EVENT-SPACE ON THE MOVE (ON THE COMPUTER GAMES PHILOSOPHY)

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Abstract

This article seeks to broaden the conceptual space of computer games studies through a ground-up conceptualisation of basic philosophical notions of the game that draws inspiration from the theories of Johen Huizinga, Roger Caillois, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Eugen Fink. Such an exploration demonstrates that a more nuanced understanding of the very nature of game is needed in order to move beyond existing binaries such as 'labour' vs. 'game' and playfulness. The recent condition in the (new) media shaped augmented and mixed reality demands one's readiness to work in different generations of reality, artificial worlds and in hybrid times. Today's individual is constantly urged to switch among various modes of given and artificial realities and execute various modes of activities that are hybrid and sophisticated as demonstrates the word-compound 'playbour'. By taking into account the very nature of the game in terms of philosophical investigations this essay tries to answer also one of the basic issues posed by the Wark's *Gamer Theory*: can we explore games as allegories for the world we live in?

Keywords: gaming attitude, as-if mode, to-and-fro movement, computer game mods, playbour

Contemporary (post-industrial, software, information, spectacle, interface, breaking news-driven) cultures from the beginning of the 21st century are gaming cultures; however, games were also known to earlier cultures from distant times. It is difficult to state from the beginning on that contemporary cultures are characterized by games precisely, although apart from playgrounds, theme parks, casinos, sport arenas and digital arcades there really are many, especially those shaped with new technologies and media. In the present, it would also not be correct to consider games as the core of the main cultural stream, since it is very well-known that its main trends are linked to many cultural changes that go hand in hand with the movements and streams of the «information», «spectacle» and «software» society. Shifts concerning techno-science (a mechanical, electrical and electronic approach is being replaced by the paradigm «bio» and is being integrated with the «info-sphere»), globalisation, multiculturalism, empire, multitude, and the aftermath of War on terror can also be observed.

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Games as entities with strict rules, process-like nature, competitiveness, and ecstatic enthusiasm of gamers are certainly not the main activities of the modern world. We witness another kind of shift. Contemporary cultures are not the cultures of games but the cultures where various components and activities were shaped and organized by the manner of game and the attitude of game. With the manner of game we especially refer to the playfulness, willingness, sense of improvisation and lightness of playing with the possibilities, as well as simulations, experimentations and working, which is released of the «lead weight» of given-reality. With the attitude of game we refer to flexible and risky procedures, which often demand algorithmic (i. e. problem solving) activity presupposing the instant point of view to reality. Such an activity is based upon fluent switching among its different forms, which appear in some kind of reservoir (or, applying one of M. Heidegger's term, «a standing reserve»). It can simply be said that they are at player's disposal. In relatively short intervals, the attitude of game enables us to operate in so called given reality, which is defined by Newton physics and Euclid geometry. Next we connect to devices to enter the world of cybernetics (cyberspace, e. g. Second Life) that we observe both from the fixed and mobile terminal.

Taking the gaming attitude means being aware of aspects of plurality and hybridisation that are becoming universal in the present, in other words, going beyond the plurality of forms of reality mentioned before and thus including also the plurality of beings, actions, events; to the eye of an adherent to the gaming attitude, no thing is to be discarded beforehand for being utterly useless. In addition, this approach implies a creative sense for combining and testing daring hypotheses, transforming every single phenomenon into an actual laboratory, i. e. an enclosed area behaving as a «wind tunnel» or dry run for testing different hypotheses, concepts and actions. Also the phenomenology arises from ontological plurality and has no complexes about entities characterized by very fragile and instant nature. This brings us to the following Herbert Spiegelberg's observation:

> «What is all-important in phenomenology is that we consider all the data, real or unreal or doubtful, as having equal rights, and investigate them without fear or favor»[2].

Why can we equalise to a certain extent modern cultures with the cultures, which in manner and approach to reality resemble a game? What are the changes that enable this expansion, even the broadened reproduction of a manner of game? What is the reason for the turn that went in the direction of playful design, which is connected with playful, sometimes even improvisational and experimental approach towards the reality? The main reason for this change is undoubtedly the cultural turn, which is based on the integration of modern technologies into

[2] Spiegelberg H. *The Phenomenological Movement – A historical Introduction.* The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960. P. 892.

the culture. These technologies, such as computers, robotics and nanotechnologies have become cultural tools and even the source of cultural innovations. They perform a representative and spectacular function. These technologies no longer play an important role in industrial domination over the nature, on contrast they are integrated into the processes of redefining a person, new forms of presenting the identity, spectacle, and into the processes of research and knowledge gaining. An individual is not alienated from these technologies (as in the Marxian theory of alienation with its standard mode of industrial production as the frame of reference), but is connected to or integrated into them.

However, not only the new technologies are of great importance, but also changes in the way of thinking and perception, which also impact the field of cultural studies, techno-sciences and the new media art. Their aim is to overcome the difference between the cultures of scientists and literary intellectuals in terms of Snow's divide between two cultures[3]. Moreover, they want to integrate both realms. What is also important for the present individual is the ability of algorithmically, problem-solving thinking and the new media literacy, which directs she toward an integrated and experimental approach to the reality as a «pluriversum» of the given world and artificial realities. The aspect of the game-like manner which stresses the importance of free experimenting and improvisation (games are also mind-shifters) is undoubtedly close to the techno-scientists, who are no longer fond of reading "the open book of nature" and assessing the hidden rules of nature, but are part of the creative pole. They create new models of reality in terms of most striking ideas of genetics, nanotechnology and the artificial life theory. In a way they are artistically creative and their products are the source of cultural innovations. Their science is not a science-as-we-used-to-know it, but *not-just-science* (the expression coined by the author of this essay) in terms of more sophisticated activity, which correspond with the big shifts in contemporary, new media shaped art toward not-just-art (the term, coined by the author of this essay).

What is also crucial for understanding the key features of the modern culture is the turn from the passive audience to the active users. Passive audience was formed by traditional mass media (press, radio, broadcasting television) and was characterised by distant observation (seeing, watching). The reason for this today's shift toward bigger (inter)activity lies in the nature of new media and new interactive technologies, which are easy to get and enable media contents (for example DVDs) with the devices, which are accessible for broader group of consumers. Therefore, the present individual does not only watch photographs, videos and movies, but first and foremost creates them and is therefore the part of the active pole what demonstrates the enormous production of moving images at the YouTube and other Web 2.0 portals.

[3] Snow C.P. *The Two Cultures.* New York: Cambridge UP, 1963.

Philosophy of Games: Theories on Subtle Reality in the «As-If» Mode

«Follow me before the choices disappear», is a typical statement from Michael Joyce's hyperfiction *Twelve Blue*[4]. When possibilities disappear, everything is over. Where there are a lot of possibilities and everything is still open like at the beginning of life, the game begins. One of the key notions in Johann Huizinga's 1938 book *Homo Ludens* is that game is older than culture; even animals play. And even though a game – which connects Huizinga to the well-known claim of Friedrich Schiller on aesthetical education by means of a game – is more than a physiological phenomenon or a physiologically conditioned reaction, it simultaneously exceeds the urge to confirm life since a game is in itself an act of providing meaning. The myth and language are also based on the game (the game of words, the game of the spirit), claims the author of *Homo Ludens* and emphasises that a game is primarily an act of freedom, since an enforced game is no longer a game: a game is an activity of freedom, which is the characteristic separating the game from natural processes, physical enforcement and duty. A game can be at least normally stopped at any time, which means that the player can voluntarily give up and leave.

One of the key features of a game considered in terms of classical (also with the phenomenology impacted) game theory is its separation from everyday life, extraction from its space and time, and transition to the playground as a particularly structured space of the game and to the intensive time of duration of the game. Game is not life; it is a simulation of life's possibilities in a condensed and programmed form, submitted to a special scenario that depends upon the genre of each individual game. What in life occurs rarely, exceptionally, completely coincidentally or in experience of most people never even takes place (for example the activity of radical enemy destruction), is arranged and compressed in a game; it seems that within a limited interval of time, a game establishes with an utmost intensity the availability of exceptional experience and impact; we can even understand it as a reservoir of options for their accelerated rotation back and forth.

Separation of the game from every-day space and time (it must be stated at the very beginning that today this separation is increasingly loosening, it is less distinctive since a number of game characteristics is already integrated into the labour of post-industrial society) implies the peculiar turning on and turning off, namely ecstasy as a radical transition to another state and the consequent temporal delay. In a game, the landscape of time is maximally diverse, with a high frequency of powerful intervals, which – like life – flatten into a straight, uninterrupted line at the moment of the game's end. The *game is over* – although implying the end of a successful activity – always hurts and shocks the gamer. Every time it leaves the impression that the game continues and that it is just

[4] Joyce M. *Twelve Blue* [Electronic resource] 2004. Mode of access: http://eastgate.com/TwelveBlue/sl1.html. Accessed: 19 September 2004.

its being drastically removed from it. The feeling of being out is (in video and computer games) also tactile: the realisation that at the moment of game's end the gamer pressing on devices for navigating and controlling the action is in vain, that there is no effect or response, shocks her whole body, inducing a feeling of complete helplessness. It is a feeling of isolation far worse than the one accompanying passionate viewing – participating – at the moment when the curtain falls in a theatre or when the gaze is deprived of a desired object in everyday perspective.

A game is a distinctively process based activity with a beginning, intermediate levels (gradation of the intensity of the game, entanglement in labyrinthine and maze situations, sporadic interruptions in intensity) and an end, the latter being specific for each type of games. It is never a complete rejection (although each of the ends hurts the gamer) since the player can try or play the same game hundreds of times. Very few readers, listeners and viewers return to the same text or work of art a number of times (unless the reception of such a text or piece of art serves their profession, meaning that they write a review or an essay, a single experience of the object usually suffices), while they can play the same game a hundred times or more, perhaps thousands of times in their life (card games, for example). The urge to continue, used and profaned by contemporary popular culture, is connected to the intoxicating effect of the «high-adrenaline» tension in the game, the programmed experiencing of uncertainty, risk and accidence.

Uncertainty, risk and accidence belong to culture, they are its essential part; especially contemporary individuals needs «packages of stimuli» of extraordinary uncertainty, risk and compressed accidental situations, which are often delivered by contemporary art. The availability of constant repetition is therefore one of its more important features, which implies the recognition of the attractive atmosphere of games and the attractiveness of their goals (particularly true in gambling). Things that individuals/users consider as enforced or a burden are generally not repeated, whereas entering the game is always completely voluntary and cheerful (except in cases of professional players, in which case playing is their every-day job, a kind of craft).

Although ecstasy and enthusiasm are important features of a game, implying the atmosphere of Dionysian in the sense of chaotic and frivolous, the game is an activity of unconditional order; a number of theoreticians – from Huizinga to Caillois – emphasize the latter. Co-existing side by side with extreme chaos and frivolity, an utterly sophisticated order and discipline can be perceived, often exceeding the order and discipline in other fields. The order is based upon the rules of the game; if these are omitted (usually the omitting of only one rule suffices), nobody takes the game seriously anymore. The rules of the game are unconditional, they provide the foundation for the normative traffic of the game's world and its time. Who breaks the rules is out since his/her disrespect for rules undermines the illusive coherence of the world

of games. «One who doesn't take the game seriously is a spoilsport»[5], Hans-Georg Gadamer described this particular feature of games. In his *Wahrheit und Methode* (Truth and Method) he provided a relevant insight into the philosophical particularities of games. According to Gadamer, a game has its own essence, which is independent from the consciousness of those who play it; the game exists even where there are no players, meaning that it transcends them as an autonomous entity, since we also talk of phenomena such as the play of light, the play of waves, the play of colours, the play of forces, the play of hair etc., which always imply «the to-and-fro movement which is not tied to any goal which would bring it to an end; rather it renews itself in constant repetition»[6].

The emphasis in this notion is no doubt placed upon the «to-and-fro movement», the movement without stable destination, repeated and renewed. The game is played and replayed independently of those entering it, the repetition providing it with the characteristic of duration. Playing a game, we are in a repeating to-and-fro movement (that is often articulated as a loop, which is form of many new media shaped cultural contents), which is easy and effortless. It seems that persistent repetition (let us recall sport games, card games and, of course, computer games) belongs to the gist of the game precisely because of its easiness (the effort of players in a game is as a rule a high-adrenalin one, meaning that eventual pain and exhaustion are compensated with enthusiasm and ecstasy). Playful to-and-fro movement is not only aimless but also effortless, «it happens, as it were, by itself», as Gadamer[7] described this specificity.

We have mentioned the high-adrenalin intoxication of the game, the zeal and the entrancement, capturing and fascinating the players to the extent that they entirely submit to its flow, which in Gadamer's terms means that the to-and-fro movement takes control over them. It seems that the players are especially successful when they go with its flow; that means that they recognize at first glance seemingly utterly nonsensical to-and-fro movement. Gadamer radicalised his view on the nature of the game in his statement «the real subject of the game ... is not the player, but instead the game itself»[8].

Such approach is daily confirmed by the practice of playing computer games (also video games and games on computer-operated machines at the digital arcades). It is there where we encounter players completely immersed into the «to-and-fro» of the game; they take few things in life with quite the same amount of seriousness as the – to a disinterested observer completely useless – movement and destruction of (enemy) objects within the boundaries of a computer game scenario. It seems as if they are completely oblivious of time; the only temporal dimension is the enlarged, augmented present, gorging on the past and the future like a gigantic black hole. This is a present consisting of «nows», which

5 Gadamer H.G. *Truth and Method.* London: Sheed & Ward, 1975. P. 92.
6 Gadamer, op. cit., p. 99.
7 Ibid., p. 94.
8 Ibid., p. 95, 96.

the player perceives as physical entities, as if they are, in a way, objects with identities. Piled up in the flow of player's experience, they form a boundary, denying access to contents past and future. It seems that the player perceives the return to the time of every day – the time undefined by the enthusiasm of the game – as a stressful burden; it is the characteristics of the future that present the greatest disturbance and obstacle. Apart from «timescape», a special problem of all games is also their space in the sense of an area that needs to be explored, navigated through and controlled. The player of computer games travels through space (in classical game *Doom* primarily through its corridors, in *Myst*, however, the movement is much freer), she conquers it and tries to navigate through it and control it to the as much as greater extent. Designers of (computer) games must therefore innovatively materialise complex environments consisting of conglomerates, consisting of spaces in different perspectives, the corridors and the arenas, suitable for fighting the «zombies».

German phenomenologist Eugen Fink also devoted extensive analyses to the philosophical issues of games in his book *Spiel als Weltsymbol* (Engl. *Game as the Symbol of the World*, 1960), in which he – together with introductions of metaphysical and mythological interpretations of games – also discussed the worldly nature of human game and world as a game without the players. That means that he redirected the topic of games from the field of cultural and anthropological analyses (also) to the field of ontology and even cosmology. A game with a cosmological feature is placed beyond the player, as a movement, it occurs independently from them, yet that movement is indefinable and evasive, the Gadamerian «to-and-fro» in the movement of the game confirms the thesis that the direction of this movement is not defined, therefore, we can say, a game is a movement with no evident aim. Game being a movement and openness, only those partners are invited into the dialogue with it, who are open and in movement themselves, which means they are on their way and approaching the game. In this respect, it is crucial that the openness to the world as «a game without players» does not belong to man but that the man belongs to the openness of the world, existing in the ecstasy of facing the infinite broadness of the world.

Fink writes about the world as a game without the players and about game as ecstasy of man as world. The game of the world directs to the groundlessness of the world, which anticipates the utter grounding of all its internal activities. Although being itself groundless and aimless, the game provides the grounds to those worldly activities which have an aim and are bound to something that is not to-and-fro movement but a movement directed either to or fro. A game – not an apparition but a phenomenon – has very complex ontological specificity, which Fink, true to the phenomenological approach to the problem in question, summarises in the following descriptions: Individual entering a game takes up a point of view that includes a very specific attitude to all the factors of the game – everything taking part in the game, both people (co-players) and things, have the character of toys, since they belong to the world of the game, which has the character of the unreal.

«With man playing, a certain "unreal" sphere of meaning, which is here and is not, which is now and at the same time is not now, breaks into the whole actuality of real things and events. Using the term 'unreal', we have not ultimately defined anything yet, we have just expressed that 'the world of game' defies simple transition to the complex of the actual world, since its 'seeming' character prevents their placing next to other things and complexes, and defined it as something 'actual'»[9].

A game therefore has an independent ontological status, the status of let us say with regard to phenomenology *the unreal*. That means we encounter the field of «unreality», which despite of its utter transitoriness and aimlessness (it is here and now and is not here and now) has the characteristics of the world *sui generis* with its own independent internal spaces and times when an imaginary scene is in question. Those spaces and times are just as non-definable, which directs us to the fact that the game happens in an independent field, constituted – as Fink emphases – with marking off, thus, it is «separated from other human activities and does not interweave with them in a joint striving for the aim. It 'interrupts' the continuity of aim-directed activity, its aims are completely intrinsic to it in the manner that those intrinsic aims of playful activity cannot be included to the general and common aims of life. The activity of the game discerns itself from other activities; it isolates itself from them, having its own 'closed area' in its own medium of appearance»[10]. Sherry Turkle highlights this feature with respect to the video games, too:

«Here is another world where everything is possible but where nothing is arbitrary»[11].

The crucial characteristic of this field is that it has no stable final destination, towards which it would be directed; it has no apparent foundation, although all things there are well founded. The game can therefore be understood as a metaphor of the cosmos within the media of appearance and thus within an independent modality, bearing the characteristics of the unreal; existing under the *as-if* sign together with its spaces and times. The *as-if* mode infects the very activity of the game: the player «works-as-if-working», relieved of the weight of the world despite conforming to the rules of the field. To Fink, a game is a symbol of the world since the game reflects what is inherent in the world itself: lack of foundation, lack of aim and the condition «beyond good and evil».

In his *Letters Upon the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794–1795), F. Schiller pointed to the meaning of game in the sense of culturing and even humanisation, which is what Huizinga and Caillois emphasise as well. The latter also anticipates an important emphasis on the con-

9 Fink E. *Spiel als Weltsymbol.* Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1960. P. 229.
10 Fink, op. cit., p. 234.
11 Turkle S. Video Games and Computer Holding Power // N.W. Fruin, N. Montfort (eds.) *The New Media Reader* / Cambridge, London: The MIT Press. P. 508.

sciousness of the game's reality, inherent in the worlds of games. The introductory chapter of Caillois *Les jeux et les hommes* (Engl. *Men, Play and Games*) titled «Definition of Game» not only stresses the temporal and spatial elimination of the game, its unstable and – with respect to tangible, material aims – unproductive nature, but as an important characteristic in the set of game definitions he also emphasises its fictive nature in the sense that playing is accompanied by «special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality»[12] in relation to the given (everyday) reality. It is important that the author stresses, we can say, the subtle consciousness of the independent, fictive nature of game reality in relation to the every-day, which no-doubt connects games with art. The player, like reader, listener or viewer of works of art, completely surrenders to the game despite knowing that its reality is something special, that there are no equations between the game and the every day reality of his/her existence. The player cherishes the unreality of the game, developing a sense of working with fictive objects and events, forming the sense for the «as-if» and not for real. With all the seriousness, the player indulges in things, which hardly count in regard to the principal trends governing the quotidian. Player's activity is accompanied by the consciousness of the co-existence of worlds within the augmented reality (world considered as in this essay already mentioned «pluriversum») and the need to fluidly switch between them. Entering *the game mode* demands a fluid abandonment of viewpoints and attitudes typical of every-day life, aesthetic enjoyment and different modes of presentation (in video and film cultures).

The game therefore reveals itself as a maximally complex and distinctive cultural activity. This is also how Robert Caillois sees it in his *Men, Play and Games*, an important part of which is a classification of games. With it, he has managed to actually embrace the broadness of the world of games by simultaneously leaving it open enough, allowing interconnections between principal types of games: *agon*, *alea*, *mimicry* and *ilinx*. The *agon* group is competitive games, *alea* games involve chance, *mimicry* contains games of deception, appearance and assuming of roles, whereas *ilinx* comprises games of zealous enthusiasm and vertigo. However, in understanding of computer games, it is important to bear in mind that these types are by no means ideal, isolated and unchangeable. Caillois claims that we often encounter games in which two or three basic types of games combine.

Combinations of basic principles do not only imply the special nature of computer games but also a changed view of the world. Agon and alea anticipate an orderly world, discipline and strict rules, whereas the mimicry-ilinx combination produces an enthusiastic concept of the world of improvisations, imagination and unrestricted inspiration. The space intended for a programmed experience of zeal, intoxication, vertigo and panic is the amusement park, the genesis of which extends from fairs and fun fairs to theme parks. In his book Caillois reveals the

[12] Caillois R. *Les jeux et les hommes.* Paris: Gallimard, 1967. P. 43.

technological effects of fictive world creation, in a condensed form stimulating vertigo and panic. At one place and within relatively limited temporal intervals (from 3 to 6 minutes), the players can indulge in thoroughly exceptional situations completely different from the rhythm of everyday life. Caillois' theoretical views on the world of games are surprisingly up to date even today, regardless whether we direct our attention to contemporary theme parks (Disneyland, Gardaland…) or consider them a prism allowing observation of even such a recent genre of games as computer games from our title are. The typology of games, ranging from agon to ilinx, did by no means develop with them in mind, yet its very openness, in the sense of paying regard to combinations of main principles and types of games, speaks on behalf of applicability of Caillois approach.

The expression «computer games» is very broad, a term covering different types of games, which combine all the major Caillois' principles – from agon, alea and mimicry to ilinx. Just as important for understanding of particular features of computer games are Caillois' views of games at fun fairs, in which he emphasises compression, programmed intensity and limited duration of games and attractions. «By crossing the border, we find ourselves in a world, which is much more compressed than our everyday life»[13]; everything is calculated, programmed to entice a powerful internal excitement, physiological fear, panic, sometimes acceleration, sometimes falling. The incredible intensity of game as a rich temporal event, shaped with special effects, concentrated exceptionality, the daring plot and the danger, is accompanied by precise rationing of time; that means that one of the attractive effects of the game is the very compression of extreme situations within a relatively short temporal interval and in a space, strictly separated from non-playing activities.

The question we are posing at the end of this survey of different philosophical views on games is to what an extent the thoughts represented still apply to our encounters with games in the context of contemporary new media based cyberculture. Can we, at the beginning of the 21st century, still talk about separation of game from everyday life to the radical extent of Caillois and Fink? The answers to these questions are to be provided in the following sections of this essay, in which some aspects of computer games as well as the question of playfulness on the Internet are to be thoroughly explored. We would like to emphasise in advance that at the beginning of the 21st century we detect a greater intertwining of the gaming mode and reality in cyberspace manifestations as well as in the everyday reality of post-industrial societies, in which the importance of gaming activities constantly increases.

Game's authentic field still remains under the *as-if* sign. It is entered by switching to the game mode, which requires placing of player's practical attitude to tangible and material reality in brackets. But the number of games is increasing, and switching into the game and immersion in it is no longer something difficult for today's players or even causing

[13] Caillois, op. cit., p. 259.

stagnation in player's mental life, no, today any movement among different view-points is as fluid as can be. Games, too, largely became an integral part of the present reality; certain features of effortless manipulating with objects, which in the paradigm of industrial societies was exclusively reserved for games, has already entered the production sphere in the context of activities, typical for the networking shaped (new) economy and the crucial mode of labour in augmented reality, which integrates the hybrid forms of labour in given reality and the cyberspace.

By the mention of the cyberspace with the rich range of the on-line activities, it makes sense to direct the attention to the playfulness of the cyberspace shaped with its key software features. The backspace key, the paste and cut command, the mouse dragging and pointing the screen contents, and the absence of prohibition directly encourage as intensive and rampant playfulness in as possible. Simulating the models, by means of the state-of-the-art software one works-as-if-she -does-not-work, even though her intentions might be serious as can be and you are paid for your programming; which means that personal computer is a device, investing the *as if mode* both on the level of activity and the level of reality form. In the *as if mode*, actuality coincides with the already mentioned field of the unreal, with spaces that are here and are not, with times that are here and were not and with to-and-fro loop-like movements.

Playfulness is also enabled by other – let us say ontological – characteristics of cyberspace. Unlike moving in real, physical world, where we need a lot of time and effort to move from one place to another, in cyberspace we can bounce with high speed from one point to the other, which means that we teleport ourselves. Cyberspace is a data and the software shaped space without geographic distances (within cyberspace, the latter are atrophied); in cyberspace, we are freed of direct influences of interactions between physical body and the environment, in which numerous obstacles can appear, which is why it functions as an eminent playground. Game as playful activity, then. Here and there, in the given space and in the cyber one(s).

There is not a coincidence that such a playfulness was one of the key topic of international conference *The Internet as Playground and Factory* (12–14 August 2009, New York), where the playbour (the word compound consisted from play plus labour) as one of the crucial concepts came to the fore. The playbour implies the core of the present smooth switching betweens various modes of reality and activities, which is demanded by one's every day's terminal activity:

> «When they are on-line, people constantly pass from one form of social activity to another. For instance, in one session, a Net user could first purchase some clothes from an e-commerce catalogue, then look for information about education services from the local council's site and then contribute some thoughts to an on-going discussion on a listserver for fiction-writers. Without even consciously having to think about it, this

person would have successively been a consumer in a market, a citizen of a state and an anarcho-communist within a gift economy»[14].

Temporal Dimension of Game

Key moments in understanding of the present computer game media are no doubt general features of games, and the playfulness generated by the activities in mixed and augmented reality, discussed in the previous section, and also understanding of the contemporary cyberculture, directed to the specificity of the new media, emphasising their interactive, digital, software based, and immersive nature. Yet the gist of computer games and their crucial characteristics can also be approached by a comparative discussion in the sense of comparing the medium to two popular mass media – film and novel. A computer game is neither film nor novel; it is based upon a different form of representation, which no longer focuses on viewer and reader but on player as user. The latter watches, listens and reads (instructions, for example, or textual objects as parts of the game's scenario), and simultaneously plays. Activity is chiefly connected to her hand (sometimes both, depending on configuration of the interface), which means that the game also stimulates the sense of touch and demands great motor skills. Successful playing demands the hand and eye coordination as well as the cooperation of hearing and touching. The player of a computer game is intensively immersed into the environment of the game, which requires unceasing interaction, rapid interventions and immediate responses to the demands of the complex, live-turning world of the game.

She faces the starting point of risky disorder, as a rule accompanied by threats from different sources. This fundamental disorder is perceived as a task and a challenge to act and intervene. She tries to restore order in a distinctively antagonistic world, which involves facing of hundreds of tasks, connected with removing of obstacles, the original conflict and her enemy's counter-actions. The player of a computer game has not much time to hesitate and postpone the tasks to some later time. In fact, there are no «later» and «some other tome» for the player, she must not know them or she is unsuccessful as a player. Yet, on the other hand, she intensively exists in a time that is a very particular time of the game, its main characteristics being weak past, barely perceivable future and a very «extensive» present – the present of interactions as intensive activity based upon considering of feedback. The player plays in a present, which constantly implodes the past and the future; this is a present, composed of «nows», arranged in different directions (since it is space-time, which depends on her intensive activity).

A computer game is not a story, an already painted painting or a finished film (the database logic as it is considered in Lev Manovich's *The*

[14] Barbrooke R. *The High-tech Gift Economy* [Electronic resource] 2005. Mode of access: http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3_12/barbrook/ Accessed: 6 June 2010.

Language of New Media[15] is crucial for its basic understanding). There is no «once upon a time» or such a narrative memento is at best just a subordinate component of the game's dominant structure, which does not exhaust in the narration of what happened but is based on the forming of a story in real time, that is, in its concurrent database composition. The course of the game does not rely on *the once upon a time*, what is important is the «now», the present reaction of the player. By destruction of obstacles and defeating of enemies) in so called first person shooter game, she destroys – metaphorically speaking – the past as well, wiping it away as non-essential, foregrounding the present. The question arising from the latter is whether game as a goal-directed activity is not, in fact, a very unique activity, in which this direction towards the goal demands a distinctive presence of future? There actually is a demand for future: solving of conflicts in the game according to its scenario is normally always directed to a successful future as the initial task, yet the very dramaturgy of the game requires explicit activity in an enlarged/heightened present; every "now" is arranged to be perceived as a task. Rather than being embedded in the cinematic world organized by the procedure of montage, the world of the computer game is a dynamic «gamescape», which is in real time changed by means of player activity shaped as algorithmic, problem-solving one. And computer game presupposes the code either in terms that both, playing a game and gaming a code are a part of same process.

Future as a horizon of yet non-played units of game and their «nows» is directed towards game's real time and implodes within it. Playing is not contemplation – a distanced immersion in something that implies a lot of time or, metaphorically speaking, all times in the world (which a reader of traditional literature has at her disposal). There is little time in a game, often too little; the time that counts is the «now» as a moment filled with tasks. It is precisely because the player as a rule faces lack of time that the time, metaphorically speaking, counts. She feels each individual «now», her attitude to the «nows» is tactile, and she perceives their coming and going. For her, «now», too, is a digital unit as a possible «standing reserve» (Heidegger's expression) for each particular situation. The «nows» filled with intensive action are the expanded «nows» that can be perceived individually.

Due to its byte coding, the digital environment of computer games implies knowledge on a peculiar atomicity, actualised as a reduction of complex components to their basic units. The description of the let us say the virtual «now» with a body, the «now» that can be counted, is, understandably, metaphorically approximate, figurative, based merely upon the experience of the author of this text in his encounters with the new media landscapes of games and digital textuality. The figurative sketch of «now» is important here only due to the emphasis that is placed on the experience of the complex present, in which a computer

[15] Manovich L. *The Language of New Media.* Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2001.

game runs, which, on the other hand, is observed through its temporal dimension, the environments of intervals and interruptions included.

Just as «textual landscapes» require spacing between words and letters, and punctuation marks (let us remember Maurice Blanchot's theory of «interruptions» and the practice of paying regard to the blanks between graphic signs as poet Edmond Jabes proposed) in order to function at all, in order to read them at all, so the intervals are relevant in the landscapes of games. Intervals can be longer – when changing levels of the game, for example – or shorter, connected to the moments of decisions on which way to chose, or which would be our possibility of choice in the unravelling of the game. They are also located within the «nows» and are distinctively felt while playing; just as textual environments are not only filled with written or printed signs but also with blanks, so the game is not merely based upon the played «nows» but also the «nows of playing», the «nows» of selection, transfer to a higher level of the game, and breaks, during which we feel the running away of time. It is during breaks that we count the played, the lost, and prepare for new challenges and decisions within the labyrinth of possibilities.

Active Hand, Coordination of Movement and Sight

Computer game is a medium demanding full engagement of all senses (and even their cooperation, e. g. tactile seeing), and the body participates in the game also via maximally active hand, which needs to be properly trained in order to successfully manipulate with complicated interfaces (joystick, console). In his book on reading of paintings and watching of texts Gandelman calls attention to the active, even tactile role of the eye and to different (historical) views to the relation between watching and touching. In this regard, the author reaches back to the figurative interpretation of this relation in the 16th century emblematics, drawing attention to the Julius Wilhelm Zincgref's renaissance emblem *Emblematicum Ethico – Politorum*, depicting an eye placed in an open palm, seemingly observing the world from the palm. We are witnessing a peculiar deterritorialisation of the eye in the shape of its nesting in the palm; the latter symbolises active and arbitrary role of the hand in the making of things, which Gandelman described as follows:

> «In the emblem the eye is merely a pilot guiding the hand toward its objectives; in the Egyptian hieroglyph, on the contrary, the eye-sun rules over the hand in an absolute manner, just as the pharaoh ruled over Egypt»[16].

I used this example to emphasise the historical tension between sight and touch, which in the oculocentric paradigm of the Western world led to favouring of the role of looking and institution of sight in general. Within this paradigm, the true master is the one mastering the view (and his ideological interpretations). It is a tradition presently reaching its

[16] Gandelman C. *Reading Pictures, Viewing Texts.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991. P. 3, 4.

peak in the mechanism of video-control, in the computer war games with smart bombs and in using of satellite, orbital views (through the eye of the camera of weather satellites). In computer games – no doubt an excellent genre of visual culture, producing trendy iconography (influencing fashion, life-styles, movies) – we are still witnessing a peculiar affirmation of the hand, especially in its function of touching, holding and pressing of interfaces. It seems that the afore-mentioned emblem from Gandelman's book is symptomatic for the present condition; player's activities are successful only when the eye – metaphorically speaking – is in her hand, directing it as skilfully as possible. The eye must cooperate with the hand, they are «hand in hand», optimum effect is achieved only through complete harmonization of both organs; a computer game is no doubt also an extremely tactile field, in which the tactile (haptic) vision, directed to the surfaces of objects, has the advantage over merely optic looking, directed to scanning of objects according to their contours.

At this point we can raise a question, who is the one with actual power in the world of computer games, who is the «God» of these games or the monarch of the territory? No doubt the one seizing both the player's sight and her hand, her «hand with eye», in short. In this case, mere «seizing» of hand is not enough, since the game demands a number of kinaesthetic and motor activities, boldly stimulating the integral perception.

> «The dimension of direct physical involvement or 'hands-on control', which the computer game grants to the spectator/player, is perhaps the central and defining characteristic of the genre»[17].

The author of this notion Andrew Darley, therefore compares the activity of a computer player to driving a car, which is also based on complex interactivity and constant control, inducing a powerful impression of participation in the real time of pure present, in which something more or less controlled is constantly happening. Driving a car (pre) requires certain skills, which is also the case in computer games with the user having to thoroughly adopt all the elements of steering and control.

The field of a computer game is arranged as to stimulate the feeling of distanced presence, the feeling of *being there*, in action, in which the player takes on roles, runs, rides, races, removes obstacles, jumps and above all destroys the enemy with firearms – sometimes inducing a regular blood-bath as is the case in the *Quake* game. To be there means to be within the screen, in its reactive environment of pure action, leading either to advancement in the game, transition to new, more demanding levels, or to failure, often resulting in very real frustrations. The unsuccessful player, intensively immersed in the world of action and thoroughly fascinated by it while playing, might perceive rejection in this activity more painfully, feeling more drastically excluded, than an unsuccessful reader or a bad film-viewer. We have mentioned the genre-symptomatic role of the – figuratively put – eye in the player's

[17] Darley A. *Visual Digital Culture.* London: Routledge, 2000. P. 157.

palm of hand, the function which is also not that of a passive observer of the activity or that of a reader of commands and commentaries. On the contrary, this is the eye, the look of which must rapidly scan different aspects of the activity on screen. We can describe it as a bouncing eye, once directed to the top of the screen, then to its lower margin, and a moment later to its centre, controlling the action, trying to perceive even more than is momentarily shown. It anticipates the action, looking behind the screen, seeing spaces around it, which are also important for establishing the field of vision of the game.

To be there, in the midst of activity on screen, in the world of action, where static locations constantly change into dynamic spaces, corresponds to the characteristic of «being in present», namely in the present composed of the «nows» described in the previous section. The game undoubtedly presupposes particular narrative structures, within it, stories come true and new ones emerge; yet these stories run now and the player (players) is one of the main protagonists. It is not about «once upon a time» but about «it is now», which is connected to the nature of interactive representation in the sense of a shift, similar to the one from the accomplished to the unaccomplished, from outside of time into its within.

Hacker and Artist Modifications of Computer Games

In all fields of new media shaped contemporary culture, stable works as closed artefacts are at stake and being replaced with let us say structures and processes as open systems, processes and interventions enabling numerous variants, transformations and upgrading. The movements in contemporary art favour performative features, which often lead to an art beyond the artworks in terms of stable products, meaning art without closed, material artefacts. The latter are being replaced by instantaneous events, conceptualistic events and works as programs. Creation of new out of virtually nothing is decreasing, making way for objects or concepts composed of already existing models, the readymades. Let us consider the changes the use of novel technologies caused in film. We are witnessing a development, which has changed film into data material, open to free user manipulation.

The film of yesterday, defined by strict authority and identity, linked to the director, actors and a distinctive script, is changing into the reservoir of digital images, which the users can slow down or speed up, scratch them, remix them, change their score, not to mention variants of well-known movies, offering a completely different denouements from those in the original, sometimes completely opposed to the director's authorial intention. DJ' procedures in terms of *mixes, cuts & scratches* are expanding from club music to the film, and other with the new media shaped cultural contents.

Has this movement surpassed the genre of computer games? Not at all. In the field in question, there are numerous variants of the well-known computer games (the so-called mods and patches); these variants usually do not bother the designers of games, working for big com-

panies, what is more, they sometimes even include the hackers' and web artists' transformations of their games in their new projects. In the case of *Tomb Raider,* for example, the main protagonist Lara Croft did not only appear in a film but also in a derivative form of the *Nude Raider* game. The field of net art can also offer computer games by net artists, which are usually not distributed in public in a form of artefacts (CD-ROMs, for example) but only exist in the authentic place of net art, on the Internet. In the establishing of the on-line artistic computer game genre, an important role was played by Anne-Marie Schleiner's 1999 on-line exhibition *Cracking the Maze*[18]. The exhibition focused on variants of popular computer games, which retain the original settings (together with their graphic solutions, iconography and forms of interactivity), yet they are subversive in dramaturgy and critical to the originals. As one of groundbreaking pieces in this movement we can consider Natalie Bookchin's video game *The Intruder*[19] as a piece that demonstrates the blurring of the borders between two (within the modernist paradigm strictly separated) fields – the elite, high art (e. g., Borges's literature) and the popular culture genres (e. g., video and computer games). The author was inspired by Borges's tale of two brothers in love with the same girl (*La intrusa,* 1966) to create a multimedia story narrated through ten computer games, which according to the software used make references to some classic, but nowadays very outdated video games from the 1980s, such as *Pong, Kaboom, Laser Blast, Outlaw, Jungle Hunt,* and *Gal's Panic*. The crucial in this piece is the feminist approach of the author, where the hero of Borges's text is understood as an intruder and a disturbing element in a world controlled by men; in the last unit of the game, she even takes the role of a moving target at which shots are fired from a circling helicopter.

Although suspicious of the expression «feminist variant», Schleiner – in the statement accompanying the exhibition – has mentioned that a number of patches replace the male hero (and macho organisation of action, also typical for the most popular variants of the shot-them-up computer games) by female protagonists and androgynous animals, or, alternatively, the patches transform female protagonists in official variants of commercial games like (already mentioned) *Tomb Raider, Resident Evil* and *Final Fantasy VII*. We are witnessing the birth of a new subculture and also a new net based artistic practice, boldly interfering with commercial products of big companies, ironically enforcing a new ideology upon them, transforming their heroes and also providing a new audience, new users. Such parasite-critical-subversive practices can undermine the dominant ideology of «official», commercial computer games and introduce new, more subtle configurations of (main) characters, spaces of the

[18] Schleiner A.M. Does Lara Croft Wear Fake Polygons? Gender and Gender-Role Subversion in Computer Adventure Games // *Leonardo*. 2001. Vol. 34, № 3.

[19] Bookchin N. *The Intruder* [Electronic resource] 2009. Mode of access: http://bookchin.net/intruder/english/html/a_title.html. Accessed: 17 April 2009.

game and also manners of playing, modes of interactivity. The established semiotic and iconographic structures of games are adjusted to new tactics and strategies, what demonstrates the most recent genre of tactical games, designed by artists-activists. As striking examples of such a game we can mention Gonzalo Frasca's *September 12*[20], which shows the inevitability of collateral damage in the war on terror, *Raid Gaza*, which criticizes Israel's military strategy, and the *Gulf War 2*, released six months before the invasion of Iraq, and anticipating the terrible consequences of confused politics in approaching the Middle East issues.

Such artistic mods and patches are today involved in the hactivism movement, which is close to tactical media, and was described in Galloway's book[21] as «countergaming» in terms of subversive strategies of net artists who have generated projects and programmes that try to subvert and critique the formal structures and political implications of mainstream games. He draws even the parallels between the work of Jodi and other «countergaming» net-art artists to the «countercinema» of Godard and others in the 1960s.

Today, the patches are primarily enabled by hacker interventions to the commercial games and their artistic upgrading in terms of activism and hactivism, yet it will soon be possible to a broader group of consumers that arrange the official variants of popular mainstream games in order to allow different courses of action, different heroes, more types of iconography, spaces of the game, and different plots and endings. By that, the entertainment (and art) industry would accomplish what the so-called new economy is based upon, namely offering of product in the form of a flexible service and not as a closed artefact. After the postmodern destabilisation of subject (its deconstruction into the fractal subject or the multiple I within computer culture), today we can observe the destabilisation of object, especially the one in an accomplished material form, and a transition to open, unstable structures. Sharp-edged (material) objects are being replaced by processes, the emphasis is placed on a service rather than the artefact, and instead of experiencing pleasure in a closed, thoroughly perfected work, we encounter experience, which in regard to the question of work of art today, Marc Napier explained as follows: «The artwork is not a thing, it is a process, an interface, an invitation to participate in a creative act»[22]. And the striking forms of such an experience are no doubt also provided by computer games, their key component being an original form of experiencing, their nature of a service and a process. Purchasing a computer game, the consumer does not buy a traditionally conceived artefact but a scheme for a certain activity, for arranging of certain actions, and a package of scenarios for different experiences and sensations.

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20 Frasca G. *September 12* [Electronic resource] 2010. Mode of access: http://www.newsgaming.com/games/index12.htm. Accessed: 17 September 2010.

21 Galloway A. *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture (Electronic Mediations)*. Minnesota: UMP, 2006.

22 Napier M. Feed [Electronic resource] Mode of access: http://dian-network.com/con/feed/index.html. Accessed: 13 November.