t just do whatever you want. You have to figure out what will work within the rules of the game. You must learn to predict the consequences of each move, and anticipate the computer’s response. Eventually, your decisions become intuitive, as smooth and rapid-fire as the computer’s own machinations.” (Friedman, 2002)

If winning a game is a process of internalization of logic of the program, process of intuitively adopting the logic of an algorithm internalization is a process that is going on without understanding the narrative domain, the story. Jesper Juul points at something similar. It is a difference between two rules in soccer. The first rule should be “the ball is out of play when it is far away”, and second one is “the ball is out of play when it crosses the white line drawn on the grass” (Juul, 2005: 64). While the first one implies certain context, understanding of what “far away” means in a soccer, second rule is not implying anything, it describes the whole process, as an algorithm would do.

We can summarize both observations. There is important dimension of a story (meaning certain actant relations, time and space in the game, graphical realism, etc.), but importance of a story emerges from the *relations* between the story and algorithm. The story is a tool for structuring “gamic action”, the instrument for *contextualizing the algorithm* which is itself alien to narrative, story or any conceptualized human experience. That importance of relation, co-working of narrative and algorithm becomes obvious when player is faced with malfunctioning of a game. Errors, crashing of a system, freezing of an interface, problems with loading a game, are moments not only of braking down the game,

but of braking down of a narrative, or any conceptualized human reality. In such moments gamer is confronted with absolutely ignorant structure of an algorithm, where in Heideggerian sense *Gestell* is present. The same formal structure of a game can, is in most cases cleverly structured and formulated, and it function as the foundation of gamer pleasure.

While game crashes that inconsistency of narrative usually spoils a pleasure of gaming. In a moment, player is facing non-transparent algorithm instead of a *narratem*. Player is surprisingly revealing an artificial character of game. It is not a revelation of false, virtual status of imaginary world, but the moment of revealing the role of the story, narrative and its relation to the productive algorithm. In a way what gamer reveal in crashing of a game is the fact that the story is only camouflaging, contextualizing an algorithm.

50

The understanding of function of an algorithmic structure, and the secondary role of a story, formulated as the first principle, or the content barrier, provokes us to take another step. Beside the revealing the role of an algorithm and the secondary role of the story (the facts that are usually the reasons for mistakes in understanding the relation of virtual and real in gaming worlds), there is an importance to reveal the antagonism between those two elements as productive for the gaming experience. Such productive antagonism takes the form of transcoding the algorithms into narrative, or, in another words, it is a translation of machine language into human experience. Consequently, games aim at accomplishing seamless bond between narration and algorithm in order to create virtual world. Narrative is forming the gaming experience into “natural” experience. It is a process of contextualizing non-narrative mathematical algorithm into narrative that “naturalizes” experience of gaming. The contextualization allows player to immerse in narrative world, in order to understand what to do player must intuitively (and not rationally) internalize algorithmic logic, the logic of a machine.

This process of contextualization becomes more visible when it is obvious that player did not decided to act on the basis of understanding the content, but on the basis of understanding a structure. For example, while playing computer game with children we can find ourselves wondering how is possible for eight

year old child to use the terminology of economy and to elaborate the importance of “lowering the taxes on the industrial production if we want to develop the industrial zone”. The example is elaborated in now classical ludologist study *Everything Bad is Good for You* written by Steven Berlin Johnson in 2005, where he is describing his eight year old nephew playing the game *Sim City*. The causal relation between the lowering of one parameter and proportionally increasing of the other is classic example of understanding the structure, and not the content. Sometimes gamer can even ignore content he/she follows game’s algorithmic logic.

The vivid example of this are so called “conceptual games” like *Tetris* or *Pong*, which often does not fit any categorization. Genres are defined by gamers actions: solving the puzzle (adventure games), training the character, combating and exploring the virtual worlds (RTS), configuration of the elements of the world (RTS), managing the virtual life (simulations), etc. However conceptual games offer rudiment action that does not elaborate fictional world. Still it successively engages players in its world. While most adventure games, role playing games (RPG) and first person shooters (FPS) contextualize algorithm within the narrative elaborated gaming worlds, *Tetris* and *Pong* offer un-contextualized matrix.

2. Lacan and games. Conceptual games and the Real.

The logic of algorithmic transference – contextualizing the algorithm in a humanly comprehensive experience – is in pure Lacanian terms - an act of clash between the Symbolic order and the Real. While it is commonly understood as a transference of violence behavior represented in computer games (through a story), or it is described as narcotic experience that isolates gamer from real world (through immobilization of all scenes), the real problem is hiding in the realm of paradoxical algorithmic Symbolic order. Virtual worlds are ruled by the algorithm that calculates, quantificates, and produces code - but does not produce any *Symbolic order*, narrative interpretation, or more broadly, any contextualized human experience. From that point of view so called “conceptual games” are the

closest to the Real defined by Jacques Lacan, as one of three orders of psyche. For Lacan the Real is 'the impossible' because it is outside any symbolization, order „which resists symbolization absolutely” (Lacan, 1988: 66). Similarly conceptual games are moving toward the Real, because those are the only games that are not so eager to obscure the craft, algorithmic machine behind the story. In order to build imaginary world, conceptual games are not doing much. In that laziness towards symbolization, conceptual games are similar to a highly artificial post-modern prose that brakes the seamless bond between technique and fantastic illusion. Meta-fiction, common for postmodern prose, is also the practice that reveals mechanism behind the text, the mechanism of the textually of the Real. Well known practice of postmodern author is that of referring to his/her writing instead of actually telling the story. For example, Italo Calvino in novel *If on a winter's night traveler* (1979) is a story of a readers adventures in reading book written by Italo Calvino. The book is about the art of reading, about what reader is doing in preparation for reading the next chapter.

52

Although the common opinion is that computer games are popular culture par excellence, there are also an art games that are actually using techniques inherent to postmodern literature. In doing that, both postmodern literature and art games are revealing Symbolic order of the fictional world. Similar to conceptual games, art games are sort of algorithmic Real. Stewart Hogarth's *The Naked Game* (2008), unfortunately lost, was the best example of such high art practice that is engaging in revealing the inconsistencies in Symbolic order. In that way, Hogarth's game played the similar role as post-modern highly artificial prose did for popular novel. The role that language had in post-modern literature (as self-reflective, meta-textual, autonomous), is the similar role of the algorithm in art games as meta-referential algorithmic narrative. *The Naked Game* was an art game that elaborated the disclosed structure, the mechanism which usually remains hidden. The game reconstructs the primitive version of *Pong* with exposing the version of a code governing the game and the variables affecting the mechanics of the game. Player could remove lines of code and see the effects in real time. (For example, when player removed a line of the code the paddle or a ball would disappear, or an game rhythm would distort, etc.)

Art games are using algorithm as highly self-referential post-modern “language” of games. While most adventure games, role playing games and first person shooters contextualize algorithm within the narratively elaborated gaming worlds, *Tetris* and *Pong* (as such, but their artistic versions even more) offer un-contextualized algorithmic matrix². Conceptual and art games, each in its own way, are elaborating the basic, non-contextualized gaming structure. Although, it is not possible to create completely non-contextualised game (as it is not possible to imagine non-symbolical represent of the Real order), because such game would be un-playable. The art games are questioning the role of the interface as mediator between game and player, between algorithm and narration. Art games separate the content (violence) from form (algorithmic code). In doing so, some of them are addressing the problem of relation virtual-real, in a form inherent to postmodernism as a whole. There are numerous examples. Franc Cadet’s *Sweet Pad* (2004) allows playing the highly aggressive game *Quake 3 Arena* in an unusual way. Instead of using the joystick, the operator acts by gently touching the sphere. In a game *Massage me* (Perner-Wilson/Satomi, 2007) the player massages his/her partner in order to hit the opponent in a violent game *Tekken*. Shooting an enemy or fighting with bare hands in a highly meta-referential pose is a poetical gesture of postmodernism. The gap is always there, but players are usually not

2 There are several auto-referential moments in popular games as well. One occurs in the game *Max Payne* where authors ‘reveal’ to Max that he is in a computer game. Alex Galloway names this practice “Mantis moments” (Galloway, 2006: 34). The term is borrowed from the character in the game *Metal Gear Solid* (1998) Psycho Mantis. In one sequence, Mantis refers to other games played by the user (the game scans document on a console memory card). Nevertheless, even during the seamless performance there are always problematic moments, bugs, program errors, uploading the game, crashing of the system, accidents related to the software that Galloway names “death acts”. Those “death acts” reveals artificiality of virtual world and warns us about a nature of medium.

aware of it³. The gap between content and acting is crucial for meta-textual level, pointing on at difference between two arbitrary related sphere - acting according to an algorithm and telling a story, conceptualizing gamers acting according to (violent, or other) narrative.

Although gamer seems to participate in imaginary world - characters, objects, atmosphere, movements, etc. he/she becomes aware of core element that is running by game - algorithm, game engine (UI generator, or GUI). The more complex generator offers the stronger feeling of “free” acting that is meaningful in relation to a world/ narration/ game. Whole history of games can be seen as history of the “seamless bond” – designing a game in a way to seamlessly bond game generator, algorithm and narration. In early textual and graphic adventure games the player simply had to accomplish every mission, even if that meant doing meaningless “manually” work, repeating the same action always in the same way over and over. In that way “rhymes insult sword fighting” in the game *The Curse of Monkey Island* (1997) can be executed in almost automatized way. Player needs to fight dangerous pirate with rhyming his insults, but what he/she does is choosing the right answer which can be done almost automatically, even without hearing the sentence (player just needs to memorize the position of sentences on the screen).

54

3 The process of designing game is also revealing this inconsistency of relation of virtual worlds (story, narrative) and algorithm beneath it. It is not only a process of visioning the virtual world, but also a designing of an algorithm. For that reason, games that are using the same generator are alike. The games are operated by algorithmic generators, those generators are the same for Doom and Quake. By using the same generator, clones and sequels change a designed of the world (graphic, characters, weapons, levels etc.) while the basic premises (closer to algorithmic character of a game), like perspective, using of inventory, possibilities for moving etc. remain the same. It is a reason why company that produced Doom and Quake, also produced serial of sequels and clones that, at the end, founded the “first person shooter” genre.

3. Algorithmic narrations and *societies of control*

If games semantic emerges not from story but from compound of an algorithm and narration, reading only the content, story (driving and killing in the streets) can poorly interpret the activity of a player and specially possible addiction disorders or violent behaviors related to game playing. The lesson of the content barrier is actually the lesson of media studies from its very beginning. Marshall McLuhan and his followers Walter Ong and Eric Havelock (school of transformative theory founded in Canada) formed the rule of media structure. McLuhan in his famous moto: “Media is the message” stressed the role of the media grammar which has a greater influence on culture and individuals than the content of a medium. From the point of view of media theory, the narrative content of a computer game should be seen not as an elaborative element, but almost the opposite – as an “obstructive” element. Since the algorithmic structure is running the game, the algorithmic structure, and not the narrative can play the role in gamers transference, or/and transfer of his/her attitudes and actions from virtual into real. If there can be any virtual/real transference, than it is a greater possibility that it could be done through the structure, and not the content. Game content plays exactly the same role as in Marshall McLuhan said for the content of electronic media, it is “the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind” (McLuhan, 1964: 25)⁴.

55

However, as a form of conclusion, it can be said that contemporary understanding of computer games and computer games transference is at the same time paranoid and not paranoid enough. It insists on interpreting the “violent content” (maniac driver, shotgun killer, etc.), while leaving aside understanding of “maniac algorithm”. While popular understanding is critiquing a violent

4 Marshall McLuhan’s definition of “acoustic space”, or Walter Ong’s “psychodynamic”, made a breakthrough in the paradigm by stressing the idea that structure of medium makes greater impact than its content. However McLuhan and his followers overstressed the role of technology and media as active and autonomous factors of social change. Marshall McLuhan’s accusation of radio for Hitler’s political success, or stressing the role of the print in emergence of schizophrenia in contemporary world, are among the well known examples.

56

content, the internalization is taking place on the level of code, formation of human activity according to an algorithmic code. Inconsistency of that critique became obvious in the case of the Seung-Hui Cho, killer in the deadliest shooting in modern U.S. history, the Virginia Tech massacre that took place in 2007. Public related shootings with game playing, presupposing that Cho was hard-core gamer who confused the reality with game in the same manner as Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, shooters in Columbine school massacre. Such presupposition was immediately withdrawn when press revealed that Cho was playing *Sonic the Hedgehog* – platform game with blue hedgehog as leading character. It seemed that such childish representation cannot be responsible for transference. Nevertheless, it seems inconsistent to step back from the previous theory. Acting within the structure of immediate quantification and evaluation of every performance is no less transformative and dangerous than immersing in violent narrative. Why to discard the idea that Virginia Tech killer was under the influence of gaming algorithm of *Sonic the Hedgehog*, while the same game represent, structurally, the form of everyday experience of every schoolboy activity? The transference of the algorithmic structure of mathematical computation, quantification of every player's move, act and decision is no less possible than the transference while playing the first person shooter game. Is it not exactly the “paradoxical logic” that Paul Virilio is describing when he is writing about vision machines, the representational surveillance logic, that acquires a something like surrealistic surprise, or ‘accidental transfer (1994)’? Is it not an act of a subject that internalized paradoxical logic of machines, industrialized prevention as a kind of panic anticipation of surveillance cameras, military machinery and other types of autonomous and dangerous (virtually) vision machines? Is it not similar to Jean Baudrillard's *les strategies fatales* (1983), fatal strategies of object which are ironic toward the common morality? Can the Virginia Tech massacre be seen as an outcome of fatal strategies of objects, algorithmic structure interfering human activity?

Here we approach the second problem, the one of technological determinism deeply embedded in contemporary culture and media criticism. If it is not a content, but the structure of medium that has an influence on gamer, than we

must criticize a hypnotic character of medium it self. Marshall McLuhan resolved the problem of content barrier, but he is also responsible for the contemporary media essentialism. Pierre Levy criticized the contemporary McLuhanesque deterministic approach to technology stating that the dominant metaphor that we are using when describing a technology is “the metaphor of impact” - the technology is a missile, and culture passive target (2001: 3).

The first who located the problem of technological determinism was Raymond Williams. Williams in his study on television wrote:

“The most precise and discriminating local study of ‘effects’ can remain superficial if we have not looked into the notions of cause and effect, as between a technology and a society, a technology and a culture, a technology and a psychology, which underlie our questions and may often determine our answers.” (Williams, 1974:2).

57

If there is something transformative in the structure of gaming media, than it must be related to the structure of the world, not vice versa. Such proposition of media analysis can be found in McKenzie Wark’s study *Gamer Theory* where Wark writes, “the questions of the form of the game cannot be separated from the questions of the form of the world” (2007: 67). In order not to end with escapist conclusions, we must take very cautiously attitude toward game-world relation. Games cannot transform the real life, personal identities, social norms, etc. Almost the contrary, not only that games cannot be transformative as an autonomous agents of change, but they are moreover acting like an neutral elements, elements that are revealing the inconsistencies of real life, understanding of the Self, understanding of a social rules in the era of late capitalism, etc.

If anything, games are a symptoms of a lack in a social order. Symptom, is a strictly speaking “a particular element which subverts its own universal foundation, a species subverting its own genus” (Žižek, 1989: 16). For Freud symptom was an abnormality caused by return of the suppressed (Freud, 1990). Since suppressed is finding alternative ways to realize itself, it is manifested in

the form of a symptom. The symptom is considered as something that does not belong, a product that must be resolved. In *Die Traumdeutung* Freud described what can be understood as an initial description of a symptom, and it is very close to description of phantasmagoric scenario of computer game. When Freud asks of his patient to retell the dream, he notices that there are parts of the dream that he are covering by telling it in different way. "...[T]he parts of the dream which he describes in different terms are by that fact revealed to me as the weak spot in the dream's disguise: they serve my purpose just as Hagen's was served by the embroidered mark on Siegfried's cloak" (Freud, 2010: 519). In a footnote Freud explains:

58

"There was only one spot on Siegfried's body where he could be wounded. By a trick, Hagen persuaded Kriemhild, who alone knew where the spot was, to embroider a small cross on Siegfried's cloak at the vital point. It was there that Hagen later stabbed him. (Nibelungenlied, XV and XVI.)"

The same Siegfried's spot, small cross on disguised dream is the spot of symptom – the place and a mark for analysand to enter the interpretation. In other words, instead of understanding the violent games as transformative or narcotic stories that intrude our otherwise harmonic societies, we should take gaming worlds as a symptoms and a spots on a social cloak that are subverting the notion of Real. Such invasion of a games is opposed to a common lamentation of contemporary society as transformed by technology, virtual spaces, transcended by virtual time, etc. But what if the notion of invaded reality, mediatised in every way, is in it self a construct, since there were no natural, non-mediatised, simple reality, but only a reality that is in-it-self already constructed? From that, point of view, quantification of every human activity and evaluation on every individual decision as formal "rule of the game".

Playing games is commonly understood as a "waste of time". The pleasure of game is pleasure of non-fruitful productivity. Charles Bernstein in his essay "Play It Again, Pac-Man» writes: "While the dominant formats and genres of video

games seem to involve a restricted economy, the social context of the games seems to suggest features of a general unrestricted economy” (1991). For societies that are used to collecting and accumulating as a common behavior George Bataille coined the term “the societies of restricted economy”. Accumulation in a game is taking place in the context of “unrestricted or ‘general’ economy, which involves exchange or loss or waste or discharge” (Bernstein, 1991). Bernstein encourages us to see that there is more in collecting mushrooms and diamonds since the practice reflects the change in the socio-political definition of a power based on manipulating with information, understanding “the rules of the game”.

Gaming is an exemplar activity of the late capitalist socio-economy and the socio-political definition of a power based on manipulating with information. It is a form of society that Gilles Deleuze defined as societies of control (Deleuze, 1990). The accumulation is not a matter of producing material “things” but a matter of manipulating with “code” (an algorithm).

“In the societies of control, on the other hand, what is important is no longer either a signature or a number, but a code: the code is a password, while on the other hand disciplinary societies are regulated by watchwords (as much from the point of view of integration as from that of resistance). The numerical language of control is made of codes that mark access to information, or reject it.”

“The corporation has replaced the factory, and the corporation is a spirit, a gas”, writes Deleuze. Corporation introduced the “states of perpetual metastability that operate through challenges, contests, and highly comic group sessions”. Deleuze predicted the form of a dominant semiotic construct of the new type of modulate, re-territorialised, numerical power. This is the implementing of “modulating principle of ‘salary according to merit’”, which is also the foundation of crisis of institutions - schooling as continuous form of control, perpetual training module, and university that replaces research and criticism with training. Deleuze, not intentionally, described the experience of mastering the game, training in simulations and algorithmic quantification of mastering the skills.

Classical neo-liberal studies of gaming worlds describe the process of resolving the problem in game as fruitful mechanism of training “for life”. James Paul Gee in his study *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (2003) describes why game *Virtual Leader* is important for management. There is no need for deeper insights, lamentations about the world of the game, what player must do is to explore the virtual world, make some hypothesis about that world, [and than] explore the same world [again] whit this hypothesis in mind (2003: 88). Educational sciences are referring to this process as “reflective learning”. It is a process in game in which the player thinks and re-thinks the basic assumptions. Critically reflecting on this practice McKenzie Wark concludes that, in the game, “every action is just a means to an and” (2007: 9). But players are not fullled, they are well aware of ‘unproductive behavior’, acting productively within the rules of unproductive economy. Not only that it is not an illusion, that gamers are well aware of the process they are engaging with, but also it would be totally wrong to thing that gaming is a waste of time. In their activity gamers are re-acting the most real and valuable socio-political “game”. It is a game of capitalist production that is marked by this process of reflective learning and non-productive non-material accumulation.

60

Jean Baudrillard considered *Crash*, a novel by James Ballard (1973), to be an exemplar narration for postmodern state. In order to understand contemporary Western subjectivity, we do not need to read classical SF literature. For Baudrillard, *Crash* is not a glorification of violence or perversion (novel represents a group of fanatics that find sexual excitement in car accidents), but precise analysis of Western subjectivity infected by mechanic hyper-functionality. The body became functional as mechanical device, which is why sex can only be understood in the manner of crash, explosion or motor combustion (Baudrillard, 2001). If that is so, computer games represent exemplar contemporary action-narrations. It is usually wrongly concluded that computer games are perfect narrations of simulacrum as false reality. However, computer games are, in their structural dimension, Baudrillardian hyper-productive mechanical mechanisms that derive form Deleuzian numerical corporate model of control. Instead of insisting on falsity of its representation, non-material illusion, it would be more precise to

see computer games through the glasses of Barudillard's elaboration of Crash as *structural* representation of new subjectivities.

4. The role of Ego Ideal in process of identification

That leads us to the third and final problem of virtual worlds and understanding the paradox of passive/active subject. Dominant interpretations of popular (but also scientific) understanding of virtual gaming worlds are grounded in the clear distinction of the Real and Virtual. Primary status of the Real and secondary status of the Virtual is a result of understanding individuals and world within the apparatus of Cartesian dualism that divides mental and material. One of the greatest TV commercial *Double life* for Sony Play Station (2006) articulates this message:

“In the day, I do my job, I ride bus... But at night, I live a life of exhilaration, of missed heartbeats and adrenalin... I won't deny it I've been engaged in violence, even indulged in it... You may not think it, to look at me, but I have commanded armies and conquered worlds. ”

Here it is important to remember the message of Lacanian psychoanalysis about the fictional character of the Real and the Self. The Symbolical identification is: “The place in big Other from which I see myself in the form in which I find myself likeable...” The definition of Ego Ideal in Freudian psychoanalysis “is by definition virtual” (Žižek, 1997: 194). In order to escape the traumatic core of empty Self, subject have to invent symbolic mandate (virtual or real, in a sense of dualism of Descartes mental images and material world). It is not pure illusion, but a personal defense mechanism. An empty signifier, in Lacanian sense, is productive not because it has some content to fill into subjective identity but, exactly because there is not content. It is, off course, a Hegelian productive force of the negative. Only from this point of view the ideological role of computer games can be revealed. Imaginary identification in the Sony advert imply the existence of

two poles of identity: real one (that is sane, rational, normal, that is riding a bus...) and virtual identity that can be “violent, disregarded for life, limb and property”. However, common dichotomy, dividing the real from virtual is not more than a legitimation of stating the same, of being sure that nothing will change. Sony advert is referring to an Imaginary order, stating that it can be more real than the real real. Subject can be ignorant of his/her authentic identity beneath the mask, the crucial illusion is that of seeing the imaginary order and ignoring the role of master Signifier – the rule of the Symbolic order that is forming subjectivities in late capitalism. Games are not only reigns of Imaginary but also a places where contemporary Symbolic can be mastered.

62

Classical psychoanalytical question (that Slavoj Žižek is proposing in his study *The Plague of Fantasies*) is addressing Imaginary order as more authentic. For example, what if in a GTA serial (Grand Theft Auto, 1997/1998) our character that we are playing is more authentic than the character we are “playing” in real life? Taking into account that gamer is a person whose Ego Ideal is formed in game, we can conclude (with Žižek) that gamer can reveal his true nature - that his is really a mass-murderer (scenario can be possible in, lets say, Anders Breivik’s case) and not modest bus driver. It is possible. But cultural critiques are sometimes overlooking the most important thing about the gaming activity – its algorithmic structure. It is surprising if we take into account that psychoanalysis provided the most important lecture about the importance of the analysis the difference between manifest and latent content of a dream, and importance of analyzing the dreamwork instead of trying to decipher hidden content beneath the manifest content. In other words, from the point of view of (applied) psychoanalysis it is equally important to overcome the common urge to analyze a manifest content as it is important not to maintain neither on the level of the manifest nor latent content, but to go further and to analyze the dreamwork. The most important is not the content, visions in the dream, but the reasons why dream needed a revision or mutation. The same goes for computer games. Although playing violent computer games can reveal that person is suffering from mental disorder, it would not be so clearly understood by analyzing the content, but the structure of a game activity. Of course one can say that first person shooters can be played only in one way,

and that when referring to them as symptomatic, cultural analytic is not pointing only to their content but also a structure. Nevertheless faced with non-violent games, cultural analytic usually cannot say why those structures are nothing less incorporated in contemporary Heideggerian *Vorstellung*?

It is not Freudian Id, instinctual, dark pole of the personality that is usually responsible for experiencing a pleasure in the game, but actually it is super Ego, an instance that can be compared to a judge or a censor. It is more an internalization of symbolic (parental) prohibitions and demands, than the opposition or disregard of a ruling order. For example, in the GTA, as in every other game, player cannot do what ever he/she wants. Player needs to act in a codified and structured way. For that reason task of prospering in the mafia in GTA hierarchy is not much different from mastering the hierarchy in the simulation games like *Virtual Leader* where player starts as an apprentice and must muster the skills to get promoted in a corporation. What can be more like an super Ego's imperative than the task to eat healthy food and to work out in gym? In *GTA: San Andreas* character needs to eat in order to keep his health meter filled, but whatever CJ eats will affect his status.

In other words, the message of the virtual world is not that the Real can be intruded by violent virtual, that Virtual can transform subjects into violent-active subjects or addictive-passive ones, that playing the GTA could seriously damage young persons. Neither the message of the games is the truly self we are encountering. The more appropriate way to read the game is to read it as a symptom of post-political economy, identity politics, and social structure of the Self. The structure of the algorithm can be contextualized in violent content, but in every scenario the contextualized algorithm allows constant quantification and valorization of gamers moves, which is typical structure of work and reward in the late capitalism. Most players do not experience transference, most of them do not become violent or disoriented, while, at the same time, all players function within the rules of *societies of control*.

The problem of simulacrum is not its falsity, the nostalgic logic of authentic experience. What gets lost is the politic dimension of the 'appearance' itself. Postmodernists correctly detected that the Real is less and less distinguishable

from imaginary simulation, but it is so because of political retreat of ideology (why Slavoj Žižek criticizes under the term of *post-politics*). Fictional worlds are not distortions of symbolic order, political project, but there are it self formed around transsubstantialisation of symbolic order (national, religious, political, class identities). On the level of identity politics, game playing is not a deviation of rational, democratic order, but a confirmation of desubstantialised pseudo-universal identity. If so, an ideological critique of games cannot be formed as a critique of particularism, specific political view present in a game. There are propaganda games (such as *America's Army*), but the global political stand point in most games can be defined as *ideological universalism*. Žižek, in *The Parallax View* provides a formula of today's ideology: "The universality of capitalism resides in the fact that capitalism is not a name for a "civilization," for a specific cultural-symbolic world, but the name for a neutral economic-symbolic machine... (2006: 318)". What gets lost in the postmodern techno-eschatology, as well as in media studies structural definition of media influence is "political as a domain of appearance (opposed to the social reality of class and other distinctions, that is, of society as the articulated social body)..." (Žižek, 1999: 195). The structural similarity between gaming worlds and societies of control is emerging from the *appearance* of political order, and that appearance started to disintegrate. In Lacanian terms, "simulacrum is imaginary (illusion), while appearance is symbolic (fiction); when the specific dimension of symbolic appearance starts to disintegrate, the Imaginary and the Real become more and more indistinguishable." (1999: 197).

5. Conclusion

Here elaborated readings of a relation between virtual gaming worlds and reality, and supposed transfer, are also deeply connected to the three theoretical apparatuses. The first reading, the common understanding of games as wasting time or/and texts inferior to the novels or movies is the logical perspective of traditional literary or film theory. From the perspective of literary criticism the text is "the well-wrought urn", as Cleanth Brooks a pioneer of American school of new criticism around year 1947 defined the text (Solar, 2005: 133).

The second reading, the media studies reading, is already a challenge to transgress the content barrier. It is a reading of the possibility of transfer virtual/real as transfer of structured algorithm on common reasoning, understanding of social media constructivism⁵. It is the reading that stresses the role of media structure in late capitalism and post-Panopticon era, where valorization and quantification became a fundamental mode of *societies of control*. It is still inconsistent reading, because of inherent technological determinism, common in interpreting the “impact” of a media structure on the reality. Although the similarity between structure of games and societies of control (in education, health care, corporation as core model of societies of control, etc.) is obvious, the deterministic point obscures the understanding of transference. Technological determinism ignores the social matrix responsible for creating technology and defining its structure before the technology itself.

Although the second reading is an important step forward, and moving from the simple behaviorism and impact theories, there must be the third reading, since the similar problem complicates technological determinism of media theory, as well as the content barrier of literary criticism. The psychoanalytical theoretical apparatus solves the paradox common in understanding of the duality of real/virtual, dualism that divides physical and mental spheres both in analysis of the game content, and the game structure. The difference of Imaginary and Symbolic

5 In the process of analyzing the differences between three theoretical apparatuses in understanding the relation Virtual/Real, the first and second one are seen as opponents, since the literary theory is focused on narrative, and the media theory on structure. However, from the structuralist point of view there is no conflict between literary and media theory. Russian formalism (Viktor Shklovsky, Yuri Tynianov, Vladimir Propp), Prague school of structuralism (Roman Jakobson) and later school of narratology (Tzvetan Todorov and others) can smoothly be appropriated in media studies (and that has been done in the works of hypertext theoreticians such as George Landow and Jay David Bolter) because those schools are stressing the similar importance of elaborating media “material”. Russian formalism formulated the purpose of the material in the process of defamiliarization (*ostranenie*). The similarity between defamiliarization and Marshall McLuhan’s famous definition of media is obvious. The same idea of the medium/language as blind spot, that can be seen only in exclusive uses, defamiliarised practices, is present in both approaches. Also, such idea is also present in Marshall McLuhan’s description of the artists as “antennas”. McLuhan, who has been literary critic by vocation, promoted artists as visionaries that can predict the “impact” of every media.

order, defined by Jacques Lacan, is the ground for understanding why only few players experience the transfer from Virtual into Real.

To summarize, the lesson of three understandings of a social anticipation of the gaming worlds could be that gaming worlds are not embedded in a game content, but in the game structure, which is not an autonomous technological weapon, but a social symptom.

Bibliography

Baudrillard, Jean, "Crash", in *Simulakrumi i simulacija* (Karlovac: Naklada društva arhitekata, 2001), 169-183.

Baudrillard, Jean, *Les strategies fatales* (Grasset, Paris, 1983), 10-33.

66

Bernstein, Charles, "Play It Again, Pac-Man", in *Postmodern Culture*, Vol. 2, No. 1, September, 1991.

Cadet, Franc, *Sweet Pad*, URL: http://cyberdoll.free.fr/cyberdoll/index_e_sweetpad.html, 2004, (last visited 25. January 2012.)

Choi, Dan, "Ebert: Video games inherently inferior to film and literature", in *Joystiq*, URL: <http://www.joystiq.com/2005/11/30/ebert-video-games-inherently-inferior-to-film-and-literature>, 30. November 2005. (25. 1. 2012.).

Calvino, Italo, *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (Mondadori, 2002 [1979]).

Cover, Robert, "Gaming (Ad)diction: Discourse, Identity, Time and Play in the Production of the Gamer Addiction Myth", in *Games Studies* 6 (1), URL: <http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/cove>, December 2006 (last visited 25. January 2012.).

Deleuze, Gilles, "Postskriptum uz društva kontrole", ("Postscriptum on a society of control") in *Urbani festival* 04, Zagreb, 2004, URL: <http://www.urbanfestival.hr/04/hr/uvodno.html>, 1990 (last visited 25. October 2011.).

Felman, Shoshana, "Beyond Oedipus: The Specimen Story of Psychoanalysis". Croatian translation: "S onu stranu Edipa: primjerne priče psihoanalize", *Suvremena teorija pripovijedanja*, ed. Vladimir Biti, Zagreb, Globus, 1992[1983], 258-310.

Freud, Sigmund, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety (The Standard Edition) (Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud)* by Sigmund Freud (Author), James Strachey (Editor), Peter Gay (Introduction) W. W. Norton & Company; The Standard Edition edition (September 17, 1990).

Freud, Sigmund, *The Interpretations of Dreams*, Translated from the German and edited by James Strachey. Basic Group, New York, 2010 (1955) .

Friedman, Ted, "Civilization and its Discontents: Simulation, Subjectivity, and Space", URL: <http://www.duke.edu/~tlove/civ.htm>, 2002 (last visited 25. October 2011.)

Hogarth, Stewart (2008) *The Naked Game*, original work is lost, URL: http://www.indiegames.com/2008/04/art_game_pick_the_naked_game_r.html (last visited 21. October 2011.).

Galloway, Alexander R., *Gaming. Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (University Of Minnesota Press, 2006).

Gee, James Paul, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

Johnson, Steven Berlin, *Everything Bad Is Good for You. How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter* (Riverhead Books, New York, 2005).

Juul, Jesper, *Half-real: video games between real rules and fictional worlds* (MIT Press, 2005).

Lacan, Jacques, *The Seminar. Book I. Freud's Papers on Technique*, 1953–54, trans. with notes by John Forrester (New York: Norton; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

Laplanche, J. and J. B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis* , Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith , (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1973).

Lévy, Pierre, *Cyberculture*, transl. Robert Bononno (Minnesota Press, 2001 [1997]).

Manovich, Lev, *The Language of New Media* (MIT Press, 2001).

McLuhan, Marshall, *Understanding media. The extensions of man* (London and New York, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964).

Perner-Wilson/Satomi (2007) *Massage me* (URL: <http://www.talk2myshirt.com/blog/archives/507#>, last visited 3. October 2011.).

Solar, Milivoj, *Teorija književnosti* (Školska knjiga, Zagreb, 2005 [1976]).

Sommerseth, Hanna, “Gamic Realism’: Player, Perception and Action in Video Game Play”, *Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference*, URL: http://www.digra.org/dl/order_by_author?publication=Situated%20Play, 2007 (last visited 25. October 2011.).

Virilio, Paul, *The Vision Machine* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

Virilio, Paul, “Speed and Information: Cyberspace Alarm”, *C-Theory*, URL: www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=72, 27. October 1995 (last visited 23. January 2012).

Wark, McKenzie, *Gamer Theory* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, 2007).

Žižek, Slavoj, *Sublimni objekt ideologije* (Arkzin, Zagreb [1989] 2002).

Žižek, Slavoj, «Cyberspace, Or The Unbearable Closure of Being», in *The plague of phantasies*, (Verso, London/New York, 1997).

68

Žižek, Slavoj, *The Parallax View*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, London, 2006.

Žižek, Slavoj, *The Ticklish Subject. The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (Verso, London/ New York, 1999).