

## PHILOSOPHY OF THE MODERN ERA AND VIDEOGAMES: THE “DISENCHANTMENT OF THE WORLD” MYTH

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### ABSTRACT

This article refers to the philosophical study of myth construction in videogames. We have studied how the philosophical ideas of the Modern Era (which has the idea of rationalization in its core) were presented in videogames using horror games as examples. We have analyzed the narrative of Modernization as “disenchantment of the world” (M. Weber) in several game series (*Outlast*, *The Evil Within*, *Resident Evil*). Eventually, we have concluded that the narration in these games is constructed in accordance with a certain scheme: a) supernatural powers are set in action, b) a player discovers their real essence – they are the product of scientific experiments. Thus, mystical, supernatural and religious objects appear to be merely illusions, but the objects of science are proclaimed to really exist. We claim therefore that the “disenchantment of the world” myth functions in these games. Basing on videogames as a phenomenon of modern culture we show how the ideas and the culture of the Modern Era accepting science as the only possible source of the truth continue to exist today.

**Keywords:** game studies, video game, myth, science, philosophy of the Modern Era

### INTRODUCTION

Studying mythology has always been a part of cultural anthropology. But only structural anthropology revealed the two reasons why the research of mythological thinking should be paid the central attention. Firstly, myths of primitive cultures separated by time and space possess the same structures, which shows the universality of the ways people understand the world. That was clearly shown by Levi-Strauss. He concluded that there is common logic and common forms in mythological thinking [1]. Secondly, structuralists showed that mythology exists not only in archaic or primitive societies, but also in modern époque, like in modernized American and European societies, according to Barthes. He understood myth as some sort of language, a word, a specific communication system, namely, the secondary semiological system in which symbols themselves start to mean something else, i.e. they become a part of the second level symbols. Thus, in myth, symbols themselves refer not only to what they naturally address as they are, but also connote certain extra meanings. This is how a myth-sign becomes dubious, natural and artificial at the same time [2].

Such secondary semiological systems are acquiring various forms and are present in all spheres of culture. Modern media create numerous myths and broadcast certain meanings and assumptions about society, history, gender, etc. Today, videogames are an

inherent part of popular culture and, as other media, construct and narrate their own myths transmitting different ways to interpret reality thereby shaping modern human dispositions and attitudes. Therefore, the goal of a contemporary cultural anthropologist may be revealing those subtle meaning-related contents that are conveyed by, for instance, video games.

Thus, some researchers have shown mythologies expressed by virtual worlds of videogames. For example, presently, *GTA* introduces an American city as a space filled with control and surveillance by the united capital and the government [3]. Other researchers showed how another myth functions in *SimCity* – the best way for a city development is the model used in California in the 80-ies. According to that model the key to success is low taxes, high land prices, and total police surveillance [4]. Sicart wrote that *The Sims* broadcasts the myth of a successful family formed in postcapitalistic society [5]. On the example of *Assassin's Creed III*, *Assassin's Creed Unity*, and *Assassin's Creed Rogue* we have shown the myth about the entity of the French Revolution. According to that myth, the French revolution, unlike the American Revolution, was not the riddance of the old regime ties, but an attempt to reform the government in order to make the power less vivid, but omnipresent [6].

Nevertheless, as we see it, there is not much attention paid to myths transmitted by horror videogames in research literature. Such video games create many different mythological messages. In this article we decided to limit the subject of investigation to one structural element – one single myth. The aim of writing this paper is the analysis of popular horror games with respect to the “disenchantment of the world” (Weber) myth functioning. The first objective will be the explanation of the Weber's idea.

## **SOCIOLOGY OF M. WEBER AND “DISENCHANTMENT OF THE WORLD”**

The term and the idea of disenchantment of the world was formulated by Weber in “Science as a Vocation”. He connected it with the development of rationalization and intellectualization indicative for the society of today. He writes: “...increasing intellectualization and rationalization does not mean increasing general knowledge of the conditions under which we live our lives. It means something else. It means the knowledge or belief that if we only wanted to we could learn at any time that there are, in principle, no mysterious unpredictable forces in play, but that all things – in principle – can be controlled through calculation. This, however, means the disenchantment of the world. No longer, like the savage, who believed that such forces existed, do we have to resort to magical means to gain control over or pray to the spirits. Technical means and calculation work for us instead. This, above all, is what intellectualization actually means” [7, p. 35].

In this abstract the meaning of the world disenchantment is clearly depicted. Weber supposes that the transfer from traditional to modern society, i.e. modernization, and, fundamentally, all its progressive development is based on scientific world vision becoming the basis for all social institutions' functioning. It is namely this transformation of science into the basis of social development that Weber calls the disenchantment of the world. While in traditional, primitive societies medicine, for instance, is based on inspecting simple empiric interconnections between medical means and organism states explaining those interconnections with invisible powers, energies and spirits, modern medicine is based on experimental biology and chemistry.

the broad use of technical means that allow to ascertain through experiment how this or that treatment works. Therefore, mysterious invisible supernatural powers are not taken into account. Indeed, any scientist is not aware of all the aspects of a subject. So, a scientist can always hypothesize if one does not know exactly what the reason for this or that process is. However, ethos of science assumes hypotheses to be proven. This is exactly why scientific ethos always means progress: from groundless hypotheses to experimentally and theoretically proved ones [7, p. 34].

That exact movement Weber calls the true mission of a scientist: a scientist should systematically disenchant the world showing that phenomena we see do not involve any invisible and inexplicable powers. Quite the opposite, all the reasons for the seen phenomena can be clearly shown through experiment. Carrying out such educational sessions on the world scientists encourage getting closer to the Modern Era which implies the necessity of rational grounding of any possible socially meaningful decision. That is the reason why Habermas, for example, finds the project of modernity so important. It is quite unclear what can give the integral space for democratic decision making in modern society if not that project of disenchantment [8].

In fact, in his idea of the world disenchantment Weber formulated the main prerequisites for the philosophy of the New Era in all its fullness. According to it, we need to radically criticize all the existing points of view in the act of Cartesian doubt and then explain all the existing phenomena using the ideal scientific method without reaching out to widespread myths and idols. Other ways of imagery production are not considered to be fundamental enough in the first place and should either remain personal (e.g., religion, art) or be proven scientifically (e.g., law, politics).

So, the meaning of the world disenchantment idea by Weber is the following: it is gradual spreading and social fixation of the assumption that everything in the world can be explained rationally and experimentally without addressing invisible supernatural powers. It implies the corresponding conviction that it is science that should organize social life. Thus, disenchanting primitive mythological beliefs of people in the existence of supernatural powers the entire idea of disenchantment of the world, on the other hand, becomes an object of some sort of belief, the belief that science and ratio are limitless in opportunity, which makes it a myth itself.

Let's review the myth of the world disenchantment functioning on the examples of popular video game series in the horror genre (*Resident Evil*, *Outlast*, *The Evil Within*).

## THE MYTH OF THE WORLD DISENCHANTMENT IN HORROR GAMES

As we see it, in games like *Resident Evil*, *Outlast*, *The Evil Within* myth of the world disenchantment is not quite fulfilled. This myth in horror games reveals itself through events that initially seem to be absolutely mystical, however, then they are systematically explained by totally natural reasons that modern science has the access to. This leads to the disenchantment of the player's assumptions about the fact that they deal with supernatural powers in a game. This is how the myth of the world disenchantment, in fact, does the job of intellectualization and rationalization that Weber was talking about. Myth makes a player believe that any unclear phenomenon has objective reasons that can be revealed scientifically.

Let's take the oldest game from the *Resident Evil* series (Capcom, 1996) as an example. According to the story, on the outskirts of the town Raccoon a series of murders takes place. The victims don't seem just murdered, they seem to be eaten. The Bravo team of The Raccoon Police Department's Special Tactics and Rescue Service (S.T.A.R.S.) is sent there to figure out what happened. After the connection with Bravo was lost the Alpha platoon go there with Chris Redfield and Jill Valentine being the playable protagonists. Having hit the spot they find the crashed helicopter of the Bravo team. Getting away from the dogs of some bizarre kind the platoon has to hide in a mansion in which they encounter countless zombies and other monsters.

Meeting zombies and monsters to its simplest extent seems like meeting something absolutely supernatural. A player encounter unnaturally big animals, creatures that look like putrefying human bodies, though driven by some life energy, strange beings that seem to be half-humans, half-animals. But as the story goes on it becomes clear that the mansion is a place where the Umbrella Corporation conducted experiments to create biological weapons and all the monstrous creatures that a player encounters through the game are the results of those experiments that got out of the scientists' control.

Such narration takes place in all the parts of the *Resident Evil* series. In all of them seemingly creepy and unnatural creatures that a player is to confront eventually appear to be the creations of the same Umbrella Corporation, although, in the beginning the setting constantly makes you think of some supernatural powers. For instance, the last part of the series *Resident Evil VII* (Capcom, 2017) tells us about The Bakers' house that the protagonist Ethan has to escape. It looks like a place where some sect practices dreadful rituals, and Mia (Ethan's wife) whom he comes for seems to be possessed by some supernatural powers. However, as the game continues a player again faces the idea that all the seemingly supernatural events taking place in the house are merely the consequences of the Umbrella Corporation's actions. The world is disenchanting! Even if a player doesn't know what exactly Umbrella did and how all those monstrous creatures appeared, they know that there are objective reasons for that, the reasons they could pin down via an experiment.

Quite the same, the initial setting in *Outlast* (Red Barrels, 2013) makes a player interpret what is going on in the game assuming that some supernatural powers are involved. Having reached "Mount Massive Asylum" the only playable character Miles Upshur finds out that there is some invisible creature there, the creature that a self-proclaimed pastor and self-discharged mental patient Father Martin Archimbaud calls "the Walrider" considering him some kind of daemon. However, eventually a player gets to know that the Walrider is nothing but a result of non-ethical experiments that Dr. Rudolf Wernicke conducted in the basement of the sanitarium.

In turn, in *The Evil Within* (Bethesda Softworks, 2014) the main antagonist Ruvik initially seems to be some supernatural creature that is able to transform space, resuscitate corpses, etc. But in the end of the game it appears that all the supernatural events that a player encounters are just an illusion. It turns out to be that from the very beginning the protagonist Sebastian Castellanos was wired to a machine "STEM" that an organization "Mobius" worked on. Finally, it becomes clear that the machine has produced all those hallucinations basing on neuroscience and psychiatry, not on some supernatural mystical powers.

So, in all the video games mentioned we face secondary semiological system that allows to transmit mythological messages. Audio and visual channels of a videogame that a player experiences tells a story of how a protagonist gets to know that all the seemingly unnatural events have absolutely regular reasons. Here we deal with the sign of the first level: the sound and the visual parts tell a story of evil manipulations of the Umbrella Corporation or Mobius. However, this sign has an additional meaning: all the seemingly unnatural events have natural causes and science can reveal and explain them. This additional meaning is the myth of the world disenchantment that the analyzed games tell us. We can illustrate that mythological structure with the following table.

1. The signifier Sound and video	2. The signified The story in which the protagonist finds out the natural reasons for seemingly unnatural events	
3. The sign I. THE SIGNIFIER		II. THE SIGNIFIED All the phenomena have natural causes that science can reveal
III. THE SIGN		

Table 1. The myth of the world disenchantment in horror games

Thus, on the example of several popular horror games we have ascertained how the myth of the world disenchantment functions. The main meaning of the message to a player: all the events and processes can be understood rationally, if we turn to objective natural reasons that caused them. This is how, as we think, the analyzed videogames form an assumption and assuredness in a player's mind that any most unclear and abstruse happening can be given a scientific logical explanation.

## CONCLUSION

However, here we need to note one more issue. In philosophical literature there are two main concepts concerning the world disenchantment. The first one was supported by Weber himself, it can be conventionally called modernistic. According to this point of view, disenchantment of the world is the true driving force for progress. It can establish the basis for finding democratic rational consensus when it comes to society development.

The second concept is based on criticizing Weber's ideas and the idea of Enlightenment that obviously lied in the basis of his rationalization theory. This concept can be called postmodernistic. Having first appeared in the works of Horkheimer and Adorno it is based on the idea of necessity to get beyond the boundaries of the modernity project. They proclaimed the idea that scientific disenchantment of the world is not carried out to find the true world view and harmonic social existence, but to capitalistically acquire the world, which will inevitably lead to inerasable confrontation of classes [9].

Therefore, science is not objective search for the truth, but quite the opposite, there are personal interests of certain social forces behind it.

Marcuse supported such line of criticism, too. He noted that domination of the purpose-oriented rationality to which Weber's process of the world disenchantment should lead, in fact, supports the interests of the capital and controlling people [10]. This leads us to the state of postmodernism in which the scientific narrative as well as religious and other narratives is disenchanted. In the age of postmodernism they lose the right to pretend to be considered metanarratives proclaiming the truth and showing the best way of social development [11]. In the state of postmodernism, all we can do is criticize all possible points of view without sticking to any of them, because every one of them now represents some personal interest, not the universal one.

So, what attitude to the world disenchantment do the analyzed videogames support? As we see it, they represent the postmodernistic position, because science is not the expression of humanity interests, but on the contrary, it is the instrument of reaching certain goals by some evil geniuses (e.g., Dr. Rudolf Gustav Wernicke in *Outlast*) or major business players and secret organizations close to the government (such as the Umbrella Corporation in *Resident Evil* or *Mobius* in *The Evil Within*). Their actions motivated by personal benefits and not the common wealth can eventually lead to anthropogenic catastrophes and people's deaths.

Thus, we can conclude that the reviewed games present modern society in postmodernistic way. In that society, such metanarratives as Science, Progress and Modernization collapse.

Either way, in modern philosophy and social sciences it has been a while since postmodernism started to be considered as going through crisis. If postmodernism is considered an époque of narratives criticism without any possibility to take some certain position on the whole there is no opportunity for any rational dialogue and democratic consensus. Because in order to come to a common opinion there should be common grounds, but not the criticism of any grounds that can take place.

This is the reason why lately there are more and more scholars supporting the idea not about the need in abandoning the world disenchantment through science but about the necessity to disenchant science itself. Both modernistic and postmodernistic assumptions about the world disenchantment, in fact, enchant science. For modernism science is the well of salvation, for the philosophical discourse it is the source of danger. Some supernatural power appears in science. That is why lately philosophers have been trying to show how exactly science works [12]. It is essential for building the grounds for such world order in which science could exist in harmony with other modes of being without suppressing any of them [13]. Such an attitude to science and to the world disenchantment could be called non-modernistic [14].

What would a non-modernistic (in terms of treating science) horror game look like? At least, in such a videogame scientists could be both on the side of antagonists and protagonists, as well. Surviving in a non-modernistic survival-horror game could be based on scientific sophisticated intellectual struggle with monstrous creatures confronting a player. Such a videogame would show that there is nothing special in science. It is just a tool that can be used both as a dangerous weapon and as a salvation means depending on who it is used by.

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