

## THE STATUS OF NARRATOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF VIDEO GAMES IN THE CONTEXT OF MODERN POLYDISCURSIVE POSTMEDIAL CRITICISM

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Abstract: The relevance of the article is fixed by the situation of methodological revision of media theory tools in the context of the analysis of modern media phenomena. The purpose of the article is to identify the place and status of narratological analysis, which has become a classic method of video game analysis. To achieve this goal, the authors consider it important to turn to a critical revision of the narratological analysis of video games and perform an act of reassembling the methodology under the new requirements of the time. For this purpose, the article analyzes the development of both the current situation and the dynamics of the use of the narratological method.

Keywords: video games, narrative, media, ludology, game studies, methodology, postmedial approach.

### 1 Introduction

The current stage of development of culture and society can be characterized as a situation of pervasive technological mediatization. The multiplying forms and methods of transmitting and broadcasting information require close attention from the theoretical and philosophical understanding. The forms of classical media analysis, according to a number of media theorists, fail when faced with those interlacing forms of mediation that are typical of the state of modernity (Manovich, 2017). Consequently, in order to address the analysis of the media of the era of remediation, it is necessary to develop a number of theoretical and methodological guidelines that would meet the peculiarities of the objects under study. This requirement for the novelty of the method does not mean the requirement of epistemological anarchism at all, on the contrary, classical media studies conducted by M. McLuhan (2018), R. Barthes (2014), and many other theorists should form the basis of a new methodological "reassembly". In this article, we propose to conduct a critical analysis of the narratological method in the context of the study of video games as a specific and separate method of mediation, cultural practice of appropriation, translation and transmission of meanings. Given the certain fecundity and, without exaggeration, the fruitfulness of narratological research in this area, it should be noted that, in general, studies based on the analysis and identification of exclusively narratological elements of video games (and other forms of media) demonstrate a reductionist tendency. Nevertheless, the fact that there is an element of reductionism in the narratological method does not yet indicate that its tools cannot become part of a synthetic analytical method for the study of video games (and, more broadly, modern polymedial forms of communication). It becomes urgent to revise the place and status of the narratological analysis of video games in order to effectively include it in the tools used for the study of video games in the context of a theoretical rethinking of the analysis of media phenomena.

Video games as an object of media theory research are, if not the most unfamiliar object of research, then to some extent an object that combines two factors that hinder theoretical grasp (from the English grasp - understanding of the essence, understanding). The first is a relative novelty, indeed, video games have their history since the 1980s, a number of works devoted to the study

of the specifics of media and communications somehow touch on the problem of video games, but to the extent that it seems necessary to pronounce the presence of such media, but not to dive into its research at a self-sufficient level. The second one correlates with the first one, and directly enhances the effect of detachment from serious video game research, it represents a kind of prejudice against the study of video games as an independent form of media, since there is a classic game. It cannot be said that since the research of J. Huizinga (2015) and R. Caillois (2007), radical changes have taken place in the theoretical understanding of the classical game, in a certain sense, game research during the twentieth century remained stigmatized due to the frivolity of its object. Thus, video games remained, as it were, on the sidelines of serious media theoretical research, representing a rather closed and marginal area. The situation of our time requires the development of a specific theoretical language for the analysis and understanding of this media, since now video games are not just a small part of the media space, but a cultural industry with billions of turnover and widespread distribution.

### 2 Literature Review

The methodology of video game analysis is based on the theoretical framework of classical game analysis that precedes it both chronologically and in the context of a common continuity. Indeed, the key works in this direction are the work of Y. Huizinga "Homo Ludens: The Man Playing" (2015) and R. Caillois' research "Games and People; Articles and Essays on the Sociology of Culture" (2007). J. Huizinga (2015) laid the foundations for understanding the game as a serious and full-fledged phenomenon of cultural creation, R. Caillois (2007) has developed a specific sociological approach to the analysis of game forms in everyday life and the social sphere of human activity. Nevertheless, classic games differ significantly from video games and it is necessary to turn to special sources in order to clarify this specificity. First of all, an important addition that builds a methodology for analyzing video games at a fundamental level is the theory of media, proposed by M. McLuhan in the work "Understanding Media: External Human Extensions" (2018). M. McLuhan (2018) is definitely a classic of media theory and his work laid the foundations for understanding media, but the current situation requires a revision of a number of classical positions due to technological changes that have occurred since the 60s of the twentieth century. As such an addition and expansion of the understanding of the method and the problems of media analysis, it is important to refer to the works of L. Manovich "The Language of New Media" (2018) and "Theories of Soft Culture" (2017), in which he makes a theoretical revision of the classical theses of M. McLuhan (2018) and postulates the situation of transition to a postmedial methodology. A Particular interest in the development of video game analysis is presented the works of Z. Tsilinsky "Archeology of Media: about the "Deep Time" of Audiovisual Technologies" (2019) and O. Grau "Emotions and Immersion: Key Elements of Visual Research" (2013), aimed at considering the development of media phenomena from the perspective of media archaeology, that is, in their genetic technological continuity and interconnection.

The key in the context of analyzing the content of video games and describing the cognitive-imaginative experience practiced by players is also an appeal to the narratological analysis of this media phenomenon proposed by E. Aarseth (1997). Narratological analysis itself is a direct continuation of literary analysis and text analysis. The main prerequisites for the formation of this direction in the analysis of video games are an appeal to the works of R. Barthes (2014), J. Campbell (2019). Nevertheless, coming out of the classical text analysis, narratology as applied to video games acquires its own special, specific features. The principles of narrative analysis in the context of its application in the analysis of video games and the

limitations that arise in connection with the specifics of the object under study are presented in the work of J. Yuul "Do Games Tell Stories? A Brief Note on Games and Narratives" (2015). Together with the critical content of the methodology of text analysis, R. Barthes specific direction arises in the critical analysis of the narrative, during which it becomes possible to detect the content elements of the narrative of a video game based on the socio-political experience of the real world.

A significant innovation in the methodology of analyzing media phenomena was the introduction of the concepts of "plurality of ontologies" by A. Mol (2017) and the conceptual apparatus of actor-network theory by B. Latour (2014). Being perceived, the conceptual developments of the actor-network theory were also introduced into the context of the study of media phenomena, including video games, as demonstrated by the work of Ya. Bogost (2015).

### 3 Research Methodological Framework

**The purpose of the study** is to determine the status of the narratological analysis of video games in the situation of methodological transformation of modernity.

#### Research objectives:

1. to identify the peculiarity of the current situation in the context of methodological features of the analysis of media phenomena;
2. to identify the methodological advantages of narratological analysis of video games;
3. to determine the limitations of the narratological method in the context of the criticism of narratology in relation to the phenomenon of video games from the standpoint of ludological analysis;
4. to determine the place and status of the narratological analysis of video games in the context of the revision of methodological discourse within the framework of the polydiscursive methodology of actor-network theory.

As a basis for the methodological basis in the framework of the study, the authors rely on the analysis of sources of modern and classical media theory researchers in the context of determining the specifics of the current situation in relation to the analysis of media phenomena. The reliance is made on the understanding of the narratological analysis by E. Aarseth (1997). The critical analysis of the narratological method is presented in the key of the ludological criticism of J. Yuul's narratology (2015). The basis for the methodological reassembly is the conceptual theses of the theorists of actor-network theory of A. Mol (2017), B. Latour (2014) and Ya. Bogost (2015).

The authors make a comparative analysis of the positions of video game analysis theorists E. Aarseth (1997) and J. Yuul (2015), during which both the advantages of the narratological method and its disadvantages are revealed. The synthesis of general methodological guidelines of actor-network theory, postmedial approach and narratological method of video game analysis included in the context of a synthetic approach to media research is carried out.

### 4 Results and Discussion

First of all, it is necessary to identify the specifics of the current situation in the field of video game analysis. The characteristic problem of analyzing new media is associated with several complicating factors: firstly, video games are directly genetically related to classical games, but at the same time, they contain an element that deeply distinguishes them, namely, a technical and technological component; secondly, the very polymedia specificity of video games pushes for the proliferation of methodological optics for analyzing this phenomenon.

Let us turn to the first of these complicating factors that form the peculiarity of a new object of research within the framework of media theory. Video games are the heirs and direct successors of a broad cultural phenomenon - Games. Since ancient times,

games have taken many different forms: live and outdoor games, riddles, board games, etc. But it was only with the advent of digital technology, namely the advent of computer technology, that it became possible to create what we call video games or computer games. Video games have the opportunity to unfold not within the boundaries defined by the real world, but, according to V. Flusser (2009), to "project", that is, to create their own digital (computable) reality. It cannot be said that in classic games, the game world was completely dependent on the world of reality, human imagination was certainly involved in its creation, which gave this game world an element of freedom and non-determinism. While a computable digital video game has become tightly tied to the software component (it is possible to go further and as Ya. Bogost (2015) to determine the mechanical dependence of the game on the architecture of the computing device) without allowing any elements of genuine freedom and non-determinism. Rules and laws of action of the game, which J. Huizinga (2015) wrote about, have become absolutely immutable, in a video game they must inevitably be implemented for its functioning only as prescribed by the software component.

The second important aspect is the polymedial component of the video game. Polymediality should be understood as a form of information transmission and data transmission, in which several channels of classical media are involved at once, described, for example, in the work of M. McLuhan (2018). This aspect in relation to the entire space of media phenomena was considered in the work "Theories of Soft Culture" by L. Manovich (2017) with the subsequent call for the formation of a "postmedial" theory after his in-depth analysis. In fact, L. Manovich (2018) argues that the era when it was possible to talk about the specifics and features of the media ended at the same time as the media phenomenon began to go beyond the individual media. L. Manovich (2018) refers to such media phenomena, including video games. Indeed, one cannot disagree with the fact that video games cannot be adequately analyzed and conceptualized within the framework of a single classical media. As noted above, video games cannot be described by identifying them with games in their classical sense. This kind of generalization procedure will defocus theoretical optics so much that through it we will be able to see the game in general, but we will not be able to see any particular features and lose sight of the specific effect of video games as a media or polymedial structure.

In such a situation, there are double complications and there is a search for adequate methodological tools for theoretical work with a video game as a multifactorial phenomenon.

Now let's turn to the definition of the advantage of the narratological method in the analysis of video games. E. Aarseth (1997) proposed a model for analyzing video games, in which they were evaluated as a kind of invariant of narrative media (such as books, cinema, etc.). Proceeding from the principle that the basic mechanism of mastering reality for a person is the transformation of the whole variety of experience into a narrative, which, according to the researcher, correlates with the logic of the linguistic nature of human thinking, E. Aarseth (1997) concludes that all the variety of media phenomena are some invariants of the narrative way of mastering the world. That is, every media must include narrative elements that are not just present in it as a kind of complement, but perform a key function, structuring the content of the media and turning it into consistent stories consistent with the thinking and way of perception of a person. In such a situation, a video game becomes a kind of text with additional elements of visualization and immersion, which in general can be neglected by focusing on the structural and semantic levels of this media.

A number of theses are put forward in favor of the narrative method. A holistic thesis is about the narrative as the most general structure of mediation, which includes video games. Indeed, an important aspect is the fact that the player perceives and describes the experience of the game within the narrative that has developed in thinking under the influence of video games as media. The narrative structure of experience and

memories is of particular interest in the context of a conversation about the experience of any mediation, not only related to the specifics of a video game. But video games are no exception in the matter of transforming the mediation experience into a narrative form. Thus, it becomes appropriate to consider video games from the perspective of narrative analysis already insofar as the experience gained by the player is eventually transformed into a narrative, even if the structures of the video game themselves could not contain a narrative.

The second thesis in support of the narrative analysis of video games is the quite natural statement that video games often (if not always) contain narrative elements as an accompaniment that frames the game play. So certain games may be devoid of a narrative component in the course of the game, but they contain a backstory, narrative plot inserts, titles at the end, telling about what happened after the end of the game. Thus, even if the narrative was not fundamentally embedded in the body of the video game, it remains an essential part, complementing the game play "from the outside".

The third thesis in defense of the narrative method for analyzing video games says that if we do not perceive video games as a narrative in its entirety, we cannot deny the fact that they contain elements characteristic of narrative structures. For example, the following aspects can be cited: the linearity of game sessions corresponding to the linearity of the narrative; the presence of a protagonist and/or antagonist; movement from shortage to its replenishment, etc. That is, in video games, those elements can definitely be identified that can be considered effectively and adequately from an epistemological point of view from the position of narratological analysis.

Taken together, these three theses form the foundation for the substantiation and application of the narratological method to the analysis of video games. Even abandoning one or even two of them, with the proper degree of awareness, it is possible to apply this methodology and obtain coherent results. But, nevertheless, the narratological method has been subjected to serious and justified criticism. The direction that first criticized narrative analysis, pointing out its limitations, was called the ludological direction in the analysis of video games.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to identify weaknesses and identify trajectories of criticism of the narratological method of video game analysis. The most striking and convincing criticism from a methodological point of view was expressed in the work of J. Yuul "Do Games Tell Stories? A Brief Note on Games and Narratives" (2015). J. Yuul (2015) offers three counter-theses in contrast to those proposed by representatives of the narratological method, in order to identify the distinctive features and specifics of the object of study (video games) from the classical narrative.

The first counter-thesis of J. Yuul (2015) is the statement that video games and narrative media (books, cinema, and theatre) are in different "media-ecological niches". The essence of this thesis can be reduced to the following statement. The story presented in the classical narrative media, being transferred to a video game, is transformed so much that it will cause a person to have a completely different experience of adventure and involvement than the original.

The second counter-thesis expressed by J. Yuul (2015), lies in the fact that the attitude to time in the classical narrative and the practice of video games is fundamentally different. According to J. Yuul (2015), there are significant differences between the "now" interaction of a video game and the "past" and "preceding" narrative. Interaction destroys the fabric of the narrative because there are no completely consistent interactive stories. Interactivity presupposes multivariance, while narrative presupposes consistency and progressive coherence of the plot.

The third counter-thesis refers to the position of the player in a video game and the reader/viewer in narrative media. While the reader/the viewer takes a fundamentally external position in relation to the plot unfolding in front of him, the player is,

according to J. Yuul (2015), in the "twilight zone", remaining a subject outside and simultaneously acting inside the media.

Three counter-theses of J. Yuul (2015) are based on an appeal to that component of the video game, which is usually called "mechanics". Mechanics represent such a structural element of a video game as media, which allows it to be interactive. That is, it is essentially a mechanism for the reaction of the video game ecosystem to the actions and commands of the player. As a result of reactions to the corresponding actions, the ecosystem of the video game changes and as a result of this, the effect of interactive participation arises. Based on the ludological method, it is this feature of video games that is worth paying attention to first of all, and it is this structural element of the video game that narratology overlooks.

Let's turn to identifying the trajectories of methodological reassembly and determining the place of narratological analysis of video games. Comparison of the two approaches reveals an interesting feature that is even more clearly manifested if we pay attention to the epistemological problems of video game research through the prism of the concept of multiple ontologies proposed in the work "Multiple Body: Ontology in Medical Practice" by A. Mol (2017). The concept of multiple ontologies was inspired by the works of B. Latour (2014), who proposed a new approach to obtaining sociological knowledge. The main results and ideas of B. Latour (2014) were published by him in the book "The Reassembly of the Social: an Introduction to Actor-network Theory". The peculiarity of the narratological and ludological methods is that they both produce a formalist reduction, that is, they reduce the variety of manifestations and variants of the study of video games to one universal form-structure. In the context of narratology, the text becomes this form and everything that does not fall under the optics of the text disappears from the problematic field of narratology. A similar situation occurs with ludology, only in its case everything that does not fall into the category of interactivity/mechanics disappears from the field of view. In addition, the thesis of L. Manovich's postmedial approach (2017) asserts the impossibility of studying any media phenomenon from the position of reduction to one type of mediation.

Criticism of the methodology of video game research from the standpoint of B. Latour's actor-network theory (2014), multiple ontologies and postmedial turn was carried out by Ya. Bogost in the article "Mess in Video Games" (2015). Ya. Bogost (2015) proposed to consider video games as a multifactorial phenomenon, the essence of which is not reduced to any universal form. That is, the essence of a video game cannot be reduced to either text, mechanics, or technical component, etc. In contrast, he proposed to consider video games at many levels of ontologies, which, although they are interconnected, but these connections do not represent hierarchies or relationships of more fundamental and less fundamental. This implies a polydiscursive way of describing a video game, in which several modes of object description are simultaneously presented as equivalent and there is no tendency to reductionism. This approach is largely followed by the Russian video game researcher A. Vetushinsky in the article "To Play Game Studies Press The START Button" (2015).

In the context of a polydiscursive description of a video game, the narratological method and, in general, the discourse of narrative analysis, with all of the above, remains a legitimate method of studying video games and their individual elements (plot, symbolic component, features of the narrative system, etc.). It organically fits as one of several possible fundamental methods of studying this media phenomenon into the picture of the postmedial turn, the polydiscursive approach of actor-network theory and the concept of multiple ontologies. It is necessary to revise the formalist claims of the narrative method to describe all the specifics of a video game through the categories of text and narrative and integrate this method into a polydiscursive analytical toolkit in order to successfully describe in video games what really fits into the description with the help of a narratological apparatus.

## 5 Conclusion

The conducted research of the status and place of the narratological method of video game analysis within the framework of postmedial polydiscursive criticism has shown that narrative analysis has a long and stable practice of application as a tool for analyzing the video game media phenomenon. The advantages of narratological analysis of video games were revealed. In the course of the study, the methodological limitations of the narratological method taken in isolation are demonstrated. It was determined that in the conditions of the postmedial turn and the introduction of the multiplicity paradigm, it is necessary to reconsider attempts to explain a complex media phenomenon from the position of only one explanatory model. Also, the tendency of formalist reduction, to which the narratological discourse tends, should be criticized, explaining the complexity of the video game phenomenon through reduction to the text. Nevertheless, the narratological method of video game analysis has undeniable advantages in the context of local studies of individual elements of video games and within the framework of a broad polydiscursive approach can be used in addition to other methods.

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