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VIDEO GAMES IN THE PROCESS OF HISTORICAL EDUCATION AT THE ACADEMIC LEVEL

ABSTRACT

This piece deals with the significance of computer games in the modern teaching process. The author identified the main challenges for the teachers that are related to problems created by electronic entertainment. The second part of the text focuses on the positive impact of video games exemplified by popular „mods" based on actual historical events. In conclusion, the author stated that it will still be many years before computer games are used by researchers in the process of teaching the academic youth, however they do have the potential to become something more than just pure fun.

Keywords:
video games, education, history.

For a historian to take up a subject normally reserved for cultural experts is very rare, although there might exist some extenuating circumstances[1]. Especially if the subject of common interest is a discipline as young as video game studies[2]. There is no clearly defined methodology when it comes

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[1] John Dovey and Helen Kennedy concluded that a video game, in certain specific circumstances, may be interpreted using the methods that had hitherto been reserved for textual sources. J. Dovey H. W. Kennedy, *Kultura gier komputerowych* [Game Cultures], Kraków 2011, p. 109-111. As regards Aarseth's objections, in the analyzed cases we are dealing with narrative games, thus they may be subjected to classical analysis. Aarseth, *Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation*, [in:] First Person: New Media as Story, Performance and Game, ed. N. Wardrip-Fruin, P. Harrigan, Cambridge 2004, p. 54. The author of this text, however, acknowledges the flawed character of modern methods of study and agrees with the ideas of Aarseth.

[2] Ludology is taking its first steps in Poland also, as evidenced by the establishing of the Games Research Association of Poland. To find out more about Polish ludology, see: A. Surdyk, *Status naukowy ludologii Przyczynek do dyskusji* [Scientific status of ludology, a contribution to the discussion], „Homo Ludens", 2009, 1, p. 223-243.

to studying electronic entertainment[3], and researchers are still arguing over the most basic of its functions[4]. Despite all that, it is clear to see that this branch of the entertainment industry has an increasing impact on our every-day lives. Young people nowadays learn common knowledge from video games, just as they once did from television, but they are still unable to properly verify it. The subject of video games poses a challenge not only to the psychologists[5] but also to the educators working with today's youth[6].

The goal of this piece is neither to whitewash nor defame electronic entertainment. Video games became part of our reality, it is an unquestionable fact. What we should do is to figure out a method of studying this new phenomenon and to consider the possibility of using this medium in the teaching process, just as it had been done with the cinema once. Today it is no longer surprising for a teacher to show a documentary to his students. Provided that this is a complementary form of imparting knowledge, it is actually very effective. The crucial aspect is to maintain a „healthy" balance between a movie – easily accessible but unfortunately lacking in information content – and a classic lecture – more difficult to follow, but filled with useful information.

The field of video games, beyond a doubt, became one of the most dynamically developing branches of modern entertainment[7]. Only in Poland there are 14 million gamers, although this number is probably overestimated, taking into account each Internet user who has ever played a game even once[8]. Even so, the target group for video games constitutes a vast and very

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[3] Jak interpretować sztukę w grach komputerowych i sztukę gier komputerowych? [How to interpret art in video games and the art of video games?] See: Rebecca Cannon, *The Language of Gameplay 2: artist presentations*, b.m.r.

[4] See: D. Urbańska-Galanciak, *Homo players strategie odbioru gier komputerowych* [Homo players – video game reception strategies], Warszawa 2009, p. 19-24.

[5] Compare: K. Krzystanek, *Oddziaływanie agresywnych gier komputerowych na dorastającą młodzież* [Impact of violent video games on adolescents], Kielce 2011, p. 52-56. and M. Gajewski, *Brutalne gry komputerowe w życiu dzieci i młodzieży* [Brutal computer games in the lives of children and youths], [in:] Psychologiczne konteksty Internetu, ed. B. Szmigielska, Kraków 2009, p. 263-283.

[6] See: K. Squire, *Video Games and Learning: Teaching and Participatory Culture in the Digital Age*, New York 2011.

[7] The popular Steam service is at any given point accessed by roughly 4 million gamers from all over the world. The dynamic rate of increase of Steam account holders is simply amazing. http://store.steampowered.com/stats/ [date of access: 27.10.2012].

[8] Report: http://wyborcza.biz/biznes/1,100896,12531927,W_Polsce_jest_juz_14_ mln_graczy__Prawie_1_5_mln_gra.html [date of access: 27.10.2012].

diverse market[9]. The age structure of this market is also changing. In the previous century gaming was dominated by young people, nowadays gamers are mostly people over the age of 20[10]. So it may be concluded that a large portion of current college students have had contact with computer games.

In the past most studies of the subject were focused on analyzing the harmful impact of games on the youngest age groups[11]. There are no theoretical analyses regarding the influence of video games on the process of educating the academic youth, in spite of the fact that this is a group brought up in a gaming culture, drawing a large part of its knowledge from games. The target group described in this work is comprised of history majors interested in military history. The goal is to highlight certain research problems, which should be addressed further, as well as serious difficulties encountered by educators in the course of their work.

The study was carried out on a group of 30 college students, consisting mostly of men (ratio of 28:2)[12]. All the students specified that they had contact with computer games taking place in historical times. Most of the respondents played so-called „First Person Shooters" (21 people), and all of them had experiences with at least one game set in the WWII era[13]. Within the studied group 15 people were able to correctly identify the German MP-

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[9] Complete statistics on gamers in Poland were presented in the report entitled *VIDEO-GAMES IN EUROPE: CONSUMER STUDY – Poland*, 2012. http://www.spidor.pl/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Poland-ISFE-Consumer-Study.pdf; date of access: 23.02.2013. It turns out, that only 37% of the society shows no interest in games whatsoever (although 30% is only mildly interested in gaming), and 51% of Poles have never played a video game. Within the age bracket of 25-34 years, 19% of men called themselves gamers, as compared to 12% of men aged 20-24 and only 7% of those in the age of 16-19. In the case of women the numbers are as follows: age of 16-19 – 7%, age of 20-24 – 7%, age of 25-34 – 13%; it is interesting to note that the proportion of female to male gamers within the age bracket of 25-44 years is 10% to 9% in favor of women (although this particular age group is of little importance to this study).

[10] The young lost their leading position. The share of the 15-24 age group among gamers is on the decline. It is being squeezed out by older people. In the 50+ age group almost 55% of the Internet users admitted to playing video games at least occasionally.

[11] The results of analyses conducted by K. Krzystanek clearly demonstrate the negative impact of brutal computer games on the children. K. Krzystanek, *Oddziaływanie…*, dz. cyt., p.118-120.

[12] On the subject of female gamers, see: M. H. Phan, J. R. Jardina, W. S. Hoyle, *Video Games: Males Prefer Violence while Females Prefer Social*, „Usability News", 2012, vol. 14/1, p. 1-6. Also: J. Jenson, S. de Castell, *Girls playing games: Rethinking stereotypes*, [in:] Proceedings of the 2007 conference on Future Play, p. 9-16. Study results clearly show that gender is an important factor in the choice of game genres.

[13] Although these types of games usually possess a narrative component, it shall not be the subject of analysis.

40 submachine gun, 20 people could identify the American Thompson sub-machine gun with a stick magazine[14], and all were able to recognize the PPSh submachine gun[15]. It should be stressed that none of the respondents were interested in weapon studies or the history of World War II, and more than half of them (25 people) have not even begun the university course on the history of the 20th century.

The results of preliminary analysis indicate that students could identify weapon types, with which they had never had any contact; weapon types from historical times beyond their area of interest. In conversation the respondents admitted that they recognized the shape of a given weapon, because they „used" it in-game. The titles that were mentioned most often were: Return to Castle Wolfenstein (15 people) and the Call of Duty series (19 people). This clearly shows that their weapon expertise came from video games. Some of the gamers were even able to specify the number of rounds in a clip and approximate rate of fire for each weapon, as well as the usefulness of specific weapons in different situations. This is in-depth knowledge learned while playing.

In this situation two important questions come to mind – is the knowledge from video games verified in any way by the students and can games be used in the teaching process at the university level? The choice of college major and the interests of an individual are most often directly related to the game genres played by that individual. In the course of my seminars and discussions with students I was often able to observe first-hand that a vast amount of the students' knowledge of history actually comes from computer games. For instance, during a lecture on ancient history first-year students would ask me whether Romans used dogs on the battlefield. The origins of this question lie in a game from the Total War series, in which a special unit of war dogs is available to the Romans. History students have the possibility to verify this information by reading experts' works on the subject or talking to their lecturers[16]. However, the average gamer will take it as fact that such units actually existed in the army of Rome. It should be

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[14] The specific type of magazine is of significant importance in this case, as the Thompson with a drum magazine is usually associated with the interwar period and, consequently, gangster movies.

[15] The presence of the PPSh in movies and TV series is so ubiquitous that it is difficult to determine the source of the students' knowledge.

[16] A separate issue is when the players „trust" the information presented in-game and do not cross-reference it. In the studied group none of the respondents decided to verify what they learned about 20th century weapons by turning to the literature on the subject. In the case of weapon types game developers try to make them feel realistic, but they still often change the weapon parameters to make a given weapon more attractive to the player.

pointed out that ancient sources do not confirm whether or not dogs had ever been used in a manner presented in the video game[17]. What seems interesting is that in the case of the same game the students mocked the idea of using pigs against elephants on the battlefield. It seems that during the pre-production period the game developers researched the work of Pliny the Elder, who wrote that war elephants are afraid of pig squeals[18]. And so a statement from an ancient source text became the basis for creating a seemingly unrealistic military unit, which in fact might have actually existed[19].

Here we are dealing with a situation where the game provides inaccurate or heavily falsified information[20], which are then considered facts by the players. Most first-year student gamers are convinced that war dogs were in fact used in the army. Does this mean that computer games are harmful to the process of teaching the academic youth?

The answer to the aforementioned question is not an easy one. Modern entertainment is very rarely controlled or monitored by experts. Despite huge budgets[21], video game companies do not hire history consultants, and only children's productions emphasize the educational character of a game[22]. On the other hand, video games, strategy games in particular, apart from their positive influence on creative thinking also motivate their fans to take up an interesting book or two. It often happens that this fascination with a given area of study is further fostered by choosing a specific college major. There is no statistical data to show how many history students began their scholarly career by playing computer games, and only later turned to other sources of knowledge. We may, however, speculate that this scenario is rather common – an assumption confirmed by the students themselves during our conversations[23].

Mistakes in video games are not treated alike by all consumers. Some players turn to historical sources, wishing to verify the knowledge acquired in-game. There are also whole groups that correct the errors made by game

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[17] See: E. Forster, *Dogs in Ancient Warfare*, Greece&Rome 1941, b. 10, v. 30, p. 114-117.

[18] Gaius Plinius Secundus, *Naturalis Historiæ*, VIII. 9.

[19] Although it has to be said that the use of pigs in the Total War game has little to do with the practices of ancient Rome.

[20] The example of pigs in the game Rome Total War is only one of many.

[21] Basic figures can be found in: D. Wesley G. Barczak, *Innovation and Marketing in the Video Game Industry avoiding the Performance Trap*, Boston 2010.

[22] Although a change can be observed with regard to this issue as well. See the collective work: *Leading Issues in Games-Based Learning Research,* ed. T. Connolly, Reading 2000.

[23] Another group of history "devotees" are people dealing in historical reenactment. It is very frequent for these two groups (gamers and reenactors) to interact.

developers to make the finished product more in line with the reality of a given historical period. One product that clearly stands out among such modifications (mods)[24] is the Rome Total War mod called Europa Barbarorum by its creators[25]. The people behind the modification put realism as their top priority and the results of their work are astonishing. The finished product contains ancient languages (more than just Greek and Latin), descriptions of actual crucial events that took place during each year of play, descriptions of major ancient structures and so on. The amount of added text and its quality is surprising even to the experienced historians[26]. The makers of this mod were scholars and hobbyists, who wished for a deeper and more realistic entertainment. They created a product intended for themselves, which was then made available to the public for free. The goal of the group was to create a simulation of running an ancient state that would account for cultural and social differences, various methods of waging war, and could present diverse levels of civilization advancement[27]. Their success proves that it is possible to develop a game set in the historical times that would be of educational value to college students and at the same time provide a rewarding and engaging pastime. This, however, requires the makers to have a passion for history and possess in-depth knowledge, which directly translates into increased costs. Students who have played Europa Barbarorum had vast knowledge of historical geography, beyond the scope taught during the basic course of ancient history. They were able to identify the most important stages of civilization development in the case of states of the Hellenistic era and were very knowledgeable about military history and history of art. This knowledge was in large part derived from the comprehensive descriptions in-

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[24] The definition of and the issues related with modern modding culture were partially described in: T. Flew, S. Humphreys, *Games: Technology, Industry, Culture*, [in:] *New Media: an introduction* (second edition), ed. T. Flew, Oxford 2005, p. 101-114.

[25] The group runs an open-access website and Internet forum, where people exchange information on ancient history and methods of modeling and programming. See: http://forums.totalwar.org/vb/forumdisplay.php?70-Europa-Barbarorum, [date of access: 27.10.2012].

[26] While preparing the latest installment of the mod the creators are publishing historical information that their work is based on. It is a valuable experience to see the quality of these notes and the numerous methods of study used in their preparation – related to classical and experimental archeology, ancient history, demography, and other fields. A good example is the description of one of the Celtic tribes – the Boii: http://forums.totalwar.org/vb/showthread.php?126717-Preview-The-Boii, [date of access: 10.27.2012].

[27] The only limitation on the group's creativity was the original game „engine", which can only be modified to a limited extent. To learn more about the goals of the group, see: http://www.twcenter.net/forums/showthread.php?t=161111, [date of access: 27.10.2012].

cluded in the game; students also admitted that after playing the game they were much more eager to turn to books dealing with the given historical period. Thus we can see that a computer game can positively affect students of history.

It will be long before video games are used as a teaching aid at the university level. This is due to many causes. First of all, this type of entertainment is not particularly popular among the members of the academia, who put traditionalism over innovation. Secondly, game developers do not focus on maintaining historical realism, focusing rather on entertainment value. Although a part of the modern gamers' knowledge comes from video games, the developers as well as the researchers are unable or unwilling to systematize it. Including history consultants in the game development process would prolong the production and require a price increase, adding little marketing value in return.

Of course this does not mean that a modern scholar should completely ignore electronic entertainment. On the contrary, one should be aware of the challenges posed by the gaming culture in the process of education and be prepared to deal with them. Knowledge of the modern game scene would allow the lecturer to suggest products that apart from being fun also provide valuable information. We should remember that teaching through fun, even at the academic level, is highly beneficial to students.

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GRY KOMPUTEROWE W PROCESIE EDUKACJI HISTORYCZNEJ NA POZIOMIE AKADEMICKIM

STRESZCZENIE

Niniejszy tekst traktuje o znaczeniu gier komputerowych we współczesnym procesie edukacyjnym. Autor przedstawił najważniejsze wyzwania stojące przed dydaktykami wskazując na problemy kreowane przez elektroniczną rozrywkę. W drugiej części tekstu, zostały rozważone zalety gier komputerowych na przykładzie popularnych modów opartych na wydarzeniach historycznych. W ogólnej konkluzji, autor podsumował, że gry komputerowe jeszcze przez wiele lat nie będą wykorzystywane przez naukowców w procesie dydaktycznym na poziomie akademickim, jednakże posiadają potencjał ażeby stać się czymś więcej niż czystą zabawą.

Słowa kluczowe:
historia, edukacja, gry komputerowe.