To Describe the World with a Memory.

The Antecedents in the Most Recent Fictional Digital Games

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The development of electronic technologies, as closely related to the game industry, affects not only the quality of digital productions (almost photorealistic graphics, diverse gameplay, virtual reality, etc.), but also obviously, allows for an increasingly complex development of the stories contained in the games. The consequences of such evolution should therefore be considered not only within the context of juxtapositions between the next generations of computer processors, consoles or graphic card models, but above all from the perspective of theme-based changes, worldviews and new content that shape the cultural dimension of digital games as expansive multimodal narratives[1]. Although 30, or even 20 years ago, computer games were associated mainly with their ludic aspect, nowadays, by presenting complex stories, they are part of cultural, social and ideological discourses. This is not only a matter of the topics that have been raised for years, such as violence, simulation of killing, or issues related to game addiction in children and young people[2];these factors, though very important and still connected with the games, do not exhaust the whole list of subjects and controver-

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[1] The issues of multimodality in games are discussed, among others, byChristy Dena, "Beyond Multimedia, Narrative and Game. The Contributions of Multimodality and Polymorphic Fictions", in: *New Perspectives on Narrative and Multimodality*, ed. R. Page (New York, 2010) 183-201; and: Krzysztof M. Maj, *Światotwórstwo w fantastyce. Od przedstawienia do zamieszkiwania* (Kraków: Universitas, 2019), 259-280.

[2] An example of the extremely negative perception of computer games because they have violent motives is the book of Iwona Ulfik-Jaworska, *Komputerowi mordercy* (Lublin, 2015).

sies. To name a few, there is the problem of racism, which appeared in the comments and reviews of the third part of the Polish *Witcher3*, or the criticism of the title, from the feminist perspective[4]. Thus, it is obvious that digital games - especially the most complex and fictionalised ones - although they represent a fragment of the so-called entertainment supersystems (being sometimes, as in the case of Blizzard's production *World Of Warcraft*, their foundation), they become a significant medium transmitting, apart from e.g. historical information, also contemporary ideological and world-view content[5]. Such a wide range of topics gains its cultural significance and evokes - hardly countable - evidence of reception, because when designing stories in games, creators use traditional ways of creating them, characteristic for literature and film. The evolution of digital games therefore reveals important trends, related both to the direction of topic changes, to the popularity of certain plot solutions, as well as to the reproduction of specific means of expression. Considering the specificity of the phenomena of computer entertainment (interactive exploration, dialogue, cutscenes, gameplay), this process can be analysed on two different levels:

– at the level of new theme-based projects: as a multimodal potential, which is an interpretative proposition for the player, who will more or less connect, read and understand the story in the game;

– or at the level of programmed realizations: as e.g. necessary (or voluntary) role-playing solutions, which the player will co-create.

The first case, however, concerns the changes in the topic choices of the dominant, and the second case concerns the ways of their presentation.

Moral change

One of the most visible changes in the area of the latest, fictionalized digital games is a turn towards moral issues, especially family matters. And it is irrelevant whether, as part of their world-creating efforts, programmers and screenwriters refer to a universe already present in popular culture (e.g. the world of *Star Wars*, Andrzej Sapkowski's concepts, etc.) or create the world from scratch (e.g. the post-apocalyptic reality of the *Fallout* series). In each case, we are confronted with the same tendency: a combination of the most recent scenes of the stories co-created by the player with the theme of family relations and conflicts. For example, in the first two parts of the digital series *The Witcher* (2007;2011) the creators focused the player's attention mostly on the epic aspect of political and wartime events in which the protagonist participated and had an influence. The third part, however (*The Witcher III: Wild Hunt*, 2015), together with the expansions (*Hearts of Stone*, 2015, *Blood and Wine*, 2016) - already much

[3] See: .https://www.polygon.com/2015/6/3/8719389/colorblind-on-witcher-3-rust-and-gamings-race-problem [access – 12.01.2020]

[4] See: https://www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2015/05/31/why-feminist-frequency-is-dead-wrong-about-the-witcher-3/#2c22c0d435bf [access – 12.01.2020]

[5] About the Witcher's universe as an entertainment supersystem writes, among others Zbigniew Wałaszewski, "Wiedźmin: pierwszy polski supersystem rozrywkowy", in: Obraz literatury w komunikacji społecznej po roku '89, ed. A. Werner, T. Żukowski, (Warszawa, 2013), 128-129.

more elaborate and technically perfect - introduce the player/user/recipient into the meanders of complex family and customary arrangements. By understanding the causes of human drama, an analysis of parents' and children's behaviour determines the progress of the game, both in the basic part of the game (one of the main threads was directly titled "Family Matters") and in the expansions. The positive ending of the virtual adventure depends de facto on how the player interprets e.g. the role of a parent - Geralt or the relationship of two adult sisters marked by childhood trauma[6].

Similar changes can also be seen in the successive stages of development of the most - so far - modularized MMORPG, which remains *Star Wars: The Old Republic*. BioWare's production was released in 2011 and became famous for a number of difficult to count dialogues (among other things, voice acting was used on an unprecedented scale), stories, plots and cutscenes[7]. The basic version of the game, as well as two subsequent feature extensions (*Rise of the Hutt Cartel*, 2013; *Shadow of Revan*, 2014), concerned the epic dimension of galactic battles and intrigues. However, a significant turning-point occurred in 2015, when, with the extensions of *Knights of the Fallen Empire* and *Knights of the Eternal Throne* (2016), the developers introduced the main theme, showing the vivid study of the Emperor's family's pathological breakdown. From now on, the audience's attention is to be caught not only by the arcade gameplay, but above all by the analysis of the attitudes of parents and children. The story is co-created by the player and thus conditioned by a number of variables (player's choices), but in its essential message, it shows the consequences of the domination of one of the parents (father) in the educational process, which in grown-up children manifests itself in a lack of empathy and a tendency to psychological manipulation or emotional blackmail. The player, regardless of the character he or she creates (the protagonist),follows and co-creates this family story in order to learn, apart from the course of events across the galaxy, the mechanisms of depravity, moral compromises and possible solutions to family problems.

These examples are of course one of many. In the following, you can cite titles such as: *Fallout 4* (2015), *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017), *Assassin`s Creed: Origins* (2017), *Assassin`s Creed: Odyssey* (2018), or *God of War* (2018), which one of the reviewers wrote about:

"Not long ago, it was hard to imagine that I would be reflecting on paternity and apparent roughness, inspired...by the evenings spent with the God of War game. Over 50 hours of Kratos and Atreus' journey to the highest peak of Midgard, however, makes me think about it. During the journey, the relationship between father and son changes, and I - in a way - with them[8]."

The role of the family, its functions, educational aspects, relations between spouses, parents and children are no longer just a trivialized background for the events co-created in the games

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[6] See: Rafał Kochanowicz, „Zmiennik wybawiony albo tryumf wiedźmina. Cyfrowy dialog z kulturą i obyczajowością (Wiedźmin 3), w *Literatura i Kultura Popularna XXIV*, ed. Anna Gemra (Wrocław 2018), 313-327.

[7] See: https://www.pcgamer.com/star-wars-the-old-republic-scoops-guinness-world-record-for-voice-acting/ [access – 12.01.2020]

[8] See:https://www.eurogamer.pl/articles/2018-04-22-god-of-war-i-trudna-relacja-ojciec-syn [access – 12.01.2020]

(although there is no lack of such examples); they begin to determine the main vector of the plot development. After all, the popularity of this subject is hardly connected with the sense of the authors' pedagogical mission. It is simply universal and therefore free from the historical or local contexts that define the situation of potential players and recipients from around the world.

At the same time, the moral change, as understood in this way, results in the use of specific methods of presentation in games, thanks to which the existential and psychological aspect of the co-created story is highlighted. The specificity of the technologically conditioned changes in the multimodal character of digital narratives and the choice of new topics have caused the descriptive layer in the latest productions to be constructed within the framework of variously designed antecedents.

Digital antecedents

References to the past are, so to speak, an inseparable element of digital world creation in games, the authors of which specify ideas related to a comprehensive vision of the fantastic universe (usually). At the beginning, when the first digital productions of "paper" role-playing games, kept in the Dungeons and Dragons convention, such as *Might and Magic VI: The Mandate of Heaven* (1998), detailed information about the world in which the game takes place was contained in extensive textbooks. In addition to instructions on how to use the program, control or the characteristics of game characters and classes, the user found in them an outline of intrigue and a more or less detailed description of the world:

Discouraging the Unworthy

Enjoying your world, are you?

It must be nice, being so secure in where you are, what you do, and who you know. Most everyone around you is much the same, I'd imagine.

And you're all such a herd of sheep! Slow and simple and when the knife comes from behind to catch your throat, all you'll have time to do is squeak, "Baaaa!"

Or maybe you're different? Maybe you've got the fortitude to see beyond the safe illusion. Or maybe you're just a fool, rushing in where pagan deities fear to romp. Either way, we need your skills…and your heart.

I am the Ur-Mage Klavis Verge – no doubt you've heard of me!

Eh? What?! Well, no matter – you're ignorant to a lot of truths in the universe! I'm here to educate you. To open your eyes…

Accept this: your world is not your own. At best, it's a window on a reality of Might and Magic: Enroth. A new world to you, perhaps, but a land of long tradition…now facing a harrowing danger. If it collapses beneath the horrors now threatening to over-run it, your world will most assuredly be destroyed, shattered all the way down to its foundation. Survival of both worlds- your own and Enroth - depends on your actions.

No pressure, though.

You have the tools before you. You call them by
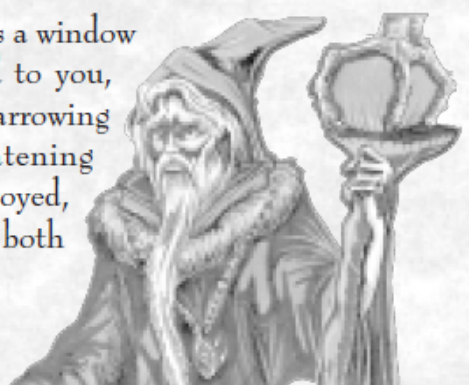
The storyline contained in the game was already transmedial; it would begin in the book and develop and end during the game on the computer. With time, however, and with the development of technology, the role of textbook descriptions has been reduced, and their function has been taken over by the lexicons, diaries, chronicles, codes and encyclopaedias incorporated in the game. Today, knowledge about the world of the game can also be organized by using the online tutorials, or by using algorithm-based Wikipedia and fandom databases. The first references to the past were usually epic and historical. Descriptions of what had preceded the events in the game showed the world on a macro scale, as in the history of the continent, the land, wars, etc. The situation began to change when more and more complex dialogues appeared in the games, and the storyline vector of the development of events stopped being exclusively about the epic dimension of the story (saving the world, the galaxy, etc.) and was designed by the creators in such a way that the viewer could also learn more about the history of this or that character. An example in this case is the production of BioWare - *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003) and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II- The Sith Lords* (2004) - in which the player's character not only fights for the right cause, but frequently talks to his galactic travel companions. In this way, the user gains information necessary for further gameplay and learns about the personalities of the virtual interlocutors. It can also be said that BioWare has popularized this aspect of the virtual adventure, which involves extensive dialogue as a way to provide descriptions of the world and to introduce customary topics. While in earlier productions, however, dialogues were a complementary feature, in the title crowning the series, *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (2011), conversations with companions (and with other characters from the game world) are already a modal dominant point of the main story (they are simply the principal way of passing information to the player by using voice acting), which, by the way, also affects their functional aspect in gameplay. A properly performed conversation (success depends on the interpretive skills of the player) results in an increase in – via a numerically expressed modulator (called *Presence*) - trust, fidelity, and commitment to the companion character. The higher the level, the greater the influence of the assistant on the elements of the virtual environment, which makes the gameplay easier (defeating opponents, etc.). The main feature of such a dialogue is, however, that in the great majority of cases, the conversations are reminiscences. The characters talk about what happened to them before they joined the main character's crew, they confide their old secrets, and sometimes, if this is the will of the player, they have an affair with the avatar he or she is leading. It is worth mentioning that there are over forty of these companions - only in the basic version of the game - and to each of them, the creators have linked a separate, individual story, closely matched to the character class chosen by the player (e.g. Jedi Knight, Imperial Agent, etc.). If the avatar refers to the convention of the Empire, his companions expose the social and cultural nuances of this faction. This gives the player additional information about the game environment, which influences the further stages of the game. The aforementioned extensions (*Knights of the Fallen Empire; Knights of the Eternal Throne*), on the other hand, have significantly developed the customary aspect of the conversations: the player's protagonist learns the story and motivations of members of the whole family (mother, father, sons, daughters), while at the same time the creators - by introducing additional film interludes and the so-called trailers[9] incorporated in the game - have intensified the retrospective character of the intrigue. The films, which open up new ventures show, in order: the twin brothers growing up under the supervision of their father (*Knights of the Fallen Empire*), and in the second case: the

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[9] You can view them on the website: http://www.swtor.com/eternal-throne [access – 12.01.2020]

dramatic childhood of the daughter and the brave behaviour of the mother (*Knights of the Eternal Throne*). The axis of events is thus a family conflict, and the solution to it - depending on the choices and improvisation of the player - is the key to overcoming the chaos in the whole galaxy. Without a doubt, the BioWare programmers, even though the events in the game take place about 3600 years before the so-called Battle of Yavin, refer in this way to the Skywalker family's narrative, but they are much more elaborate in the psychological layer of conflict.

A similar approach was taken by programmers from CD Projekt Red in the third part of the digital *Witcher*. Again, references to the past and the retrospective way of creating a story are dominant. Geralt, led by the player, is not only a "monster killer", but most of all a detective recreating the course of past events. By improvising, the player combines the Witcher's hypotheses and discoveries and follows the process of deduction, thus learning about the course of the distant events and very often their moral basis. "Family matters" - as a theme of one of the main threads - here represent an excellent example. Through Geralt, the viewer becomes somehow a "confessor"/"psychoanalyst" of a tyrannical, lost alcoholic husband and father, thereby exploring the causes and consequences of the collapse of family ties[10]. This quite long and multi-stage conversation with the "Bloody Baron" also provides, apart from personal information, a whole range of descriptions and nuances related to the reality of the fantastic world. Therefore, it has a similar world-forming function as the dialogues in BioWare's production.

The individualised past, childhood experiences, and memories both sad and joyous which the player co-creates as part of the dialogue (he chooses optional questions, answers and comments of varied fatal function) do not exhaust the retrospective description of the worlds shown in the games. The trick, which the creators increasingly use, is the playable and un-playable flashbacks, referring to film poetics, and unique, surrealistic journeys to the past. In the third part of *The Witcher*, Geralt uses the help of an oneiromancer to dream of Ciri's past in Novigrad; the viewer watches a heavily metaphorized film interlude. In the expansion Hearts of Stone, Geralt, controlled by the player, recreates the couple's ruined life. By activating subsequent requisites, the player watches genre scenes from the past, as if adapted for the film about Ebenezer Scrooge. In *Blood and Wine*, Geralt takes a "sentimental journey" with one of the characters to the magical land of fairy tales, an escapist oasis of childhood.

Wiedźmin III

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[10]Kochanowicz, 323.

The end of the main quest - in the basic version of the game - is connected with the cinematic recall of key moments in the game, when the player makes a decision on how a parent (Geralt) should behave in relation to his adopted daughter (Ciri). Almost identical solutions were used by the developers from BioWare, sending the hero on a quest to the inside of his mind to cleanse his subconscious from the invasive memories that were forced upon him. They are, as in *The Witcher*, a recapitulation of critical choices made by the recipient/co-creator.


SWTOR

In both cases, therefore, we are dealing with a situation in which the creators settle the past of the player himself. During the whole game, it was he who decided in what direction and how the intrigue would be developed, and the effect of his ideas and intentions can be played out/viewed within the context of a particularly concrete, summarizing adventure retrospection. It is also obvious that these psychologizing procedures are another step in the development of digital world creation. In a way, the potential of the extended, mysterious lands that the player can explore is being used up, so the creators of new adventures move - one would like to say - inside the virtual characters. It seems this is not a random trend, as there are still plenty of similar examples, starting with the motif of "Memory Triggers" from *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, which the main character has to find in order for the player to learn the motivations of his father's actions in the shown film flashbacks, through the flashbacks in the last two parts of the series *Assassin`s Creed: Origins*, *Assassin`s Creed: Odyssey*, where the family story is added and explained on the basis of playable or strictly film flashbacks. Next is one of the most recent productions published by Electronic Arts: *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order* (2019), in which the creators have related the development of the led protagonist to the motif of unlocking memories from a child's training; the player acts them out, and the protagonist masters the skills extracted from memory in this way. And the fourth part of the game series produced by Bethesda, *Fallout 4* (2015) concludes. The latter title is also very important because both the idea of the world itself and the game environment are almost entirely based on differently concretised antecedents.

Topically, the past, as a "paradise lost" due to atomic destruction, justifies the existing, postapocalyptic reality, in which the player takes on the role of the "Only Survivor" from Crypt 111 (the shelter)[11] and sets off in search of his son. The open-world convention has a world-centric

[11]You can choose either a male or female protagonist.

character in this case. The plot threads help the player to freely explore the extensive, virtual imitations of ruined Boston and its suburbs. The protagonist survived the cataclysm in a state of hibernation but woke up several decades later. His journey is thus determined from beginning to end by a retrospective perspective, and the world becomes a maze of memories, both his own and the others'. The exploration in *Fallout 4* does not consist of just travelling, but is primarily connected to a kind of reconstruction of the dramatic events and fates of people who left their traces in the form of computer blogs, letters, recordings, notes etc. By finding them, the player gets to know the individual dramas of people experiencing family tragedies, struggling for survival, gradually falling into madness, or changing, under the influence of radiation, into monsters.
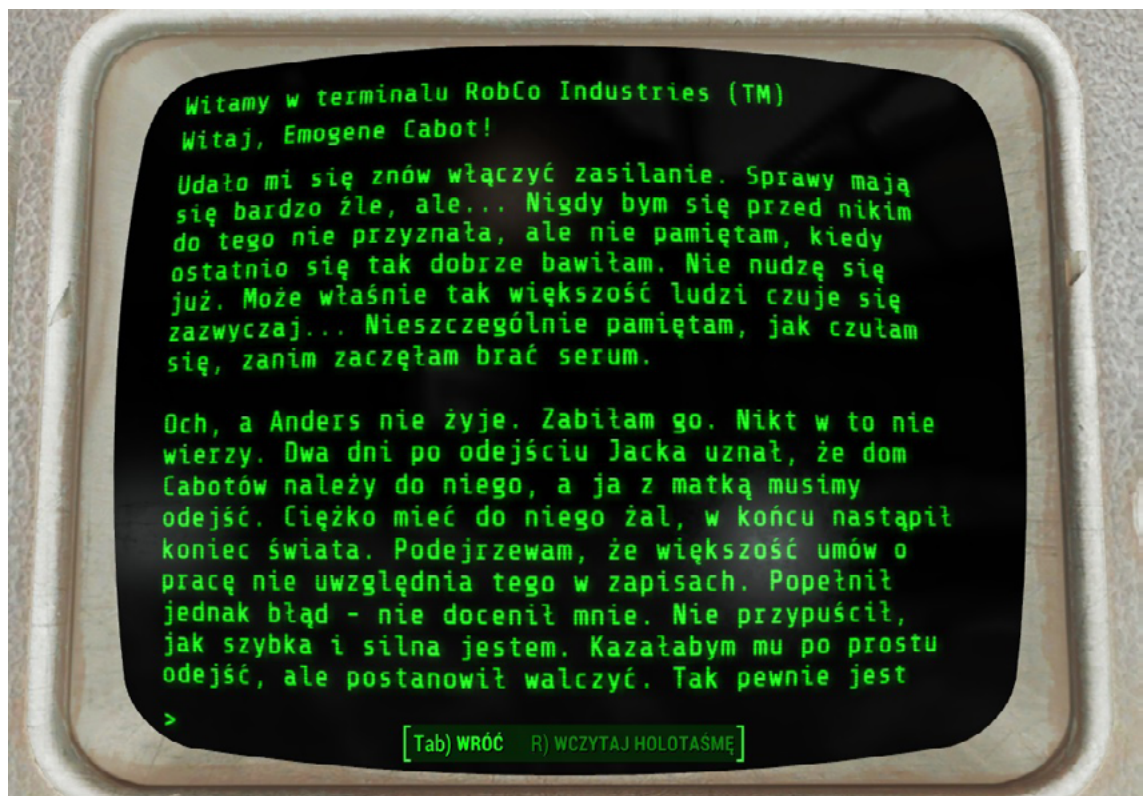
Fallout 4

The number of such remains, which is difficult to count, as well as the need to find them, which is designed in the storyline, clearly defines the retrospective character of the description of the world being explored and actually gives it meaning. As Krzysztof M. Maj. points out:

> "The reader of the world-centric narrative will pay much more attention to descriptions of the environment, details from the history of a fictional world, political, philosophical and scientific nuances, as well as to everything that may require any follow-up, suggesting the potential of a particular narrative system."[12]

[12]Maj, 62.

Referring to the above reflection on world-forming concretisations in *Fallout 4*, one might add that without discovering the memories and antecedents, the adventure would not make much sense; it would simply be a virtual walk in ruins. However, the creators also implemented other solutions in the game characteristic of the open-world convention, such as housing (building one's own place), thus realizing the idea of a possible, simulative "inhabitation" of the virtual world. Like in *The Forest*, in which Michał Kłosiński discusses the context of the hermeneutically defined issue of "inhabiting" digital worlds, gameplay in *Fallout 4* also "assumes and presents such factors as fatigue, health and hygiene of characters, as well as the level of hunger and thirst[13]". These aspects, combined with the coded possibility of constructing residential and defensive buildings (...) with the simulated need to build a safe space of the house where it is possible to record the state of play, cooking and resting the characters" intensify the impression of immersion in *Fallout 4*. Therefore, they significantly reduce the distance between the player and the virtual environment, which, in turn, considerably affects the reception and interpretation of the traces of someone else's existence, which are extracted from the ruins by the protagonist. The intentional character of the gameplay so programmed by the creators also confirms the motif of a journey to "inside the mind of the character". It is true that most of the accounts from the past in Fallout 4 are text or sound recordings, but in line with the new trends of expanding the boundaries of reality to be explored, the Bethesda programmers also send the protagonist on a journey to the "inside the mind" of the murderer (Conrad "Connie" Kellogg). The controlled protagonist walks through a "synaptic maze" activated by a chip and the player learns, step by step, the causes and stages of development of a pathological form of personality (traumatic childhood, negative influence of the environment, family tragedy, etc.). Critical fragments of memories are presented in the form of situational scenes, revealing the psychological nuances and - one would like to say - the "human face" of the killer.

Fallout 4

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[13]Michał Kłosiński, *Hermeneutyka gier wideo. Interpretacja, immersja, utopia* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL, 2018), 57

The goal of the exploration designed in such a way is - apart from gameplay - to offer the user a way to interpret the world in which he or she has temporarily "lived". The player is not only supposed to explore, but also to understand the layout of dependencies, which will make it easier for him/her, in the subsequent phases of the game, to make such or other decisions. The information related to this is also contained in the virtual environment itself. The creators have taken full advantage of the specific nature of the environmental narrative, by filling the digital space with significant details and items[14].Their decoding and reading also consists of reconstructing the past and can trigger both emotions - when the viewer encounters, for example, macabre visualizations of the Holocaust - and deeper thoughts when he finds unsuccessful attempts to avoid it:
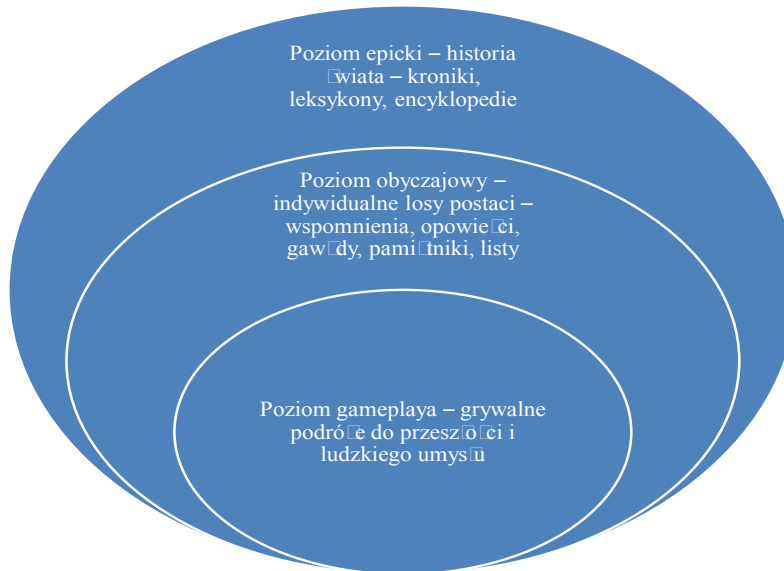

Fallout 4

Fallout 4

[14]In the game, the original music was also implemented in the sound layer - classical compositions and songs referring to the Cold War era.

Conclusion

If one were to juxtapose the antecedent concretizations appearing in the most recent computer games in the form of a diagram, it would be as follows:

Poziom epicki – historia
świata – kroniki,
leksykony, encyklopedie

Poziom obyczajowy –
indywidualne losy postaci –
wspomnienia, opowieści,
gawędy, pamiętniki, listy

Poziom gameplaya – grywalne
podróże do przeszłości i
ludzkiego umysłu

The above examples demonstrate the changes taking place in the area of digital entertainment: from epic to inner space, from world problems to individualised dramas. However, they also remain a manifestation of a greater cultural trend, which is no longer just about the convergence of the media as a tool of communication, but also, one might say, about the "convergence of poetics". The multimodality of digital narratives (computer games), manifested in the variety of ways in which the recipient is provided with information about what is happening in the world of the game, implies similar phenomena about which Werner Faulstich wrote extensively in relation to film:

"The movie, by using a movable decoration, taken from empirical reality, distracts the viewer from that reality and then, via catharsis, reunites him with it. Its experiential dimension - together with the structure of the literary work - personifies the maternal principle: by giving a meaning, it brings consolation."[15] [translation – AK]

In the fictionalized digital games, creators reach for both the poetics of film and of literature. They use film-like "decorations" and implement a text of a literary nature. The fictional story created in this way, although its final form depends on the improvised actions of the player, therefore has a double dimension. First, the world-forming story marks and defines the boundaries of the presented reality. Secondly, it gives it a meaning and "brings consolation". Designed in games and difficult to count motifs of the past, retrospectives, memories, movie

[15]Werner Faulstich, *Estetykafilmu. Badania nad filmem science fiction Wojna światów (1953/1854) Byrona Haskina*, transl. Marek Kasprzyk, Krzysztof Kozłowski (Poznań: Wydawnictwo UAM, 2017), 138.

flashbacks become a basic descriptive category, a kind of narrative vehicle, helping the recipient/player to organize the story by arranging it from scattered fragments. It is, thus, filling a narrative gap that appears at the moments when the arcade aspects of gameplay are becoming dominant. At the same time, however, it is also a testimony to the increasingly frequent attempts to humanize the digital world.

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translated by Agnieszka Kocznur

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KEYWORDS

world creation

COMPUTER GAMES

transmedia narration

Abstract:

The development of digital role-playing games brings with it not only qualitative transformations, but also a change in the choice of topics. An example of it is the "moral change": game developers increasingly refer to family issues. As a result, there are changes in the method of creating the story presented in the game. The role of the game's retrospectives is becoming more and more important in a variety of ways. The functions assigned to them are connected with both the introduction of moral issues to the games and with world creation, because the descriptions of the world presented in the retrospective perspective become the basic source of information about its boundaries and features.

family

RETROSPECTION

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