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The Influence of Synthetic Worlds on General Culture

Let me first define the term. Such concepts as synthetic worlds, artificial worlds, digital worlds and virtual worlds are used as equivalents. In Russian the term 'artificial worlds' is mostly used, while in the West, 'synthetic worlds' is a more popular term thanks to the well-known book by Edward Castronova, an American professor (see: Castronova, 2005).

Following Castronova, I will speak of the synthetic worlds as a new phenomenon for the man's cognition of himself and the world and, finally, for the mankind's new intelligent choice of future.

The field of human culture is vast. It fixates different pictures of the world which can be of interest to man. Literature, painting, photography, cinema, music and TV programs reflect the existing world, or else the way people want to see this world, i.e. their fantasies as to how this world might be organized. All said above has one common characteristic. The world reflected in this way turns out to be static or dead. We are prone to see the great masterpieces of culture as something set.

Another step toward the cognition of the world by way of culture is connected with games, plays, theatre in the broad sense of this word. In them, the man is not just a spectator. He is a participant of the creative process. Children like playing role games; through them, they get to know the world better; through them they realize their desires. In theatre, actors perform one and the same play in different ways. This is not an exact copy as the case is with a film or a novel. In some modern theatres, spectators are invited to participate

in the performance. At pop-concerts, spectators can dance and sing along — they are physically engaged in the process. And in the old times, it was spectators who would make the decision whether to let the defeated gladiator live or die. No doubt in the playing technology, man uses more senses, more movements, to explore the world and the play than while just being a spectator.

The next step is computer games. Here the involvement of participants in the cognition of the world is significantly deeper. The player is not aware of what to expect at the next move. This teaches him the art of anticipation. The more thorough the artificial world is explored, the easier it is to anticipate and the more to enjoy the game. In computer games of newer generations, the player will be able to construct his own virtual world, or rather a fragment of this world, to be exact, in which he will be learning to 'live'. Those desires the man can not realize in the real world can be implemented in the virtual one. That explains why computer games appeal so to young people — to the extent that they develop a morbid addiction linked to the desire to escape from the reality into an imaginary world.

Lastly, the most interesting stage in the technology of self- and world cognition is constructing synthetic worlds to which the man personally belongs. Technologically, it is another generation of computer games for multiple players.

Those games are called MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game — a terrible abbreviation!). The games are quickly finding their way in places with broadband Internet. They increasingly engage more and more players. Dozens of millions of people can be playing simultaneously. These MMORPGs are otherwise called synthetic or virtual worlds. Besides, they are 'live' worlds: they are constantly changing, evolving, getting better unlike the dead virtual worlds associated with 'The Star Wars', 'The Fifth Element', or the well-known 'Matrix'.

There is a natural doubt or objection regarding how good or creative the plunge into the synthetic world is. Statistical data is as follows: now people

spend three to five hours watching TV. It is about the same amount of time which ardent fans of synthetic worlds spend on their plunges. On TV, you can see world masterpieces, the results of creative uplifting, the things which enrich our life, the life of the consumer. In a synthetic world, the participant wants to live a 'full' life, hanging around with the like, failing to enjoy the masterpieces of the world culture. It seems, therefore, that in a synthetic world the man should dumb down, lose inherent complexity or, at best, be affected by the creators of the synthetic world.

This, however, is contravened by a well-known open code technology that now embraces many spheres. For instance, Wikipedia, the popular web-encyclopaedia (http://ru.wikipedia.org) is made and supported by this technology, in which individual creative work is replaced by the work of masses and collectives, which bears excellent fruits.

There are a few dozens of synthetic worlds in existence from which the user can choose. Synthetic worlds are not universal, as compared to the real world, they are hand-made. Richard Bartle who made one of the first synthetic worlds suggested classifying users of synthetic worlds into the four groups:

— *Researchers,* who are interested in how the world is built; they explore it, the richer it is the better.

— *Socialites,* who long for communication with the other members of the society; they choose the worlds with numerous social groups, cities, clubs, arenas, weddings, hunters, etc.

— *Creators,* whose primary mission is creating, building, accumulating wealth, constant construction.

— *Winners,* whose primary aspiration is to dominate other people, to subjugate them; they choose such synthetic worlds where they can fight, with everlasting contests and rivalry; their goal is to win as in sports.

Let's turn to culture. Is culture enriched by synthetic worlds? Can it develop and be enriched using the tool of synthetic worlds? I will try to provide arguments in favour of the positive answer.

As I said before, there are, or to be more exact, there have been built, different synthetic worlds. If such a world is full of idiocy, then it is as shallow as those 'wham' games, and, quite naturally, a 'resident' of this world will not gain from it culturally. There are, however, synthetic worlds in which their creator will feel at ease — he will be able to apply his skills. There are technologies for making your own films, painting pictures and writing plays. You can even generate a new type of art, non-existent in the real world. A creator's fantasy in this world is less limited than in the world of reality, hence one can expect such advances in culture and art in it as can hardly be seen in the mundane world.

The advent of this new tool increases creativity. Why do Cameron's films attract a great deal of attention? Because apart from the rest, he uses such expressive means that have been unheard of before. Opponents of this statement will reason that in Bosch's pictures there are no less monsters that equally affect human psyche. Suffice it to take a glimpse at these pictures to be convinced of the opposite.

In fact, a significant turnaround has occurred. In the minds of earlier generations, the 'evil' was only personified by Baba Yaga, Kaschei the Immortal and vampires. Modern generation of people is brought up on computer games and, figuratively speaking, 'resides' in the world of monsters. The fairy-tale 'The beauty and the beast' no longer impresses you as it did before. To sum it up, imaginary worlds have become closer to us, they have become part of everyday mentality.

Finally I will pose a general question: can we claim that information and communication technologies have led to a qualitative breakthrough in culture and art, to a new vision of the world?

Bulgakov in *The Master and Margarita* opened a new way of representing the world to the reader. A somewhat similar vision was suggested by Zamyatin in *We* and by Orwell in *1984*. This method, however, was actively used and lost its gloss. Synthetic worlds is a method of cognition, no doubt more fundamental and long-lasting. What can be achieved by this method, time will tell, and not

before long.

Literature

Castronova E. Synthetic Worlds: Business and Culture of Online Games. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005.