Representation of Power In A Smartphone (Semiotic Analysis of Smartphone Culture in Watch Dog Game)

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Abstract   This is a research contains analysis and case study on visual communication design, especially in game design. Game has become a visual activity that gives meaningful experience for the player in relation to its narrative and culture. The research method of this research is using qualitative interpretative based on semiotic model which contains sign systems were divided into denotation or connotation. This signs produces meaning and post–modern hyperreality. The data were gathered by playing Watch Dog game and taking relevant screenshots which represents a meaningful   review in a relation with the use of smartphone as a main weapon in the game. The elements of the game were interpreted by the researchers as an interpretation based on the social interaction which happens in our modern society.

Keywords   Video Game, Watch Dogs, Semiotics

1. Introduction

The development of digital technology affects society's behavior both individual, institutional, and community that inevitably have to adapt. Although technology is neutral but greatly influenced by the individual user. But as an artifact, technology precisely determines the direction of civilization and culture (Straubhaar, 2008:51).

All this time, digital game has a wide stigma in our society which assosiated with bad habits of children. The stigma of violence, indulgence in sexuality, addiction; All of which inflicted by digital game. In the Journal of Cyberpsychology and Behaviour, written that the potential addiction of digital games is very large and can be a "disease" especially for children. However, this development can not be avoided. The growing development of technology impacts the growing of digital game both in terms of gameplay and visual graphic.

On 27th May 2014, the famous game developer, Ubisoft; launched game called Watch Dog for PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, and Windows Platform. Watch Dog is a 3rd person action game, meaning that as a player we can see the character while playing. Watch

Dog offers unique experience unlike other action game which use only firearms. In Watch Dog, the player can used hacking tool to subdue the enemy. The hacking technique is a very powerful tool in this game. Player will play as Aiden Pearce, fall from grace hacker; as a hacker your important tool is smartphone which connected all around the Chicago by certain operating system, CtOS. The ability to use hacking is a key element to progress within game's missions.

Figure 1. Watch Dogs Cover

Nowadays, digital game can't be separated with today's society.   The development of technology, it is possible for digital game to be easily accessed. Game commonly known to be addictive (Ng & Peter Wiemer–Hastings, 2005), especially on digital game which have an intriguing

adventure, immerse storytelling, and beautiful character design. The development of technology enables console games to have higher software and hardware specifications. It creates more complex and unique experience to gamers.

When we are talking about digital games, the elements which build game's story are the prime source of signs which creates meanings. The interpretations of signs by gamers give certain knowledge and reference. This meanings come from a real simulated world of gaming. In a relationship between signs and the Watch Dog's story there is a sense of the fabric of power relations formed, for example: mission to defeat certain enemy or the urge to control certain strategic area. In Daniel Hutagalung's research about hegemony, it was written that ideology and power can be connected with story and character's condition in digital games. On Watch Dog, the protagonist character's resistance againts higher authority becomes the basis of the quest for "power" to which he aims (Hutagalung, 2004).

2. Literature and Theory

2.1 Digital Games and Sign Warehouse

As we argued, digital games can be easily separated with today's society. The addictive nature of game shown also on digital game which contains intriguing adventure, immerse storytelling, and beautiful character design (Ng & Peter Wiemer–Hastings, 2005). Culturally, human have desire to play (Huizingga, 1990). That natural desire was shown in a form of digital game. Digital game's existance can't be separated with the nature of playing inside human condition. Storyline and characters, shown as interactive gameplay that need to be consumed by human to fullfill that desire. In his writing, Baudillard said about hyperreality in term of Disneyland Theme Park as a context of representation. The representation as fantasy and imagination world that wasn't exist in reality world. Disneyland symbolizes an imaginary world where visitors seem to feel in different world by watching the performances, games and activities there.

Digital game performs as a very broad "world of sign." The world which was sold by the developer of game. The world filled with joy, horror, entertainment, or anything that can't be fullfilled in reality. Digital games exercise as activity of signs for gamers. On Simulacra, Baudillard explained that reality wasn't reality in modern society whom

very closes to the world around them. The reality experienced was shown as formations of the surrounding media that they see and use everyday (Ritzer, 2008). Human's reality that is happening now is the result of its interaction and interpretation of the media and messages circulating the media. Society becomes a mediated society in its reality. The reality of the mediated society has the effect, if humans have mediated reality with the media, then its interaction with other humans will be mediated or formed from its medium.

2.2 Theory About Power

The seeking of power has been shown long in mankind history. Wars become a way to show one's power to other. In a simplest way, a vote to cast a decision is is a way of upholding a party's position. Antonio Gramsci explained such a concept with word, hegemony. In a hegemony, the dominating groups will always try to cultivate the controlled party. This cultivation of power covers many aspects, such as ideology, politics, or strategic decisions. Antonio Gramsci argued hegemony is an attempt by the dominant party to lead the way of thinking, acting, and judging of society to suit its will (Harahap, 2012).

3. Data and Methods

This is a qualitative descriptive research using critical study with help of image based research, using and expressing visual image as our base of this research. In our process of interpretation, we will perform the dialectical process with the text as the object. This means that researchers assumes that reality is the result of mental constructions of individuals of social actors, hence the reality is understood diverse by every individual. Research steps will carried out as follows:

1. Watch Dogs game as the object of research will be documented and carefully observed.
2. Observe and select scenes from Watch Dogs to be analyzed using a visual methodology, particularly on the site of image itself to obtain the articulated signs in each character's display especially in the context of smartphone use. Researchers act to make interpretation, meaning and understanding of visual context of objects observed.
3. This study uses a visual methodology in which there are three meaning sign's production, which

are: site(s) of the production of image, site(s) of the image it self, site(s) of where is it seen by various audiences (Rose, 2001). But the study only uses, the site(s) of image itself as its point of view. The reason is, it is closely related to the active subject (single and not as audiences) in interpreting the visual image.

3.1 Data Gathering Processes

Generally, the research step through observation of the object under investigation, shows as:

a. Deep observation and documentation. A process of documentation from Watch Dog, using high resolution video capture application to preserve high quality images. High resolution images are necessary for further analysis. Deep observation means careful observation, involves focusing attention to objects of research by using all senses. Deep observation used specially against the use of smartphones in the Watch Dogs game.

b. Literature study is one of data gathering technique involves books, sciencetific journals, web articles, reading articles, and many more.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 Smartphone is a New Weapon

In a relation of signs and meaning, media is a reality where exchanges of signs and meaning occurred within the society. By using McLuhan's formula, he argued that medium is the message. In a context of media, the cutting of images and interviews or certain effects that appear to be a form consumed by the public. (Baudillard, 2004). Nowadays, signs and symbols which grow in digital games are more than mere visual sign. It appears in a complex form of story, equipment (game), sign as action or activity, and many more. In Watch Dog, the most stand out thing is the use of smartphone by main protagonist character (Aiden Pearce). Instead of firearms or supernatural ability, smartphone emerges as a crucial weapon in Watch Dog.

Game is a structured simulation which provides a certain experience to its players in an entertaining way (leisure activity). We observed that Watch Dog a wholly different that most of game (like Final Fantasy, Persona, etc). In most games, experience points usually used to update your characters. But, in Watch Dog, players used experience points to update the ability of the smartphone which was used by main protagonist character (Aiden Pearce). Later in a game, player realizes that the used of smartphone can not be separated entirely. Smartphone was used in any different kind of actions and missions. In this case, the smartphone becomes a fixed feature in the game.

Based on the observation above, we argued that there are 2 main functions of the smartphone in Watch Dog.

1. Infiltration function. This function is based on the term hacking which means doing it secretly or stealthly. Players used this function to secretly open security door without arousing suspicion of NPCs. Players also used this as a way to get a password system, distrupting enemy's comm, distracting enemy's movement. This function can be read on the smartphone used in the game by disguising the existence of Aiden Pierce. He was created as a figure that can not be touched because he can not be traced by the system (CtOS) or NPCs. So he can complete missions.

2. Destructive function. This function was based on Aiden Pearce's smartphone abilities. Using his smartphone Aiden Pearce has the ability to disable NPCs' movement using vehicle or other necessary tools, such as: control traffic lights, controling bridges, jamming enemy vehicles, blowing up stean pipes, or raising road blockage. The destructive nature of the smartphone make NPCs disable.

4.2 Smartphone Culture and Semiotic of Power in Watch Dog

The conditions displayed in the Watch Dogs are interesting as a reflection of today's social society. Nowadays, society is in a domain, the domain of mediated society. Almost every member of society uses a smartphone as central device to do daily activities.

Figure 2. Condition of social life in Watch Dogs

The growth of easily access of internet makes information exchange between every member of society become easier day by day. The activity in social media, digital game, and taking daily notes using smartphone have become a very common activities.

By reflecting on our current society, Watch Dog represents much of our current society, such as:

1. Concept of Vulnerability

   Hacking on Watch Dog is not a mere fantasy inside a game. Our interconnected world become easily access by unwanted individuals who want to get our data. Our growing activity within the internet becomes main gateway of hacking. Almost everyday, people get hacked; everywhere at anytime. The advantages of interconnected media, now seen as one of its invulnerable.
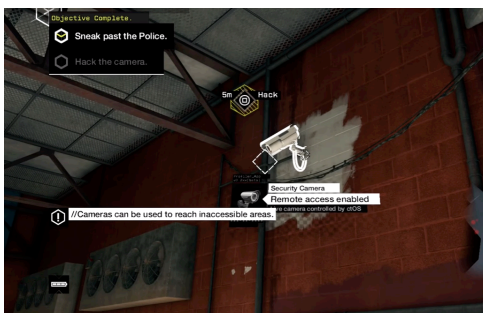

Figure 3. Hacking process in Watch Dogs

   The more data we stored in form of digital technology, the more vulnerable we are. Activities such as online shopping, e–banking, and many more; are the source of our date stored online waiting to be hacked.

Figure 4. Hacking into someone's phone

2. Concept of Power

   In Watch Dog, we seen smartphone as a very important existence for the protagonist characther unlike in any game before. Majority of games with an action RPG Genre (like Watch Dog) have emphasis on character statistic data (level of attack, defense attributes, stamina, hit points, etc) or firearms but Watch Dog is very different game. The game doesn't emphasis the statistic data (strenght, defence, etc) and fire arms but emphasis the use of smartphone to conquer the game

We still remember in our country, how the internet held massive amount of information regarding national or local political campaign. In certain moments, information (in internet) can be very destructive. Also, not forget about our mainstream media which uploaded information to the internet. Society bombarded with a lot of mislead informations or hoaxes. The information than access (mostly) by smartphone.

5. Conclusions

As a media, game can be categorized as a new (form of) media. In the beginning of its existence, game acts as entertainment for people. Game was originally act as product of a mass that created for entertainment-related reality. In its development, game develops along with the development of technology becomes a media that not only serve as entertainment purpose. Game as media creates world of signs, it is because when players interact within game then there is an exchange of meaning to the sign in it. These exchange of meaning makes game become a complex media for players. The visual of game creates a social concepts for its player.

Watch Dog offers unique experience unlike other games. Aiden Pearce, our main protagonist; is told within the game to destroy an evil corporation by using interconnected technology (internet). The use of smartphone as main device for players, was a very unique gameplay breakthrough in Watch Dog. The portrayal of smartphone functions in the semiotics context provides a strategy option for players to perform missions.

We learnt from Watch Dog that there is a shifting of power from offline reality to online reality. With its infiltrative and destructive functions, "the holders" in online region have opportunity to be able to control society's mindset and movement. A real example is the very existence of controversial accounts such as the Trio Macan (on the Election of DKI Jakarta) or Mak Lambe Turah account which is currently very popular. Their existence became "idolatrous" because they were able to drive the mindset of many people to debate and argue with news that was posted. This move-

ment looks massive in the online world like: Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

This virtual movement that became semiotics signs raised at Watch Dogs, that the holder of power is now changing from just a certain position to anonymous figures, with no name and clarity (such as Trio Macan and Mak Lambe Turah) who has millions followers. In the context of Watch Dogs, gaming is no longer merely an entertainment and pleasure function but a critique of certain social conditions. The development of technology and information is unavoidable but it is interesting when the development opens up space for a social criticism for society.

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