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**Embryo of Identity Embroided in the
Imbroglia Materialized by the Fabricated
World of Video Games**

**Swati Joshi
M.Phil Scholar
Gujarat University
India**

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Athens Institute for Education and Research
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209 Email: info@atiner.gr URL:
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Embryo of Identity Embroiled in the Imbrogio Materialized by the Fabricated World of Video Games

**Swati Joshi
M.Phil Scholar
Gujarat University
India**

Abstract

"To simulate is to feign to have what one does not have" (Baudrillard, 1981/1994, p. 4). The characteristic of liquid modernity lies in the apocryphal story of a tightly bound family being challenged by the concrete issues of loss of intimacy. The children, who are the most vulnerable members of the family, are transformed from innocent real beings into the virtual sycophants serving the Underworld of Simulation. Their addiction to video games is the escapism from the lacuna in the reality that haunts them. It takes them to the world they wish to conquer; wherein they are the heroes vanquishing the symbolic enemies (loneliness and absence of communication with the loved ones) and the simulated ones. The children grow up torn between the real beings that are their family, yet, disconnected with them; and the fictive entities with which they communicate their anger, their fears, their desires etc. Their engagement in adapting them to belong to the magical gaming world shows that the V-World has taken on the role of parenting in their lives. The children belong to the V-society and look up to the characters of the V-world to form their identities.

Keywords: Emancipation, Escapism, Identity, Simulation, Video game.

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Introduction

Elizabeth Gaskell opens her novel, *Wives and Daughters*, as follows:

To begin with the old rigmarole of childhood. In a country there was a shire, and in that shire there was a town, and in that town there was a house, and in that house there was a bed, and in that bed there lay a little girl; wide awake and longing to get up, but not daring to do so for fear of the unseen power in the next room. (p. 7)

The above-mentioned graphic description limned by Gaskell purposes to introduce the milieu of the protagonist, Molly Gibson. The same opening is cited here to acquaint the reader with the contemporary social set-up, wherein the children dare not disturb their *busy parents*. In the *allagítopia* (place wherein the only constancy is change), the parents have turned into providers and the children have transformed into the end-users. The parentage has been reduced to patronage. The need to provide for has replaced the need to belong to and the need to communicate.

As Carroll (1865/2010) rightly portrays, "Now, here you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that" (p. 119). The quotation hints that one needs to run faster, if one wishes to escape from the solitary confinement imposed upon them by the existing social framework. At this juncture, emerges the question of running to and running from. The children are definitely *running from* the real world in order *to run to* the simulated universe of video games. Running from anything indicates escapism and running to anything betokens the demand for support.

Christopher Norris (1987) explains Derrida's examination of the term *pharmakon* in his work called *Derrida*. Norris elucidates that according to Derrida *pharmakon* means: poison and cure. Of course, Derrida expounded the meaning of *pharmakon* in the context of writing. Derrida explicated that writing could turn out to be a poison or a remedy. The paper stretches that analogy to the context of video games. Video games too can turn out to be a poison or a cure. Video games provide a platform to the players to purge their negative emotions. But when they are used as a model to look up to, the same video games turn out to be poisonous creating berserk, hysterical and hyperactive individuals.

The video games preside over the household as the preceptors, whereas the children are reduced to nothing but the receptors that receive the stimuli from the external context to respond. Well, this has not only transfigured the patterns of identity formation for a child, but also the Greek expression of *veni, vidi, vici* to *veni, vidi, vinteopaichnidia vicit*. It literally means: I came, I saw, the video games conquered.

This paper endeavours to prove the textualization of video games as visual mythology that can be analysed under the rubric of visual applied anthropology. This visual mythology is polyphonic and interactive. The player is not a sojourner in a V-world represented in this visual mythology; in fact, he is the participant in it. This V-world dwells inside the player as much as the player dwells in the V-world. And this very bond with the V-world plays a vital role in shaping the identities of its young players. The paper analyses how the V-world of the visual mythology uses the concept of hypodermic needle theory to infuse the purposive messages into the absorbent minds of its participants.

Zygmunt Bauman has mentioned the words of Paul Valéry in *Liquid Modernity* (2000/2012):

Interruption, incoherence and surprise are the ordinary conditions of life. They have even become real needs for many people, whose needs are no longer fed ... by anything but sudden changes and constantly renewed stimuli ... We can no longer bear anything that lasts. (p. 1)

The characteristic feature of the present *allagitopian* society is "fluidity" (p. 2). And the video games that represent this society also represent the fluidity of this society. The video games consist of unexpected obstacles occurring at the unpredictable moments that the player must overcome to achieve the goal in the game. The video games have become the need, especially for the children, since they present to the players, stupefying situations full of hurdles and prizes. That is because the certitude of their solitude needs to be changed and replaced with happiness and comfort in the virtual world.

Textualization of Video Games as a Visual Anthropology

Prior to the explication of the terms and the concepts within the title, one must not overlook the "Dual Structure of Game and Play" expounded by Mäyrä (2006). Mäyrä elaborated on this concept by dividing the video games into 2 parts: core and shell. Core means gameplay and shell deals with the aspects of the society represented within the video games. The core or the gameplay deals with the achievement the target set by the game developer using the four arrow keys on the computer or the console, the mouse clicks etc. The representational aspect deals with the content of the game that affects the player unconsciously. For example the player decorates the virtual dolls in the beauty games. The core of the game is to decorate the doll. But if one examines the representational aspect/ shell of the game, one can see how the video games become just another medium to endorse the stereotypical idea of the beauty of the woman. This idea gets deeply rooted into the young minds of the female players and they strive to become the prototype of the virtual doll. It is at this point that one must think of *textualizing* the content of these video games.

The word *textualization* is extremely important here. It is not a word, but rather a concept. And to understand this concept we need to first reflect upon the etymology of the word, text. The word text is derived from the Latin word *texere*, which means, "to weave, to join, to fit together, braid, interweave, construct, fabricate, build" (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2001). The process of textualization, ergo, means the fabrication of the stories to be represented within the video games that reflect the social set-up, whether of the ancient times (like in *Free America* one finds the historical setting of Boston Tea Party, American Buffalo etc) or the contemporary time (like *Restaurant Town*).

The plot of the story represented by the video games consists of: a protagonist, an antagonist, a sidekick, a skeptic, a guardian, a co-antagonist and the characters emblematic of reason and emotion (Huntley & Phillips, 1993/2001). Huntley and Phillips both have labeled the protagonist as the "player" (p. 28). The player in the context of video games is not only the character in the gameplay that plays the role of the protagonist, but also the human player that controls the actions of the protagonist in the video game. The sidekick helps the protagonist to achieve the target. The skeptic, the antagonist and the coantagonist create the hurdles to prevent the protagonist from achieving the pre-determined target.

Aarseth has developed the idea of "textual machine" (Nitsche, 2008, p. 31), and the idea that the player is the provider of the input and the generator of the output in the video games. Video games, according to Aarseth (writes Nitsche), are

more interactive than radio or television; because by using the mouse click or the keyboard or the console, the player or the protagonist gets the opportunity to interact with the other characters to discover the already-created story. This interaction is much participatory. Action video games therefore prove to be the most interactive ones. The more he unravels the mystery in the story, the more triumphant he feels.

The false myths of beauty, masculinity, etc can be endorsed through the video games effectively, since they are interactive. The beauty games endorse the idea of a beautiful woman as the one who is thin, tall and with certain options of hairstyle like bob cut, wavy long hair, etc. The equation of a macho man = violent, aggressive man is the other idea promoted through video games.

At this point, one must wonder whether video games are really the microcosmic representation of the society at large? Are the video games mirrors of the society or "distorted social mirrors" (Harris & Sanborn, 2014)?

The video games reinforce these stereotypical messages in the minds of the young players through the stories they present to the player in each level. The player is also the reader of these visual myths, but he does not realize this. The player plays the game for the gameplay, not for analyzing the representation of the society within the game. The player is a narcotic player not the critical reader of these stories. The more score points, the player earns, the more he plays. That is because his urge to exert his power or to complete a particular task set before is satisfied instantly. The increasing points that encourages the player to play, act as the "operant reinforcer" (Coon & Mitterer, 2007/2010, p. 226). Operant conditioning takes place while playing video games because the player plays the games willingly, because he gets rewards in terms of increasing points.

To understand the direct effect of the stimulus received from the gameplay on the player, the paper further moves on to the discussion of the hypodermic needle theory. Fourie (2001/2007) says:

This theory equates the influence of the media with the effect of an intravenous injection: certain values, ideas, and attitudes are injected into the individual media user, resulting in particular behaviour. The recipient is therefore seen as a passive and helpless victim of media impact.

The blame of diffusing the false myths of social ideologies rests on the shoulders of the video games, not on the player's. This approach assumes the human player as an unconscious entity submitting to the wily strategies designed by the game developers. On the contrary, the conscious human player voluntarily chooses to be seduced into playing for more levels because he receives positive reinforcement by earning points. The player is imbued with the intended stereotypical messages, while playing the game.

The textualization of the shell of the video games, when studied under the rubric of applied visual anthropology, can solve a number of problems. But, first and foremost one needs to reflect upon the concept of applied visual anthropology. To understand this, let us first discuss the meaning of applied. Applied deals with any idea that is applicable in practice. It is concrete. To explicate the concept of visual, one must draw the line between visible and visual. Visible means anything that can be seen and visual means the capacity to be able to see. This paper endeavours to define visual anthropology as a field that helps people to mainly analyze the human relations within the social constructs beyond the superficialities. The analysis of the shell of the video games then becomes the sub-study under the study of applied visual anthropology.

The young player swallows unconsciously everything represented in the video games. This affects his behaviour pattern. In this scenario, the apparatus of communication becomes an important "Ideological state Apparatus" as stated by Louis Althusser (1970) ("Ideology and Ideological Apparatuses", para 8). It becomes the social responsibility of the media to realize the aftermath of the stories created by the game developers for the game players.

As mentioned in "Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework of Australia" produced by Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations for the Council of Australian Governments (2009), a child's identity is established at three levels: (a) belonging (b) being (c) becoming.

"Belonging" signifies his liaison or his relation to his family, the neighbourhood, the country and the culture. It is the responsibility of the parents, the education system, media etc. to inculcate in the mind of the child the sense of belonging to his family, culture, country and society at large. But in the present times, there is lack of sense of belonging with the parents itself. The child feels like a lonely, isolated entity, as a result of this.

"Being" is the knowledge of one's existence in relation to his socio-cultural context. Because of the lack of belongingness to his parents, he accepts and swallows the socio-cultural representation in the video games unknowingly and unquestioningly. All that he gathers about his sense of being is that he is a player in the V-world, whose rules he must abide by to achieve the predestined targets by the game developers. He learns of sense of being as a player of level 2 or level 11 so on and so forth.

"Becoming" then, in this scenario, is dependent on the progress in the video games. I want to become the highest scorer in Road Rash or Subway Surfers. The worst is when the child develops an idea of idolizing the protagonists in the video games. He forgets that he is a human player acting the role-play in the V-world. Since they feel less connected with the real society, they do not participate so actively in building social relationships. Since they do not have critical thinking, they never question the shell of the video games.

The age at which the child learns to realize about his existence and his identity through the negativity in the video games plays a vital role in his identity formation. He is not in a position to scrutinize the manipulated content endorsed by the video games. If we, as researchers, neglect our social responsibility to draw the attention of the governments of the world, think tanks, NGOs etc to the severity of this problem, we may end up losing sustainable resource of development-youth.

Conclusion

The video games when placed under the heading of applied visual anthropology must be critically analysed. It is these games that are tailoring the minds of the young individuals. The content of the video games is training the individuals to absorb without thinking some of the very dangerous concepts. The social intervention, whether of government or of the NGOs is required to realize the gravity of the matter. The gaming zones have turned into "State Conditioning Centres" (Huxley, 1932/2007, p. 20). The method used by these video games is that of "hypnopædia" (Huxley, 1932/2007, p. 20). "Hypnopædia" or sleep-teaching means continuous reinforcement of the concepts into the minds of the end-users while they are asleep. This concept of sleep teaching is apt here, because over a period of time, the game has narcotic effect (Kumar, 1994/2013, p. 486). These passive game players who are actively involved in the gameplay unconsciously

sleep-learn whatever is forced upon their minds by the video games. They have unconsciously chosen their role models, i.e. the characters within the video games.

The moment we realize the negative effects of the shell of the video games, we must look at the same entity, i.e. the video games as a means of mass communication; used to create cultural gaps. The media must take a note of its social responsibility to act as a medium for "cultural brokerage" (Pink, 2007/2009). The video games represent the microcosm of the society at large. If these video games represent the false beauty myths, masculinity myths, success myths etc. they are creating cultural gaps. Video games also represent the culture of one society to the other. If such content is circulated it can deteriorate the social relations at a global level. Therefore, it is our responsibility as critical analysts to suggest the game developers to reflect upon the shell or the representational aspect of the video games before releasing them into the global market.

The video games have a cathartic effect on their players. They provide a platform to their players to vent their pent up emotions. They also assume the role of their parent over a period of time, since children learn everything from their video games unknowingly. For example they learn dressing styles, hair-styles from the beauty games, they learn to cook from the cookery games, they learn to crush everything that comes their way to achieve their target from the action games etc. Ergo, it is high time we begin to take necessary steps to control the negative effect of the video games on the society.

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