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THE INFLUENCE OF VIDEO GAMES ON LITERARY WORKS: CULTURE AND/OR SCIENCE

Summary

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the influence of video games on Salman Rushdie's life and work, with a special emphasis on the two books he has written for his sons: *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) and *Luka and the Fire of Life* (2010). The role of video games in culture is so important that they have become the focus of research for many renowned scholars, creating the scientific field of game studies. After a short history of video games, the paper includes sections on their role in Rushdie's life, as well as in some of his works, particularly highlighting the narrative devices he 'borrows' from the virtual world of video games, whose rules superbly suit his inventive and discursive storytelling technique.

Key words: video games, Salman Rushdie, *Luka and the Fire of Life*, storytelling technique

1. Games in culture and game studies

1.1. A short history of video games

Video games are a relatively new phenomenon. Even though they have been present in some form since the 1940s, the first 'real' video game is considered to be *Spacewar!*, released in 1962 (Wolf 2012: xv), and it was not until the early 1970s that they entered mainstream culture with the appearance of video game arcades – popular establishments that housed coin-operated video game machines. Some of the more re-

nowned early arcade titles include *Asteroids, Breakout, Centipede, Missile Command,* and the legendary *Pong* (Mäyrä 2008: 61); all of these were created by the video game company Atari, formed in 1972. Early video game machines were primitive and offered little in the way of visual or audio quality, and they required a lot of space. The next logical step would be to reduce their size and make them available for household use in the form of game consoles. Among the first notable home consoles are the Magnavox Odyssey and Atari's Video Computer System, later dubbed the Atari 2600. The former did not enjoy much popularity due to limited marketing (Rabin 2009: 6), yet the latter has achieved "giant success" (Rabin 2009: 8), partially due to its large library of games. Even though the arcade industry was still going strong, Atari's classic arcade titles such as *Space Invaders, Asteroids* etc. were available on the 2600 game system.

In the 1980s another video game giant appeared in the form of Nintendo. Having existed for over a century already (though making toys during this time), their first foray into digital gaming was the *Game and Watch* series of handheld devices. Each of these devices held one simple game and doubled as a digital watch. Soon, however, Nintendo entered video game history with the invention of Donkey Kong, a story about a gorilla who steals a carpenter's girlfriend. This carpenter was simply referred to as Jumpman (Rabin 2009: 10), but would later be renamed Mario and receive his own arcade game called *Super Mario Brothers.* Nintendo would go on to release a revolutionary cartridge-based game console called the Nintendo Entertainment System - NES in 1985 (see more in: Wolf 2012: 449-456). As the NES finally proved beyond a reasonable doubt that there was indeed a profitable market for household game consoles, this release essentially sparked a competition between major video game companies; having spawned consoles such as Sega's Genesis and Saturn, Sony's PlayStations 1 through 4, Microsoft's Xbox, Xbox 360 and Xbox One, and Nintendo's Gamecube and Wii, as well as its handheld Game Boy and DS products, it is a competition that has pervaded the industry to this day. With over 40 million sold copies (Wolf 2012: 382), *Super Mario Brothers* is the second best-selling video game ever, after Wii Sports (82 millions), but it has to be borne in mind that there were many sequels of this game, each sold in millions of copies, such as for instance: *New Super Mario Brothers* (30 millions), *New Super Mario Brothers Wii* (29 millions), *Super*

Mario World (20 millions), *Super Mario Brothers 3* and *Super Mario Land Brothers* (each with 18 million sold copies), and many others.

Besides console-based systems and video arcades, the personal computer (or PC for short) is another platform that has gone through numerous transformations to become what it is today – from a highly overpriced workstation that could run some games to an affordable centre of multimedia entertainment. And although personal computers can be much more powerful than consoles of the latest generation, both still enjoy their share of popularity.

1.2. Art or not art

Depending on the way they are played, video games can differ drastically from one another; one may task the player with eliminating a target, another with solving a puzzle, and yet others may test the player's skills in organisation, logical deduction, perseverance etc. In other words, „there is a continuum of games that covers everything from relatively crude "bang-em-up" wrestling games to ingenious science fiction and adventure games to postmodern avant-garde novels" (Berger 2002: 5). The genre of a video game, as a rule, gives a general definition of the basic mechanics of the game in question; these genres, although constantly evolving, are generally recognised in video game culture as collections of established gameplay elements with possible minor variations. Thus a first-person shooter will always feature the player looking through the eyes of the game's protagonist as he or she uses various kinds of weapons to eliminate enemies; a turn-based strategy game always has the player fill the position of some sort of general taking turns to grow, train and lead his or her army to victory over opposing forces; platform(ing) games require players to traverse a two- or three-dimensional world that includes a great amount of floating 'platforms', occasionally fighting enemies, to reach the desired goal. In each of these examples some of the elements may be changed, removed or skewed, but the overall approach usually remains unaltered.

With this sort of variation in mind, there is no doubt that video games can rightly be compared to books and movies. All three are a kind of text; all three require a medium, the technological aspect of which can

vary, and in its variety alter the nature of experiencing the subject matter; all three are characterised by a wide array of genres. Yet in modern society, only the last two are considered art forms, while video games are usually viewed as „a popular entertainment phenomenon [...] in terms of their social, psychological, and cultural significance" (Berger 2002: 3). They belong to the realm of leisure, which has unfortunately become "a consumer industry" (Fiske 1989: 81) in the 20th century, despite the fact that originally it had a much deeper implication, that is evident from Fiske's definition: "Leisure is essentially a time for self-generated semiosis, a time to produce meanings of self and for the self that the world of work denies." (Fiske 1989: 82)

There have been many debates on whether video games are a form of art or not. For instance, famous movie critic Roger Ebert wrote an article that dismisses the notion (Ebert 2010), whereas San Francisco State University Professor Arthur Asa Berger embraces it (Berger 2002: 8). This conundrum appears to be a matter of opinion and attitude towards new technologies.

1.3. Why play games at all?

In *An Introduction to Game Studies: Games in Culture*, its author Frans Mäyrä quotes the German poet Friedrich Schiller as having said the following: "Man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and *he is only fully human being when he plays.*" (2008: 43) Games have always been an integral part of human culture, and have changed drastically throughout the ages. It is only natural that, with the development of new technologies, new games and methods of play would arise.

John Fiske highlights several reasons for playing video games. The entire Chapter 4 of his book *Reading the Popular* is devoted to "Video Pleasures", obviously based on Fiske's "own experience of playing" (1989: 81) – as he himself underlines. First of all, he considers that the machines in video arcades are a symbol of the capitalist consumer society (which can also be said for consoles or PCs in this sense), while the players are usually those who are powerlessness and subordinate in the real world, either because of their race, age or class, "and therefore the relationship

between human and machine is the reverse of that normally experienced in social life." (1991: 110) It is precisely in this reverse relationship that lie the relevance and functionality of video games, "because their structure can be related to the social system, and playing them can therefore enact the social relations of the subordinate with the one crucial inversion – in the video arcade the skill, performance, and self-esteem of the subordinate receive rewards and recognition that they never do in society." (1991: 111) Therefore, Fiske claims that people who are engaged in video games-playing activities by the very act of playing video games make "their own resistant meanings of human-machine relations and power structures" (1989: 2). Of course, for video game players, the virtual world of video games becomes the symbol of the real one, and for them "the dog-eat-dog world of the game, in which they eat the monster or the monster eats them is an accurate metaphor for the society "out there"." (1991: 111)

On a more global level, playing video games – as part of popular culture – is a way of resisting the hegemonic forces of homogeneity, which are the feature of 'the power-block' of social foreces: "video game players "lose" their socially constructed identities and therefore the structure of domination-subordination" (Fiske 1989: 8). According to Fiske, the video game player plays against the machine, and that is a form of resistance with the goal to evade the social control and gain a new sense or identity (1989: 78-79), because a video game "works semiotically within the domain of power and control, not money" (1989: 80). Secondly, playing video games requires "intense concentration" and thus helps the player evade "the forces of subordination." (1991: 111) Fiske concludes that the result of video games-playing activities is thus "a loss of self, a release from the socially constructed and disciplined subjectivity." (1991: 67)

And last but not least, according to Fiske, to a large extent the attraction of video games is the pleasure of the players who can manipulate "the narrative being played out on the screen" by affecting the events with the help of joysticks and firing buttons, which extend their control of the narrative. (1991: 111) Fiske sees this element as a crucial difference between video games and other forms of popular art, such as TV for instance: "While the reader of the television narrative is able, within limits, to control the meaning of that narrative, he or she cannot physically al-

ter the events as he or she can, and does, in video games." (1989: 88-89)

Of course, many experts for game designing have also tried to define the reasons why people play video games and why they prefer some games to others, because that helps the manufacturers develop games that would sell better. Among these numerous experts, the most accurate theories have been proposed by Marc LeBlanc and Ian Schreiber. One of the best-known and most influential game designers and programmers in the games industry, Marc LeBlanc, specifies these reasons for chosing a particular video game: sensation (game as sense-pleasure); fantasy (game as make-believe); narrative (game as unfolding story or drama); challenge (game as obstacle course); fellowship (game as social framework); discovery (game as uncharted territory); expression (game as self-discovery); and submission (game as mindless pastime). (cited in: Salen and Zimmerman 2004: 334).

Ian Schreiber, also a reputed game designer, proposes the following reasons for playing video games: exploration; social experience; collection (collecting things); physical sensation; puzzle solving; advancement; and competition (see more about this in: Brathwaite and Schreiber 2009). Evidently, some of the reasons in these two groups overlap, while others are similar, which is the proof that the authors have managed to pinpoint the real reasons for playing video games.

2. Salman Rushdie

One of the best-known writers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, Ahmed Salman Rushdie,[1] was born in the Indian city of Mumbai in 1947. Coming from a well-educated family, as his father was a lawyer and his mother a teacher, he himself was educated in England from an early age, first at the Rugby School and then at King's College in Cambridge, where he graduated in history and got his MA degree with honours. It was not his first novel, *Grimus* (1975), but his second novel, *Midnight's Children* (1981), that earned him international fame and the Booker Prize, as well as many other awards. His fourth novel, *The Satanic*

1   Biographical data taken from *Gale Contextual Encyclopedia of World Literature* and *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*.

Verses (1988), was extremely controversial, because Muslims considered it insulted the prophet Muhammad and profaned their religion, the Islam. So, the following year the book was burnt in riots worldwide, while the Iranian[2] head of state and religious leader Ayatollah Khomeini declared the death sentence, so-called fatwa, both against Rushdie and the publisher of the novel because they 'committed blasphemy'.[3] Rushdie went into hiding for some ten years, and much later described this experience in his memoir *Joseph Anton* (2012).

In the meantime, he published many other novels, two of which were dedicated to his sons: *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) for Zafar, whose middle name is Haroun, and *Luka and the Fire of Life* (2010) for Milan, whose middle name is Luka. Although judging by their titles these two books could be classified among children's novels, it might be wiser to think about them as belonging to children's literature for adults or, in other words, being grown-up children's stories. Both novels focus on a famous storyteller Rashid Khalifa (aka writer Salman Rushdie), but in the first one he is accompanied in his adventures by his son Haroun, and in the second one the protagonist is his son Luka, and we can say that they are both quest fantasy novels. In the second book, written two decades after the first one, the story is also taken forward twenty years, so it is kind of a sequel to the first novel. Rashid is much older and already at the beginning of the book due to a curse he suddenly faces death. When he fails to wake up one day, his son Luka decides to revive him from the coma. The only way to do that is to travel to a magical land, the so-called 'World of Magic' and steal the 'Fire of Life' that would help his father wake up. On his travels, Luka vanquishes numerous enemies and solves various riddles, confronted by strange creatures, monsters, and even gods from different religions. Having managed to obtain the Fire of Life, he returns to the human world, and revives his father.

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2   It is worhy mentioning here that, contradictory to this attitude, the Iranian government had praised Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children*, and the translation of this book into the Farsi language had even been named as the book of the year in Iran.

3   Although neither Rushdie nor the publisher of the original novel were killed, "Rushdie's Norwegian publisher was shot, his Japanese editor murdered and his Italian translator stabbed, with many people dying in riots protesting the novel's publication" (Flood 2014). Moreover, "thirty-seven people were massacred in Sivas, Turkey, in a 1993 attack intended to target Aziz Nesin, the book's Turkish translator" (de Graaf 2014).

3. Video games in Rushdie's life and work

If we take a closer look at his life and works, we can see that there are several distinct levels on which Salman Rushdie can be associated with the world of video games, for instance:
- As a result of the fatwa, a game was created in which he is the main target
- During his years in hiding, he used video games as a pastime
- In the book dedicated to his son *Luka and the Fire of Life* there are numerous references to video games and the structure of this novel itself resembles a video game, to the extent that Rushdie even thought "about creating a video game version of the book" (Sandhu 2010).

3.1. Game on Rushdie

In 2012, twenty-three years after the death sentence was issued and Rushdie forced into hiding, despite the fact that the fatwa had been lifted in 1998, the bounty on the writer's head was raised (to three million dollars) and threats repeated. Coincidentally, in that same year the Islamic Association of Students announced at the International Computer Games Expo in Tehran that they have developed a video game called "The Stressful Life of Salman Rushdie and Implementation of his Verdict".[4] Many American games are banned in Iran because they include fighting against Muslim terrorists, and are therefore assessed as harmful to the image of the country's culture. That is why, in order to counter that "cultural invasion", Iran started producing its own computer games, as "one way to combat the cultural war against Iran" (Kamali Dehghan 2012). Details about this game in which Salman Rushdie is the subject have not been revealed, but obviously its goal is to implement the fatwa against Rushdie, at least in this fictional universe, by chasing him down and ultimately killing him, as the rumours say, in the heart of New York of all the cities in the world (Nazaryan 2012). In conformity with that, the intention of its creators is "to teach the younger generation about the 'highly important' fatwa" (de Graaf 2014), but above all "about the "sin" committed by Rushdie" (Paramaguru 2012).

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4   See more about this in: Kamali Dehghan 2012, de Graaf 2014, Paramaguru 2012.

3.2. Games for Rushdie

In this same year – 2012, only a few months after this video game was announced, Rushdie published his autobiography *Joseph Anton: A Memoir*. This book portrays Rushdie during his ten years in hiding (1989-1998) because of the fatwa, when he had round-the-clock police protection and assumed the nickname Joseph Anton, which is a blend from the names of his two favourite writers: Joseph Conrad and Anton Chekhov. Written in the third person, the memoir reveals how hard that life was for Rushdie and how much he missed his family. In the beginning, he started writing book reviews in order to pass the time in a more agreeable way, but soon his eldest son taught him how to play video games:

It was Zafar who finally brought him back to himself, Zafar whom he worked constantly to see—the police drove back and forth, 'dry-cleaning' father and son, making these intermittent meetings possible—in London at Sue and Gurmukh's house on Patshull Road in Kentish Town, at the Pinters' in Campden Hill Square, at Liz Calder's place in Archway and once, wonderfully, for a weekend in Cornwall at the home of Clarissa's oldest friend, Rosanne, a farmhouse with goats and chickens and geese deep in a valley near Liskeard. They played soccer—he showed promise as a goalie, diving eagerly this way and that—and computer games. They put together model train sets and model cars. They did ordinary, everyday, father-and-son things and it felt like a miracle. (2012: 115)

On the other hand, Rushdie's second wife, whom he was soon to divorce, was nothing but against[5] this new pastime of his:

Marianne came around and scolded him for playing video games. Thanks to Zafar, he had grown fond of Mario the plumber and his brother Luigi, and sometimes Super Mario World felt like a happy alternative to the one he lived in the rest of the time. 'Read a good book,' his wife told him scornfully. 'Give it up.' He lost his temper. 'Don't tell me how to live my life,' he exploded, and she made a grand exit (2012: 156)

This passage shows that video games have become not only his pastime but also his means of fleeing harsh reality, both that of hiding in a cellar and of being scolded by his wife, whom he tried to ignore:

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5   We'll see later on in the examples from *Luka and the Fire of Life* that Rushdie used this detail from his real life in the novel.

Alone at Hermitage Lane he reached the end of his Super Mario game, defeating the big bad Bowser himself and rescuing the insufferably pink Princess Toadstool. He was glad Marianne was not there to witness his triumph. On the phone she was ranting again about his alleged *amours* and the untrustworthiness of his friends. He tried not to pay attention. That afternoon Pauline had taken Zafar into the house at St. Peter's Street because there were things of his that he wanted, his boxing gloves, his punch-ball, various games. (2012: 161)

After *Joseph Anton* was released from press, Rushdie spoke more in public media about the role of video games in his life during these sad ten years. This period in 'imprisonment' resembled a video game itself, because he was hiding in different places, protected by the police, and some executioners were even sent from abroad in order to kill him. Therefore, it was concluded that Rushdie "turned to video games to escape the brutal reality of his condition" and "used video games as escapism while hiding from the Iranian government" (Ingraham 2012). So, we can see that in his shelter Rushdie was very lonely, felt weak faced with the threat of death, and therefore he was happy to play video games and assume other identities which helped him become powerful, flee to a better world (though admittedly virtual) and achieve even the impossible in that magical digital universe. All of this was naturally reflected in his works, as well, most of all in *Luka and the Fire of Life*, where especially the impact of the popular Nintendo game *Super Mario Bros*.[6] is evident, as it is already mentioned in the above quotation from *Joseph Anton*.

3.3. Games in Rushdie's works

In fact, even before Rushdie published *Luka and the Fire of Life*, he used elements from video games in his works, already in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. For instance, two of the main protagonists of the *Super Mario* game are also featuring in this novel. The most striking similarity is the fact that Princess Batcheat greatly resembles Princess Toadstool[7] from the game, as both are 'damsels-in-distress' that need to be rescued:

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6   More about different versions of this game at: http://mario.nintendo.com/.

7   Cf. in the quote above: "rescuing the insufferably pink Princess Toadstool" (Rushdie 2012: 161).

"To war, to war! For Batcheat, only Batcheat!" (1990: 105) And also, we can find the main hero, Super Mario himself, in the personality of Iff, a 'water genie' who accompanies Haroun. His likeness to Mario is evident not only in the characteristic moustache but also in his main weapon, the plumber's wrench, which is remarkable because Mario IS best known as a moustachioed plumber.

Besides these two novels for his sons, Rushdie also briefly mentions video games as a distinctive part of the modern culture marked by consumerism and commodification, in his novel *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*: upon her death, the pop singer Vina is elevated into the status of a cultural icon, as a character featuring in "video games and CD-ROMs and instant biographies and bootleg tapes." (2000: 486) But the fact remains that Rushdie's book which has been for the most part and as a whole inspired by the virtual world of video games is *Luka and the Fire of Life*., a novel in which Rushdie uses "the conventions, tools and experiences of gaming" (Kumar 2013: 2074). First of all, the structure of this novel is the same as in most of the games, as it consists of nine levels that are to be cleared in order to accomplish the task of the game. The names of the levels certainly resemble those given in video games, for instance: the Trillion and One Forking Paths, the Mists of Time, the Inescapable Whirlpool, or the Great Rings of Fire, and these are the places Luka either has to pass through or escape from, like when he had to avoid being lost in the Trillion and One Forking Paths labyrinth (2010: 92) or when he flew away on a magic carpet from the Inescapable Whirlpool (2010: 191). Even the description of the Magical World at the beginning of the novel contains the names of magical places arranged like levels in a video game:

The Torrent of Words, by the way, thunders down from the Sea of Stories into the Lake of Wisdom, whose waters are illumined by the Dawn of Days, and out of which flows the River of Time. The Lake of Wisdom, as is well known, stands in the shadow of the Mountain of Knowledge at whose summit burns the Fire of Life. (2010: 8-9)

From the technical point of view, the novel is played by its protagonist Luka but told by the narrator, who apparently stands behind his back and watches Luka play the game, that is, create the narrative instead of the narrator:

though Luka is not the narrator of the novel, and that there is an omniscient narrator, the readers continue to get the field of view seen

over the shoulders of Luka. This becomes very evident when Luka enters the World of Magic. In this world, the view that the readers get is that of the monitor and the counters which appear on it. This indicates that it is Luka who manipulates the point of view of the narrator and that it is not the narrator who creates Luka. With this device, Rushdie undermines both the reliability of the narrator and the authorial control of the novelist in a postmodern touch. (Kumar 2013: 2081)

In *Luka and the Fire of Life*, there are plenty of intertextual references pointing to numerous video games or other forms of popular culture, like in the following text:[8]

he had grown up destroying fleets of invading rocket ships [Space Invaders], and been a little plumber [Super Mario] on a journey through many bouncing, burning, twisting, bubbling levels to rescue a prissy princess from a monster's castle, and metamorphosed into a zooming hedgehog [Sonic the Hedgehog] and a street fighter [Street Fighter – SF] and a rock star [Guitar Hero; Rock Band], and stood his ground undaunted in a hooded cloak while a demonic figure with stubby horns and a red-and-black face [Darth Maul from Star Wars I: The Phantom Menace] leapt around him slashing a double-ended light sabre at his head. (2010: 11)

Of all different video games, however, the resemblance is again the strongest when we compare the novel with the *Super Mario* game – for instance, same as Super Mario, Luka is transformed into a super hero: "he became, at least in his own mind, Super-Luka, Grandmaster of the Games." (2010: 13) Another similarity is that he has many lives which he loses unless he clears a certain level and advances to the next one: "He had collected 315 lives (because of the three-digit counter in the top left of his personal screen, he guessed that the maximum number he could collect was probably 999)" (2010: 51). Also, there are some elements from video games used with a comic purpose, to entertain the reader, like mentioning 'pisps' and 'wees' (altered from PSP and Wii, meaning Playstation Portable and Nintendo Wii Games, respectively, in the real world of video games), or the pun with the words 'console' and 'in-console-able' (2010: 13-14). As it has been noticed, for Rushdie "The magic console was the next best thing to a magic carpet or magic lamp" (Martyris 2012). Many other references to video games can be found all over the book, and the

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8   Respective references are marked in square brackets by the author of this paper.

following are the most persuasive in drawing a parallel between Rushdie's novel and a video game:

- In video games there are secret levels, and in the novel there are secret zones: "'When we enter the Mists we will leave behind the world of Living Memory and move towards Eternity; that is,' he went on, seeing from the confusion on Luka's face that he needed to be clearer, 'towards the secret zone, where clocks do not tick, and Time stands still. Not one of us is supposed to be there.'" (2010: 99)

- There is also the possibility of skipping a level or quitting the game altogether or for the time being, referred to in this sentence: "right at this moment he wished he was inside some other, fictitious version of reality and could press the Exit button to get back to his own life." (2010: 18)

- This is an example of a 'timed challenge' (a quest to be raced for an award or a score in a video game) in the novel: "'Are you telling me,' Luka said, feeling an anger rise in him, 'that my father is about to implode into Nothing? Is that what you're trying to say?'" (2010: 39)

- *Super Mario* is a platform game, and in many of these video games there are extra lives available, same as in *Luka and the Fire of Life*: "Lives were everywhere, in everything, disguised as stones, vegetables, bushes, insects, flowers, or abandoned candy bars or bottles of pop; a rabbit scurrying in front of you could be a life and so might a feather blowing in the breeze right in front of your nose." (2010: 49) This is in conformity with Fiske's observation that "extended periods of good play are rewarded with bonus points, extra lives, or complimentary messages on the screen." (1989: 81) So, some special hidden bonus items are also collectible both in video games and in the novel: "Luka began to hunt. He used his favourite tricks. Kicking tree stumps and rustling bushes were always good. Jumping into the air and landing hard on both feet shook lives down from the trees, and even made them tumble, like rain, out of the empty air." (2010: 50)

- An extremely important factor in each video game is saving the player's progress, which can be done in the novel as well:

There was a golden button set in the archway's left pillar. 'I'd push that if I were you,' suggested Nobodaddy. 'Why?' Luka asked. 'Is it like ringing a doorbell to be invited in?' Nobodaddy shook his head. 'No,' he said patiently. 'It's like saving your progress so that the next time you lose

a life you don't have to come back here and fight the Old Man of the River all over again. He may not fall for your little trick next time, either.' (2010: 57)

- However, if the player fails to do it, he or she has to start from the beginning and risks losing a life: "There had been no way to reach the saving point, wherever it might have been. So the risks were growing." (2010: 108)

- And last but not least, in the following passage Rushdie obviously alludes to game controls (or gaming controllers, such as joysticks, steering wheels, etc.):

He stared at the instruments on the bridge. There was this switch, which probably put the wheels down for driving on when the *Argo* was on land, or up when the *Argo* hit the water; and this button, which was pretty obviously green for 'go', and this one next to it, which was just as self-evidently red for 'stop'; and this lever, which he should probably push forward to go forward, and maybe push further forward to go faster; and this wheel, which would do the steering; and all those dials and counters and needles and gauges, which he could probably just ignore. (2010: 64)

John Fiske considers that 'repetitiousness' is one of the basic elements of popular culture, which "is marked by repetition and seriality, which, among other effects, enable it to fit easily with the routines of everyday life" (1991: 100). Among the phenomena he mentions are "video games played time and again, a sports team watched game after game – popular culture is built on repetition" (1991: 101). Not only does Rushdie use this element in the habitual way of video games, in which a level which is not cleared or saved has to be repeated again: "If for any reason Luka failed to punch the golden button at the end of the next level he would be condemned to defeat this one all over again" (2010: 108), but he also explicitly and literally – as though he read Fiske's *Understanding Popular Culture* – repeats parts of his text in order to stress its 'repetitiousness'. The following is just one out of many such examples:

Far, far below them as they climbed - perhaps *forty miles* below them already - swirled the Inescapable Whirlpool, creating loops in Time, and above it the treacherous El Tiempo; but even though they were as far from danger as it was possible to be, they were still in double trouble, because far, far below them as they climbed - perhaps *forty miles* below them already - swirled the Inescapable Whirlpool, creating loops in Time, and above it the treacherous El Tiempo; but even though they were as

far from danger as it was possible to be, they were still in double trouble, because far, far below them as they climbed - perhaps *forty miles* below them already - swirled the Inescapable Whirlpool, creating loops in Time, and above it the treacherous El Tiempo; but even though they were as far from danger as it was possible to be, they were still in double trouble, because far, far below them - perhaps *forty miles* below them already - swirled the Inescapable Whirlpool, creating loops in Time, and above it the treacherous El Tiempo; but even though they were as far from danger as it was possible to be, they were still in double trouble, because far, far below them as they climbed - and here the carpet broke out of the temporal whirlpool with a jerk that sent even Nobodaddy flying. (2010: 106-107)

From these examples, it is evident that Luka "enters the World of Magic as a player entering a video game", as well as that the framework of the novel is "made of fairytale, story, magic and video game" (Kumar 2013: 2078). However, not only does Rushdie use video games as a motive in this novel, but he also depicts some situations from the real life, like the one he described in *Joseph Anton* (see previously quoted from Rushdie 2012: 156), so here we can see how he transforms into fiction the scene between himself and his wife Marianne who scolded him for playing video games:

Once again it was his father Rashid Khalifa who encouraged Luka, and who tried, with comically little skill, to join him on his adventures. Soraya was sniffily unimpressed, and, being a commonsensical woman who distrusted technology, worried that the various magic boxes were emitting invisible beams and rays that would rot her beloved son's mind. Rashid made light of these worries, which made Soraya worry even more. 'No rays! No beams!' Rashid cried. 'But see how well he is developing his hand-eye coordination, and he is solving problems too, answering riddles, surmounting obstacles, rising through levels of difficulty to acquire extraordinary skills.'

'They are useless skills,' Soraya retorted. 'In the real world there are no levels, only difficulties. If he makes a careless mistake in the game he gets another chance. If he makes a careless mistake in a chemistry test he gets a minus mark. Life is tougher than video games. This is what he needs to know, and so, by the way, do you.'

Rashid did not give in. 'Look how his hands move on the controls,' he told her. 'In those worlds left-handedness does not impede him. Amaz-

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ingly, he is almost ambidextrous.' Soraya snorted with annoyance. 'Have you seen his handwriting?' she said. 'Will his hedgehogs and plumbers help with that? Will his "pisps" and "wees" get him through school? Such names! They sound like going to the bathroom or what.' Rashid began to smile placatingly. 'The term is *consoles*,' he began but Soraya turned on her heel and walked away, waving one hand high above her head. 'Do not speak to me of such things,' she said over her shoulder, speaking in her grandest voice. 'I am in-console-able.' (Rushdie 2010: 13)

This passage is very important for the book, primarily as it contains a common argument against video games (uttered by Luka's mother Soraya – that is, in real life, Rushdie's wife Marianne), and then a sensible one used to counter it (offered by Luka's father Rashid – in other words, Salman Rushdie). This is in keeping with theory, because "Game theorists argue that video games are not merely Quixotic or deforming but attempt to create independent-minded adults out of children and young adults by making them understand the values of self defense, protection of others and the need to fight against overwhelming odds." (Kumar 2013: 2074) In an interview, Rushdie explains this attitude in his own words, first bringing out the negative attitude:[9]

I think there are legitimate concerns there and I worry also that there is a dumbing down factor. These games... I mean they sometimes require lateral thinking. They sometimes require quite skilled hand-eye coordination and so on. But they're not in any sense <u>intelligent</u> in the way that you want your children to develop <u>intelligence</u> to make the mind not just supple, but actually informed. And of course if people spend too much time on this stuff then it militates against that. (Miller 2010)

On the contrary, there is the opposing point of view from which another aspect of popular consumerist culture, including video games, is seen: "there is <u>intellectual</u> work involved, discriminating work involved, in the choices about which pornography, which pop music, which computer games to consume" (McKee 2007: 9). Furthermore, talking about "the sense of joy and excitement that connoisseurs of motorbikes, romance novels, Batman comics, basketball, or action console games experience from engaging with the objects of their affection", McKee explains why these forms of popular culture are usually seen in the negative light, al-

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9   Key terms in the following quotations are underlined by the author of this paper.

though there must be something more about them: "We assume that no-body could make an <u>intelligent</u> decision to consume action console games or romance novels or gay online pornography, because we don't know many <u>intelligent</u> people who make those choices and are willing to take the time to explain them to us." (2007: 222) Similarly to this, Fiske also points to the fact that video games are "full of information, but empty of meaning" (1989: 87), but on the other hand, he illustrates the positive aspect of video games, too, by citing Professor Scriven (University of Western Australia) as saying that "The games are a good thing. They are lots of fun and develop some interesting abilities", as well as President Reagan who said they develop "incredible hand, eye and brain co-ordination" (1989: 78).

3.4. Games in Rushdie's narrative storytelling technique

In keeping with this, in the next part of the same interview Rushdie also argues for further investigation of the impact of video games on storytelling:

Rashid Luka's father is basically fond of the video game and defends video games to Luka's mother, who is much more skeptical of their value. But there is a bit of the book which also suggests that the problem may be that this way of inhabiting the imagination may do something harmful to our relationship to story, to the way in which human beings have always needed and responded to the art of the story and that is something to be worried about, because I think that there is something about storytelling that is very intrinsic to who we are as human beings (Miller 2010).

This last sentence shows that, on a deeper level, Rushdie found a segment of video games extremely important for his own art and creation, and that is why, "While he agreed that the concerns are legitimate and that too much gaming could have a dumbing-down effect and perhaps even erode man's ancient attachment to the story, he made a powerful case for the new form." (Martyris 2012) That new form is precisely the result of the most important role of video games concerning Rushdie's works, which are usually categorised as the magic realism genre, a sub-genre of fantasy in which authors combine elements from the real world with those that are magical. This feature of Rushdie's oeuvre is ev-

ident at the beginning of the novel *Luka and the Fire of Life*, when he describes how that world is full of magic and different realities: "Fortunately for Luka, he lived in an age in which an almost infinite number of parallel realities had begun to be sold as toys." (2010: 51) On the other hand, this is the very reason John Fiske considers crucial for the opposition of adult people to video games and criticism of this medium which uses a different reality:

some of the reasons many adults (particularly well-educated ones) are inept at, and therefore critical of, video games is because the ability to play them involves parallel processing, the ability to absorb multiple patterns of information simultaneously and to perceive rather than analyze the structured relationships between those patterns. The mental processes are quite different to those linear ones so well trained into the literate elite. (1991: 88)

However, the technique Rushdie employs in his storytelling in this book is taken over from the way people play video games, with numerous possibilities and much more freedom to decide about various choices than in the real world, or in the writer's own words:

one of the things that is interesting about it to me is the much looser structure of the game and the much greater agency that the player has to choose how he will explore and inhabit the world that is provided for you. He doesn't... in fact, doesn't really have to follow the main narrative line of the game at all for long periods of time. There is all kinds of excursions and digressions that you can choose to go on and find many stories to participate in instead of the big story, the macro story. I think that really interests me as a storyteller because I've always thought that one of the things that the Internet and the gaming world permits as a narrative technique is to not tell the story from beginning to end—to tell stories sideways, to give alternative possibilities that the reader can, in a way, choose between. (Miller 2010)

That is how Rushdie explains the benefits of his interest in video games for his narrative storytelling technique, and one of the crucial terms here is 'agency' – which is increased to a higher level in *Luka and the Fire of Life*, thanks to the elements Rushdie imported from video games: "The preoccupation with agency is a constant in the work of an author who has always tried to blend the tradition of oral storytelling with postmod-

ern self-reflexiveness in order to give the reader the illusion of participating actively in his fiction." (Gonzalez 2012: 184) And that is also the reason why Rushdie is not opposed to the world of video games, although he is aware of its dangers. Quite the contrary, he uses its elements in the structure of *Luka and the Fire of Life*, thus combining the two different media:

One has to keep in mind that Video game is not a genre in fiction but rather an interactive medium. It is closer to a visual experience while a conventional fiction is verbal. Purists in literature consider visual media and computer games as threats to the very act of reading as they can easily lure the young minds away from books. Rushdie, however, seems to imply in *Luka and the Fire of Life* that video game and verbal narrative can have a symbiotic relation and the readers can have the experiences of both the media simultaneously. It could also be argued that Rushdie has made an attempt to revolutionize the narrative technique by using the conventions of gaming, and thereby trying to revitalize fiction with computer games. (Kumar 2013: 2073)

It is thus obvious that Rushdie wants his novel "to be a paean to the creative richness made available by cyberspace" (Gonzalez 2012: 183), as well as that *Luka and the Fire of Life* "has in its objective a postmodern metanarrative function" (Kumar 2013: 2081), which is the most important influence of video games on the works of Salman Rushdie.

4. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to demonstrate that "Rushdie put his video-game expertise to good use in the two children's novels he wrote for his sons" (Martyris 2012). It is especially in the second of these two 'fairy-tale novels', *Luka and the Fire of Life*, that he "uses narrative devices associated with video games: it has a mission-based plot, traverses many levels, describes the counters that appear to characters when they have lost some of their lives, and engenders a feeling of infinite possibility." (Sandhu 2010) The rules of the virtual world of video games also suit Rushdie's storytelling technique, and it is precisely "the discursive narrative architecture of a video game, a non-linearity which he finds fascinating. Rushdie's elliptical, story-within-story, detour-friendly, digres-

sion-heavy style is anything but linear." (Martyris 2012). By analysing the examples found in *Luka and the Fire of Life*, it has been ascertained that the virtual world of video games indeed had a lot to offer to Salman Rushdie, not only in his private life and as a base for his novels, but also as a structure for his inventive storytelling technique.

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УТИЦАЈ ВИДЕО ИГАРА НА КЊИЖЕВНА ДЕЛА: КУЛТУРА И/ИЛИ НАУКА

Сажетак

Циљ овог рада је да се анализира утицај видео игара на живот и рад Салмана Руждија, са посебним освртом на две књиге које је написао за своје синове: *Харун и Море прича* (1990) и *Лука и Ватра живота* (2010). Улога видео игара у култури је толико важна да су оне постале жижа истраживања за многе реномиране научнике – као што је, на пример, Џон Фиске – те је тако створена нова научна област: студије игара. После кратког историјата видео игара, у раду следе одељци о њиховој улози у Руждијевом животу током његових десет година скривања због фатве (1989-1998), приказаног у аутобиографији *Џозеф Антон: мемоари* (2012), као и у некима од његових дела, са нагласком на наративним средствима која је

"позајмио" из виртуелног света видео игара, а чија правила је сјајно прилагодио свом дискурзивном наративном стилу. Анализом примера пронађених у књизи *Лука и Ватра живота* установљено је да тај виртуелни али и стварни свет заиста имао пуно тога да понуди Салману Руждију, не само у његовом приватном животу него и служећи као основа за већ поменута дела, али и као веома важан елемент структуре његове инвентивне приповедачке технике.