

## **Semiotics of Gender in the Video Game Void: Postmodern Motifs**

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### **Abstract:**

Modern cultural space is closely connected with development of information technologies. Virtual reality represented by computer games penetrates topoi of contemporary culture. On the one hand, gender images presented in the narrative of computer video games become a part of everyday life, everyday practices of modern citizens. On the other hand, the images collected and replicated in various segments of modern culture and society become the material for designers of modern computer entertainment industry. These images reflect typical gender characteristics, their semiotic flexibility, rhizomaticity, saturation with intertextual references and "semiotic abundance".

In this article, the authors analyze the semiotics of gender in computer video games, the transformation of gender, the semiotic "tools" of representing gender, the semiotics of "gender fluidity". The authors show the complex character of gender, tendencies of apparent "naturalization of the sign", which correlate with the postmodern and metamodern motifs of contemporary culture.

### **Introduction**

Virtual reality, represented in many phenomena of information technologies, is becoming an integral part of the modern cultural space. Information technologies and the Internet are becoming the determining factors in the development of the entire modern society and culture.

Computer and video games are becoming an important part of the modern information space. If earlier the phenomenon of computer and video games had some marginal characteristics and was not always taken seriously by cultural researchers, now it can be considered as a full-fledged factor and an important phenomenon that defines and reflects the contours of the modern information and cultural space.

Modern computer and video games are related to the most important phenomena of culture and cognition, reflecting many current ideas and trends. It seems to us that in modern video games, aspects of the plot and narrative, images created by game developers, deep ontological tendencies are manifested and they also characterized modern postmodern and metamodern culture. These trends are closely related to the semiotic ways of fixing the narrative, images and systems of meanings that represent the virtual world of video and computer games. An important part of the virtual world of video games are the characters and their gender identity. In this paper we have analyzed the place and features of semiotic fixation, as well as gender issues in modern video games.

### **Objectives**

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the gender images presented in modern computer and video games, the semiotic features of their fixation in relation to the settings of postmodern and metamodern reflection. The authors describes the complexity of gender images and the importance of computer and video games as semiotic phenomena that reflect and model gender images that exist in culture.

### **Methodology**

In our study, we use a comprehensive methodology, which is based on methods of semiotic analysis of signifiers, code analysis (visual, auditory). In addition, we used the principles of postmodern criticism of the sign in culture (serial production of the signified, hyper-realization).

We used methodological of transformation and “naturalization” of the sign, the principles of hermeneutics and the hermeneutic circle (understanding gender images through narrative, and vice versa, correlating the gender images and the semantic space of culture).

One of the most important problems of modern society is the problem of gender and its representations. Gender images largely reflect the self-positioning of modern man \ woman, his \ her answer to the question: “Who am I?”. Gender issues are fully represented in computer and video games. To fix gender and gender images, modern computer video games have a number of semiotic means.

We can distinguish semiotic means and tools related to the visualization of characters and the audio sequence. Perhaps, these are the most powerful semiotic means of representing images in general and gender images in particular, because they are perceived or “read” by user – the recipient in the first place, starting from the splash screen of a particular game or video trailer. In addition to semiotic means associated with the external aspects of the picture or appearance of a character, we can also distinguish narrative semiotic means that fix the identity of a particular character, clarify his character and gender characteristics. To catch and understand this layer of meanings, great hermeneutical efforts are already needed – the player must decipher the character; interpret his actions and choices at certain points in the storyline. That this kind of hermeneutical work is not possible for all players and not everyone is attracted to it, some players prefer to be content with the external picture, visual effects or other aspects of the gameplay. However, it is worth to mention that such an interpretation of the character is possible only in fairly linear games, where the characters and the plot are clearly defined, and the player is led along the “corridor” of events. Non-linear games, such as interactive movie games, assume that the player will decide the fate of his character himself, although this may often go against his character or demeanor. For example, in the game “The quarry” the player needs to decide how the characters behave when they are trapped in a children's camp. It is he who determines the behavior of the characters, which may run counter to the characters “prescribed” by game developers. For example, Emma is a girl blogger and a “star” who behaves pompously and mean, but in the hands of the player can help other characters, be kind (to some extent), and avoid conflict in every possible way.

A special type of gaming experience is the so-called cross-gender game, described by Russian and foreign scientists (Rodionova, 2019), (Osborne, 2012). A cross-gender game is a type of game activity when a real player, for example, a man plays a female character and vice versa. Moreover, as some scientists note, this may affect not only the difference in the appearance of the player-character (avatar), but also the difference in gender roles. Rodionova A.A. writes that “a heterosexual can play a homosexual character, a woman can play a man character, etc.”

Foreign researcher E. McCallum-Stewart has a different opinion. She notes that the choice of gender in modern games is a kind of option for the player, the same as the choice of race, class and character characteristics (Mac Callum-Stewart 2009). According to this scientist, a study was conducted according to which players who chose a cross-gender character most often determined their choice for social reasons (for example, female players did not want to attract attention to themselves) or aesthetic reasons (some female characters look better than male characters, or the armor fits them better). It is obvious that another layer of problems of semioticization of gender images is revealed – correlation with the gender of the player. This can be called a way to the plane of pragmatics of the sign-image, just as in postmodern intellectual practices the reader is

seen “interacting” with the narrative world of the work, extrapolating his intentions and ideas to the character, to some extent, sublimating his fantasies.

The representation of gender in computer and video games, the features of gender images reflect the main problems of gender in the modern consumer society. We can focus on the following aspects. Firstly, the traditional sexualization of images and the fixation in them of strongly marked masculine and feminine features (Provenzo, 1991). As for the female images, we can mention an attractive sexual appearance, and as for the male ones, a muscular toned body and general brutality of the image. Such general characteristics reflect the tendencies of hyperrealization of topos of reality, which were described in detail in the works of J. Baudrillard in the second half of the 20th century (Baudrillard, 1995).

The culture of the consumer society is such that in addition to stamping similar images, their hyper-realization is expected. In the case of a female images we can talk about sexualization. As Baudrillard noted, such hyper-realization correlates with the desire to convince, first of all, oneself, in a society of simulacra and copies, of one's own authenticity and reality. Perhaps that is why the selfie phenomenon is so popular, as if users of social networks are trying to convince themselves of the brightness of their life and its pleasant moments, of the “fullness” of their image.

Such hyper-realization with an emphasis on gender and gender characteristics was inherent in the first computer and video games, the characters of which were not always well-elaborated, they were not correlated with the narrative (the narrative did not always clarify their features). Examples include the classic game of the 90s “Tomb Rider”, the main character of which has become almost a symbol of the sexualization of female characters. In the 2000s, sexualized female characters in video games became more common. So, for example, Kaileena and Shahdee – the main characters of the game “Prince of Persia: Warrior within”. Shahdee was in such a revealing outfit that the game was banned in a number of European countries. We can also mention here the beautiful vampire Rayne from the BloodRayne game.

A certain hypertrophy of gender characteristics, semiotically correlated, first of all, with character's appearance, is also presented in modern games. Sometimes this takes on deliberately grotesque forms, such as the masculinity of the characters in the game Uncharted (Nathan Drake) or the character of the game Vanquish (Sam Gideon).

In general, appearance and external attributes of gender identity represent this identity that most often. Many games can be cited as an example, starting from the classics games presented by Duke Nukem, the main character of which is a masculine image (muscularity, determination), transmitted not only through external characteristics, but also through some plot aspects (the story of the main character about his autobiographical book “Why am I so cool”) and ending with the images of secondary characters in RPGs (for example, “lustful Argonian maiden” from the “Elder Scrolls” game series). It is also worth mentioning the famous fighter against aliens Sam Stone, better known as “Serious Sam” from the game with the same name. The games of this series are distinguished by absurd humor and narrative style, and Sam himself is a vivid example of masculinity and brutality. Sam also has a great sense of humor and often, he sneers at the characters of other computer games, or finds a film set where an episode of one of the previous parts of the game is filmed.

In most cases, gender characteristics are fixed using visual and auditory codes. According to the researchers, there can be many reasons for this - fixing gender through the prism of sensual-sexual aspects: the idea of game designers and their taste preferences, considerations of the marketing plan (Near, 2012). Thus, video games can also be considered as a product of a certain consensus, correlated with the idea of a character and a game as a whole, a marketing

strategy, and modern trends. It seems to us that gender images in games can be quite complex, reflect tendencies that are not always realized (including ontological ones), act as a rethinking of human characteristics in general. The complexity of fixing gender characteristics is achieved by a complex game of signifier and signified in the space of video games.

This idea correlates with the general cultural background of modernity, postmodern and metamodern tendencies, which are characterized by the cultural and semiotic multi layers of any phenomenon, the possibility of considering objects in the aspect of their perception and interpretation by completely different recipients - to the extent of the intellectual level and desire (!) to search for different meanings in topoi of reality.

Some games deliberately capture the complexity of gender images, for example, in "The Silent Hill" series of games. In these games, there are references to recognizable Freudian plots and mythologems (images of a father, childhood trauma, semiotics of a city as a topos, etc.). In this game, gender is represented based on Freudian explanatory schemes, and this is no coincidence, because it is psychoanalytic interpretations that most often correlate with gender issues. Here we can mention almost the entire tradition of French postmodernism with its attention to sensual, sexual and gender characteristics, various phenomenology in the rethinking of gender (the works of J. Deleuze, Y. Kristeva, J. Derrida).

For example, many monsters in "Silent Hill" game series are related to Deleuze's "body without organs" (Deleuze, 1983), (Deleuze, 1987): in the second part of the game, there are monsters that have several pairs of limbs, reminiscent of mannequins covered with flesh, etc. Most of them are related to the themes of childhood trauma, sublimation and transformation of the libido, which refers us to gender foundations. It is worth mentioning that in this game there is also the symbolism of gender: the main character, who, according to the plot, lost his wife, unconsciously seeks to realize his male desires through the main (Maria) and secondary characters (monster nurses). Here, gender male aspects are correlated with sensual attraction that is not associated with a specific woman (which is a fairly popular gender stereotype: male sexuality is illegible, a specific object of desire is not important). In this game, this stereotype is condemned at the narrative level: the city itself, as a kind of subject, "punishes" the protagonist, who is being tested - it turns out that the protagonist killed his wife, who was ill for a long time, and this becomes clear at the end of the game.

Mentioning appearance of the characters, correlated with a certain gender identity, in our opinion, there are two tendencies: the first one is based on the ideas and thoughts of game developers towards sexualized images in order to attract more buyers; the second tendency is more complicated and deep and has an ontological character. We can name this tendency as "naturalize of the sign", that means the strengthening in the objects of culture, which serve as signifier of the elements of the materiality of "presence", correlated with sensory contact and its characteristics. H.-U. Gumbrecht, criticizing the project of Western metaphysical philosophy, for being turned to the search for deep meanings of reality, some genuine spiritual foundations of things in the material world to the detriment of the presence of things in the horizon of experience and practices (including everyday ones) (Gumbrecht, 2004). Now we see, in the context of postmodern and metamodern tendencies, the return of the material (and therefore the sensual) world to the field of philosophical reflection. These trends also capture the semiotic code of the game space. They are reflected in the representation of the body as a sign of itself. On the one hand, the body acts as a representative of the meanings associated with the narrative, on the other hand, it seems to represent gender itself in a kind of semantic oversaturation. The material presence of the body can be understood as a kind of symbol of semantic oversaturation (including

gender aspects in culture). This can be described as a kind of fatigue from the play of meanings and the circulation of signifiers. This phenomenon is well manifested, as it seems to us, for example, in a decreasing sexualization of female images in computer games of recent years (Tomb Raider), which can refer to a kind of "fatigue" from an excess of sensory-visual characteristics of gender images, and not just be dictated by trends and prevalence of feminist imperatives. This phenomenon is reminiscent of the semiotic fatigue and oversaturation of the entire Western culture, which in the era of postmodern and metamodern often churns out images from the semiotic "fragments" of the past culture. Such a peculiar reflection of culture over its own basis also penetrates into the gender images presented in modern computer games, because the game narrative and virtual space reflect and simultaneously construct the contours of reality.

It seems to us that these trends are well seen in the transformation of female characters in computer and video games. There is a shift away from sexualized characters towards more masculine ones. Moreover, this is manifested not only visually, but also narratively. Speaking of the visual aspect, it is undeniably worth mentioning that the female characters have become much stronger physically, they look more masculine, like Abby from "The Last of Us: Part 2", who is physically stronger than some of the men in the game. The costumes of female characters are also changed - they become more closed; there is a shift away from the model appearance - the faces of the female characters become close to the parameters of ordinary people. We can also mention the Viking Eivor from the game "Assassins Creed: Valhalla", the gender of which depends on the player, and at any time during the gameplay the player can change it. Visually, Eivor-man and Eivor-woman look brutal and courageous. They have the same outfits and hairstyles. Moreover, Eivor is such a brave and courageous woman who is not inferior to the rest of the Vikings. Many aspects of Eivor's behavior (whether male or female) depend on the historical circumstances of that era: so she / he can drink a lot / fight, etc.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

Thus, the gender images presented in modern video games reflect and, at the same time, construct the contours of gender in the real world. Gender images in modern games are quite complicated and semiotically ambiguous. They reflect the "fatigue" of culture both from traditional stereotyped images and from the semiotic oversaturation of the narrative. Modern gender images are complex, they show both the intentions of the developers, desires, aspirations and identification parameters of the players, as well as a kind of reflection on their own experience.

We consider promising works of researchers who capture this complexity of images, as well as the complexity of the gaming alter ego, correlated with the identity of the player (Filiciak, 2003). In addition, the phenomenon of cross-gender games is of undoubted interest, in which you can choose the gender of a character and construct a gender identity, correlating with your own or your imaginary one.

It should be mentioned that computer and video games and the gender images, which are presented reflect the complexity of culture and should not be viewed simply as patterns or acrotyes used by adolescents and young adults (Beasley & Standley, 2002). Thus the achievements of semiotics and the philosophy of the sign to analyze the hermeneutics of gender images should be used.

This hermeneutics of images reflects the complexity of modern culture, which rethinks itself, looking for new ways to create meaning, to create an ideal reader/recipient/player. In this

sense, computer games act as one of the complex phenomena of the modern information space and culture, as a tool for fixing and a field for rethinking the semiotics of gender.

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