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COMPUTER GAMES AND ART

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Abstract: This article devoted to the search of relevant sources (primary and secondary) and characteristics of computer games that allow to include them in the field of art (such as the creation of artistic games, computer graphics, active interaction with other forms of art, signs of spiritual aesthetic act, own temporality of computer games, "aesthetic illusion", interactivity). In general, modern computer games can be attributed to commercial art and popular culture (blockbuster games) and to elite forms of contemporary media art (author's games, visionary games).

Keywords: art: computer games, aesthetics, virtual reality, media art, contemporary art, interactivity, visionary.

Modern computer games are vivid example of the rapid development of XXI century audiovisual technologies. Incredibly popular now, computer games have come a long way from the primitive arcade games to full virtual worlds like "The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim", "Total War: Rome 2" or "Mass Effect 3", and we know that most of them requires more than one month of "real" time to complete the game. Now modern computer games closely linked with arts, education, ethics, psychology, philosophy, social

communication, and even sports (cybersports or E-sports).

However, in general, despite the abundance of video games in modern culture, the scientific exploration of this phenomenon (especially in Russian sciences) was not enough, outside the system, "dotted", or concerned only private individual manifestations of it. Research of computer games in the modern social sciences and humanities is a relatively new trend.

With all their technological content, computer games are largely synthetic product. As D.Galkin correctly noted, "Along with computer graphics and web-design, computer games are techno-artistic hybrids, where the technological foundation not only serves as a tool to create an artistic product, but also is included in the content of the artistic and aesthetic properties of the product" [1]. It raises the obvious question: *can we consider computer games as art, or just entertainment? Is it possible to include modern computer games to the field of art? And if so, on what basis?*

To begin the search for possible reasons for classifying computer games to the field of art we need to determine the **relevant sources**. First (if we not counting the games themselves and our independent

analysis of it), we cannot ignore many specialized computer publications, analytical articles and publications in electronic and print media in the West and in the Russia. Interesting, that most of publications consider computer games only in the terms of high-tech products of entire industry of **electronic_entertainment** industry and not in the discourse of aesthetics or philosophy of art. Also the majority of sources relating to the theme of computer games (which is first of all media materials) understand art itself (in a classic romantic way) as something elitist, art-house, (that understanding of art is typical for the mass consciousness and popular works). Accordingly, the computer games, with their focus primarily on entertainment (not on transcendental experience) are not considered as art. Did video games contribute to the awakening, to a new perception of transcendental truths or to the experience of catharsis?

In this context, it is logical to include most of computer games into the sphere of **pop culture**, where the main thing is not a subtle aesthetic experience, but commercial benefit. That is why in most modern games (as in blockbuster cinema), the main emphasis is not on the deep inner meaning, but on entertainment, on a primitive story (affecting basic human emotions, based on animal instincts), and on external brightness and addiction, special effects.

Of course, there are multifaceted, complex, artwork designed for an audience with the appropriate level of aesthetic education. But, more often, such projects have a small budget and are little known to the general public. Therefore, the most common first option is a game with a simple, easy-to-understand idea upscale in all aspects of implementation, from the level design

to the quality of models, textures and sound design. A typical example - GTA game. "The idea is simple and exploits one of the basic human emotions - aggression. The laws of the game world are extremely clear. The main value in it is physical force. Accordingly, the main character is a bully, solving problems with fist and gun. The essence of the game is expressed clearly, the result - half a billion dollars in the first week of sales" [2]. By the way, it can also be related to many popular games in the genre of FPS (First Person Shooter).

In this sense, computer games are primarily a technological kind of popular art, based on the mass production. The careful researcher will also notice a cultural determinism in computer games: game stories are borrowed from popular culture genres (fantasy, science fiction, etc.), and sometimes games are just a complement to the popular movies (of Harry Potter, Lara Croft, Pirates of the Caribbean, "Star Wars", etc.). In fact, they become interactive game adaptations of mass cinema. Thus, we can refer computer games to the sphere of pop culture and define them as a form of mass commercial art screen.

Nevertheless, despite all the commercial orientation, the question remains: *is there a chance for a computer game to align with traditional art?*

However, even in this question lies another problem: the fact that in contrast to the traditional works of art (paintings, music or architecture) modern computer games (primarily mass blockbuster games) usually *do not have an author*. They are the result of *collective work* of the development team, where everyone is responsible for his direction (level design, development engine, creating models NPC, beta - testing, etc.), although united by the common idea,

which is again, in most cases not the creative expression of the author or the aesthetic value of the product, but its *utilitarian* commercial importance.

At the same time, in favor of our hypothesis that computer games can be considered as art is the fact that sometimes appear fully **author's projects**, where the main thing is the expression of individuality of the author. In these games the emphasis is not on the best results in the first week of sales, but on non-utilitarian, *aesthetic* purposes, such as the creation of a non-trivial artistic image. An example may be the iconic **«American McGee's Alice»** (2000), where the developer American McGee not only creates a virtual game, but offers his author's vision of L. Carroll's work, transformed into a game of phantasmagoric visionary reality.

It is noteworthy, that a number of modern western publications devoted to computer games mark some of them as art and "**visionary**" work. For example, PC GAMER magazine calls the game **«Deus Ex»** as "visionary product" [3]. In this context are relevant the words of Ortega-i-Gasset, that "the mission of art is not mindlessly doubling of reality, but open irreal horizons" [4]. In this regard, the identification as sources of our search author's "visionary" games and the corresponding publications allows us to attribute a number of computer games to the modern forms of **visionary art**.

With the ability to move the player from the burdens and worries of everyday life to the virtual world, computer games have a therapeutic effect, and at the same time, implement one of the "basic appetites of the soul" [4], Aldous Huxley's notion of the ability to "transcend yourself, your self-confessed self though for a few moments" [5], appearing in the

visionary experience. Many modern computer games can offer a completely non-trivial form of experience: vivid visual experience, colorful "fairy" worlds in thirty two million colors, surround sound and great music, which gives them the sensual authenticity, that allows us to compare it with the world of **visionary experience**.

In this sense, with some computer games it is entirely possible to implement such delectable romantic notions as seeing yourself in a "beautiful fairy-tale world" (Novalis), finding ourseves in the kingdom of providence and dreams "(Uhland)", etc. On the other hand, computer games give the opportunity to experience the transpersonal experience. Typically, computer games (especially in the genre of RPG - Role Playing Games) presuppose / create an alter-ego through the character". Virtual worlds of computer games create all conditions for the complete identification of player with his "character" (creating a visual copy of the player with reliable video and audio sences, make possible this identification). Even the meaning of time and space can significantly minimized, because focusing on what is happening, the player is able to completely "disconnect" from reality. In this sense, the focus shifts to the characteristic for visionary inner contemplation and an irresistible desire to extend that non-trivial experience).

However, the main difference of this immersion in virtual worlds from visionary experience is that despite the appeal and a feeling of complete immersion in the virtual world, it is never being total (this is main distinction from the totality of visionary experiences). I can say that it exactly corresponds to the so-called "**aesthetic illusion**". This is a "state of consciousness induced by specific artifacts like texts,

theatrical performances and works of fine art" [6]. Likewise, an important component of aesthetic illusion is distancing, which provides "an opportunity to experience the fun of unpleasant emotions - fear, horror, etc." [6]. Although dominates the feelings of pleasure. Thus, the experience of immersion in virtual worlds of modern computer games we can call the "aesthetic illusion", similar to traditional forms of art.

Next to our research should pay attention to another, less-known group of sources – to the creators of artistic manifestos, developers, designers, artists of modern computer games. The creators and designers of modern computer games often say that they want to create and give the audience "something more than just entertainment for a few hours" [7]. In this connection, it is interesting to see what the developers say about concepts of computer games on their projects.

As an example, a game like the non-trivial "**Spore**" begins with a kind of demiurgic kit, where by means of elements and shapes (eyes, ears, feet, hands, teeth, claws, etc.), the gamer can create absolutely any creature non-anthropomorphic (that is also can be regarded as an example of so-called "media sculpture" as a form of new media art). It is noteworthy that when the game was just about to be published, the network announced a contest for the most interesting creature. And which creature was the most popular? Cheburashka? Olympic Bear? No, fantasy of the users moved in a main direction. The Internet was filled millions of walking, jumping, crawling and flying phalluses. We can see here obvious Freudian motifs, archaic culture elements and stamps of mass culture.

But here is what the developer Will Wright says about "Spore": "in a global sense, I'd like people playing Spore to look at life in perspective and think about the scale of space and time. Try to understand even for a second how long there has been life on our planet. Spore gives the feeling of how from a microscopic protein compound could grow civilization. Generally, *Spore is a game about the importance of life*" [8]. Here we see that the game developer puts into his work not just utilitarian, but also the aesthetic sense, which is revealed in the continuous redefinition of his works. The same Will Wright, who dedicated the entire life to the creation of various simulators, creatively "evolved" from the original idea of city building to a "simulator of all", as the gaming press called "Spore".

What *else* can make computer games art? In favor of our hypothesis there is another fact: like in the traditional fine arts (from sketches to the painting) we can see the game author's search from the birth of thoughts and emotions to their rebirth and transformation. At the same time, the game experience shows signs of the spiritual and aesthetic act. Transcending the linearity of time and space (putting game time to pause and rewinding the picture on the maximum scale), we can marvel at the majesty of the created universe and experience authentic aesthetic experience associated with the transition to a state of completeness being or contact with "Universum" [9] (the main goal of the aesthetic act on V. Bychkov). However, these experiences (including visual effects) can be quite comparable to aesthetic experiences from traditional artworks.

In addition, there is another important source that directly "makes" computer games art. We are talking

about official statements of statesmen and organizations consider computer and video games as "art". At the **institutional** level, in a number of countries (including Russia) E-sport have been officially recognized. Perhaps the day is near, when computer games will be included in the program of the Olympic Games, the only question is – in the winter or summer. Also, particularly interesting for us is that computer games were officially recognized as "art". In Germany in 2008, computer games were considered a modern form of media art. Games such as "WarCraft", "S.T.A.L.K.E.R." and "Call of Duty" now considered artistic heritage, and their developers now are part of the German Council for Culture.

In France in 2006, Minister of Culture Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres recognized computer games art and promised government support to their creators. The Minister said that he would like to achieve the same subsidies for game developers, which now the studios receive. The arguments for this are "their enormous creativity and cultural value"[10]. He even ask to call him "Minister of video games" [10]. But at the same time Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres a little ambivalent. On the one hand, he emphasizes the need to recognize as a part of mass culture. A "growing number of games sold, compared to books, movies and other goods"[10](as evidence we point to the fact that, for example in 2005 the game Pro Evolution Soccer 5 was sold in France better than the Harry Potter books or "Star Wars" DVDs). On the other hand Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres argues that modern computer games can be called art, because they are not just a commercial product, but a "form of artistic expression, and in their creation are involved writers, designers and directors"[10].

Moreover, even in such distant from the Western world Muslim Iran (!) computer games are now called the "eighth art"[11]! And as the arguments are that " in creating computer games used.. directing, script, filming, special effects, music, sound and other techniques" of the "seventh art "(cinema)" [11]. At the same time, Iran is believed that computer games need "public support"[11]. Despite the fact that the guardians of the Islamic revolution detect hidden anti-Islamic ideas in "some imported games such as Angry Birds" [11] Iran sees in them a huge favor that "computer games help children develop speech, and also develop a reaction, intelligence and creativity by introducing a child into the world, which he can control"[11].

Art and computer games also linked by means of one more interesting aesthetic aspect. It is concerning the invasion of modern computer games into the neighboring areas of society, the genre differentiation of games and their synthetic nature. It is about the development of the **movie** (once considered the only entertainment, an attraction that will soon disappear). Now computer games are not only borrowing plots of movies, but, on the contrary, we can talk about the reverse trend. Computer games become the *basis for the creation of new movies* shot on the story of the games (Prince of Persia, DOOM, Final Fantasy, etc.). At the same time, many of the films use as fully digital characters and the whole visual style of modern computer games (such as "Avatar", vivid visual experience, the new format 3D, colorful "fabulous" worlds, surround sound, etc.).

However, unlike a movie, the major difference is called "**Interactivity**" of computer games, not passive contemplation, but active participation in co-created

virtual reality (this way computer games differ from the visionary with its characteristic setting for contemplation, inaction). At the same time, we should not forget that this interactivity generates a certain freedom, but freedom largely imaginary, because all further gameplay is pre-programmed. The proof of this are widely used in the genres of FPS and RPG **system of scripts**, that in fact, strictly regulating virtual reality. As an example, the famous game «Medal of Honor» gives an opportunity (being a soldier) to survive the invasion of Normandy exactly as shown in the Steven Spielberg film "Saving Private Ryan". Generally, in computer literature there is even a specific term like "corridor shooter", describing the game with clearly specified system of passing the game. Even in RPG with the maximum degree of freedom (such as the legendary «Planescape Torment», «Baldur's Gate» or a recent series of games «Dragon Age» and «Fallout 3 (mod New Vegas)», *all variants of the story and dialogues are also predetermined*.

Another characteristic feature of computer games, which makes them similar to traditional arts is its **own temporality**. If in the movies (as well as in sound recording) it may be, for example, non-linear editing, in computer games it can be expressed also in the use of option save/load. It represents an opportunity to replay this or that live situation. That is impossible (but often desired) in everyday life, but possible in the virtual worlds of computer games. In a broad sense we can also talk about the visionary transformation" [12] of linear time and space" [12], because the player can : 1) change the time in the game - to pause the download from the beginning, go to the right to finale, speed up or slow down time (for example, in the genres of flight simulators or strategies); 2) change the

game space, the size of perceived objects can cover the whole possible range, from the smallest objects to the planets or galaxies (for example, in the genre of space strategy).

A typical example of own temporality gives us a series of games «Total War», where you can replay the entire history of the Middle Ages, stop the invasion of the Mongols or conquer Western Europe by Kievan Rus. In turn, these historical games with their meticulous, careful attention to the historical heritage (expressed, for example, in creating the most reliable virtual copies of all medieval arms, modeling historical map with all the actually existing at the time states, etc.) simultaneously discover innovative and powerful educational resource of modern computer games. In the West, such gaming products are widely used in the classroom on world history (in the form of an interactive game "boring" history became particular attractive), and analyzed for lessons on aesthetics as relevant phenomena of contemporary media art.

Finally, computer games can refer to art due to its bright visual component like computer graphics, similar (or superior in its intensity) to the visual component of the traditional fine arts. Many kinds of traditional fine arts use visual style of computer games. Moreover, the visual aesthetics of modern computer games is widely using in contemporary media art (video art, media installations, media sculpture, net art, etc.).

If you turn to the bright visual component of modern computer games, then we see one more interesting aspect: external graphic development of computer games historically back the development of fine arts (especially if we take, for example, the period of modernism), from abstract graphics in primitive

arcades to the maximal realism of today's virtual worlds. The fact is that for most of virtual worlds of computer games fundamentally important their similarity of the real life (like in simulators genre).

So, in search of an answer to the question "Is it possible to include modern computer games to the field of art? And if so, on what basis?":

First, we have done a research for the sources that evidencing about computer games as art. We can divide these sources into two groups - "primary" (author's games and visionary games) and "secondary" (specialized computer publications, analytical articles and publications in mass media in the West and in the Russia; artistic manifestos of the creators of modern computer games, official statements of public figures and organizations (all around the world - in Russia, Europe and even in the Islamic world) consider computer games as "art" - this is an institutional source.

Secondly, we have identified the characteristics of computer games that allow to include them in the field of art:

1) The creation of artistic games (author's projects) with non-utilitarian, aesthetic purposes (expression of creative individuality of the author, creating an artistic nontrivial image).

2) Bright visual component - computer graphics, a similar (or superior in its intensity) with the visual component of traditional fine arts.

3) Active interaction with other forms of art (use of computer graphics and visual style as in the traditional arts and contemporary media art; computer games as a foundation for new movies, books, etc.).

4) Signs of spiritual aesthetic act, admiration from the created virtual world, the possible aesthetic experience associated with the transition to the state of fullness of life and fusion with the universe.

5) Own temporality of computer games, typical for other arts.

6) The effect of the "aesthetic illusion" similar to the traditional forms of visual art.

7) Interactivity (despite the "corridor shooters" and prescribed dialogues in RPG), inherent for contemporary art.

In general, modern computer games can be attributed to commercial forms of massive screen art and popular culture (blockbuster games) and to elite forms of contemporary media art (author's games, visionary games).

As a result, modern computer games show a wide range of research opportunities that may be relevant not only in the discourse of aesthetics and philosophy of art, but also in the context of perspective interdisciplinary social and humanitarian studies.

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