

## “BRAVE NEW” VIRTUAL WORLDS – A SOCIO-HISTORICAL APPROACH

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### ABSTRACT

*THIS PAPER PROPOSES A SOCIO-HISTORICAL APPROACH TO THE EMERGENCE OF (ONLINE) VIDEO GAMES IN ROMANIA. AS A PART OF THE POPULAR CULTURE, VIDEO GAMES (ARE SUPPOSED TO) INFLUENCE SOCIAL AND INDIVIDUAL VALUES, ATTITUDES, BEHAVIORS, AND TO CHALLENGE COMMON UNDERSTANINGS OF COMMUNITY OR LESIURE TIME WITHIN THE DIGITAL ERA. THIS PAPER AIMS TO FIND ANSWERS TO THE FOLLOWING RESEARCH QUESTIONS BY ANALYZING THE SOCIAL CLIMATE IN WHICH VIDEO GAMES DEVELOPED IN ROMANIA: WHAT TYPES OF GAMER COMMUNITIES EXIST AND WHAT ARE THEIR MAIN CHARACTERISTICS? ARE THE NEW VIRTUAL WORLDS ABLE TO CHALLENGE GENDER, ETHNIC OR CLASS DIFFERENCES? THE PAPER EMPHASIZES THAT IDENTITY RECONFIGURATION IN CYBERSPACE – THROUGH ERASURE OF THE PREVIOUSLY MENTIONED IDENTITY MARKERS – IS STILL A UTOPIA. THE METHOD USED TO INVESTIGATE THIS ASPECT IS THAT OF QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS APPLIED TO TEXTUAL CONTENTS IN SEVERAL VIRTUAL GAMERS COMMUNITIES. CONCLUSIONS SUGGEST THAT, IN SPITE OF THE ATEMPORAL, SYNTETIC, AND DISEMBODIED CHARACTERISTICS OF THE VIRTUAL WORLDS, THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL OFFLINE WORLD'S FEATURES ARE SPECIFICALLY REFLECTED WITHIN THE VIRTUAL FIELD.*

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**KEYWORDS:** VIDEO GAMES, VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES, OFFLINE-ONLINE DIVIDE, GENDER AND ETHNIC RECONFIGURATION.

### INTRODUCTION

The theoretical framework of cyberspace has a short, still developing history: in 1984, William Gibson invented the term cyberspace (described as "consensual hallucination") in his novel "The Neuromancer". Theories about the cyberspace have been

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developed in various academic fields (gender studies; philosophy; anthropology; cultural studies; sociology; psychology; economy etc.), whereas new fields such as the anthropology of cyberspace and cyberculture are in progress.

The literary interest (cyberpunk and science fiction literature, for example), and the academic approaches to cyberspace are related not mainly to what cyberspace is, but rather to what should/could be and how should/could transform the offline reality. For example, we can observe that the social human relations are constantly mediated through computers and the Internet: whether we use email for work purposes (especially in academia and private corporations), or choose to maintain friendship relations through social networks, chats or blogs, the commodification and technologization of inter-individual relations represent a critical point for optimistic or skeptical approaches towards the role of the Internet in everyday life. This type of approaches can cover a wide range of theoretical interpretations, from "multiple personality as commodity fetish"<sup>2</sup> - interpreted as creating new virtual identities which start to occupy increasingly more time and energy in individuals real life - to rebuilding the sense of community in an era of digital globalization<sup>3</sup>.

This technological existence acquires new dimensions in the post-industrial computerized society where cyberspace facilitates "(...) a continual exploration of new identities, new subjectivities (...)"<sup>4</sup>. Consequently, this type of existence supposedly allows and promotes the entire or fragmented transfer of identity in an alternative space, cyberspace. The exploration and development of other identities and subjectivities might be mediated by the virtual body, considering the fact that this body is assigned with new dimensions of gender, race and sexuality, or with none distinctive identity markers. As Reeser observes, science fiction or utopian spaces (virtual spaces, in our case) represent appropriate areas for gender and (especially) masculinity reconfiguration, "by offering the possibility of reimagining masculinity without some of its current constraints"<sup>5</sup>. Reeser emphasizes that virtual gender reconfiguration, reaffirmation or reconstruction impacts the

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<sup>2</sup> Rosanne Stone Allucquere, "Will the Real Body Please Stand Up? Boundary stories about virtual cultures", in *The Cybercultures Reader*, ed. David John Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (New York: Routledge, 2000), 506.

<sup>3</sup> Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Barbara M. Kennedy, "The `virtual machine` and new becomings in pre-millennial culture", in *The Cybercultures Reader*, ed. David John Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (New York: Routledge, 2000), 20.

<sup>5</sup> Todd W. Reeser, *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2010), 195.

user because he/she oscillates between two worlds and two genders (or modified, hybridized genders) during the time spent into cyberspace and after<sup>6</sup>

This paper proposes an exploratory framework for identity performances of the Romanian gamers in online communities. The descriptive qualitative content analysis conducted in two gamers communities (PGL and Computer Games Romania forums), and one virtual community (the purpose of which is to recollect communist and post-communist memories, La Trecut.ro) provides a critical approach to the *liberatory* capacity of cyberspace. Although invisible, identity features such as ethnicity/race, gender, class and social status remain important signifiers and dividers amid the different communities. A number of fifty threads and blog entries have been analyzed, especially those included in off-topic categories, because these categories offer rich content regarding interaction, attitudes and behaviors of members. Considering the length of this paper and its work in progress status, the presented results are partial and not generalizable.

### **HISTORY OF VIDEO GAMES – PLAYER’S RECOLLECTION AND THE VETERAN GAMERS PROFILE**

The website “La Trecut” [In the Past] recollects memories about cultural practices and trends during the communist period and the early 1990s. The website gathers experiences which have marked adolescents' lives in the previous regime and immediately after: black-and-white TV, 10-minute cartoons/week, outdoor games, old music cassettes brought from abroad, the first video games played, etc.

References indicate Prince of Persia as the first computer game played in Romania<sup>7</sup>, at the beginning of 1991. The number of computers was rather small during that period, and many users confess that they have played this game thanks to their parents' jobs in calculus centers. Therefore, the golden age of games is still important for many old gamers. “The passing from outdoor games to Prince of Persia or virtual rallies was very quick (...). Because they were very new, our first contact with PC games is still fresh in our memory, in comparison with games played two years or a month ago (...). Back then the graphic was not great, the technology was poor, and everything was represented highly suggestive,

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<sup>6</sup> Reeser, *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction*

<sup>7</sup> “Prince of Persia”, La Trecut, accessed November 30, 2012, <http://www.latrecut.ro/2006/05/prince-of-persia/#comments>

not like copying and improving reality as in the present (...) and there was a lot of imagination involved in the playing process.”

Those who did not have access to a computer mention how they used to play video games on Sega's play stations (console) or on its counterfeit- the latter was obviously cheaper and thus more affordable. Pitfall, River Raid, Mario, Tetris, Bomber Man, Star Force, F1-Race, Popeye, Tank 1-2, and Pac-Man were among the most popular video games played on consoles; comparing those games with the ones today, one user observes: “Today’s games are clearly not games! Everyone is super excited about how real they are. (...) It’s a game; I don’t want it to be real!”. These first games were welcomed not only by children and youth, but also by adults (users note how they used to play along with their family members). Most of the users recount the socializing impact of these games through gathering in the houses of those who had consoles (or later, computers) in order to play for hours. Not only the children and youth enjoyed playing, older members of their families were involved too, by spending time and playing with their sons, daughters or grandsons. The virtual playground was available to everyone, regardless their age.

The above mentioned games can be included in the following categories: maze (Pitfall, Bomber Man, Pac-Man), puzzle (Tetris), platform (Prince of Persia, Mario), shoot’em up (Star Force). Users consider that these types of games influenced their imagination, and challenged their logical thinking. Theorizing the importance of the digital learning technologies, Shaffer, Squire, Halverson and Gee<sup>8</sup> underline the following implications of video games: “Look at video games because they create new social and cultural worlds: worlds that help people learn by integrating thinking, social interaction, and technology, all in service of doing things they care about.”

Many of the veteran gamers, those who have had access to video games either on consoles, either on old computers, followed careers in IT, or economics, as they frequently bring up the topic of their jobs within forum discussions. The “Computer Games” (CG) on-line platform provides rich data with regard to the history of video gaming in Romania; started as a printed magazine specialized in computer games, CG can now be accessed only online. The CG’s audience is formed by many of the so-called hardcore gamers or veteran gamers; those individuals, overwhelmingly males, describe themselves as having a history of at least a decade in playing video games.

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<sup>8</sup> David Williamson Shaffer et al., Videogames and the Future of Learning (2004, 3), accessed December 10, 2012, <http://www.academiccolab.org/resources/gappspaper1.pdf>

For 1995-1999, most of the games recalled belong to the real time strategy type: Dune II and Age of Empires are still vividly alive in gamers' memory<sup>9</sup>. One of CG users underline how he benefited from playing computer games: "I remember my first contact with games, 10-11 years ago; I have learnt many things from those games – firstly, I learnt English, and secondly, they helped me to improve my general knowledge. The Age of Empires game series offered a good dose of strategic options, and a lot of historical information, about Joana D'Arc, William Wallace, Montezuma, etc. They had the effect of getting stuck into your mind because everything was represented graphically; you were the one controlling those characters, and you had the chance to write history."

Nevertheless, role-playing games already had a serious fan base among Romanian players in 1999: Diablo (this particular game benefited of special sub-forum categories, being probably the most played RPG in 1999), Everquest, Ultima series, Fallout 1 and 2, Baldur's Gate, and Eye of the Beholder were among the most popular RPG mentioned by gamers. In 2001, (MMO)RPGs counted their first "addicted victims": a thread called "Guys, are RPGs also taking over your lives?" displays gamers concerns with regard to the addictive effects of these games. Whereas some of the players recount failing high school exams, or college admissions, others point out how they lost contact with friends and girlfriends due to the amount of time involved in playing Diablo and Gothic, among other games.

### **GAMER COMMUNITIES IN ROMANIA: THE GENRE DIVIDE**

Currently, the Romanian community of online players is split between massively multi-player online role-playing (MMORPG), real-time strategy (RTS) and (first) person - shooter games (FPS). Professional Gamers League<sup>10</sup> (dedicated to players of RTS, FPS or 3rd Person Shooter gamers such as Dota, Quake, and Counter Stryke) has over 87,000 members, while RolePlay community numbers approximately 20,000 members. Computer Games gathers various MMO players and has a large community of over 340,000 members.

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<sup>9</sup> "Evoluția (?) Jocurilor", Computer Games, accessed December 2, 2012, <http://computergames.ro/editorial/evolutia-jocurilor/5/>

<sup>10</sup> PGL association aims to promote games as electronic sports in Romania. PGL organizes national tournaments and contests of Counter Stryke, Dota or Fifa (among others) and annually it organizes the preliminaries for World Cyber Games, the international e-sports competition; <http://www.pgl.ro/>

Disputes among MMORPG and FPS players occur from time to time in the games' forum. RPG players claim that a game's quality is given by its narrative story and suggested virtual capabilities of controlling his/her own destiny. With regard to the players' profile, one user considers that<sup>11</sup>: "I don't mean to develop a conspiracy theory, but many of those who used to play BG (n.a. Baldur's Gate) are now working in creative fields; they are highly educated. Products of WII school, CS (n.a. Counter Stryke) and HI5 (n.a. a popular social network) are janitors in EU countries." His opinion is shared by other users who consider that "games are played according to a certain level of intellectual thinking. (...) Persons with an advanced intelligence, focus on games that include puzzles, questions, point & click, that have more mature, psychological, challenging storylines." These statements are counter-argued with sarcasm by FPS players: "No kidding! (...) Aaaa, so if you play BG you will become a lawyer, a professor, or you will be a PhD in literature. If you play CS and Wii, you will become a janitor (...). Some of you take these games way too seriously, like they are a world dividing principle, or some essential training for a respectable citizen. Ten years earlier, when CS was launched, it was considered a very good shooter; back then, the term "cocalar" was unknown and CS players were not listening to "manele" or cleaning toilets. Obviously, ten years ago not everybody could afford a computer, and these games were played by a small group of people, usually the ones really interested in IT and gaming. Now, because everyone has access to these games, you tend to make these idiotic associations."

Role-playing games players are described as more thorough regarding details and more mature, and as advanced English speakers (one of the players pointed out that after he finished playing *Morrowind*, he could have been able to pass an English proficiency test). In contrast, shooter games' players are perceived as immature, with poor education and superficial future perspectives. Nonetheless, as Dovey and Kennedy theorize, "as a result of the highly gendered culture which surrounds computer games playing, first-person shooter games are often seen as the most masculine and the most challenging genre"<sup>12</sup>, hence the appropriation of the shooter genre by adolescents and *cocalari* might lead to the repudiation of these types of games due to their "marginal" masculine players. Originally, *cocalar* (plural - *cocalari*) has a different meaning from its current popular appropriation.

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<sup>11</sup> "Evoluția (?) Jocurilor", Computer Games, accessed December 2, 2012, <http://computergames.ro/editorial/evolutia-jocurilor/>

<sup>12</sup> Jon Dovey and Helen W. Kennedy, *Game Cultures. Computer Games as New Media* (London: Open University Press, 2006), 127.

The term *cocalari* was used to describe a specific group of nomadic Romani people. Nowadays, *cocalar/i* is a pejorative term used to describe Romani males and Romanian males who adopt a Romani “specific” conduit: listening to manele (a music style usually performed by Romani artists), and wearing excessive accessories made of gold; also, they are accused of displaying a lack of taste in fashion, poor education, and a “natural” inclination towards illegal activities (stealing, robberies, physical assaults)<sup>13</sup>. The stigma of *cocalar* follows a gendered, ethnic and class pattern: acknowledged as a deviation from the Romanian, middle and upper class standard, *cocalarii* are portrayed as a subaltern, *inferior* type of masculinity.

During 1997-1998 the internet cafés became very popular among Romanian youth. These e-café have quickly gained a bad reputation (at least among parents) since most of the secondary school and high school students attending these places were usually skipping classes. As far as the author of this paper remembers, in the early 2000, the e-café hosted especially combat and shooter games (FPS such as Counter Stryke, or the action-adventure shooter game Castle Wolfenstein). These spaces embedded a culture of violence, most of the shooter games' players (males aged 15 to 25) engaging in aggressive language, and frequently in acts of violence toward other gamers (or toward computers, when failing to complete a level in game). It did not take long for these spaces to be stigmatized as supporting and promoting deviant behaviors – beside the allowed alcohol consumption, there were rumors that illegal drugs were sold to gamers in order to develop their addictions for both Internet and narcotics. Referring to the moral panics surrounding the Internet and games' effect upon users, Bell notes: “*Moral panics about compulsive and anti-social games-playing have stained the place of computing in the popular consciousness ever since, as witnessed by similar panics around the Internet – panics founded on the computer game’s two key features, as immersive and interactive media. In this kind of reading, ‘immersive’ gets rewritten as ‘addictive’, and ‘interactive’ as ‘antisocial’, since kids were assumed to interact with machines rather than each other(...).*”<sup>14</sup>

Gendered and racialized, e-café are currently recalled by CG users as “gathering spaces for low-life individuals”; furthermore, Romani males’ presence in e-café increased

<sup>13</sup> Elena-Alis Costescu, ”Performing (Post)Gendered Identities in Online Game Communities” (paper presented at Videogames 2012. 5th Annual Conference in Science and Art of Videogames . Game, Play, and Society, Lisbon, Portugal, December 13-15, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> David Bell, *An Introduction to Cybercultures* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 46.

in 2004, and they were blamed for disturbing other (white) clients. One user asking for advice in starting an e-café business, in 2004, receives a large amount of stereotypical and racial answers<sup>15</sup>: “Be careful! There are many Romulans (n.a. pejorative term used to describe Romani people) in that area, and they will attempt to take over your space. Be careful; don’t let them become your clients (...); some day, all your equipment might get stolen.” At present, internet cafés lost their popularity: Internet monthly subscriptions start with 9 dollars, and computers are also affordable; e-cafés are now mostly used for communication or printing materials and less for gaming, therefore the moral panic regarding these places has decreased.

### **HARDCORE VS. CASUAL GAMERS**

Hardcore and veteran gamers separate themselves from casual gamers; usually referred to as the Facebook games, Funware movement or colored ball games, the new generation of games is portrayed to be a decline in the games' evolution. In an editorial titled “Games Evolution (?)” Computer Games highlights that the hardcore players' community is composed mostly by adult males with advanced technological skills. The development of the games industry has led to placing games on the mainstream. Besides very good graphics and affordable prices, new games are criticized for lacking good narrative perspective and for their increased simplicity. Rather than focusing on the gender divide, gamers approach the age divide with regard to casual games and mainstreaming: they consider that by being the first generation of players, they enjoyed several advantages, such as a refined taste in games and logical thinking, contrary to what the new casual games have to offer. Juul defines the stereotypical casual player as it follows<sup>16</sup>: „has a preference for positive and pleasant fictions, has played few video games, is willing to commit small amounts of time and resources toward playing video games, and dislikes difficult games”. The stereotypical hardcore player „(...) has played a large number of video games, will invest large amounts of time and resources toward playing video games, and enjoys difficult games”<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, the amount of work invested in playing games and

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<sup>15</sup> ”Săli de Internet”, Computer Games Forum, accessed December 14, 2012, <http://forum.computergames.ro/88-internet-cafe/87926-sali-de-internet.html>

<sup>16</sup> Jesper Juul, *A Casual Revolution. Reinventing Video Games and Their Players* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2010), 8.

<sup>17</sup> Juul, *A Casual Revolution. Reinventing Video Games and Their Players*



developing strategies leads to a certain superiority when evaluating what a gamer should be and what a gamer is not (casual gamers are not perceived as real gamers).

The gamer identification criteria follow a pattern of antithetic construction: defined in contradiction with the casual, newbie, or ethnic minority players, the gamer is also supposed to be a male. A female gamer started a thread in the CG forum, complaining about the sexist situations experienced when playing, and when revealing her gendered identity as a gamer: "Girls can be gamers too! Even since I have started to play online games, I've encountered the same sexist misconception (especially among Romanians...): what, you are a girl? So what? I was admin on the largest SA-MP server (littlewhitey's), I have played a lot of MMORPGs for long periods of time, with players from all over the world, and yes, I am a girl. For one's surprise, I personally know at least six or seven hardcore gamer girls. And no, they are not fat, ugly, alone or sad. (...)"

Her thread received approximately 170 answers; some of the male gamers agreed that female gamers are usually stereotypically treated in games (one user further exemplifies: "I have noticed how some guys – even in Modern Warfare 3 – make ridiculous jokes when they see a female playing online: 'Go back to the kitchen / 'Make me a sandwich' / and unfortunately, the list can go on"). But the majority started a one month-long campaign of cyber-harassment against this female gamer. In order to exemplify how this specific thread developed, I will quote several samples of misogynistic approaches and marginalizing statements against female gamers in general and the aforementioned one in particular: "I bet you are fat"; "Be careful, try not to keep your laptop too close to the stove"; "Female players are attention whores, they are not interested in the game-play; they only seek attention"; "Are you sure you are not gay?".

The female gamer had to prove herself as a hardcore player, answering questions about what kind of games she preferred (WoW, Quake, and Counter Strike are just some of the games enumerated by her), and what specifically did she enjoy about these games. Some of the gamers considered that gender and ethnicity have no relevance when defining a hardcore gamer. Yet, revealing that you are "different" from the accepted gamers' profile (white, male, Romanian) is an action immediately followed by repercussions: "In globalism, everyone is entitled to play whatever they want ... whether is a man or woman, regardless of race, sex, religion, ideology (...), we all have the right to play (...). As you can see, opening this useless thread only increased your frustration, and you succeeded to

be trolled while seeking for affirmation. Congratulation! It's like an African would open a thread stating, "Blacks can be gamers too!" What would he gain? Nothing, but to be trolled and to receive racist comments. Why? Because he would have stupidly tried to be taken into consideration by others (...). You cannot prove what a good gamer you are, if you are expressing frustrations on forums, unless you beat everybody in CS, FIFA, Starcraft and WoW (...). It doesn't matter if you are a female or a male gamer. What truly matters is competition." Nonetheless, when invisible, gender and race do not matter; but when they are expressed by gamers, competition and playing skills are hindered if the players' identities do not fit the standard profile.

## CONCLUSIONS

The short history of video games in Romania has impacted lives of thousands of people. Social and economic experiences influence individuals' approaches toward these games: their novelty and limited access at the beginning of the 1990s have led to a select fan base, whose career options, skills development or future gaming preferences were shaped by computer and games literacy. The Internet provided the perfect environment for these individuals to gather, share opinions and memories and to form virtual communities. The diversity of gamer communities reflects the increasing development of game culture in Romania – masculinized and sharply divided by age, genre, ethnicity and amount of time involved in the process of gaming, these communities of practice must be conceived as part of the popular culture.

The Romanian gamer communities reflect the way in which social and cultural practices and identity markers such as class, gender or dominant ethnicities are highly maintained as differentiation principles in virtual and offline worlds alike. The cyberspace liberatory and equalizing prospects are not observable within the analyzed communities, where "(...)it does appear that virtual reality technologies are implicated in the production of a certain set of cultural narratives that reproduce dominant relations of power"<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Ann Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* (Duke University Press, 1996), 123.

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