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Expressions of Postmodernism

Within the Dimension of Digital Games

Abstract

A specific type of society or historical period is usually determined by characteristic kinds of technology and corresponding forms of media contents that shape the public discourse and reflect both collective social experience and individual lifestyles. Given the preferred kinds of media products and media entertainment forms, contemporary society is terminologically denoted as “postmodern” (or “late modern”), largely due to the obvious expansion of gaming technologies and the Internet. Digital games and virtual gaming environments have become prominent forms of media entertainment, especially in the case of children, teenagers and young adults. The fact we cannot forget to mention is that every emerging societal model reflects or rather revisits and reshapes at least some of typical cultural elements and means of expression known from previous cultural epochs (for instance, digital games production draws inspiration and creation principles from modernism, classicism and other art or philosophical movements). These aspects are either recreated in identical ways or modified in order to include some of the already known features and consequently shape their own prominent

characteristics. Particularities of the current postmodern (or late modern) society and its products are thus at the centre of our attention. The main objective of the study is to reflect on the presence of specific traits of postmodernism in the dimension of digital games. To reach the given goal, we mainly apply logical-conceptual methods of textual analysis, while the issue of mapping the characteristics of late modern culture in relation to digital gaming products is subject to a discourse analysis. Defining the basic terms such as “postmodernity” or “postmodernism” and introducing the elementary concepts related to this cultural form will help us to achieve the primary objective. The presented theoretical premises thus become adequate fundamentals for clarifying the presence of typical features of postmodern culture in both the formal design and narrative structure of digital games.

Keywords

digital game, eclecticism, hybridisation of elements, parody, postmodernism, postmodernity, quoting, seriality

1 Introduction

The term “game” might be defined as a sociocultural phenomenon with an added value. A game is not merely a product of pointless

entertainment; it fulfils obvious cultural functions. We may even state that the game principle has shaped societies for millennia. Many of the games typical for previous historical periods included religious traits, serving various sacral purposes. Once-prominent sacral functions of games still remain important. It is obvious that they have been transformed into the present media (virtual) reality, even though their original traits and formal characteristics have changed significantly. Considering the constant development of digital communication platforms and multimedia, leisure activities associated with gaming have formed their own digital dimensions. However, this issue, nowadays crucially integrated into the virtual world, has much deeper significance. The ways the general public and the academic circles perceive digital games differ considerably. The general public often sees a game as a ‘fruitless’ activity, entertainment and relaxation. It may even seem that playing games represents various irrelevant activities that are important only to the individual players who want to strengthen their preferences and fulfil their desires. On the other hand, media theorists, social scientists or philosophers consider games as significant cultural elements which influence the historical and cultural development of society, and not only by offering new technological possibilities and highly immersive virtual environments. Therefore, a digital game is not just a phenomenon of media entertainment; it is also an instrument of sociocultural dynamics, a part of everyday

activities shaping the social and cultural environment, and a clear reflection of the contemporary society. A critical discussion on the characteristic features of late modern culture (and their consequent identification in various games taking place in the virtual environment) is the focal point of the study. We put special emphasis on selected digital games, their narratives and the ways they are technologically processed. Another aim of the study is to offer a set of theoretical outlines associated with the issue in question. The terms “postmodernity” and “postmodernism” are seen in light of the attributes of postmodern (late modern) culture. We also base our thoughts on Gilles Lipovetsky’s concept of hypermodernity, seeing today’s cultural situation as an era marked by “*globalisation of liberalism, almost general application of business principles in terms of everyday life, maximum use of instrumental sense and rapid individualisation*”.¹ The aforementioned theoretical reflection can be considered as an adequate discussion platform that allows us to conduct the subsequent discourse analysis. The analysis mentions specific digital games in order to identify and explain the presence and meaning of characteristic features of postmodernity in the given type of media products. The theoretical framework is based on opinions and theories proposed by prominent theorists of postmodernism such

as Jean-François Lyotard, Fredric Jameson, Zygmunt Bauman, Miloslav Petrusek or Stuart Sim. The case study, on the other hand, emphasises the practical application of the relevant academic knowledge on the dimension of digital games.

2 Theoretical Outlines of the Issue

The contemporary society can be defined as “postmodern” or “late modern”. Jean-François Lyotard, whose opinions are discussed in Stuart Sim’s publication, sees this type of society as the period when the central place is no longer ascribed to an individual and their needs. The author finds it appropriate to leave or actively destroy those parts of the human race that appear to be redundant and unnecessary. He thinks that humanism is dead and claims that this state of matters is suitable. The postmodern society and related posthumanism literally dissolve the borders between humans and build people’s relationships with technologies.² According to Jean-François Lyotard, the most significant features of the postmodern society are inhumanity and the absence of firmly established values.³ Zygmunt Bauman, however, states that there are certain advantages in posthumanism. The more uncertain the definition of identity, the better it is for its holder; the best life is led by individuals that are not bound

¹ LIPOVETSKY, G.: Časem proti času čili hypermoderní společnost. In LIPOVETSKY, G., CHARLES, S. (eds.): *Hypermoderní doba. Od požitku k úzkosti*. Prague : Prostor, 2013, p. 55-56.

² SIM, S.: *Lyotard a nelidské*. Prague : Triton, 2003, p. 15-18.

³ LYOTARD, J. F.: *O postmodernismu. Postmoderno vysvětlované dětem. Postmoderní situace*. Prague : Filosofický ústav AV ČR, 1993, p. 26-28.

to a single object of interest or material artefacts and are able to maintain emotional temperance. The author also points out that current interpersonal relationships are unstable. He describes them as temporary and assumes that they only last long enough to bring us satisfaction.⁴ It is not surprising that the issues related to the development of human identity within cyberspace have become a prominent part of postmodern media philosophy.⁵ The era of late modern is also characterised by negative attitudes towards superiority of rationality in the cognitive process and by refusal of the moral *apparatus* of good connected to a corresponding authority. It is a period condemning the mechanical character of social life that is bound by set rules or norms.⁶ According to Zygmunt Bauman, the basic principles of the postmodern society, or culture, are discontinuity, inconsequentiality of actions, fragmentation and the episodic nature of various spheres of human activities.⁷ Martin Brestovanský underlines the elements of play, coincidence, anarchy, unending change, design, superficiality without any meaning or word. In his opinion, postmodern culture is mainly represented by

a search for its own new identity, own language and coding.⁸ In other words, the postmodern movement refuses to follow the previous philosophical and art movements, claiming they are exhausted and out of date.

The era we live in is also marked by an uncritical celebration of ‘otherness’ (which supports and deepens the aforementioned extreme individualisation).⁹ Media have never been less trustworthy, whether we talk about our general distrust of news¹⁰ or about much more questionable types of information sources. Moreover, the late modern society saturated by entertainment does not tend to differentiate between reality and game (amusement), because entertainment experiences, especially those provided by the media, have become our everyday communication ritual. Media entertainment surrounds us and binds us together, continuously disrupting other matters we have to attend to. As noted by Shay Sayre and Cynthia King, in the 21st century, we do not buy goods, services and media products, but rather symbolic experience and emotions, as well as an ephemeral idea of freedom and unlimited fantasy.¹¹ To put it differently, people living in the

society of today expect that the media products they purchase or people they are interested in will utterly fulfil their highly specific preferences and desires. The term “postmodernism” represents a part of the cultural complex defining the postmodern society. Depending on specific scholarly perspectives we tend to apply to understand postmodernism, it may be defined as a new cultural style, a new sensibility or a new historical moment.¹² Postmodernism influences philosophical movements,¹³ science, ethics, education,¹⁴ digital literacy,¹⁵ as well as the ways we develop and distribute technologies. It is defined by the expressions “crisis of representation” (the relationship between term structures in reality is loose; the existing theories represent reality no more) and “the death of the subject” (which refers to the expansive understanding of the subject in the sense of equality of all individuals within the society).¹⁶ Richard Appignanesi et al. state that the typical trait of late modernism is pluralism, i.e. multiplication of

¹² STOREY, J.: Postmodernism and Popular Culture. In SIM, S. (ed.): *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*. London, New York : Routledge, 2001, p. 116-124.

¹³ See: GÁLIK, S.: Temporalita (nových) médií. In *Filozofia*, 2018, Vol. 73, No. 5, p. 408-417.

¹⁴ See: GÁLIK, S., GÁLIKOVÁ TOLNAIOVÁ, S.: Influence of the Internet on the Cognitive Abilities of Man. Phenomenological and Hermeneutical Approach. In *Communication Today*, 2015, Vol. 6, No. 1, p. 5-15.

¹⁵ See, for example: ŠVECOVÁ, M.: Location-based Games as a Method of Teaching Seniors in the Field of Digital Technologies. In *Media Literacy and Academic Research*, 2018, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 61-71.

¹⁶ PETRUSEK, M.: *Společnosti pozdní doby*. Prague : Sociologické nakladatelství (SLON), 2006, p. 289-291.

differences. Given the context of digital games, they speak of the emergence of simulated reality that tends to be stronger than everyday reality.¹⁷ As noted above, postmodernism can be seen as a broad and significantly sceptical cultural movement that refuses the ideas of modernism, as well as modernism’s attempts to experiment and explore originality and, at the same time, to return to older artistic styles. One of the most significant characteristics of postmodernism is the presence of so-called double coding within diverse cultural artefacts. Late modern designers and producers try to create cultural products which ignore the common boundaries between mainstream and alternative, lowbrow and highbrow,¹⁸ or even video and theatre.¹⁹ As a result, more or less experienced media audiences, but also art *connoisseurs* are unable to objectively perceive and then evaluate aesthetic qualities and meanings of postmodern cultural products. Most often, they do not even try to do so. Jozef Jurina describes the main characteristics of postmodernism similarly to Richard Appignanesi and other mentioned authors, putting emphasis on the presence of moral relativism and subjectivism in our actions. According to the author, postmodernism as a cultural period

refuses old and honourable ideals, seeing the former philosophical and cultural perspectives as exhausted metanarratives. It prefers plurality and heterogeneity of various games of particular communities and cultures. Following Jean-François Lyotard, Jozef Jurina further claims that postmodernism refuses the validity of firmly established rules and does not react to typical opposites set by society, such as good and evil, mind and body, truth and lie, etc.²⁰ Jim McGuigan adds that postmodernism, or the culture of the postmodern society, openly ignores any borders between different media, genres or areas of social activities.²¹ Chris Barker, however, states that the term “postmodernism” is very unclear and multivocal, because it is used in many different contexts. As we have mentioned above, the expression generally refers to either a cultural style or a philosophical movement. Nevertheless, both lines of thinking agree that postmodernism manifests itself through intertextuality, irony, pastiche, *bricolage*, radical eclecticism and overlapping genres.²² Postmodern philosophy pays attention to the proclaimed collapse of all metanarratives, to discourses rejecting any order.

²⁰ JURINA, J.: *Nebezpečnosť postmoderného morálneho relativizmu*. [online]. [2019-08-26]. Available at: http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:http://147.213.211.222/sites/default/files/2006_1_010_013_jurina.pdf&gws_rd=cr&ei=3ppWWPzfGln7as-uuvgl.

²¹ MCGUIGAN, J.: *Modernity and Postmodern Culture*. Maidenhead : Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 174.

²² BARKER, C.: *Slovník kulturních studií*. Prague : Portál, 2006, p. 152.; See also: PRAVDOVÁ, H.: *Determinanty kreovania mediálnej kultúry*. Trnava : FMK UCM in Trnava, 2009.

Postmodernism is a denial of all values, a set of arguments outlining the notable absence of objective reality.²³ These tendencies only underline the complicated and ambivalent nature of today’s culture. According to Fredric Jameson, it may seem that any positive moral evaluation of postmodernism is practically out of the question, although many authors are prone to short-sighted celebrations of new aesthetic norms. However, the enthusiasm accompanying the slogan “post-industrial” is inappropriate, because it implies unrealistic fantasies of the almighty digital media and their saviour potential. These fantasies are shared across the whole political spectrum. Right-wing and left-wing politicians, along with many intellectuals, see this extreme form of techno-capitalism as a vulgar apology of the significant cultural decline caused by the emergence of postmodernism.²⁴ Even though Jameson’s attention is rarely centred on media and their products, his words apply to all kinds of media narratives, including digital games. Being one of the most commercially interesting media industry segments, the production of digital games deliberately recycles stories, ideas and cultural elements (content) and ‘innovates’ them thanks to high-end technologies. However, these creative processes cannot change the fact that the ability of exceptional formal

²³ RAJSKÝ, A.: *Nihilistický kontext kultivácie mladého človeka. Filozoficko-etický pohľad*. Bratislava : VEDA, 2009, p. 19-23.

²⁴ JAMESON, F.: *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham : Duke University Press, 1991, p. 46.

⁴ BAUMAN, Z.: *Úvahy o posmoderní době*. Prague : Sociologické nakladatelství (SLON), 1995, p. 35.

⁵ See, for example: GÁLIK, S.: On Human Identity in Cyberspace of Digital Media. In *European Journal of Transformation Studies*, 2019, Vol. 7, No. 2, p. 33-44.

⁶ POLAČKOVÁ, A.: Krátka reflexia k ponímaniu moderny a postmoderny. In *Annales Scientia Politica*, 2012, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 72.

⁷ BAUMAN, Z.: *Úvahy o posmoderní době*. Prague : Sociologické nakladatelství (SLON), 1995, p. 25.

⁸ BRESTOVANSKÝ, M.: *Úvod do mediálnej výchovy*. Trnava : Trnavská univerzita, 2010, p. 35.

⁹ See, for example: RADOŠINSKÁ, J.: *Mediálna zábava v 21. storočí. Sociálno-kultúrne aspekty a trendy*. Trnava : FMK UCM in Trnava, 2016.

¹⁰ See: VIŠŇOVSKÝ, J., GREGUŠ, L., MINÁRIKOVÁ, J., KUBÍKOVÁ, K.: Television News as an Information Source and Its Perception in Slovakia. In *Communication Today*, 2019, Vol. 10, No. 1, p. 40-60.

¹¹ SAYRE, S., KING, C.: *Entertainment and Society: Influences, Impacts and Innovations*. New York : Routledge, 2010, p. 38.

qualities of media products are unable to fully compensate for the obvious lack of new creative ideas. In fact, 'new creative ideas' are sometimes just aggressively pushed audience opinions based on online questionnaires, social media monitoring or comments posted under streamed contents or trailers. Today, any original creative idea has to face a plethora of other thoughts associated with meeting the target audience's expectations.

Based on the aforementioned notions, we can state that (media) products of postmodern culture (in our case, digital games) are characterised mostly by the fact that their contents can be **'read' at different levels**. Much has been said about their **intertextual nature**, tendency to quote, palimpsest techniques, seriality and remakes. The **existence of several aspects, points of view, angles and perspectives** complicates the ways we perceive our surroundings. Overlapping of genres is chaotically combined with the principles of parody, irony and pastiche. Otherwise incompatible elements merge. We have given up on strict rationality, seeing all layers of culture as a mixture of contradictory creative processes and meanings.

As a result, advertisements may feature various artful compositions,²⁵ and media products may be created solely in order to fulfil advertising purposes (in the case of digital games, we talk about

so-called advergames).²⁶ Moreover, antiheroes have replaced traditional portrayals of morally virtuous heroic characters.

As we presume, perception of media contents at different levels can be understood in the sense of the emergence and ubiquitous presence of heterogeneous media products with the same story and **transmedia narratives**. For example, the popularity of the digital game series *Tomb Raider* (1996-2018)²⁷ has led to the production of multiple action movies using the same title (2001, 2003, 2018), comics (1999) or a book tie-in directly following up the digital games in question (2004). In other words, the obvious involvement of several communication channels aims to evoke aesthetic experience and diverse pleasures that have become the crucial value of the contemporary culture of **mass consumption**.²⁸ The aforementioned traits of postmodernism are also closely connected to the tendency to create **quotations**, i.e. to link literal references to already existing media products which are present within newly produced media contents. The **palimpsest**

technique, creation of a text following up other texts, is applied very often.²⁹ It is clear that **seriality** is the basic principle of today's media storytelling, representing thematic or other continuity that binds together various media products.³⁰ The culture of postmodernism is also marked by creating **remakes**; that is how many well-known topics and stories become a basis for constructing new products with only minimal alterations to the original storylines. Considering the formal aspects of digital games and their content, we cannot omit the existence of multiple aspects, points of view, angles and perspectives, or the presence of **'double coding'**.³¹ Each individual interacting with digital games can understand their content differently. Another postmodern phenomenon we have to mention is the **hybridisation of genres** and genre types.³² In many cases, it is almost impossible to encounter a digital game that would belong to one specific genre. **Parody** (an absurd imitation of a text the producers want to make fun of), **irony** and **pastiche** (other

types of imitation, but, contrary to parody, they are not created in order to mock the original) are essential aspects of late modern cultural production.³³ **Combining otherwise incompatible elements** and **abandoning strict rationality** are also typical, as postmodern culture literally condemns the mechanisation of social life led by strict rules and norms.³⁴ Therefore, creation of peculiar cultural hybrids occurs frequently. Cultural products have become commodities, social goods that, just as any other consumables, can be offered, traded and exchanged for money on a daily basis.³⁵ This leads to deepening of social misrecognition of those who do not possess enough economic resources to acquire the latest entertainment forms.³⁶ Finally, specific manifestations of postmodernism include **widespread presence of antiheroes**. Inspired by these quasi-heroic figures, a postmodern individual freely chooses their own codes of behaviour and, furthermore, they are left with a space for their own subjectivity that is constituted independently from any objective

rules.³⁷ Virtual avatars present in digital games are often co-created by the players themselves in order to express these players' relationships to certain values and aesthetic aspects.³⁸ Therefore, in many cases we can see a main protagonist (of, for instance, a digital game) who articulates a primarily negative moral scheme leading to their controversial actions. Despite the aforementioned critical notions, we find it important to remark that many of the presented theoretical outlines need to be continually reassessed to better understand the current cultural situation. The ways we perceive today's media culture (digital games being no exception) have to be critically revisited in light of the emerging cultural phenomena associated with the era of digital entertainment. According to Simon Lindgren, Michael Dahlberg-Grundberg and Anna Johansson, "hybrid media culture" is a system of production and reception of cultural elements that spread uncontrollably across both the virtual world and our everyday existence. As noted by the authors, the only thing keeping 'the offline world' alive is our timeless need to materialise virtual identities, opinions and topics. Hybrid media culture thus merges the digital and the ordinary. Online and offline universes struggle to attract and engage our attention

and interest.³⁹ This fact directly influences our decision to identify several elements of postmodern culture in contemporary digital games, as we believe that digital games contribute enormously to the discussed process of replacing reality by media simulations.

3 Elements of Postmodernism in Digital Games

The main intention of the second part of the study is to map the essential traits of postmodernism in specific products of virtual reality – digital games. While analysing selected gaming products, we pay attention not only to their narrative structures but also to their formal and technical design.

We could regard the game trilogy *Max Payne*⁴⁰ as an exemplary case which obviously incorporates all characteristics of postmodern culture. The main storyline of the action third-person game series starts by introducing an American police officer who has been falsely accused of murdering his superior and family by his corrupt colleagues. The protagonist strives to unveil the truth, i.e. to prove his innocence and expose the real criminals. Target consumers (namely male teenagers and young adults) are able to experience the content via digital games (published in 2001, 2003 and 2012) but also as a 2008 movie that

26 See: MAGO, Z.: The Concept of Timelessness Applied to Advergaming. In *Acta Ludologica*, 2018, Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 18-33.

27 CRYSTAL DYNAMICS, EIDOS MONTRÉAL, FERAL INTERACTIVE, UNITED FRONT GAMES, NIXXES SOFTWARE BV: *Tomb Raider*. [digital game]. USA, Canada, London : Crystal Dynamics, Eidos Montréal, Feral Interactive, United Front Games, Nixxes Software Bv, 1996-2018.

28 RAJSKÝ, A.: Charakteristické črty postmoderny. In RAJSKÝ, A., KUDLÁČOVÁ, B. (eds.): *Európske pedagogické myslenie (od moderny k postmoderne po súčasnosť)*. Trnava : Typi Universitatis Tyrnaviensis, 2012, p. 66; See also: ROUBAL, O.: Sociology of Branding: 'Just Do It' in the 'No Limits' World. In *Communication Today*, 2017, Vol. 8, No. 1, p. 40-51.

25 See: PREDMERSKÁ, A.: Typologické vymedzenie vzťahu umenia a reklamy. In PETRANOVÁ, D., MAGÁL, S., MISTRÍK, M. (eds.): *Panelák: Média a umenie*. Trnava : FMK UCM in Trnava, 2013, p. 72-89.

29 ORENIČOVÁ, H.: *Postmodernisti a predstavitelia magického realizmu*. [online]. [2019-08-27]. Available at: <https://oskole.detiamy.sk/clanok/postmodernisti-a-predstavitelia-magickeho-realizmu-2918>.

30 RUSŇÁKOVÁ, L.: *Naratívna analýza a jej miesto v diskurze mediálnych štúdií*. In RADOŠINSKÁ, J., RUSŇÁKOVÁ, L., BUČKOVÁ, Z. et al.: *Empirické aspekty filmov o superhrdinoch*. Trnava : FMK UCM in Trnava, 2019, p. 61.

31 ECO, U.: Labyrinty interpretácie. In BENCZEHOVÁ, B. (ed.): *Postmoderná filozofia kultúry*. Bratislava : Comenius University, 2014, p. 60.

32 ORENIČOVÁ, H.: *Postmodernisti a predstavitelia magického realizmu*. [online]. [2019-08-27]. Available at: <https://oskole.detiamy.sk/clanok/postmodernisti-a-predstavitelia-magickeho-realizmu-2918>.

33 See: RADOŠINSKÁ, J.: Problém intertextuality filmov o superhrdinoch. In RADOŠINSKÁ, J., RUSŇÁKOVÁ, L., BUČKOVÁ, Z. et al.: *Empirické aspekty filmov o superhrdinoch*. Trnava : FMK UCM in Trnava, 2019, p. 292-319.

34 POLAČKOVÁ, A.: Krátka reflexia k ponímaniu moderny a postmoderny. In *Annales Scientia Politica*, 2012, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 73.

35 RAJSKÝ, A.: Charakteristické črty postmoderny. In RAJSKÝ, A., KUDLÁČOVÁ, B. (eds.): *Európske pedagogické myslenie (od moderny k postmoderne po súčasnosť)*. Trnava : Typi Universitatis Tyrnaviensis, 2012, p. 70.

36 See, for example: SOLÍK, M., MINÁRIKOVÁ, J.: Sociálne uznanie v globálnom priestore: Možnosti a limity mediálnej reflexie. In *Communication Today*, 2014, Vol. 5, No. 2, p. 21-31.

37 POLAČKOVÁ, A.: Krátka reflexia k ponímaniu moderny a postmoderny. In *Annales Scientia Politica*, 2012, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 74.

38 See: RUSŇÁKOVÁ, L.: Stylisation of Virtual Characters in Digital Games. In *European Journal of Science and Theology*, 2019, Vol. 15, No. 1, p. 113-123.

39 LINDGREN, S., DAHLBERG-GRUNDBERG, M., JOHANSSON, A.: Hybrid Media Culture: An Introduction. In LINDGREN, S. (ed.): *Hybrid Media Culture: Sensing Place in a World of Flows*. New York, Abingdon : Routledge, 2014, p. 1-5.

40 REMEDY ENTERTAINMENT, ROCKSTAR GAMES, ROCKSTAR STUDIOS: *Max Payne*. [digital game series]. Helsinki, Vancouver : Remedy Entertainment, Rockstar Games, Rockstar Studios, 2001-2012.

was released under the same title, though with slight changes related to narrative (the main differences lay in the physical appearance of Max himself, as well as in some support characters, especially the one who killed Max's family). Palimpsest techniques and quotes are also present (within the storyline as well as in terms of technical design of the games). In this particular case, we could speak of the developers' obvious references to Norse mythology, namely to the myth of Ragnarök (the Norse legend about the end of the world). Names of Norse gods are also used very frequently (e.g. the winged demon called Valkyrie). The digital product in question uses visual elements of film-noir, employing a dark, black and white, highly stylised setting of multiple scenes.

Given the fact that the analysed product is a game series remade into an action feature film, we may say that *Max Payne* is a result of continuous storytelling (seriality). In certain aspects, it follows the trope of so-called bullet time (during a shoot-out, time is slowed down, so the hero is able to avoid bullets). The story includes various genre elements and is thus subject to strong genre hybridisation. Although the analysed game series is clearly presented as an action-based, it also contains multiple elements of role-playing (represented primarily by the storyline and dialogues) and adventure games (especially the moments when the lead character tries to explore his surroundings and logically resolve the situations he has to face). Other digital game genres can be identified as well, despite the fact that their presence is a bit more subtle.

Parody, irony and pastiche are mainly associated with a cynically presented detective plotline. The developers and writers drew inspiration predominantly from the work of Mickey Spillane, the renowned American author of crime novels. Furthermore, the digital game series *Max Payne* is a model example of combining incompatible elements. Aversion towards strict rules (i.e. towards excessive rationality) is manifested visually. Within the trilogy, we can perceive a conventional three-dimensional game design combined with cutscenes stylised as panels of images (strong resemblance to comic book design may be identified). However, not only the formal design but also the narrative itself declares that the analysed product is a part of popular culture. More specifically, the game series crosses the boundaries between mass culture and popular culture. Despite aiming to attract young males predominantly, it appeals to heterogeneous, diverse audiences (the first part of the game trilogy achieved sales exceeding 2 million copies).⁴¹

Max Payne's story includes several perspectives, points of view and contradictory ideas (e.g. police officers acting like criminals; Max talking about justice, yet pursuing cruel revenge). The sole existence of such contradictions indicates that Max is an antiheroic character. The main protagonist, a police officer, is accused of a serious crime and

⁴¹ HUDÁK, M.: *GTA ži Minecraft: Legendárne hry, ktoré sa dostali aj na mobily*. [online]. [2019-08-27]. Available at: <https://zive.aktuality.sk/clanok/137809/gta-ci-minecraft-legendarne-hry-ktore-sa-dostali-aj-na-mobily/>.

thus has to abandon his profession. Although Max's proclaimed ambition is to persuade the society of his innocence, most of his actions are, in fact, against the law. While trying to prove that he is not a murderer, he becomes one. Moral judgements related to Max's decisions (cruelty against others, killing people) and his seemingly righteous past (innocence in the case of murder of his loved ones) are left exclusively to the players.

In 2013, the digital gaming product *Aliens: Colonial Marines* was released.⁴² The storyline begins on a planet marked as LV-426, where a group of miners (colonists) from a planetary human colony owned by a company Weyland-Yutani finds the ruins of a crashed spaceship and, inside it, remains of an alien and thousands of eggs. A few weeks later, the company loses contact with the colony and as a result, a marine unit is sent to the planet. The special force remains silent for more than five weeks and one of the unit members, Corporal Dwayne Hicks, eventually sends a distress signal. The USS Sephora spaceship, under the command of Captain Jeremy Cruz, reacts to the emergency call and is required to assist. Corporal Christopher Winter, who is the player's avatar, is a part of this unit. His goal is to find Hicks, stay alive in the colony full of aliens, destroy the whole place and leave the planet. As in the previous case, the analysed title can be consumed at various levels. Its explicit transmedia character is, however, proven

⁴² GEARBOX SOFTWARE: *Aliens: Colonial Marines*. [digital game]. Frisco, Texas : Gearbox Software, 2013.

only by the existence of a limited series of comic books published in 1993 and 1994.⁴³ The comic books' graphic design has become an apparent inspiration for the game's styling and aesthetics. This fact is closely connected to other typical features of postmodernism – the tendency to create quotations (here, by direct references to the comics published earlier) and palimpsest techniques. However, the most prominent intertextual elements refer to the science-fiction movie *Alien* (1979, directed by Ridley Scott). The story presented in the game begins on the planet LV-426 known from the aforementioned film. Moreover, aliens, i.e. the monsters killing the colonists and marines, are designed in accordance with the given feature film. The players may also notice that avatars manipulate with legendary weapons such as Hudson's Pulse Rifle, Hicks' Shotgun, etc. Based on these facts, the analysed game title could be described as a clear expression of seriality (it revisits the same themes as Scott's movie and all its sequels),⁴⁴ although with some minor modifications to the storyline that are mainly determined by different technical requirements associated with digital games. The game in question also follows various previously released digital games such as *Aliens vs.*

⁴³ *Aliens: Colonial Marines (Comic Series)*. [online]. [2019-08-28]. Available at: <https://avp.fandom.com/wiki/Aliens:_Colonial_Marines_(comic_series)>.

⁴⁴ The *Alien* movie franchise includes six feature films – *Alien* (1979, directed by Ridley Scott), *Aliens* (1986, directed by James Cameron), *Alien 3* (1992, directed by David Fincher), *Alien Resurrection* (1997, directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet), *Prometheus* (2012) and *Alien: Covenant* (2017, both directed by Ridley Scott).

Predator 1 (1999), *Aliens vs. Predator 2* (2002) or *Rage* (2011). The title *Aliens: Colonial Marines* provides the player with an opportunity to determine its meaning. On the one hand, the main protagonist and his unit could be perceived as positive characters (they do try to eliminate aliens that represent lethal danger), but, on the other hand, they further disrupt the natural environment of said inhuman entities and while doing so, they act just as mercilessly. A considerable amount of genre hybridisation occurs in the game. Elements of a first-person shooter game (fighting the enemies) merge with a strategic game (thinking through and planning the fight tactics, consequent realisation of the campaign), a role-playing game (the presence of a storyline and importance of the main protagonist and his decisions) and an action adventure game (the player surveys the planet). Parody is represented by a clear display of a sweet cake (a donut) that appears in the game whenever the player shoots an alien – this donut serving as an obstacle embodying evident mockery of the serious situation that the unit fighting on the planet LV-426 goes through. The narrative thus abandons strict rationality, as it combines incompatible elements – a rough, deadly planet full of aliens with a gastronomic lifestyle typical for Americans. The game's sales exceeded 1.3 million copies, which makes it a highly popular gaming product able to reach wide audiences.⁴⁵ The main

⁴⁵ PURCHASE, R.: *Aliens: Colonial Marines Managed 1.31 Million Sales*. [online]. [2019-08-28]. Available at: <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2013-05-10-aliens-colonial-marines-managed-1-31-million-sales>.

protagonist, Christopher Winter, expresses rather positive intentions (to find the missing Corporal who sent the distress signal), but he executes them harshly and without mercy (killing inhuman entities in their natural environment). Thus, the main hero expresses many antiheroic traits. The last example of using postmodernism in contemporary digital games production is the digital game *Dying Light* that was published in 2015.⁴⁶ The title is developed by Polish producers and introduces the story of a secret agent Kyle Crane, who is sent to infiltrate a quarantine zone in a city called Harran. The game depicts a hostile city with a dynamic day and night cycle which experiences an unknown infestation. The narrative is distinctively bound to the presence of the given day and night cycle (the enemies become more aggressive and harder to eliminate at night). The player's objective is to explore a large urban environment and eliminate the vicious epidemics while fighting the infected population. The analysed game is not a part of any transmedia storytelling, so it does not integrate several communication channels to elicit aesthetic experience and different kinds of pleasures. However, the game is highly intertextual. It literally refers to the worldwide gaming phenomenon *Super Mario* via so-called Easter eggs (i.e. hidden and officially undocumented features of the

1-31-million-sales>.

⁴⁶ TECHLAND PUBLISHING: *Dying Light*. [digital game]. Ostrów Wielkopolski : Techland Publishing, 2015.

game, certain types of bonus experiences or jokes). The narrative is interconnected with Raymond Benson's tie-in novel *Nightmare Row*. The analysed digital product is clearly inspired by many digital games presenting zombie-infested dystopias, such as *Zombie Shooter* (2007) or *Left 4 Dead* (2008). Its technical design employs various elements typical for the highly popular digital game series *Assassin's Creed* (2007-2018), especially the movement abilities of the avatar. The so-called parkour includes climbing ledges, jumping off edges, jumping from one roof to another). Moreover, players familiar with the digital game series *Metro* (2010-2019) may notice the distinctly similar atmosphere of the game's environment. The analysed game heavily draws from *Dead Island* (2011). The storylines differ only in details – a town versus an island; one protagonist versus four main characters. The presence of double coding is also evident. Saving the remaining uninfected population seems to be less important than killing the already degenerated human beings, which raises a certain moral dilemma for the players. Considering genre hybridisation, we may speak of an uneven combination of a survival horror (the main character fighting for his life against constantly attacking zombie entities) and an action adventure game (open world that the player explores and looks for possible solutions). The seriousness of the depicted topic is parodied by the aforementioned references to the game *Super Mario* (in this case, through a particular chimney situated on the roof of a building, the player may enter the world of Super Mario). This hidden function

included in the game (combining unrelated environments – a city full of zombies and the fantasy world of Super Mario), however, does not have any deeper meaning. Its importance in terms of storytelling is negligible. The game achieved notable sales – 13 million copies on different platforms.⁴⁷ The game's main protagonist, secret agent Kyle Crane, expresses many positive traits (bravery, physical strength, courage, determination). However, he mostly performs conscious negative actions that lead to the death of others (killing the deformed people, sometimes in various visually engaging and 'funny' ways).

Conclusion

The study clearly shows the presence of postmodern cultural elements in the dimension of digital games. We are well aware of the fact that the obtained data cannot be generalised, but the presented analysis (aimed at three digital games that have achieved cult status) is supposed to serve as a possible guide to (or an inspiration for) further development of scientific discourse concerning similar or related topics. Games once used to be just a part of common sociocultural reality. However, along with the emergence of a new societal formation (the postmodern society) and the related rise of a unique type of reality (virtual reality), the dimension of games has become a prominent

⁴⁷ Techland to Celebrate *Dying Light's* Third Anniversary with Giveaways, Discounts, and New Content. [online]. [2019-08-28]. Available at: <<https://www.dualshockers.com/dying-light-third-anniversary/>>.

part of digital entertainment. However, its characteristics have not changed. A game can always be localised and its time horizons remain clear as well. The players are required to respect certain principles, but they also fulfil their needs (suspense, luck, satisfaction achieved by reaching the set goals, etc.). We can state that digital games are immensely popular and their development may be seen as a prominent segment of the media industry. Digital gaming has become a source of virtual identities,⁴⁸ a producer and promoter of various stereotypes,⁴⁹ but, most importantly, a lucrative form of entertainment. The study focused on the presence of postmodernism and its aspects in the dimension of digital games, taking into account their narrative structure and technical design. Thanks to acquainting the reader with the basic terminology related to the analysed topic, we were able to select certain coding units that we subsequently identified within specific digital games. On the basis of a detailed examination of selected media products, we discovered an evident presence of late modern culture in the dimension of digital games. All the analysed digital games (the *Max Payne* series, *Aliens: Colonial Marines* and *Dying Light*) obviously represent the established specifics. Given the transmedia potential of the analysed games, the players

⁴⁸ See: RUSŇÁKOVÁ, L.: Mimicry - Principle of Identity Transformation from the Perspective of Digital Games Theory. In *Communication Today*, 2016, Vol. 7, No. 2, p. 18-29.

⁴⁹ See, for example: PRAVDOVÁ, H.: Fenomén zábavy a úloha stereotypov v produkcii a recepcii mediálnej kultúry. In *Communication Today*, 2011, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 7-24.

are able to perceive their stories and contents at heterogeneous levels, e.g. by watching a movie or reading comic books. The narrative structures (and sometimes also formal elements) of the selected products tend to refer to other products and use palimpsest techniques (e.g. superficial and unrelated references to foreign mythology, filming styles and other media products, most often books, comics, movies, digital games created by other developers). The extensive use of seriality is also evident, as the analysed games articulate topics, environments or character types which have been included in many previously existing books, films and digital products. Any minor modifications of storylines or characters serve only one purpose – to create a false idea of originality and creativity. The analysed digital games articulate well-known topics and exhausted tropes such as an effort to prove one's innocence, a marine unit fighting aliens, saving humanity from epidemics. However, their success lies in their producers' ability to promote these ideas, storylines, characters and environments as original and exceptional. The discussed storylines necessarily refer to heterogeneous meanings and values. The players are thus encouraged to express different opinions on the in-game situations and their possible solutions. Given the nature of the analysed products, we can also observe the phenomenon of hybridisation that is directly connected to current scholarly discussions on media genres. The mentioned digital games cannot be unambiguously classified as neither of them belongs to only one genre type.

The analysed digital games mostly contain elements of action games ('shooters'), role-playing games, adventure games, strategies, etc. One of the most unique characteristics of postmodern art and cultural production is the presence of parody, irony and pastiche, i.e. communication phenomena which clearly degrade a product's proclaimed seriousness and strengthen its entertaining character (e.g. a donut attacking the player's avatar inside a spaceship). The analysed digital games apparently do not respect excessive rationality or strict rules of design, highlighting the element of absurdity instead. The given tendency only further disrupts the once clear boundaries between various levels of culture. However, we cannot forget to mention that besides the technical design and the plot, the most important part of any mainstream digital game is its main protagonist, the (anti)hero who usually expresses positive or seemingly positive intentions, but acts contrary to any conventional moral values, often even despicably. All producers of digital games (and other kinds of media products as well) know that the people of the late modern era, haunted by the traits of neo-narcissism, their own thoughtlessness and unconscious fears, will still seek substitutional metanarratives created by media professionals. The greatest stories of today are able to refer to universal human experience and archetypal schemes of the past, but the general loss of awareness of previously existing stories, legends and similar or even identical media products allows them to falsely appear as innovative or ground-breaking ideas. As it seems,

people who play digital games, predominantly those who belong to the youngest generations of consumers, find their role models in virtual portrayals of morally ambiguous heroes who exchange their intelligence for sarcasm, turn their success into arrogance, act violently because they are afraid and hide their skills in favour of deception. The aforementioned findings document many different reflections of postmodernism in the dimension of digital games. However, they also underline the overall character of all late modern media products. The cultural environment in question can thus be described by the term "eclectic". Its strongest feature is the ability to imitate and/or uncritically merge elements of several different (often contradictory) creative styles and techniques, or even artworks created by other authors. However, making this concluding statement is not enough. Given the constant technological progress and rapid transformations of the cultural essence of society and of individual lifestyles, we have to continually and critically reassess the ways media producers use these ever-changing phenomena for their own benefit.

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