

Social representations and ideologies in digital games

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Keywords: *game studies, social representation, ideology, ludology, narratology*

Abstract: *The place of digital games in the global media culture cannot be ignored any longer. This paper focuses on the relationship between social representations in games and society and reality and the way they are interconnected. The theoretical approach is an interdisciplinary one, which combines elements of communication sciences, social psychology, narratology and media studies. The first part of the paper is a short exposition of some theoretical concepts while the second is a case study on the Command & Conquer: Red Alert strategy game series. The article concentrates on showing the ability of games to create meanings and significations in building a specific world image.*

Introduction

Digital games have been overlooked, especially in the Romanian space, in what academic studies are concerned, because of their labeling as a children's medium, lacking consistency and seriousness. But taking into consideration even only the immense economic profits obtained from games (higher than the film industry and the toys industry put together), their place in world culture cannot be ignored any longer.

Games have been researched, mostly in universities in the United States, starting with the second half of the 20th century, so it is safe to say that there is a bibliography

behind the subject. Unfortunately, most of it concerns games as technological objects and a medium of scientific advancement. The social sciences and humanistic approaches have emerged only since the beginning of the 1990s. The new academic field that encompasses all these approaches is called *game studies*, and is already cloven into two opposing approaches. On the one hand there is the ludological take on games, which sees them as formal, abstract systems, based on fixed rules, which tend to favor quantitative, sociological research. On the other hand there are the narratologists, which consider games to be representational systems, communication structures which are actually new forms of narrativity and, thus, can be studied using the theories of the narrative.

This paper aims to look at the way in which the social representations in games and in society are connected. The study is definitely not a singular one, but most other works concentrate on other media (especially visual: film, photography, television, but also the written press). The theoretical process is a meeting of knowledge from communication sciences, social psychology, narratology and, inasmuch as they can be considered a separate discipline, media studies. The paper analyzes the Command & Conquer: Red Alert strategy game series, trying to maintain focus on the ability of games to create meanings and significations that build a specific world image.

What is a digital game?

Dictionaries seem to treat *game* as a representative only of the the amusing activity of playing, not as the product itself. We will define a digital game as the entertainment product that involves the interaction of a user with an interface, interaction that generates feedback, usually on a video display device. Practically, games are complex pieces of software, existing in the form of digital code, that can be run on various electronic devices known as gaming platforms (computers, consoles, handheld devices, arcade machines etc.).

At a functional level games require a user, the player, to input information using a controller (keyboard and mouse, joystick, pad, wiimote etc.). This information is then analyzed and processed by computing systems (that vary widely in operation from on type to the next) and interpreted according to programming and game rules. The result of this is sent back to the user on at least one output device: video (computer display, TV, telephone screen), then audio and sometimes even tactile (usually *force-feedback* controllers that shake in response to what happens in the game). After this step the cycle begins again. Because of the high processing speeds this happens almost instantly. This leads to the fact that many games require quick reflexes and fast action.

From a ludological perspective, among the recurrent elements in games there are the rules (which determine the universe itself, what can and cannot be done and when), the conflict (against an adversary or the environment), using the player's abilities (aptitudes, strategies, luck) for reaching a goal (winning, getting the highest score, finishing with the fastest time, accomplishing a given task) (Wolf 2008, 3). All

these are usually present in games in different forms and quantities. Because of pre-programmed characteristics, keeping score and watching over the observing of rules is done automatically, and it is an objective system. For this reason, the computer can share the roles of referee and player. Identifying the CPU (central processing unit or processor) with a player adds an extra affective dimension of competition with a matching adversary.

The user also takes on the role of a character, which is more relevant from a narratological point of view. The existence of at least one instance that can be called a character is the first step towards accepting digital games as text. This type of interactive text has been called by Espen Aarseth *cybertext*. The concept of cybertext is concentrated on the mechanic organization of the text, proposing the complexity of the medium as part of the literary exchange (Aarseth 1997, 1). Also, this concept focuses attention on the consumer of the text, towards the user as an integral part of the text. In the case of reading a standard literary text the process is a linear one and takes place only in the mind of the reader. In the case of cybertext the reader also performs extranoematic activities, that take place outside the mental processes – more specifically referring to the physical action required, for example pressing the buttons on a keyboard. “Traditional” reading has only a trivial extranoematic component (moving the eyes and the minimal effort of turning pages), but in the cybertextual process the user performs selective operations (“semiotic sequences”) that are not included in the current concept of reading (as developed by literary theory). Aarseth calls this phenomenon *ergodic* (term borrowed from physics) and refers to the cybertextual ensemble as *ergodic literature* which requires a nontrivial effort on the reader’s behalf for getting through the text (Aarseth 1997).

Among the arguments encountered by Aarseth against the specific character of cybertext (in opposition to literary text) there is the fact that all texts are, at a certain level, nonlinear. The reader is involved in the act of reading and has to make decisions for understanding the literary text. There is also the argument that all text are linear because the user can only perceive them sequentially, one piece at a time. He supports his position by pointing out the fact that the metaphor of the text as a labyrinth has been taken too literally. Literary critique looks for ambivalence in texts expressed linearly but, in fact, the reader, however much engaged in reading, has no power of decision. A difference is made between a unicursal labyrinth, or a linear one, (a complex, sinuous, structure that only follows one path that inevitably leads to the exit) and a multicursal labyrinth, or a maze, (with many different directions to be chosen from, dead ends and the possibility that, once in, a way out might not be found). In a cybertext the user is constantly haunted by the potentiality of paths not taken, voices unheard and inaccessible strategies. This inaccessibility, though, is not equivalent with the ambiguity of interpretation, but rather with the absence of possibility (Aarseth 1997, 3).

Aarseth’s text does not exclude the possibility to apply descriptive poetics such as that of Vladimir Propp in *Morphology of the Folk Tale* (1970) to digital texts. Standard

literary theory, though, can only be adapted to suit the linear results of a games run-through, not on the multitude of possibilities that exist in potential.

Social representations and ideologies

Social representations theory is somewhere at the meeting of psychology and sociology, and it analyzes the relationship between the subject and the object in the perspective of social influence. Serge Moscovici, the creator of this term had brought back to the surface, at the beginning of the 1960s, Émile Durkheim's concept of *collective representations*. According to Moscovici, social representations are the collective elaboration of the social image of an object by a community, with the purpose of facilitating communication and social behavior. Through this, common value systems are created, helping individuals to operate in social contexts, and socially intelligible codes, making the communication of the world's aspects to other group members possible (Neculau 1997, 299).

"Social representations are almost tangible entities. They travel, cross each other, continuously crystallize in our everyday universe, through a word, a gesture or a meeting, impregnating the majority of social rapports of produced or consumed objects, of interchanged communications. [...] They correspond, on the one hand to the symbolic substance that goes into their making and on the other to the practice they generate." (Moscovici 1995, 29) Social objects are ambiguous. We have no clear criteria to judge them. This is one of the reasons why autonomous individuals converge to a common judgment when they are in a group. "We have no criteria for evaluating truth or fault in what political and religious opinions, values, cultural norms and symbols in general are concerned." (Moscovici 1995, 29). For this reason, individuals find themselves having to accept the other's judgments to reduce uncertainty. Other people's judgment is constructed similarly and so a common social norm is arbitrarily created, deciding what is true or false, used to represent reality.

Practically, the lack of total objectivity of any situation assumes the fact that each experience is defined by its context and the way it is perceived. The majority of people start in assimilating the external world from previous observations and concrete evidence. These, in their turn, come from the outside, from scientists, journalists, politicians, basically any kind of "authorized" information emitters. Social representations theory considers that "the object is described in an active context, in movement, and is conceived by a person or collective that always communicates contextually, adjusting its behavior" (Neculau 1997, 298).

Representation objects come from the most diverse fields of social life and often present academic interest: interindividual relationships, group relationships, intelligence, medicine, sexuality, politics, social organizations, economic institutions, technology etc.

Moscovici described two fundamental processes of representations through which individuals turn the unfamiliar into familiar. The first is objectification, "the cognitive

process through which the individual or group transforms concepts, abstract notions into familiar images” (Neculau 1997, 302), so the simplification of information about an object through concretization and adaptation to their own purposes according to the internal logic of the individual or group. The second, anchoring, implies attributing meanings to new phenomena in order to integrate them in the individual’s category system, by comparing them with the already existing paradigms.

Social representations are formed through gradual processes. In addition, once formed, they are in continuous transformation. These evolutions appear with the intervention of new elements in the context of representation. These new elements may be ideas, convictions, norms or practices. Current research places great emphasis on the changing contexts in the building of social representations. Representations conditioned by contexts are transmitted from generation to generation, by socialization, collective practices, education, legal system etc. They work by gaining cultural capital which anchors the individual in the group he belongs to. When a person receives just one type of information their entire lives, they accept it as their own and reject any contradictory information. This system allows for manipulation from those that have the power to furnish (maybe even exclusively) the context. “The ideological and cultural medium institutes fixed models, offers templates of thought and interpretation, «teaches» the individual and decisively influences him in building his image of the world.” (Neculau 1997, 313)

Willem Doise places ideologies at a higher level in which social realities are also encompassed. Ideologies are the corpus of general ideas, and representations are the deviations from these ideas, the particular modulations (Neculau 1997, 313-314). According to Moscovici, ideologies are systems of representations and attitudes to which all familiar social or racial prejudice phenomena, stereotypes, beliefs etc. relate. “Their common feature lies in the fact that they express a social representation which individuals and groups form for the purpose of acting and communicating. Such representations are, obviously, those that shape that half physical, half imaginary reality that is social reality.” (Moscovici 1995, 7)

Ideologies contain concepts, images, discourses, theoretical positions and symbolical forms, not only what is explicitly mentioned in the texts. Modern ideology theories, such as those of Roland Barthes and Douglas Kellner, explore the complex ways in which images, myths, social practices and narratives work together in producing ideologies. This perception opens perspectives towards the study of ideologies in popular culture products, of which digital games also a part.

Such analyses are necessary because “representations in popular culture texts constitute the political image through which individuals view the world and through which they interpret political processes, events, personalities.” (Kellner 2003, 60). In a mediated cultural image, representations constitute the comprehensive image on the world, the sense of personal identity.

In the ideological vision of every individual, he is the norm and all that is different is abnormal. These norms usually belong, according to Marxist philosophy, to the

dominant class. The digital games market is a global one, but the biggest consumption center is represented by the United States and Western Europe. These are followed by South Korea and Japan, but here there is a considerably different consumption model and there are producers that cater specifically for the area. For this reason, the vision most encountered in games is that of what in the USA is called WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant), but adapted to a younger audience. So, ideology is an instrument of the dominant system which facilitates the continual oppression of the already marginalized. Ideology in itself creates distinctions inside the categories of the system, such as gender, race, wealth, social class, ethnicity and arranges them axiologically, crating a system of values on arbitrary criteria. "Ideology constructs divisions between «proper» and «improper» behavior, while constructing a hierarchy within each of these domains which justifies the domination of one gender, race, and class over others by virtue of its alleged superiority, or the natural order of things. For example, women are said to be by nature passive, domestic, submissive, and so on, and their proper domain is deemed to be the private sphere, the home, while the public sphere was reserved for, allegedly, more active, rational, and domineering men." (Kellner 2003, 61) It is these exact binary oppositions that cultural studies trying to take apart, exposing the mechanisms of the ideologies behind them and undermining them. The critique of ideologies discusses dominant social categories and proves their arbitrary social construction. Such a study must, therefore, follow abstractizations and reifications back to their social origins and reveal the distortions and mystifications that have led to the current state of facts.

Case study: Command & Conquer: Red Alert

"The word, which henceforth is allowed only to designate something and not to mean it, becomes so fixated on the object that it hardens to a formula. [...] The outside-left in football, the blackshirt, the Hitler Youth member, and others of their kind are no more than what they are called." (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, 133) This is how Adorno and Horkheimer describe the effect of industrialization on culture. In games, which operate on formulas and standard algorhytms, things are even more so. Of course, together with the evolution of technology the algorhytms are hidden behind more and more believable illusions of reality, still with much to go until a perfect implementation. This structure is transferred to the narrative and visual content, leaving room for ideological interpretation.

We will now analyze the Command & Conquer: Red Alert games trying to identify the way in which political, social, cultural ideologies manifest themselves in the industrial system of the entertainment market today. The Command & Conquer world is a fictional universe, host to three parallel series of real time strategy games. First there is the Tiberian series with an alien invasion plot. Then there is the Generals series, started in 2003, which revolves around the issue of terrorism and Chinese ascension. The oldest series in the universe, however, is Red Alert, comprising several

games taking place in an alternate reality in which Albert Einstein returns to the past and eliminates Adolf Hitler in an attempt to stop World War II from happening. The plan fails and Stalin, without the Nazi hindrance, invades Europe in the 1950s. This first game was produced by Westwood Studios and launched by Virgin Interactive in 1996.

The two factions that go against each other in the game are The Allies (the European countries, including Germany) and the Soviets. In the Red Alert 2 sequel the Soviets invade the United States (spanning around the 1970s-1980s), losing in the end. In the most recent episode (launched at the end of 2008), seeing the imminent defeat in the war, the Russian general Cherdenko goes back in time, using a time machine invented by a Russian scientist, and assassinates Einstein to annihilate the technological superiority of the Allies. Upon return Cherdenko finds himself in the USSR premier's chair and the Allies are on the brink of defeat. A new, very technologically advanced, force, previously unknown, appears – the Empire of the Rising Sun – bent to conquer the world.

Despite the fictional plot, social representations in the Red Alert games are easy to apply to current realities, drawing inspiration especially from propaganda materials from World War II and the Cold War.

The games operate on binary oppositions through its very nature: two enemy factions meet on the battlefield. Although the player gets to play both sides the perspective is singular. The Soviets are negative characters no matter what side the player is on. The title, Red Alert, besides hinting to a potential intense gameplay experience, a red alert signaling the greatest degree of danger in many warning systems, it also implies a sense of communist threat. From the start this places the Russians in the aggressors' position, of the disturbers of the *status quo*, bringing violence with them. In opposition, the Allies are defined as peaceful and defensive, though not passive.

From a graphical point of view, the difference between the two factions is clearly marked. In the first game, because of the technological limitations of the moment, the difference was made by using a color-coded system. The units and buildings had the same appearance, but the Allies were blue by default, in opposition to the red communists. In western cultures blue symbolizes wisdom, calm, integrity, peace. On the other side red represents passion, anger, sin, danger, but also sacrifice and courage. In addition to this, during the Cold War the color red gained negative connotations, being associated with the communist party and the Soviet Union. In the McCarthyism period, in the 50s, being suspected of being “red” was an insult and could become very dangerous, strongly influencing the social perception of individuals.

In the next installment of the series the graphics are improved and differential elements become clear. On the one side there are the Allies, still with a blue color theme, with buildings projecting an appearance of advanced technology, rounded edges, modularity, solid constructions of polished metal. Soviet buildings are by comparison square, angular, with a rusty iron and bare brick aspect, a combination

of modern technology and tradition. The traditional image is stressed especially by representative architectural elements such as towers in the style of Russian orthodox churches (for example the tower of St. Basil Cathedral in the Red Square in Moscow) on top of industrial buildings such as construction yards and war factories. Both armies' buildings are imposing, but in different ways: while Allied buildings inspire a high degree of functionality, efficiency and professionalism, Soviet buildings are imposing through their mass, and through elements of induction of state authority (the traditional towers, the omnipresent hammer and sickle, the huge statue of a Russian soldier on top of the barracks etc.). All in all, the design of Soviet architecture in the Red Alert games imagines an antiquated culture which has artificially grafted modern elements, without great success, a forcedly industrialized society, stuck in an incipient evolutionary stage. This is in direct contrast with the harmonious architecture of the Americans, a result of the outgrowing of the industrial stage, reaching a maximum functionality, automatization and correct exploitation of technical and scientific innovations.

The situation is similar for game units. The base unit is the foot soldier, *GI* (term referring to American soldiers, from the galvanized iron used to make army equipment) for the Allies and *conscript* for the Soviets. The derogatory meaning of the term *conscript* can be sensed right away, implying a high degree of coercion (a conscript is a mandatorily mobilized recruit). In Red Alert 3 the Allies' base unit was renamed to *peacekeeper*, widening the ideological gap.

From a graphical point of view, the Allied infantry is equipped defensively, with body armor, bullet proof clothing and helmets. Soviet soldiers are dressed to be able to handle the harsh climate of the USSR: long, heavy coats and fur hat, but with huge machine guns. From a game mechanics standpoint the peacekeepers are much better performing units, but costly, while the Soviet units are cheap but less resistant and less efficient. This is why playing the Soviet side of the game requires a more quantitatively oriented strategy, while the American one is more qualitative.

Differences between units build a heroic, positive image of the US and their allies while demeaning the Soviet Union. One of the battle vehicles on the Americans is the Mirage tank. In the game's script this tank is one of the most important technological developments of the Allies, incorporating a holographic projection system that allows it to cloak itself completely when standing still. They appear to enemy troops as trees until the moment they make a move or attack. On the same level on the technology tree the red army has the Apocalypse tank, a huge fighting machine, much larger than Allied tanks, with high resistance and immense brute force.

The general characteristic of Soviet units is, consequently, the emphasis on brute force or quantity, not on strategic advantages as is the case for the opposing faction. Another such example is that of the resource collectors. These are vehicles that gather ore from set places on the battlefield and take it back to the base to be converted into credits used in producing units and buildings. The Allied gatherer, the Chrono Miner,

is equipped with a technology that allows it to teleport back to the base when loaded. To compensate for the lack of such a technology, the Russian gatherer, called a War Miner, is heavily armored and is equipped with a mounted-on, low power (not being an attack unit) machine gun that can defend it from a limited number of troops. The active aggressive quality of the communists can be again observed in contradiction to the strategic defensive character of the Americans.

Each faction can be played as a specific country from either sides: the countries of the Allied block are the United States, Great Britain, France, Germany and Korea, and the ones of the soviet block are Russia, Cuba, Iran and Libya. Each of these countries is essentially the same as the others in its block, but they all have one specific characteristic, usually a specialized unit. The difference in the two sides' philosophies is clear: the Allied special units are a high power defensive cannon, with a great range; a sniper; a tank that fires armor piercing projectiles for taking down enemy tanks; a very fast plane; and the ability to drop paratroopers anywhere on the map. Again, defensive techniques and adaptations for fighting from a distance. Communist nations have units such as the Tesla tank, a high power, short range tank that uses electric arcs to produce damage; a truck carrying a small nuclear bomb that explodes upon impact; suicide terrorists that throw themselves into battle with dynamite tied around themselves; and the unit called the Desolator, a soldier in a sort of Hazmat suit who contaminates the terrain around him with radiation so that units passing through that terrain suffer damage. This group of battle units specialized on close quarter fighting creates the image of an aggressive culture with distorted values (suicide bombers sacrificing themselves for violence).

Both factions also have a *superweapon* which only becomes available towards the end of the technological development in the game, is expensive and very slow to use but produces enormous damage on a wide area. The Soviets have a Nuclear Silo that can launch atomic missiles after a long preparation sequence (meant to maintain the balance of the game). The missile instantly kills all human units in its effective range and badly damages or fully destroys buildings. After the explosion the terrain remains irradiated for a while and units continue to lose health points. The explosion is accompanied by an *atomic mushroom*, and the terrain gets a greenish signaling the high radiation levels. The missile silo is a massive construction with the hammer and sickle on the side, which, when ready, opens up to let the missile fly.

The Allies have a Weather Control Device that launches a devastating storm over an area. This device has a similar result to that of the Russian nuclear missile, but because of its nature it places the Allies on superior technological and moral ground. The Weather Control Device is a very advanced piece of machinery, proof of American superiority, with a high capacity for destruction, but a destruction that does nothing but concentrate the forces of nature on a specific area. In comparison to the atom bomb, which is a human product that has lost much of its mythical dimension in the last decades, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, the machine that controls the weather is

an almost magical instrument, but in harmony with the rest of the world and drawing its powers from it. We might call it “green”. In addition it leaves no traces, it does not artificially contaminate nature, but as clouds gather over an enemy base it seems purifying, almost divine.

The introduction of the Japanese threat in the most recent game of the series signifies a greater proximity to the current affairs of the United States. In Red Alert 3 the Americans are part of a scenario in which they are placed in technological inferiority. If until now the Soviets had numerical superiority to their advantage and the Allies had the technological one, the emergence of the Empire of the Rising Sun leaves the Allies without their edge. They end up relying on strategic superiority and determination. The Japanese element is a figment of the crisis of the United States, at the time only noticeable in an economic recession. They represent the fear of losing the position of world leaders to the nations of the Extreme Orient, to the superiority of the oriental mentality, of the philosophies that are so hard to be comprehended by western peoples. But the Empire represents not only the technological superiority of Japan and South Korea but also the rising economic threat of China.

The Red Alert series has evolved over time not just technologically, but also in what the style is concerned. If in the beginning it was almost grave and serious, in time it has gained a high degree of irony. The style is now camp, a postmodern esthetic direction in which bad taste and (self)irony are seen as positive attributes. Camp feeds off of the hypocrisy of the dominant culture, trying to allude to it. It does not offer values, but it makes the culture face its own inconsistencies to attract attention on the way social norms are constructed. Stereotypes are highlighted with the explicit purpose of drawing attention to them.

From the point of view of the game mechanics, the factions in Red Alert require different strategic styles and tactical approaches, one side concentrating on active aggressiveness and close combat while the other concentrates on defensiveness and long range attacks. But for the game to be a fair one the sides are well balanced. There is no clear advantage in playing either the Allies or the Soviets. From a cultural point of view, though, the Allied side is clearly favored. The Soviets are shown as the natural enemy, the unjust aggressors, technically, culturally and philosophically backward, but strong in numbers and persistent. They are presented, using the entire arsenal of stereotypes, as negative characters, intentionally making it difficult to empathize with them and their cause.

On the other side, the Americans and their allies are presented heroically, in a blue light, as saviors, in communion with nature, but above it, exploiting its potential without damaging it. They are seen as pacifists, forced into an unjust war, and identification with Allied characters is facilitated by most content elements.

Although this Manichaeism is not camouflaged, on the contrary, it is exaggerated with intent, as a critique to modern society, its influence on the target audience can diverge away from the producers intention. A young audience, with no experience

can appropriate the social representations in Red Alert literally, ignoring the critical dimension of the game as a cultural product.

Conclusions

Digital games have become a very influent side of popular culture in the last years. The development in this field being closely connected to the evolution of technology, it is only natural that the growth be felt together with the advances in computing, and for this reason a continual growth is expected until the reach of a plateau in games' popularity. From this perspective, the importance of games relative to the current social and cultural realities will still be, for some time, ascending.

The present tendencies on the market are to extend and encompass larger and larger segments of the population. Despite the popularity of digital games, the target audience is still a niche: most production is directed towards male, urban audience, with ages between 10 and 30, concentrating especially on teens. To make it a general phenomenon, as are cinema and television, it is required to also reach out to the female audience and to older segments.

Until then, game contents, regarded as cybertext, will be directed especially towards the younger market. For this reason it is important that the paradigms of world perception proposed by games be analyzed and in accordance to these studies consumer education programs could be built to help them obtain the necessary competence for correct interpretation of the media texts that are digital games.

Interpreting games as a form of interactive literature, that can be analyzed using the hermeneutics of literary critique, adapted to the specifics of the medium, launches new directions in media research, changing the perception of what games are and how they function. Until now the dominant idea was that games operate inside a "magic circle", limited in time and space, that does not affect the outside world, but in-game processes give birth to precise narrative, social and psychological meanings.

This paper is a beginning of the answer tot the question of how the world looks from a gaming perspective. This means discovering the value systems embedded in the games, but also the position of the game in the social system of which it is a part. The artificial world of the game cannot be regarded as isolated anymore.

By analyzing the products in the Red Alert series we have shown how a game can create an axiological value system built on social representations form the real world and which can impose other representations in back the real world. As in the case of a literary work, the game critique analyses ambiguities and suggest interpretation paradigms. In this specific case two interpretation directions are clearly differentiated. One of these direction presents two sets of opposing ideologies which place two social groups in opposite polar positions on a hierarchical value scale, based in exploiting and exaggerating social representations form a single perspective. The other interpretation draws attention upon the very faults of this type of hierarchization and on the inconsistency of the construction of social norms through exaggeration taken beyond the limits of arbitrary social representations.

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