

FOREWORD

Understanding video game subculture

This thematic issue is dedicated to one of the most important cultural phenomena of the modern world, which is paradoxically not researched well enough. The paradox lies in the fact that there are 2,5 billion people on Earth who play video games, and there are tens of thousands of articles about video games, but when it comes to undisputable scientific facts, all that is left from all that noise are efforts of individuals or groups of individuals to try and define the phenomenon. It is not for anyone's personal gain – any phenomenon that includes its own subculture, with its own value system, slang, lifestyle, and all the other identifying elements, even when we exclude the money – and we truly can't – is worth much deeper and diverse research. Hundreds of billions of dollars are spent each year on video games and video game-related objects, and when compared to the money invested, it is clear that we talk about the most lucrative business with a third of world population as its consumers. The implications are vast, so is the potential, and the academization of the phenomenon is necessary in order to be able to intervene before it becomes too late. This thematic issue is but a humble effort to contribute in that process. Why video games came into existence? What is their value? What are their implications in different aspects of life? What is their place in technology and in culture? These are some of the questions this issue will try to provide answers to.

This thematic issue is not dedicated to general phenomenon of subculture. Papers in this issue do not even presume the undisputable existence of gaming subculture, although there are global researches and papers that posit that there is a subculture of an online community with massive gaming community within, which, like any living organism, does not have other inner purpose than to exist and multiply. In order to understand that, we have to understand several underlying aspects of this phenomenon, whose existence and properties allowed all the other aspects to exist and grow, and, eventually, formed a sociological construct that is subculture. In this issue we try to tell the story of video games and their being that in fact uses players and gaming community to realize its *Dasein*. If this scientific turn seems unexpected, let's not jump to conclusions, since the greatest minds, from Heraclites and Plato to Gadamer and Heidegger claim exactly that.

Elements of video game subculture do exist and try to establish the subculture in the mainstream media space as something that is at least equal, but as with every new subculture, video game subculture is treated by traditional authorities with too much of caution, flagrant distrust and disapproval, similar to any other subculture and each new medium in the past. We think that those subculture elements will ripen and form an authentic subculture no authority will disprove in future.

Video game shares the destiny with all previous new media and subcultures. Each new medium was disapproved and deemed inferior to already established media when it originated and continued to early period of its history. Books once printed by Gutenberg were deemed aesthetically inferior to previous, hand-written and decorated by vignettes. Reasons for disapproval were changing as new media were created, but their treatment remained similar. Like its predecessors, such as film, television or comic books, video game was considered very low ever since it formed itself enough and entered public perception. Scientific community nearly ignored it, considering it as a medium that offers only fun and escapism without performing other traditional media functions, like educational or artistic, along with numerous damaging consequences. When it came to value transfer function, video game was most often considered as harmful medium. Now, it is obvious that moral panic regularly happened whenever some new, massively accepted and influential medium was created, so it is an established thing with societies and people. So modern parents and educators, born during the last moral panic (1950s, comic book censorship in the US), and the whole traditional society is now in panic because of possible consequences of video games on children and adolescents. In addition, violence in video games is in the center of mass consternation, and apologists of the moral panic claim that if the young people adopt the pattern of violent video games that might shake the foundations of civilization on the planet, more than other negative consequences of playing video games, or just sitting in front of the display for too long.

Nonetheless, video games ignored the moral panic and became one of the top segments of modern culture and entertainment industry. By becoming a part of everyday life of billions of people around the world they have created a primal subculture. Video games have formed and will continue to form new traditions and new behavioral skills while changing the structure of society. It is necessary to clearly identify their place in the information culture and structure of their inner content.

Still, the video game phenomenon resists rationalization because of, more or less, two reasons. The first is that the phenomenon is approached from the wrong side, the side of the method of analysis of performing arts, while the second is that video game has much more complex structure and different socio-cultural functions. In their structure video games have elements of many cultural realities – rituals and myth, art and simulation, different ethical and aesthetical constructions, different ethical institutions previously unseen in social relationships. Video games constitute many new ontological constructions. These constructions are yet to receive scientific explanation. One of them is, for instance, ethics of the world of video game, or its being, constituted as *non-ethics* and that creates a video game world as a world with absence of moral, *privatio ethicae*, meaning a world outside and above moral.

Objects, or Heideggerian things, we call video games are multi-channeled specimens of cultural context, based on various human sensory channels. Video games contribute to structure of arts, culture, and daily changes in life, like film and television did for more than a century, but after shared path, from a certain point video games went their own separate way. At one point in this issue we will try to explain that ludistic incompatibility of video game with any other cultural phenomenon.

In consideration related to video game theory there are many questions. Like in co-existence of imagination and desire of man, his ideas and plans on one side and limitations on the other, when it comes to further development of video game theory and practice, everything depends on hardware. Ontological being of video game can be perfected and developed as fast as hardware and game engines allow. When the processing power becomes large enough, we will have a new ontological dimension of video games and gaming. As preconditions for existence of video game are a player and a game loaded into memory of an electronic device, the game will be able to exist if it is loaded into player's memory. The existence of the being of video game does not always and fully depend on electric energy flowing through the gaming hardware, because it exists in the world of the game inside the player's imagination and experience as well. Being of a video game cannot exist without and outside of video game, but world of a video game can. The question arises – is it, for a part of gamers at least, video game as defined and delivered by the manufacturer only a matrix or means of creating experience working synchronously with player's consciousness and individual and collective subconsciousness to create images and or otherwise expressed information, and together with the game software as it is given and as it is shown on display create much more personal and associative world?

It seems that the video game history began with Willie Higginbotham's oscilloscope experiment that created *Tennis for Two*, or with certain earlier rudimental patents, but the truth is that the ground for video games creation and development, and eventual takeover of culture was set even before humans evolved to their current form, and in this issue that point will be discussed as well. But when we talk about video games as the most modern form of game, their history, despite not being long, was turbulent and spectacular, full of invention, drama, rises and falls, until it arrived at its current Golden age. Not even two decades after first experimental video games, we saw a spectacular rise. In the late 1960s and early 1970s television broadcasted only several channels even in the most developed countries, and the reality of that age was pretty gloomy and hopeless. When Magnavox and later the first video game industry titan Atari created home gaming consoles, people suddenly had a choice to plug that device in their TV sets and enjoy a virtual reality, one where you are actively involved in the outcome on the screen. Atari then grew so much that it crushed under its own weight and brought down the complete industry in 1983. There were many reasons for that, such as hyperproduction, oversaturation of the market, lack of originality, but the final straw was when Atari published *E.T.* video game to coincide with the release of Spielberg's masterpiece. The players then, already fed up with the way the gaming industry handled their issues, could directly compare the visual look of the film and of the game, and since the hardware was pretty primitive then, the game was not only a poor copy, but something that doesn't ever resemble the look seen on the silver screen. The market crashed, but the opportunity was grabbed by the Japanese. Nintendo, and later Sega, revived the market, constantly improving their hardware and software, but the next revolution arrived when Sony entered the market. Sony had a deal with Nintendo to develop a CD reader to be used in their next gaming console, but as friction between the two compa-

nies appeared, the deal was cancelled. Sony then decided to use that already developed hardware and to manufacture their own console. That marked the birth of PlayStation. Nintendo continued to improve, and not only that they are still in the market today, their different approach brought them immense number of hardware and software units sold. Sega couldn't keep up, despite trying hard, and now they are software manufacturer, while Microsoft entered the hardware market with their Xbox consoles, so today we have PlayStation and Xbox duopoly, with Nintendo with higher sales, but in a niche of its own. So far, the latest revolution happened with introduction of Internet 2.0 and broadband Internet, as well as development of handheld device into strong processing units. Mobile revolution turned many non-players into players, and today a third of the world's population play video games regularly. And yet it seems the phenomenon has just taken impetus.

What is the future of video games? Futurists, and not only them, are asking where is the boundary?

The boundaries are set only by progression of hardware and imagination of the video game creators, which practically mean that despite existing at every moment, there are no boundaries to growth and evolution of video games. Robotics futurists estimate that by mid-21st century people will have artificial partners so realistic that they would be able to be a substitution for human partners, while AI experts estimate that the level of sophistication of virtual characters will become so immense that people will be able to have their virtual partners, who they might not be able to touch, but will be able to speak to at any time, which is similar to current alienation trends where people talk over Skype or other communications app despite being able to easily meet and talk face-to-face. Such artificial companions will even be more human than many real persons one might be in contact with in extremely alienated world of the future, like Hari from Lem's and Tarkovsky's *Solaris* or Samantha from Spike Jonze's *Her*.

There are more optimistic futurists as well. They base their optimism on the fact that video game's important difference from any other phenomenon is its virtuality, parallel existence of two worlds where the player moves. The existence of two worlds already implies connection and intertwining of worlds from both sides of the display and parallel living of the player in the both worlds via avatar. Futurists in turn predict much more serious and different interaction between the player and the video game characters when the hardware improves that much to allow the characters to „come out” of the video game into the real world. Surely one cannot touch a holographic or other projection, but to many people of the future a kind word and care will be much more desirable. The future might bring loneliness and devastating alienation, where a kind word one hears from the intuitive AI video game character might be the only kind word one has ever heard from another person, real or otherwise. A film we mentioned before, Spike Jonze's *Her* might become a prophetic classic, as it predicts interactions between the man of the future and his biomimetic extensions, regardless of their software or hardware nature. The video game industry and the gamers subculture are ready.