Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation
Ural Federal University named after the first President of Russia B.N. Yeltsin
Ural Humanitarian Institute
Department of Political Science and Sociology
Institute of Modern Management Technologies

XXIII International Conference "Culture, Personality, Society in the Conditions of Digitalization: Methodology and Experience of Empirical Research" named after professor L.N. Kogan

19- 21 March, 2020
Yekaterinburg

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The conference proceedings are intended for sociologists, political scientists, philosophers and everyone who is interested in these problems.

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The philosophy of the game in the American ludic novels of pre-digital and digital era

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Abstract

"The Universal Baseball Association, Inc." by R. Coover and "Reamde" by N. Stephenson offer differing views of the evolving concept of "game" in the XX and XXI centuries. The purpose of the study is to reveal the implications of the game theme in these novels as well as the transformation of the game concept in the XX and XXI centuries.

Coover's novel analysis in parallel to Kant's concepts of a man's ability for reasoning reveals how the imaginary world of the game can become self-sufficient and reduce the creator of the game to no more than one of its participants. Having got out of control the game imposes its own logic on all participants including its creator. It no longer obeys the creators will and the decision center moved to the analogue of Kant's hypothetical super intelligence phenomenon. Stephenson's novel offers an example of the gaming reality creation in globalization era. Stephenson's game presents a dialectical contradiction: it replaces reality but simultaneously serves as a tool for escaping to this reality. Advanced digital technologies create the necessary gaming infrastructure and provide users with the material culture, socio-economic mechanisms for the distribution of online and offline resources, and spiritual culture. This makes the game world as a multidimensional form of reality.

The survey has revealed several tendencies of digital technological development such as the set of technological tools available to the designer of the virtual world, the less this game world will differ from authentic reality. In the digital era, the online game becomes a way of active and intensive interaction with the external world rather than an escape from reality.

Keywords: game, digital technologies, American literature.

1. Introduction

Game theory, originally a mathematical concept, progressively extended to philosophy, cultural studies, and literature with the major focus on a deep relationship between game patterns and social practice. The study concerns some American writers' works in which a game theme can be found. After giving a brief interpretation of the novels by J. D. Salinger and J. Updike the study pays attention to the novels "The Universal Baseball Association, Inc." by Robert Coover (1968) and "Reamde" (2011) by Neil Stephenson. The purpose of the study is to reveal the implications of the game theme in these novels as well as the transformation of the game concept in the XX and XXI centuries.

Since the early 1950-s American writers have often turned to the game themes in their writings. Critical literary analysis of J. D. Salinger and J. Updike novels from socio-cultural perspective allows us saying that in developing their stories writers turn to the game models and person's behavior in the playing field when describing characters who seek to preserve their individuality in the modern highly competitive consumer society with its standardized values especially those which the concept of success are concerned. For example, the protagonist of the novel by J. D. Salinger "The Catcher in the Rye" (1951), Holden Caulfield lives in an unspecified

institution with a permanent feeling of angst and alienation but he has a dream to act as a defender of children's games. The author uses a vivid image of the game as a means of emancipating the person and preserving children's sincerity in the tough world of adults, where falsehood and hypocrisy reigns. John Updike's novel "Rabbit, Run" (1960) depicts three months in the life of a former high school basketball player Harry Angstrom who is trapped in an unhappy marriage and a monotonous, tiresome, and dull sales job. Harry feels truly free only on the basketball court, the place where everyone understands the rules of the game and the goal you need to strive for is clearly defined, and, what is more important, the relations between the players are based on cooperation and mutual understanding in contrast to "nothing personal, just business" boundaries of occupational world relations.

By the end of the XX century, computer game business has become a widespread social phenomenon and a fast-growing branch of the world economy. N. Stephenson's novel "Reamde" concerns different aspects of gamification. In literary criticism, his novel is cited as an example of the negative influence of game practice on modern mode of living. [3], [5], [7] This work is also viewed as a case study for teaching digital ethics. [2] Some academicians define N. Stephenson's novel genre as "science fiction realism" and consider it an example of the third form of culture, which synthesizes science and humanities. [6]

2. Methodology

The study employs a comparative literary analysis approach enriched with the parallel study of some philosophical concepts relevant to the research in this field. R. Coover's novel analyzed in parallel to Kant's concepts of a man's ability for reasoning shows that the organizer of the game space can possess all the qualities of this supernatural intelligence as far as game reality is concerned. The comparative study of the novels written in different époques communicates changes in the relation between the artificial game reality and the authentic one. Structural analysis of N. Stephenson's work has revealed a removal of the contrast between the game and non-game realities in the novel written in the era of globalization, computers and the Internet. The socio-cultural approach to the novels' study serves to follow ethical aspects of the game in the digital and pre-digital eras in the works by R. Coover and N. Stephenson.

3. Results and Discussion

American avant-garde writer Robert Coover explores the game theme in his novel "The Universal Baseball Association, Inc. J. Henry Waugh, Prop.". Coover's work gives a philosophical justification for the attractiveness of gaming reality. The novel's main character, Henry Waugh, is a lonely and unhappy middle-aged accountant. However, each night after he comes home from work, Henry plunge himself in a world of his choosing: a baseball league in which every action is ruled by the dice. Henry created this baseball board game with imaginary teams of players led by imaginary coaches. The course of the game is determined by the combination of numbers that fall when throwing the dice. He also developed a statistical table that includes all possible cases that can occur on and around the playing field, even the death of a player. In the course of narration, the author describes how his character – Henry Waugh, thus, passionate about his imaginary game, gradually loses his touch with real world. The fictional world of the game then turns out to be much more attractive for him than the everyday gray and monotonous life that the modest accountant has to lead.

The epigraph to the novel quotes the second part of I. Kant's philosophical work "Critique of Judgment", paragraph 77. This quote reads: "It is here not at all requisite to prove that such an intellectual archetypes is possible, but only that we are led to the Idea of it..." [4, 3] The German

philosopher defines the properties of the hypothetical intellectual archetypes (prototype) in contrast to the discursive reason of man (intellectual ectypes). According to Kant, human's reasoning ability, by virtue of his finiteness, is inevitably forced to operate with particular laws, since he is deprived of the ability to contemplate nature in its entirety. Therefore, the connections between the phenomena that he establishes on the basis of one or another conceptual apparatus are more or less random in nature – that which may appear to be different, turns out to be general, and vice versa. At the same time, one can conceive of some kind of intuitive synthetic reason, which is able to perceive nature in its integrity, and therefore the laws revealed by it are devoid of an element of chance, or, in social terms, are obligatory for unconditional execution. The bearer of this type of reason is a supernatural construct that can only be located outside the sensually cognizable world.

However, the organizer of the game space possesses all the qualities of this supernatural intelligence as far as game reality is concerned: he determines the purpose of the game, develops a system of rules that regulates the behavior of participants and sets a complex of spatial temporal characteristics for the game reality. In other words, he builds and develops a new world and acts as the architect and creator. It is his opportunity to be a god, a self-sufficient subject and the owner of his own world that makes the game especially attractive for the character in Coover's, work and this what novel reflects in its title – "Private property of Henry Waugh".

Another thing is that after the act of creation is complete, after the created world becomes self-sufficient and the game process begins, even the creator of the game becomes no more than one of its participants. The game no longer obeys the creator's will and the decision center moves to the analogue of Kant's hypothetical super intelligence. In particular, the novel describes an internal conflict that occurs in the soul of the main character when, in accordance with the rules, has to die a player to whom Henry Waugh feels personal sympathy. In this situation, it turns out that the only way to save the player's life is to completely stop the game, that is, completely destroy the imaginary world in which the player and his creator live. What is more, for the creator of the game there is no way to influence or change the course of game events. The game goes out of control and imposes its own logic on all its participants, including its creator.

Unlike other forms of artificial reality such as literary work, film or painting the game format requires the participants their complete obedience to the laws of the modified gaming time and space. It is impossible to distance oneself from the game, you cannot go to a different level of perception, and you cannot be a half or three quarter's player; the game requires self-denial comparable to a religious one. By its nature, the relationship between a person and a gaming reality is close communication of a profane with pseudo-supernatural forces. The high popularity of computer games can be explained in a similar way: gaming is one of the simplest psychological tools to go into a different form of reality.

The "Reamde" novel written in the XXI century offers an example of gaming creation reality in the globalization era. In Stephenson's version a game replaces reality but simultaneously serves as a tool for escaping to this reality through the use of the most advanced modern digital technologies. The construction of the necessary game infrastructure and networks make it possible for game players to interact with each other instantaneously.

The novel's plot develops two kinds of reality: the online virtual and the offline authentic one. The central element of the virtual part in the novel is "Massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) "T'Rain" invented by Richard Forthrast, who is a "T'Rain" gaming company owner. When the author introduces the game theme into the text of the novel, he gives a detailed description of Richard Forthrast's biography. The reader learns about his cultural background and the circumstances under which he came to create this game. Also the author

explains his psychological motivation for game creation and identifies his current role in the management of complex and challenging game situations. In addition, in his novel N. Stephenson precisely describes the "T'Rain" game qualities to highlight its difference from such competitors as "Warcraft" and "Counterstrike", particularly the "T'Rain's" game world spatio-temporal characteristics, its systematic nature, complexity and pursuit for expressed in the creation of a specific game related material culture, language, folklore, mass media and literature, economy, sociology and ethics. All these elements exist in the form of a superstructure over the basis of the game rules which regulate patterns of the user's behavior in the playing space. Both aspects – the image of the creator of the game world and the characteristics of its virtual reality – are mainly presented at the beginning of the work, that is, the novel's author prioritizes the game before reality, thus preparing the reader for the fact that the main events of the story to be matched with the "T'Rain" game scripts.

Among Richard Forthrast's qualities the most important are: his marginal status, his connection with criminal culture, and his closeness to wild nature. Richard Forthrast comes from a family of survivalists – a subculture consciously cutting itself off the civilization and not recognizing state borders, one of the characters calls them the American Taliban. The ways of mainstream social self-realization by means of conventional methods are closed for him, and not because of his victim of oppression status, it is his voluntary deliberate choice. In accordance with his marginalized position the place of Richard Forthrast's residence is a sparsely populated region in British Columbia in Canada, not far from the US border; he himself often crosses this border, often by using illegal ways. In the same marginalized position are the majority of the novel's characters. That is, the indwelling in a virtual reality is the apanage of those marginals who are psychologically ready to cross the borders separating one kind of reality from another.

Richard Forthrast lives in an area historically associated with Prohibition bootlegging, and he himself was involved in smuggling marijuana before joining a gaming business. The infrastructure of the game which he created in the novel is used, inter alia, for money laundering, fraudulent schemes and financial fraud, in which such criminal groups as the Russian mafia and Islamic terrorists take part. So, the author of the novel expresses the idea that the gaming business is organically connected with crime. This is explained by the fact that the game space arises and functions solely thanks to a system of clear rules, which makes up the essence of the game. In virtual reality, these rules and restrictions are more arbitrary than in authentic reality, but at the same time they are more visible, tangible. That is why the game players much more often ponder over the concept of the rules and the laws than in actual reality, in which people can live without thinking about the goals, rules and laws regulating their way of life for years. This density and obtrusiveness of the laws and rules system in the game world actualize the problem of their violation; hence there are a lot of criminals in the story line in the novel "Reamde".

The game for its administrator and users acts as an alternative to the current real life, therefore, the logic of its creation and functioning inevitably leads to constructing the game / reality opposition. The reality in the novel "Reamde" is America of the XXI century with its political, socio-economic system and a high level of technological development. In contrast to a modern life environment Richard Forthrast appeals to medieval antiques; he lives in a medieval castle, transported to Canada from Eastern Europe and the castle's interior reproduces the medieval building indoor settings. Richard Forthrast'sSchloss castle is located far away from highways and railways, in a mountainous area, where ski slopes are equipped for extreme tourism lovers unpretentious to the level of tourist service. Relations between players in "T'Rain" are built according to medieval feudal rules. The mechanism of formulating the body of the rules regulating main activity in the game is described as follows: «Then Richard, with a bit of jargonic assistance

from Corvallis, had given it an arresting title: Medieval Armed Combat as Universal Metaphor and All-Purpose Protocol Interface Schema (MACUMAPPIS)». The USA capitalism and democracy of the XXI century is opposed to the medieval era. Thus, a breeding ground for the game activity is border sensitivity, criminal consciousness and passion for the Medieval style fantasy.

The "T'Rain" game's commercial success and its popularity among users can be explained by the maximal closeness of the artificial game reality to the authentic one. A competitive advantage of this game was the result of Richard Forthrast's innovative breakthrough: he involved a group of geologists for its development. They transformed the abstract game scenery into a reality-like landscape which actually replicates crustal relief. For the inhabitants of this game world special material culture was also invented. For example, a complex system for equipping game characters, endowing them with superpowers and providing conditions for their survivability was developed. In the field of virtual material culture a spontaneous socio-psychological experiment was carried out: users were granted the opportunity not only to choose ready-made colors for their characters appearance but also to create their own color schemes. This is not only increased the user's engagement level in the play, but also gave rise to different trends in fashion, which turned out very similar to the real life history of fashion.

As the reality of the game "T'Rain" is patterned upon the actual reality, the players' community elaborates economic mechanisms for the distribution and redistribution of limited resources. These resources can be of two types: the limited objective resource – time available for a player, and the limited quasi-objective one – a set of the game character skills available for a player. To level up the potential of his game character, for example, to acquire for him some magical abilities, the player has to spend his gaming time to extract all the necessary virtual material resources, for instance, virtual gold. The time required for extracting this gold in the game world is comparable to the time needed for extracting physical gold in real life and this match is one of the results of geologists' contribution to the game development. To save their game time budget solvent players from North America and Europe spend their offline money to purchase virtual gold from the third world countries players; usually these players are teenagers who have free time but have no money. Thus, the game economy's basis is conversion of time into money, and this financial operation engages the online game economy into interaction with the offline real economy hence allowing game economy going beyond its virtual boundaries. And the configuration of global socio-economic relations inside the game reproduces the system of relations between the countries of the first and the third world. Marxist interpretation of "T'Rain" economic system is presented in the theses "Trading Frames: Interface Operations and Social Exchanges in Video Games". [1]

Much attention in the game is paid to the verbal aspect of the game behavior. When playing the users super-intensively communicate with each other, and for their communication they developed their own special slang which allows him transmitting information in an extremely compressed, archived form. For example, one of the first-time players in the novel when agreeing with his partner gives the following remark: «To which the money changer responded immediately with "K," that being the chat abbreviation for the unwieldy two-letter message "OK"». [8, 779] Even two lettered "OK" for game communication seems "unwieldy". So, game practice creates a language and then this special language lays the groundwork for creation of game folklore, mass media and literature.

The game developers also contribute to the verbal design of gaming reality. Unusual, exotic-sounding phoneme combinations are selected to designate different categories of game characters then parallels in some exotic mythological system, for example, in Indian one, are found for them.

After that the developers invent magical qualities for each type of character using this mythological system as a template. This is the way the game's folklore is being created.

To equip the game practice with relevant discourse the administration publishes a periodical: «the T'Rain Gazette, a daily newspaper (electronic format, of course), created by a microdepartment operating out of the Seattle office, which summarized what had been going on all over T'Rain during the preceding twenty-four hours: notable achievements, wars, duels, sackings, mortality statistics, plagues, famines, untoward spikes in commodity prices». [8, 172] So the game players network provided with its own mass media becomes a self-conscious and self-reflexive community.

Because in a fictitious world a fiction writer is its essential element, the stuff of the game developers includes two full-time writers – Donald "D-squared" Cameron and Devin "Skeletor" Skraelin, both previously fantasy story writers. Their responsibilities are: firstly, to create new scenarios for the game characters to increase the game thrilling impact; secondly, to write multi-page novels about "T'Rain" game events. For example, Volume 11 of «T'Rain Origins: Chronicles of the Sundered: The Forsaken Magicks» is mentioned in Stephenson's novel. [8, 216] That is, the writers in the game world, on the one hand, construct virtual reality; on the other hand, they describe and study it. Thus, creative writing becomes a self-sufficient process, it does not need objective reality anymore.

Thus, the game in the novel by N. Stephenson provides users both material culture and socio-economic infrastructure for the distribution of resources as well as spiritual culture elements makes it a full-scale multidimensional form of reality.

The thematically similar ludic novels "The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop." by R. Coover and "Reamde" by N. Stephenson are written in different technological eras: the former in pre-digital and the latter in a digital one. And this explains the interpretation of the game theme around which the novels are built. For Coover's novel protagonist the game is a means of avoiding everyday reality, avoiding his boring, monotonous, and routine lifestyle with lack of adventure and bright emotional feelings. To cover this emotional deficit Henry Waugh creates his version of virtual reality being as distant as possible from authentic reality. Consequently the reality of game in Coover's novel is clearly separated from the actual reality and is opposite to it.

In Stephenson's novel the contrast between the game and non-game realities is eliminated and as the plot unwinds the characters repeatedly have to cross the boundaries between a computer game and authentic reality. As a result, these separating boundaries become as transparent and invisible as the border between the United States and Canada on an imaginary parallel line 49. Stephenson's novel characters are psychologically prepared for adventures and emotional stress, and they successfully exercise this power in both online and offline realities. Hence, the artificial world of the game should have all the qualities to make its artificiality scarcely noticeable for the characters.

4. Conclusions

A comparative analysis of two American novels written in different eras has revealed the tendency of digital technologies development: the wider is the set of technological tools available for the virtual world designer the less this internal game world will differ from authentic reality. In the digital era, online game instead of being a form of escape from reality becomes a way of active and intensive interaction with the external world.

This completely repeats the dialectical question about two different trends in the development of art: art as a means of avoiding reality or one of the ways of knowing it by other means. Stevenson's work testifies in favor of the second statement, hence his characterization as "science-fiction realism" and his attribution to the third form of culture, synthesizing the scientific and humanitarian forms of cognition of reality.

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