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## What can digital games teach us about (dominant) masculinity?

### KEYWORDS

digital games, masculinity, representations, gender, avatar

### ABSTRACT

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Digital games are a medium of constantly growing socio-cultural significance, which strengthens and expands their potential to influence players. Participation in digital games, however, is indirect and thus accomplished through an avatar – a hero, an object or a more abstract structure that allows the player to impose his will in the game world. At the same time, male avatars embody a specific type of masculinity, symbolically affecting the user. This mutual interaction can be of particular importance in shaping the ideas and views around one's masculinity or its patterns in the cultural and social dimension. In this sense, players learn from games how to be a man. This article constitutes an attempt at capturing the leading types of masculinity among the main protagonists of the most popular digital games. The study shows that many popular games reproduce the stereotypical narratives of dominant masculinity as understood by Zbyszko Melosik. The article contains an attempt at indicating the reasons for this state of affairs and the possible consequences for the players.

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## Introduction: Social and cultural significance of digital games

Digital games have been for years an essential element of the media landscape and nowadays, they constitute grounds of one of the most important creative industries. The newest research shows continuous growth of the number of this medium fans. Currently, there are over 2.5 billion of them in the world and in 2019 they spent over 152 billion dollars on games, which makes up almost a 10 percent increase in comparison with 2018 (Wijman, 2019). In Poland approximately 76% of Internet users are persons who at least once a year play any digital game (KPT, 2019). This data shows that gaming has become a popular phenomenon causing an increase in the significance of this sector for the Polish economy. In 2018 its value exceeded 500 million dollars, which places the domestic electronic entertainment industry in the second dozen of the largest gaming markets in the world (jmr/rg 2018). It is symbolically confirmed by the unprecedented in the Polish stock exchange change from April 2020, when as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic National Bank of Poland (NBP) passed off its leader position to the games' manufacturer, CD Projekt, which became the most valuable company (Paćkowski, 2020). It turns out that in the era of a global crisis in the physical world, virtual worlds remain an interesting alternative, which are even more willingly "inhabited" than usually (Paćkowski, 2020).

The potential of digital games in shaping cultural phenomena cannot be omitted. The practice of producing film adaptations of games already has a longer history (Stuart, 2020). Furthermore, books or comic books are written as inspired by gaming brands. The cosplay culture (Buhl, 2019) as well as prosumer ventures to run YouTube channels devoted to games or streamings from matches on portals such as Twitch have been developing globally. Moreover, one should also be aware of the existence of exhibitions, concerts or festivals promoting the digital gaming culture as well as museum institutions taking care of preservation thereof. Even these selected examples show how much digital games have been instilled in the social environment; therefore, it is worth observing potential effects of this presence in the lives of gamers.

The birth of the digital games market created "a configuration of objective relations between positions" that is a social space, which Pierre Bourdieu calls a field (Bourdieu, Wacquant, 2001: 78). Social actors, who are able to dominate in a given field, have a full potential of shaping its structure, that is, creating and structuring practices and representations in a given field with regard to other (less rich in capitals) participants (Bourdieu, 1977: 72). The latter, by their participation in the field

and subjection to the impact of structures, create or modify individual habitus that is: “interiorisation complex, that is, tendencies, attitudes, internalised dispositions, introduced in the sphere of human habits (...)” (Kłoskowska, 2006: 13–14).

Moreover, habitus generates possibilities of creating and reproducing specific masculinity visions, since “it determines the types of actions required by culture” (Elliott, 2011: 178). Gamers can process their own habitus by participating in a kind of game for access to digital games, which can be considered at many various levels (manufacture, distribution, consumption) (Klimczuk, 2010). By allocating their economic capital, they buy access to specific titles and at the same time subject themselves to the impact of symbolic structures reproduced in those games, including the image and behaviour of virtual characters with whom they enter into interactions.

Here, it is worth asking which types of masculinity narrations are proposed by creators dominating in the manufacture field? The analysis thereof seems to be crucial for two reasons: first of all, it will outline the image of leading manners of constructing virtual bodies in the process of developing digital games and secondly, it will allow at least a partial attempt at answering the question on possible consequences for players – popular culture consumers “which is currently shaping trendy beliefs on the topic of a body” (Melosik, 2010: 11).

## **Relation between a gamer and a game**

How do gamers personify themselves in virtual worlds and enter relations with characters they meet? Digital games, the origins of which go back to the 60s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Mańkowski, 2010: 13), introduced a fundamental novelty with regard to the traditional, analogue media, namely, a situation of interactivity that is a complex interaction between a gamer and a game. It resembles a dialogue between a computer programme and a human (Filiciak, 2006: 49), consisting in the user’s continuous and direct impact on and change of the status of the game due to the received information (audio-visual, haptic) from the simulation they observe and in which they participate. Thus, it is a type of information feedback executed with the use of equipment and programme input/output interfaces. The aforementioned information is an element of simulation being a dynamic system made of rules, which generates (as a result of the game’s engine operation) simulated world, virtual reality where all elements of a specific game are immersed (including characters’ models), as well as the gamer himself or herself (Dovey, Kennedy, 2011: 16).

A game user participates in the simulation via the figure of an avatar, who depending on the project, allows execution of various interaction models based on: spatial multi-presence, avatar, party, contestant (e.g. competition, quiz) or desktop interface metaphor (Adams, 2009). Simply put, an avatar is “a semi-otic vessel worn by gamers like a glow” (Dovey, Kennedy, 2011: 118) and via which they impose their will in the game’s universe. The category of an avatar is interestingly presented by Piotr Kubiński, who writes about the double personification of a gamer in the gaming world – a human simultaneously “lives in” the virtual character (avatar) and thus, also the virtual space of a given production (Kubiński, 2016: 38). This type of subjectivity is defined as “an operator” (Kubiński, 2016: 38). However, such a simple metaphor of a direct incarnation in virtual body/object does not demonstrate the truly complex character of the dependency described herein. As rightly noticed by the games’ researcher and producer Magdalena Cielecka (2013: 79):

A gamer happens to be the character’s conscience forcing him or her to act in compliance with specific moral values. Sometimes he or she happens to be a puppeteer steering the character as a puppet so that it dances as he or she wishes. He or she also happens to be a voyeur who is eroticism-oriented. Finally, he or she also happens to be an opponent, whose main task is not to win over the world, but to overcome the character’s resistance.

Contents created in games can influence players, which is assumed by models of digital games’ analysis. For instance, Espen Aarseth and Paweł Grabarczyk distinguish in their model a mental layer, which includes analytical categories referring to the gamer’s mental sphere – how she or he experiences and (re)interprets audio-visual elements or operating mechanisms observed in the game (Aarseth, Grabarczyk, 2018). In this context, it is worth mentioning Michał Kłosiński, who in his video games hermeneutics project argues that by engaging in fiction gamers can test possibilities, themselves, moral and ethical norms, values or beliefs (Kłosiński, 2018: 34). He refers to such scholars, as: Paul Ricœur, Edward Castronova, Lawrence Lessig, Martin Heidegger, Erving Goffman, Samuel Weber or Esa Kirkkopelto and argues that by the phenomenon of immersion that is “polisensoric dive in virtual world, in virtual body” (Kłosiński, 2018: 67), a gamer inhabits this world as the-one-who-is-oneself-as-other-person. Thus, games allow imaginary “entry into bodies” with different sensitivity or emotionality (Kłosiński, 2018: 68). According to Kłosiński, such a perspective opens gamers to the unknown and allows them to experience otherness due to the abilities and skills that are specific to a human (Kłosiński, 2018: 74). These competences in conjunction with the described characteristic features of games cause gamers to be able to feel

different emotions (also reinforce or avoid them depending on the adopted strategy of play), as well as experiment with various masculinities constructed in the course of reinterpretation of impressions from the doubly indirect residence in the virtual world (Jansz, 2005: 236).

## **Gaming market vs masculinity and corporeality of virtual characters**

The culture of digital games' production is based on technicities meaning "mutual relations of technological identity and competences", determining "the interconnectedness of identity and technological competence." (Dovey, Kennedy, 2006: 64)", which allows "him or her contact and developing relations with like-minded persons" (Dovey, Kennedy, 2011: 82). As a result of processes of connecting specific types of identity and competences, a dominant ideal entity has been developed encompassing such features, as: masculinity, white skin and heterosexuality (Dovey, Kennedy, 2011: 81–82). This entity is a generalisation of features of digital era pioneers, who were the first to use the potential of new technologies, also for entertainment purposes, which resulted in developing a new medium of digital games. Until recently, an additional factor influencing the culture of games' production used to be common recognition of a computer as a masculinity attribute (Dovey, Kennedy, 2011: 103). In fact, the level of masculinisation of the electronic entertainment industry remains quite high in contrast to the continuously levelling proportion of female gamers to male gamers (Hamilton, 2019). Despite slow changes in the industry (MacDonald, 2020) games are still mainly developed by white men (Burrows, 2013; Packwood, 2018). It translates into artistic decisions, since the previous research implies that digital games predominantly present white adult men (Williams et al., 2009; Sarkeesian, 2019), also in multiplayer titles (Waddell et al., 2014: 6–7). This production and cultural dominance of male perspective forces the use of appropriate analytical categories.

It is worth noting here that in the course of the socio-cultural development the comprehension of masculinity, understood as ideologies shaping both, desired ways of functioning by men as well as concepts describing attitudes taken by the interested parties towards themselves, women and the surroundings has been changing (Skucha, 2012; Kłosiński, 2015: 14). Some researchers, for example Raewyn Connell, consider this issue in the perspective of opposition between hegemonic masculinity and alternative masculinities (Skucha, 2012: 10). Hegemonic understanding should include categories of dominant masculinities by

Zbyszko Melosik. Dominant masculinity discourses simultaneously constitute a continuation of traditional ways of constructing it as well as a reaction to the growing emancipation of women and in the ideological sense, they pursue the rebirth of male dominance in social life (Melosik, 2010: 187). On the grounds of the in-depth analysis of media contents from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Melosik proposes the following dominant masculinity discourses developed as a result of a culture response to the crisis thereof: a man of success, masculinity understood via physicality (bodybuilder), Rambo, macho and playboy (Melosik, 2010: 190–225). These categories were used in the analysis of selected digital games presented below.<sup>1</sup> Similarly as the concept of “corporeality”, which in the digital games analysed for the purposes of this text, is materialised in characters selected for consideration. The manner of presentation thereof, which is in practice the object of the research, in the aesthetic (visual) and semiotic dimension, corresponds with the image chosen by the creator, which is always based on a specific production culture being a part of a generally understood cultural system. Culture produces desired body visions comprising of: ideologies, social practices, statuses and sets of features desirable in a given group, depending on a given, physical human organism subject to social transformations and defined as corporeality (Konecki, Chomczyński, 2012: 45–46).

Therefore, a question arises, if the currently popular digital games, in the vast majority designed and published after 2010, propose masculinity visions escaping categories developed on the grounds of the analysis of media contents reproduced at the beginning of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?<sup>2</sup> In other words, what can digital games teach us about masculinity?

## Own study methodology and selection of examples

The aforementioned theoretical deliberations constituted the grounds of the methodology of own study aimed at verifying, whether the potentially unfavourable for recipients masculinity examples are still reproduced in the most popular digital games. The analysis is based on the following assumptions:

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the limit of characters, a full description of these categories was dropped. Interested readers are referenced to the source text.

<sup>2</sup> The description of dominant masculinity discourses by Zbyszko Melosik was presented for the first time in the book entitled *Kryzys męskości w kulturze współczesnej* [*Crisis of Masculinity in the Contemporary Culture*] of 2002 (first edition).

- 1) Nowadays, the electronic entertainment industry is an enormous and diverse market. Therefore, indicating the sufficient number of games necessary to prepare a reliable study, as well as choosing a proper selection criterion are difficult. Due to the initial character of the project, as well as the discussed issues, it has been decided to adopt the number of active users as the first selection criterion. This value indirectly indicates popularity of the game and its significance for the whole culture (field) of digital games' production and thus, the large scale impact potential of reproduced masculinity examples. Furthermore, one should be aware that choosing the currently most popular games is very problematic. It results from various forms of distribution (physical, digital; and within the digital form, various online stores with digital versions of games), or often a lack of official sales data.
- 2) The relation between a gamer and an avatar is complex, however, for the purposes of deliberations adopted herein, avatar-based or party-based interaction models are the most important. Such presentations of avatars include forms of corporeality with which gamers can identify.
- 3) Usually men are responsible for digital games production and male models appear in games more often, especially in the case of characters controlled by the gamer. Therefore, it has been decided to focus on masculinity narrations and male heroes representing them. It means that the object of interest does not include female characters, although the discussion of results sometimes mentions such characters to provide wider context. In this understanding, deliberations of Zbyszko Melosik concerning the dominant masculinity narration proved to be analytically useful. In his deliberations, Melosik connects descriptions referring to the vision of a body, behaviour, social position or attitude to the environment. The conducted analysis of games predominantly focuses on the corporeality of heroes and their generalised role in the universe of a given game.
- 4) Due to the initial character of the study, as well as in consideration of the leading role of characters controlled by a gamer, the analysis covered only main heroes in single-player titles. As a result, the analysis excludes online games or games designed to be played by multiple persons (coop, multiplayer, MMO), which constitute a different type of relations between competing users. Moreover, the study covers basic versions of games, that is, without official additions or unofficial modifications prepared by users. These issues can be treated as potential topics of further research.

Selection of cases for analysis was of purposeful and convenience character. A group of potentially interesting characters was developed on the basis of the

undertaken research problem and the aforementioned assumptions. It translated into the manner of constructing a research sample the basis of which is made of Steam statistics available on the steamcharts.com website. Steam is the largest global supplier of digital copies of computer games. In 2019, a billionth user account was created on the platform and there were on average 90 million active user accounts per month (Lanier, 2019). Of course, such selection means that the analysis covered only computer games' editions and those available on the specific platform. Nevertheless, this first doubt does not have such a great significance in the era of common multi-platform games and thus, the majority of products are simultaneously available on all leading equipment platforms: computers, consoles, and sometimes even on mobile devices. Whereas, the Steam's market position shows that this platform's statistics should sufficiently well present general trends in the whole submarket of computer games. 100 top games from the Top Games By Current Players<sup>3</sup> ranking were selected for analysis. After preparation of the list of games, each subsequent one was verified in compliance with the following analytical scheme. First, it was verified, whether the game presents an avatar-based or a party-based hero. If not, a given production was excluded from further study. Another step consisted in verifying which type of corporeality best describes the character of the main hero (avatar) and whether it fits dominant masculinity discourses proposed by Zbyszko Melosik.

## Own study results

Among games selected for analysis, 29 different productions of various genres were distinguished, in which the user has a possibility of controlling the main hero in a form of a hero or a party avatar (enumerated from the most to the least popular as on the day of the study): *Grand Theft Auto 5* (2013, Rockstar Games), *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015, CD Projekt RED), *Terraria* (2011, Re-Logic), *Garry's Mod* (2004, Facepunch Studios), *Stardew Valley* (2016, Sickhead Games), *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018, Rockstar Games), *ARMA 3* (2013, Bohemia Interactive Studio), *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim Special Edition* (2016, Bethesda Game Studios)<sup>4</sup>, *Fallout 4* (2015, Bethesda Game Studios), *RimWorld* (2016, Ludeon Studios), *NBA 2K20* (2019, 2K Sports), *Divinity: Original Sin 2* (2017, Larian Studios), *eFootball*

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<sup>3</sup> Data as on 27.01.2020.

<sup>4</sup> Special edition of *TES 5: Skyrim* is treated as the same as the original release of 2011 due to the lack of significant differences in the areas of analysis conducted herein.



*PES 2020* (2019, KONAMI), *Space Engineers* (2013, Keen Software House), *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011, Bethesda Game Studios), *Mount & Blade: Warband* (2010, TaleWorlds), *Dark Souls III* (2016, From Software), *Dragon Ball Z: Kakarot* (2020, Bandai Namco), *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (2018, Ubisoft), *The Forest* (2014, Endnight Games), *No Man's Sky* (2016, Hello Games), *Dying Light* (2015, Techland), *The Binding of Isaac Rebirth* (2014, Nicalis), *Oxygen Not Included* (2017, Klei Entertainment), *XCOM 2* (2016, 2K Games), *The Sims 3* (2009, EA), *Hades* (2018, Supergiant Games), *Far Cry 5* (2018, Ubisoft Montréal) and *DOOM* (2016, id Software). Other productions excluded from the analysis, which allow controlling an object (e.g. a vehicle), were developed with multiplayer or *multipresent, contestant-based* and *desktop* interaction models in mind.

In 16 out of 36 games, users can choose the gender of the main hero, whereas, more often in titles which include a character creator. This functionality's implementation somehow forces creators to make available a female avatar as an option, whereas, if models are predefined (that is, designed by creators and available from the beginning of the game), male protagonists are much more often used. No game in which the main or preferred option is a female avatar has been noted. These observations match the results of the previously mentioned studies. Even if creators can use numerous cultural archetypes e.g. by reference to mythological characters, they do not always choose women and they never choose only women. It is shown in such productions as *Hades* or *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*. Both games are settled in the mythological universe of Ancient Greece. In the first game it had been decided to provide only a male character and in the second game the players can choose between a male and female avatar.

The conducted analysis shows that dominant representations of corporeality in selected computer games match discourses (in order from the most frequently used) of a man of success, a bodybuilder or Rambo.<sup>5</sup> It means that the majority of selected games reproduce a vision of heroes characterised with the following features:

- A man of success: tall and well-built body; strength; activity; engagement in the world and dominance over it; courage; independence; aggressiveness;

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<sup>5</sup> While learning about the presented below description of types of the corporeality of characters in the context of dominant masculinity discourses, it should be taken into consideration that it should not be treated as definitive and indisputable. It primarily results from the fact of cultural and semantic variability and subjectivity in perception of significance of a body. Furthermore, not each and every hero completely reproduces a given masculinity narration or has more than one feature. It is also worth remembering that the characteristics of an avatar is not solely limited to objective, more or less variable, features of a character model, but is also realised by different motivations and strategies of given players realized during gameplay, which was not the element of the conducted study.

honestly; emotional stability; rationality; protection of the weaker (women); pride and constant successes.

- A bodybuilder: emphasized physicality and musculature; sometimes monumental, even grotesque posture; male power based on high fitness and, at the same time, agency; explicit dichotomy between men and “weaker” gender – women; resolving problems violently; transforming physical strength into other types of capitals for maintaining power.
- Rambo: “deadly” body with the best physical characteristics (muscular, swift, fit); an absolute man embedded in a soldier figure; task-orientation; effectiveness; emotional and social independence; readiness for sacrifice; virtue (heroism, strong will, vigour, dynamism); white, heterosexual, culturally Western fighter for freedom.

Relatively univocal assessment of the game’s input in promoting the aforementioned masculinity discourses is possible only in the case of titles having a predefined main hero (or a party thereof), who does not have to be modified in the character creator at the beginning of the game. These productions include: *Grand Theft Auto 5*, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, *Red Dead Redemption 2*, *ARMA*, *NBA 2K20*, *eFootball PES 2020*, *Space Engineers*, *Dragon Ball Z: Kakarot*, *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* (with regard to the male protagonist), *The Forest*, *Dying Light*, *Hades*, and *DOOM*.

The situation is more complex in productions including a character creator. In such cases the avatar’s image depends on the level of advancement of this tool and the gamer’s intervention. The presence of the creator itself does not mean that there are various types of corporeality available in the game. *Far Cry 5* is an interesting example. This is an audio-visually developed action game, where a simplified creator was implemented for the first time in the long history of the brand. Nevertheless, it turns out that the game does not offer avatar models other than those matching dominant discourse avatars, that is, a bodybuilder or Rambo. Male avatars copy the image of a well-built and fit man, who single-handedly solves the complex plot mainly with the use of physical violence. Any modifications are limited to the appearance of the face (a few pre-made and generally physically attractive versions) and clothes, as well as skin tone. The case is similar with *XCOM 2*. In the single player mode, and such constitutes the object of this analysis, the game offers a group of predefined heroes with whom the adventure starts. The team consists of three male soldiers and one female soldier. These characters available from the beginning match the Rambo model (with regard to a female we would talk about Rambolina). Of course, gamers can, but do not have to, modify the image of premade heroes, although the available creator does not allow exceeding

the frameworks of imposed narration of masculinity both, due to limited options and strong embedment of the character in the figure of a deadly soldier. One could wonder, whether *XCOM 2* creators could have followed a less obvious path. At the same time, exceeding the Rambo discourse seems to be in this case exceptionally unlikely, since the production is maintained in a war convention, however, the competition is between people and aliens, which completely releases creators from taking care of any reality (historic, social, military etc.). While deepening this issue, one can ask, whether we can imagine a not that physically fit soldier who has difficulties in dealing with virtual opponents and thus making this task difficult to gamers? This is a subversive assumption, but quite possible to be implemented in digital games.

The fact that the situation is not always better in this regard in computer role-playing games (cRPG), in which the freedom to create heroes is usually an important element, is slightly surprising. *Mount & Blade: Warband*, *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim*, as well as *Divinity: Original Sin 2* not only initially suggest stereotypical visions of corporeality, but also do not allow avatar's modification exceeding the dominant understanding of a man of success, a bodybuilder or Rambo. Heroes implicitly proposed in the creator present physically attractive bodies and creators do not attempt to break through this common scheme in any manner, although they have such a possibility, after all, they decide how many various corporealities can be created on the grounds of functionalities implemented in their own game. Moreover, available modification options do not always allow gamers to do so. In *Skyrim* a weight change bar has been made available, but, in fact, it modifies the body of a virtual hero only slightly. In *Divinity: Original Sin 2* such an option is not even available, thus, irrespectively of the race, all heroes have well-built, muscular and surely strong bodies. Such a presentation is binding even in the case of selecting a character in a form of a skeleton, which shows how deeply the dominant discourse contents described herein are instilled. Admittedly, choosing this option does change the appearance, however, the hero maintains the shape (an outline of a figure) suggesting physical attractiveness of "a full body" (fragments of armour underline the musculature of male avatars), although it is not greatly justified, since the skeleton does not have any muscles or tissues making the "curves" of soma. It turns out that certain stereotypical characteristics of a physically attractive body (narrow waist, broad shoulders, developed musculature) keep their meaning even after getting rid of the corporeal layer. Another accusation can be made against *Divinity: Original Sin 2*. Namely, all races, even non-human as for example lizards, maintain the described attractiveness models typical for a human body. Moreover, it is worth noting that in the enumerated games, apart from *Divinity*,

broader options of avatars' face modifications were implemented and thus, at least in this aspect, less obvious images can be generated.

The most developed character creators were implemented in role-playing action games *Fallout 4* and *Dark Souls III*. As far as the first one is concerned, again, we encounter an issue with the suggested implied model which reflects a body of a white man with a nice appearance and an impeccable figure, typical for the Western culture, however, the game allows creating persons matching the post-apocalyptic world with a very diversified appearance, among others, by options of changing the shape of many body parts. The case is similar in *Dark Souls III*, in which the gamer takes the role of a daredevil wandering the dark world full of repulsive opponents. Here, creators also provided numerous options (e.g. modifying sizes of particular body parts and colour thereof, different levels of musculature or hairiness), due to which gamers are able to create very atypical corporealities of main heroes. Both titles allow, depending on the gamer's invention, creating images that escape the dominant masculinity discourses proposed by Zbyszko Melosik, but this effect is limited to the visual sphere. Any modifications of the body do not have a direct impact on the game in which gamers continue to reproduce hegemonic models of world dominance and aggression towards (many) encountered characters thus transforming the avatar's virtual power and own manual-intellectual ability into various types of benefits (points, objects, progress in the game, own satisfaction etc.).

In the set of the analysed titles the broadest options of generating corporealities escaping the dominant masculinity narration are offered by *The Sims 3*. This last but one part of the exceptionally popular "life simulator" includes a very developed creator allowing independent specification of the level of musculature and weight of the character, as well as almost freely shaping how hair, face and clothes look like without explicit limitations due to gender. In consequence, *The Sims 3* gives the possibility of creating a sim implementing any of the masculinity visions described by Zbyszko Melosik, but also models which are explicitly different. Moreover, this production shows a certain potential to present alternative masculinity models also at a level of entertainment, allowing impersonating a homosexual man. For the record, it should be added that avatars completely atypical for the game universe, also created within different fictions, are often introduced to such productions as *Garry's Mod* or *XCOM 2*. However, this is not credited to the creators themselves. Both games allow a quite simple import of models, which is willingly used by gamers, who copy heroes from other games or load their own original characters. However, this practice requires modification of the original game's contents, which exceeds the analytical model adopted herein.

In the set of analysed games, single productions, which are slightly problematic with regard to the issue discussed herein, were noted. In *Oxygen Not Included* creators provided characters of colonists, whose gender can have three statuses – male, female or other (so-called: X). This understanding of gender, which exceeds the traditional binary division, triggers discussions among gamers, in which suggestions that such divisions are introduced forcefully or in order to promote leftist ideologies appear.<sup>6</sup> Whereas, in *No Man's Sky* – adventure action game consisting in space exploration – the avatar's project hinders gender identification, since he/she wears a thickening suit. An interesting phenomenon occurs here, since some female gamers do not appreciate this design and they expect more diversity in corporeality (in the scope of the figure shape, movement animation and a way of moving) of the avatar available in this game, which would have a beneficial impact on their impressions of the game and the possibility of identifying themselves with the controlled character.<sup>7</sup> The issue discussed herein is also detrimental to female gamers. Another game worth mentioning is *RimWorld*. The example of this production allows realisation that in the case of digital games the problematic depiction of heroes' gender (e.g. a rigid specification of roles or rules of entering interactions between representatives of different genders) may be literally inscribed in the application code, which triggers discussions among critics and creators (Lo, 2016). In such a depiction, it turns out that even the "building materials" of the digital game, that is, the set of instructions interpreted by the processor does not remain neutral for meanings generated at higher levels, which are then received and interpreted by gamers. This exception constitutes an interesting contribution to further research projects. The quality and style of graphics constitute another interpretative difficulty. In the simplest productions in terms of the audio-visual setting it is difficult to provide a univocal assessment of the avatar's corporeality. An example can be given by *Terraria* or *Stardew Valley*, which are maintained in the pixel art style. In such cases characters' models are very simplified and they do not differ much from one another, only with hairstyle or details of worn clothes. It is similar in the case of other independent game from the list, that is, *The Binding of Isaac Rebirth*, in which characters' corporeality is reduced to the level that brings to mind cartoons for the youngest. Adoption of such a graphic style in a way eliminates the discussed problem in the audio-visual layer. What is important, all of the aforementioned games are independent productions (Indie), which shows

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<sup>6</sup> Proven by the posts on the game's forum: <https://forums.kleientertainment.com/forums/topic/92397-gender-x/> (02.04.20).

<sup>7</sup> More in the discussion on the forum available at: <https://forums.atlas-65.com/t/what-about-a-female-form/5808> (02.04.20).

that smaller manufacturers are more willing to take risks related to increasing diversity in games and breaking through industrial schemes, although sometimes it is done at a cost of the audio-visual setting's quality and thus, the level of the avatar's specification. The situation is different in the case of the productions created for mass recipients by large developers described at the beginning of the chapter, where much more attention is paid to the quality of characters' models, although not necessarily their corporeal diversity.

The fundamental conclusion from the conducted review of games indicates shortages in the scope of the diversity of avatars. A predefined character that would not fit at least one of the dominant masculinity discourses proposed by Zbyszko Melosik was not found in the adopted group. If it is the case, it is an effect of gamers' invention realised due to inbuilt creators or downloaded models with sometimes a much diversified appearance. It turns out that the categories developed at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century on the grounds of the analysis of content from the traditional media (television, commercials, films or tv-series) are sufficient to categorise at least some of the contemporary digital games.

It means that, while referring to the deliberations of Michał Kłosiński presented in the theoretical part, inhabiting a virtual world in these productions as the-one-who-is-oneself-as-other-person in an imaginary manner entangles gamers in virtual bodies with emotionality or sensitivity proper for stereotypically understood masculinity, often connected with relational dominance and spatial exploitation. In thus constructed avatars, gamers not so much "inhabit" virtual worlds, as Piotr Kubiński writes, but rather conquer them, also in the context of encountered characters. Usually beautiful, strong and physically fit bodies of digital heroes must be justified not only aesthetically, but also in terms of gameplay. A digital game also includes mechanics, systems of interacting with simulated objects, activated due to manual and intellectual abilities of the gamer entering the world as the-one-who-is-oneself-as-other-person. What values are proposed by "others"? Do they resist or maybe, on the contrary, encourage gamers to specific actions? Is it really something "unknown" and "different"? In the group of the analysed titles, those are much more often "old" and well-internalised ideologies of dominant masculinities. What consequences can it have? An attempt at answering this question is made in the following fragment of the article, here, it is worth asking, whether there are available any alternatives?

Inspiration comes from quite a non-obvious side, since from sociological deliberations on the contemporary models of fatherhood, which according to the researcher thereof, Katarzyna Suwada they are strictly connected with socially accepted masculinity models (Suwada, 2014: 79). Caring masculinities are character-

ised with rejecting dominance, adopting values related to care and thus, reference to positive emotions, understanding of co-dependency of individuals and relations between them (Suwada, 2014: 79–80). Nevertheless, it seems that the current mainstream of the electronic entertainment industry has not yet matured enough to take the risk related to such an approach, which has been more broadly discussed in the next subchapter. At the same time, it is worth underlining that implementing caring masculinity models in digital games is not simple. An example can be given by the game *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* (2013, Starbreeze Studios) telling a story of two brothers who set off on a journey for a medicine for their dying father. Whereas, they have to and, more specifically, the player has to, through the agency of an interesting mechanics of simultaneous control of both characters, take care of one another and help each other while wandering the virtual world. Nevertheless, it turns out that for some this title constitutes an example of a production including a desirable and rare depiction of the role of male heroes in digital games (de Four, 2013), and for others an illustration of a toxic approach to this issue (Carlton, 2019).

## **Dominant masculinity discourses in digital games – possible reasons and consequences**

While searching for potential reasons of the continuous reproduction of described masculinity models in popular games, it is worth starting with the conception of Jon Dovey and Hellen Kennedy, presented in the theoretical part, who claim that a white, heterosexual man is an ideal individual dominant in the games' production field. Therefore, they transfer the closest and most understandable for them masculinity model to their creations. It is confirmed with the quoted data from the research on the electronic entertainment industry's structure. By combining it with the mentioned theory of Pierre Bourdieu, one can present a thesis that in the games' production field, such creators have significant resources (capitals) to shape its form and contents and those influence habitus of gamers by their "embodiment" in avatars or inhabiting virtual words as the-one-who-is-oneself-as-other-person. It is significant not only in the game universe, but also outside, since the habitus spreads to the "area of assessments, emotional reactions, attitude to value" (Kłoskowska, 2006: 13–14).

Of course, the industry masculinisation is not the only possible explanation of issues described herein.<sup>8</sup> Another is related to high costs of games' development

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<sup>8</sup> By the way, it is worth warning against believing in simple solutions according to which only the industry feminisation guarantees positive changes in the scope of the diversity of reproduced

and the related risk. Noah Falstein, a game designer and producer who has been in the industry since the 80s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, argues that creators and publishers often lack courage to go beyond the clichés and beliefs on the insufficient profitability of diversity-oriented ideas (Falstein, 2009: 224). Furthermore, Falstein suggests that sometimes digital games developers simply do not have enough imagination to go beyond known schemes, which in combination with limitations resulting from financial calculation leads to inertia (*ibidem*). An indirect proof thereof is more frequent openness to diversity (e.g. presenting heroes of different races or with disabilities) on the part of independent producers (Menta, Echevarria, 2018).

Creators' financial calculations are connected with beliefs concerning consumers. Despite the already mentioned fact of significant levelling of the percentage of female gamers to male gamers, one can still encounter opinions that the market core is mainly made of young, white, heterosexual men, especially in important European and American markets, which influences the manner of executing marketing strategies (Shaw, 2012: 39), however, perhaps also reinforces the phenomenon, described above, of reproducing masculinity models typical for technicity dominant among developers. White men create characters that are supposed to suit tastes of male players similar to them (averaged in the course of market research). Besides, the latter, and at least some of them defined as "hard core" gamers (that is, at least in theory, the most diehard), can exceptionally loudly express their objection against attempts made at undermining dominant or hegemonic masculinity models in digital games, since they consider it to be an indication of feminisation of the gaming culture or implementation of certain (usually understood as leftist) policies in the industry (Vanderhoef, 2018). This issue can be additionally complicated by reference to Japanese productions, where the masculinity model happens to be perceived by fans as androgynous or feminised, thus, constituting an opposition to the Western discourse defined as "macho" (Glasspool, 2016: 101). The significance of the existing culture and its role in shaping both design-publishing and consumer practices is revealed. Moreover, the studies on constructing masculinity in digital games prove that engagement in virtual adventure reproducing masculinity models dominant in a given culture leads to their reconstruction and reinforcement among gamers (DiSalvo, 2016: 114). What can be the consequences thereof?

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characters or phenomena. The production of titles enumerated herein engaged women, also those at high positions (e.g. Jen Zee – *art director* in the studio responsible for the game *Hades*). The impact of the industry habitus is much stronger and requires open and general reflection, since women are also subject thereto. Similarly as players.



One of the effects of gamers' exposure to the avatar's muscular model can be, at least temporary, but at the same time, significant, decrease in the satisfaction from the image of one's own physical body, which can result in lowered self-esteem and even depression (Sylvia, King, Morse, 2014: 186). At the same time, some studies suggest genre differences, for example connecting only sports games with increased probability of risky behaviours among gamers, such as: alcohol abuse, drugs consumption, irresponsible driving or committing offences (Gilbert, Giaccardi, Ward, 2018: 450). Furthermore, there are certain assumptions regarding the impact of gamer's identification with heroes in games including sexist or violent elements at the level of empathy towards women being victims to physical violence (Gabbiadini et al., 2016: 10). This phenomenon predominantly occurs among boys and young men, who very strongly identify with a male avatar in such games (*ibidem*). It is confirmed with the newest analyses that prove that games considered by gamers as full of violence help them to maintain negative (i.e. stereotypical, limiting, hegemonic) masculinity images (Blackburn, Scharrer, 2019: 322). This observation is especially worrying with regard to the results quoted herein, but also more general findings on the negative impact of traditionally and hegemonically understood masculinity on the psychological and social development of boys and men (American Psychological Association, 2018: 3). Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that the quoted studies concerning the sphere of digital games are often of correlative character and are conducted on small (also homogeneous) samples, therefore, they should be treated rather as a sign-post for further analyses and not the final evidence in the discussion on masculinity in the context of gaming.

Also Melvin DeFleur should be mentioned. This valued mass communication theorist argued that reproducing in the media similar depictions of the same groups can lead to the effect of the recipients' confirmation and thus, producing stereotypical beliefs in their minds (DeFleur, Dennis, 1996: 41–49). The youngest players who are intensively shaping their own habitus in the media socialisation process are the most vulnerable (Szpunar, 2012: 34), as, at the same time, they are devoid of fully developed mental structures that enable selective and critical reception of the contents. Unfortunately, this is not a groundless fear, since it is well-known that children also reach for games aimed at older players (Gałuszka, 2018: 161–183) that are for them a new (digital) educational and socialisation space (see Kwieciński, 1998; Jenkins, 2006; Polcyn, 2018).

To sum up this fragment of deliberations, it can be stated that it discloses a kind of cultural feedback or rather a vicious circle. Games' producers implement hegemonic masculinity models in games probably reinforcing internalisation thereof among the

most diehard (“hard core”) gamers, who, in turn, still happen to be (stereotypically) depicted as one of the most important groups of customers in the field of games’ production, to whose expectations virtual worlds and heroes living therein are constructed. Of course developers and publishers have all resources (capitals) to shape the structure of the gaming market and impact habitus of players, however, due to the aforementioned reasons, they do not always use this potential. Probably, the actual or planned profit is more important than the vague and distanced perspective of increasing diversity in games and influencing preferences of gamers.

## Summary

As suggested by Zbyszko Melosik, in the era of non-obvious and fuzzy cultural masculinity models, a lot of men search for clear and specific answers to the question: what does being a man mean? (Melosik, 2010: 206). The source of such questions can be pop culture. The conducted analysis implies that digital games are a medium within the framework of which basic gender differences and explicit (sometimes dominant or hegemonic) masculinity models are not only not “dispersed”, but even maintained, which for many recipients may be a source of suggestions regarding constructed narration on their own identity. Perhaps, to a certain degree, this is the reason behind the abrupt reaction of some gamers to the attempts of problematising the status of the gaming culture and implementation of non-dominant depictions, such as alternative masculinities correlated with positive and socially desirable features. Furthermore, similar masculinity discourses are reproduced in the analysed games, which, as noticed by the aforementioned Melvin DeFleur, can replicate and reinforce some depictions thereof, especially among younger, less aware players. In this context, sadly, it has to be stated that producers of the analysed titles, to some extent, “pass” on gamers the task of increasing diversity of characters by in-built creators and only in the dimension of corporeal representation (image) of a hero. In games, the majority of them are strong, brave, determined, attractive and have an individualistic approach. Usually, they do not break through the traditionally understood masculinity and, after all, the latter can be realised in a lot of different ways (for instance, as caring masculinity), although, of course, changing generally accepted schemes both, design and consumption, is not easy and needs time. Indication of explicit changes in presenting male avatars both, at a level of their corporeality and role played in the virtual world, in the group of analysed games was not successful. It is not a question of the often criticised by anti-feminists “masculinity feminisation”, but rather

showing diversity of male bodies, emotional conditions and possible roles to play. Zbyszko Melosik wrote about shaping the feeling of masculinity on the grounds of “experiencing extreme situations through the agency of the life and adventures of television heroes” (Melosik, 2010: 221). If the television is to be a sphere of such reinforced feelings, then, one should be aware that the world of digital games has a potential of exceeding what can be generated by the traditional media. It is not a question of the ability to produce an infinite number of different virtual worlds, but predominantly of the described form of participation, which is not limited to the role of a passive observer. In digital games a player is a co-participant and sometimes a creator of observed events. The gamer’s will is realised in the game’s universe through the agency of an avatar, a peculiar entry into the digital body and its virtual role in the whole history of a given universe. In this sense, the issue of representation and forms of reproduced corporealities and masculinities gains a special significance, although, as proven by the conducted analysis, it has not yet attracted widespread attention from digital games’ creators. Therefore, the answer to the title question is, unfortunately, worrying – some digital games teach unfavourable, from the point of view of gamers’ development, dominant masculinity models by their reproduction among digital games’ protagonists.

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