Visualisation of digital media discourses: a case study of Russian language esports media

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The paper examines the ongoing trend of the extensive visualisation of digital media discourses through an investigation of Russian language esports media discourses. The authors suggest that esports discourses are typical examples of digimodern and hypermodern discourses in which the visual mode with its various elements and genres is central and dominant in serving the interactional purpose of esports discourse. The analysis focuses on the complexity of the discourse of the esports community and its role as a media communication community on the global intercultural communication scene. The interdisciplinary research methodology draws on the resources of several academic disciplines, primarily those of linguistics, semiotics, communication and media studies, and cognitive sciences. The case study explores the dominant role and the functions of the visual mode in Russian language esports discourses on portals such as cybersport.ru and cyber.sports.ru using materials relating to the esports teams Virtus.Pro and Newbee. The discourse and content analysis reveals that the growing visualisation of esports discourse has emphasised the importance of visual elements such as photos, graphics, infographics, videos, mesh banners, screenshots, quotations, memes, contests and CTA (Call to Action) buttons as the overriding means of interaction. The corpus used in this research is comprised of materials from the cybersports.ru (729 texts about Virtus.Pro Dota2 and 57 texts about Newbee Dota2) and cyber.sports.ru (1774 texts about Vitrus.Pro and 219 texts about Newbee) online portals.

Keywords: *esports, visualisation, discourse of media, digital discourse*

1 Introduction

Any analysis of the discourses of the emerging media forms of the 21st century must involve some consideration of the convergence of old and new technologies. The traditional distinction of mediated discourses between old media formats such as newspapers, magazines, film, radio and television and newer discourses which are Internet-based or Internet-dependent becomes less clear-cut, because many of the new mediated discourses either incorporate old forms or integrate their genres and modes by transforming them into new forms and formats. For example, it is possible to watch a live stream of a football match on a smartphone, to read the most recent news from a scrolling news ticker while watching a sports documentary on TV, or to post a vlog or a photo about a new esports platform.

Contemporary semiotic enquiries into mediated discourses reveal similar findings; visual communication and various modes and forms of visual communication dominate the texts of both old and new media discourses, and meaning and its representation are primarily conveyed through visual communication. Visual signification often places the signified above the signifier, thereby allowing visual images to acquire a greater importance than the visualised content itself. Therefore, meanings are constructed, presented and represented in the visualisation processes, and visual discourses of contemporary media communicate, magnify, transmit, and multiply messages carrying signs of various orders.

The role of visualisation, visual communication modes and the multimodality of visual representation all underline the complexity of the approaches used in the analysis of digital media discourses. Many authors agree on the necessity of studying the role which visual communication plays in the linguistic and communicative practices of 21st century mediated discourses (cf. Thurlov et al 2020). There is also a general consensus that the central problem of the first two decades of the new millennium is that the visualisation of a person is closely associated with the visualisation of the everyday practices of a postmillennial individual, practices that are directly related to the technological innovations performed in virtual digital discourses. The establishment and rapid development of these discourses through the spread of the Internet have found their representation in the growing variety of cyberspace interactions, including cybersports and cybergaming (cf. Sell 2015).

In the 21st century the meaning of sport and its perception, signification, and representation are very far removed from the more elemental understanding of physical activities performed either individually or as a collective. The original more strictly physiological or physical functions and characteristics of sport have been superseded by its symbolic meaning and social significance, and thus any modern examination of sport must also encompass concepts such as social status, behaviour, global, international, national, regional, and local cultural identities, emotions, and numerous other factors. Moreover, the above mentioned field of cybersports (esports) and cybersport media are the result of the advances in new technologies that have enabled, among others, the existence of esport communities on new communication platforms as a new mediated intercultural communication phenomenon (cf. Boguslavskaya et al 2018).

Interdisciplinary research into esports is relatively new, and the majority of studies have tended to embrace perspectives from several academic disciplines, such as information science, sport science, cognitive sciences, law, sociology, media and communication studies, etc. The most respected research findings to date have been listed and analysed in a publication compiled in 2019 by the research team of Jason Reitman, Maria Anderson-Coto, Minerva Wu, Je Seok Lee, and Constance Steinkuehler under the title Esports Research: A Literature Review (Reitman et al 2020). Many of the esport research approaches are rooted in T. L. Taylor's book Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming (Taylor 2012) and Emma Witkowski's paper On the digital playing field: How we "do sport" with networked computer games published in the same year (Witkowski 2012). The current authors base the approach employed in this paper on John Aycock and Patrick Finn's findings based on media and communication methodologies which they presented in their text Uncivil Engineering: A Textual Divide in Game Studies (Aycock & Finn 2019); our analysis also employs the linguistic and semiotic methods found in Giorgia Aiello's 2020 paper, Visual Semiotics: Key Concepts and New Directions (Aiello 2020).

2 Esports discourse and its digimodernist and hypermodernist characteristics

As was suggested above, the rapid technological developments of the last two decades of the 20th and the first two decades of the 21st century have provided a wide range of new opportunities for the everyday practices of postmillennial individuals. The communication technologies and the forms and channels of communication which they have facilitated have been overridden by computerisation, virtualisation and Alan Kirby's (2009) digitalisation of both form and content accompanied by growing levels of interaction and animation that all

have found their space in various realities, for example, in the simulated, embedded, immersive or augmented spheres. The new forms of textuality that have appeared over the period of digimodernism all share the same characteristics. Kirby (2009: 1) claims that one of the essential features which differentiates digimodernist discourses from the earlier mediated discourses is their multiauthorship and the actual intervention of the communicants in the authorship process. He further explains that a reader or viewer (and, in our case, esports players or their fans) are all able to intervene in the text; either to add content into the original text or to modify its development, with the result that "[t]he digimodernist text in its pure form is made up by the reader or viewer or textual consumer" (Ibid.: 51). Esports games and the texts published on esports platforms not only fit this most obvious feature, but they also represent other facets of Kirby's digimodernist concept. The author states that virtual visual texts undergo a continual process of creation (onwardness); they exist in the present alone, aa an essentially evanescent form (they are not created with the intention of being archived and then recalled); the texts are neither logical nor hierarchical (exhibiting a form of haphazardness), nor do they have a definitive beginning and end (fluid-bounded text). Their major potential (which is also applied in esports discourse) lies in the ability of the texts to develop in multiple directions and evince an immediate, mostly visual pleasure in their electronic digitality (Ibid.: 50-60).

Esports discourse also embodies another important characteristic of the digimodernist era – the shift in focus from content to form. The ever-evolving nature of animation and other graphic procedures in the visual mode of communication in the 21st century has sparked the quest for the perfection of the visual form and the highest possible level of interactivity. The content of virtual digitalised discourses wanes in importance and the participants in the communication fall under the dictatorship of the visual form. Digimodernist individuals may lack elementary writing skills or struggle with face-to-face communication, but they are better equipped with skills for uploading photos taken on their mobile phones to their Instagram or Facebook accounts, or with the skills of handling 3D technology necessary for esport gaming. New mediated communication forms and new interaction forms in cyberspace are gradually replacing direct social contact and leisure activities accompanied by physical meetings and regular conventional social interactions. Postmillennials are more likely to communicate via mobile phones than face-to-face; they prefer esports and online gaming to competing with their peers in real matches; in effect, they spend more time in virtual digital worlds than in the real world, navigating the Internet while searching for a new esports game or a new gaming blog or vlog and sharing it with peers grouped to more than one esports social network. The more visual a text is, the more displayable, reproducible and consumable it is in virtual discourse. The visualisation of postmillennial discourses is essential because it is their visual presentation and representation that attracts individuals and makes the interaction and sharing more authentic and appealing.

Moreover, the characteristics of esports discourse indicate all of the features of hypermodern texts as defined by Gilles Lipovetsky (2005). Esports are a discourse representing the complexity of digitalisation, the globalisation of communication, extreme forms of individualism and the excessive consumer behaviour of individuals (the elementary structural patterns of hyperindividuals). Esports gaming has the potential to satisfy the excessive wishes and diverse tastes of hyperconsumers who link their everyday practices of engaging in sport (including the audience activities) with the mediated practices of esports gaming and the almost limitless possibilities which it offers. The constantly growing discourse of esports on various platforms is able to fulfil the growing needs of perpetually unsatisfied hypermodern individuals

in their quest for novelty and entertainment, gradually replacing real life sports and games activities with esports gaming practices.

The interactivity of this hypermodern communication fully corresponds with the needs of individuals to be both continuously interconnected and independent simultaneously. Esport discourse is unbound by the limitations of space and time, and its visual character supplies a constant flow of images thanks to which the individuals can engage in fantasy sports in order to realize their real life dreams. Furthermore, the visualisation of the discourse is also essential because it employs the visual presentation that is so attractive to hypermodern individuals and makes their communication more interactive, more authentic, and more appealing (cf. Rose 2016).

3 Visualisation, intermediality and the creolisation of online discourses

In 21st century discourse studies the term *visualisation* relates mostly to a graphic representation of information rather than to the creation of a mental image. As was already stated above, we can discern "the growing tendency to visualise things that are not in themselves visual" (Mirzoeff 1999: 5) that started in the last decade of the 20th century and continues to develop into the present day. The everyday environment and practices of hypermodernist and digimodernist individuals are full of visual images; they can truly be said to live in the era of visual culture. According to Nickolas Mirzoeff (Ibid.), visual culture is characterised by the following dominant features, many of which also correspond with the characteristics of hypermodernism and digimodernism discussed above:

1) Globalization
2) Rapid production and utilization of visual content
3) Onscreen life
4) Visually-dominant media in all spheres
5) Reduction of critical thinking.

Based on the cybernetic approach to communication, it is possible to outline three basic research fields in the visual content sphere:

1) Production of visual content– dealing with questions of who created it and why
2) Meaning of visual content – answering questions of what is represented and by means of which channel
3) Perception and effects of visual content – determining what was received and interpreted.

Julie Steele outlines three elementary categories of the visualisation of discourses:

1) Infographics and other categories of hand-drawn or custom-made images (automated tools can be used, but one size does not fit all)
2) Data visualization as a kind of bidirectional encoding that allows ideas and information to be transported from the database into the human brain (ranging from complex interactive materials or animated graphs to brightly-coloured infographics)
3) Visual content as an artform (Steele 2012: p.n.a.).

Language is of crucial importance in the materialisation of images due to its nominalizing function; however, the human brain perceives visual images more easily and this form of perception consequently leads to visual data expansion. Visual content has become a new format in journalistic discourse, enabling audiences to be informed and helping to make their decisions. Visualization as a technology has its own specific goals and adopts concepts, methods and tools from other fields to that end. For instance, design mapping principles are

taken from cartography, graph data designation rules from statistics, visual design provides the laws of composition, modelling and colourisation, writing styles are adopted from journalism, software applications are taken from the IT sector and programming and psychology offer readership orientation (Shevchenko 2014: p.n.a.).

The growing visualisation of media discourses and information overload has resulted in the transformation of mass media. In the 1990s audiences lost interest in news items whose discourse lacked substantial visual elements in support of their verbal (written or spoken) modes. Henceforth, visual content has been taken as proof of authenticity and actuality, leading to the contemporary tendency in which news is constructed as visually dynamic dramatised events with very limited factual content (Azimov & Schukin 2009).

Therefore, even journalistic genres which had long been strong in verbal (spoken and written) modes have become overwhelmed by the absolutism of visualisation in their discourses, and the role of contemporary journalism has adapted to its new role of organising verbal and visual modes respecting the expectations of audiences who live within hypermodernist and digimodernist visual culture. In order to fulfil this goal, mass media employ polysemiotic discourses that combine verbal coding techniques with nonverbal elements, primarily visual in nature. Verbal and other nonverbal components of mediated discourses represent *intermediality* – a term introduced by Klaus B. Jensen (cf. Jensen 2016) to describe the interconnectedness of media and communication, within which different discourses of various media interact as elements of various communicative strategies within wider social and cultural environments.

In print media discourse intermediality is realised through the polycoding of written and iconic elements; in the case of audio discourses (for example, radio broadcasting) this occurs through the interaction of spoken and musical elements; in the case of television discourse, we can observe polycoding in, for example, teletext and video sequences in the visual mode. The internet can act as a platform with the space to accommodate polycoding through various modes, providing ground for the utilization and hybridism of the majority of polysemiotic system forms and elements. Procedures involving the use of advanced polysemiotic systems lead to the progression of a *creolisation* of discourse, a phenomenon characterised by the representation of one or more non-homogenous elements (for example, verbal or lingual and nonverbal) that are related to other semiotic systems rather than natural language (cf. Sorokin 1990).

Esport discourses represent the essence of creolised texts in the 21st century in a state-of-the-art form. These discourses integrate elements of verbal and nonverbal polysemiotic systems, both textual and visual elements, and this polycoding character enables them to attract large numbers of media consumers. The visual content elements contain information supporting the verbal/written mode of the text: photographs, pictures, schemes, maps, graphs, videos, flash animations, graphical designs, logos, etc. (cf. Shevchenko 2014; Simakova 2017). Internet-memes and hashtags are somewhat distinctive in function and complex in composition. Memes are polysemiotic in construction, usually ironic and viral in nature, aimed at triggering an emotional reaction, and they can be characterised as elements of the visual mode belonging to cultural narratives (cf. Karp'jak 2018). Hashtags represent textual elements related to visual ones and they illustrate the existence of text as a single message expressed in signs of different semiotic systems.

Thanks to the ongoing development of new digital technologies and the ample opportunities they offer for online streaming – one of the elementary preconditions for the functioning of esport media discourses – combined with advances in the visualisation and

implementation of polysemiotic modes have resulted in the massive development of esport gaming discourse. The case study below intends to prove that it is the extensive visualisation, intermediality, and creolisation of esport discourse that have enabled its growth and increasing popularity. Although the esports industry can trace its roots back to the 1970s, the advances in IT sector, digitalisation and wider access to personal ICT items and high-speed internet connections make the lively and vivid discourse of esport gaming a quintessentially 21st century phenomenon.

4 Case study: Russian language esport media discourse

The research objective of this case study was to explore the role and the function of visual mode in the creolisation of Russian language esport media discourses, specifically the esport media of Cybersport.ru and Cyber.Sports.ru, through an analysis of published texts related to one of the leading CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) multidisciplinary teams *Virtus.Pro Dota2* and the Chinese team *Newbee Dota2*, both of which primarily play Dota2. The choice of these teams for investigation in the case study was justified by the following criteria:

1) both teams are comparable in terms of the prize money they have won in tournaments
2) both teams occupy leading positions in Dota2 tournaments
3) *Newbee* won The International 2014, Perfect World Masters and ESL One Genting 2018 and earned $11,873,118 in prize money (Newbee 2019: p.n.a.)
4) *Virtus.Pro* is the leading CIS team in terms of prize money ($8,952,628); they won 5-6 places at The International Major and were the leaders at the close of the Dota Pro Circuit 2017/2018 game season (Virtus.Pro 2019: p.n.a.).

The analysed corpus of published texts consisted of the materials of Cybersports.ru, comprising 729 texts about *Virtus.Pro Dota2* and 57 texts about *Newbee Dota2*, and material from Cyber.sports.ru, comprising 1774 texts about *Vitrus.Pro* and 219 texts about *Newbee*. The research focused on the discipline of Dota 2, a multiplayer computer game with two teams of five players. One team plays for The Radiant and the other team for The Dire. The goal of each team in every round is to destroy the rival's Ancient and to defend their own (eSports Market Report 2019: p.n.a.). Esports players use a mouse and keyboard in an arrangement to that found in real time strategy games and the game perspective uses a simulative isometric view.

Using the data provided on echarts.com, the numbers of evisitors to Dota2 tournaments per month can be examined and the information can be filtered by country or event. According to the available data, there were 811,672 viewers of ten Dota2 tournaments, and a total time of 18,517,532 hours was spent watching these tournaments in January 2019. The combined prize fund for the month of January 2019 consisted of US$1,522,257 (Dota2 2019: p.n.a.). In January 2020 865,060 viewers spent a total of 27,869,508 hours watching 21 Dota2 tournaments. The prize pool for January 2020 was US$16,907,740 (Dota2 2020: p.n.a.). Furthermore, the data from the Virtus.pro social media resources, such as the SMM feat blog which specialises on esport audience analysis in social media, offer a more detailed breakdown of the audience participation in these events in 2019: 81.6% were men and 18.4% were women; 79.28% lived in Russia and 6.25% in Ukraine; the most popular forum on social media platforms was VK Dota2 with 205,591 subscribers (SMM feat. Cybersport. 2019: p.n.a.).

The data prove that esports audiences of streaming services are growing in number, a trend which correlates with the growing number of people involved in esports gaming

activities. This growing popularity and increased financial rewards have led to the increasing demand for more dynamic and dramatic professional events, professional commentary and dedicated journalism, a process which itself stimulates the further development and professionalisation of esports media in both professional and bush-leagues. Compared to the numbers of viewers and money involved in esports gaming in, for example, the USA, the Russian growth in the number of people and businesses involved in Russian esports is growing at a much slower rate, probably due to the more limited financial resources. Another consequence of this trend is that there is little subdivision of Russian eaudiences into individual esport communities (Nikolaeva 2018: p.n.a.).

The analysis of the corpus revealed that esports media fans do not directly correlate to esports media audiences: according to the analysis of the content development strategies, it is possible to distinguish which esports media outlets focus more on cybersports players and their fans and which esports media outlets are more directed towards policymakers and advertisers seeking out their target audiences. For instance, the Russian esports portal cyber.sports.ru, which was developed on the biggest Russian online media sports.ru, describes itself as the leading sport media outlet in Russia and is currently exploring the potential of sports audiences within the world of videogaming. The portal creates special texts "explaining esports in understandable terms and placing them close to football and ice hockey materials to foster a better perception of the image of esports" for their 150,000 users per month and their specific target audiences of middle-class 18-29 year old males living in big cities who are interested in technology, media and games (https://cyber.sports.ru). On the other hand, the second most popular esports media platform, Cybersports.ru, mostly focuses on professional esports audiences.

The analysis of the corpus uncovered extensive visualisation and creolisation within Russian esports discourses. The analysis of the cybersports.ru portal revealed 31 published texts featuring infographics alone which provided Dota2 results for 2019. The materials obtained from *Virtus.Pro* (Dota2) from the period between 13.01.2019 and 29.12.2019 consisted of 729 texts (comments were not incorporated into the selected sample). All of the published texts included hypertext links and hashtags sections. There were no photos accompanying the texts (with one exception), and the most common journalistic genres among the texts were news reports and short text articles/items, but there were also some examples of more extensive texts, including opinion pieces or observation articles (cf. https://www.cybersport.ru/dota-2/articles/virtus-pro-i-navi-proshli-na-meidzhor-miracle-stolknulsya-s-problemami-kak-proshli-otborochnye-na-vtoruyu-paru-turnirov-dpc).

Newbee (Dota2) samples from the cybersports.ru portal from the period of 13.01.2019-29.12.2019 recorded only 57 published texts (comments were not incorporated). Again, all published texts included hypertext links, hashtags sections, and graphic elements with tournament sections. This may suggest that that the Russian audiences are not particularly interested in the Chinese team itself and will only watch the tournaments if the Chinese team reaches top positions.

On the cyber.sports.ru portal, 1,774 texts were identified concerning *Virtus.Pro* and these typically took the form of short news items, more extensive analytical articles and blogs. All of the published texts were supported by photo illustrations, more than a half of them (all of them in the version formatted for mobile phones) used these illustrations in their headlines. The most frequently appearing images depict scenes from tournaments; they often show the emotional reactions of cybersports players and show the players seated at their PCs while playing or in esports team photo profiles. The texts also featured images of esports members

taken outside the tournament period, but in most cases they were dressed in their esports team-branded clothes. Many visuals were illustrations of the esports team virtual images.

The visual materials concerning *Virtus.Pro* included logos or names of commercial brands such as Pari Match and Adrenaline Rush on team clothing. These images also featured computer equipment and game armchairs portrayed with their brands, and Starbucks appeared in product placements in three photos from 2019. The analysis identified 219 texts about *Newbee* on the cyber.sports.ru portal, all of which included hypertext links, hashtags sections, and graphic elements with tournament analysis. All of these findings reveal that the most frequently used elements of visual content in the discourse on Russian esports were photo illustrations, pictures and infographics including tournament graphics. These visual elements were targeted to evoke an emotional response from an audience which is not as intensely involved in esports as more dedicated cybersports players or fans. The analysis of additional visual elements that accompanied the written texts but were not part of them recorded a high occurrence of screenshots, popular quotations and memes, quizzes and pooling, and call-to action buttons. These additional visual elements were used as interaction enhancing tools.

The analysis of selected elements of the verbal mode also demonstrated the audience-oriented approach in the creolised texts. The ratio of common vocabulary to esports terminology was 4:1 in the texts taken from the cyber.sports.ru portal, a relationship which did not differ significantly from the ratio of 4:1.5 in the texts from cybersports.ru. This type of ration is often found in relatively new and developing sports, such as skateboarding, parkour or kite surfing, because these activities are characterised by rather informal communication styles and lexical styles in which differentiation is nearly absent (Nikitina 2012: 135). At the same time, the esports terminology used by professional esports players, journalists, and audiences contained conceptual and terminological frameworks in which it is a very challenging task to draw the line between specific terms, slang and argotic expressions (Rudenko 2016).

Moreover, the esports language lexis featured a combination of sport lexis represented by sport terminology and computer gaming industry lexis and consequently it was possible to identify a considerable number of English language loan words due to the "international status of communication between esportsmen" (Zaripov 2016: 99). The analysis showed that texts from both of the analysed online platforms contained several basic types of loan words:

1) loan words adapted to the Russian language grammar system, e.g. 'kor' in Russian 'кор' (English core), 'sapport' in Russian 'саппорт' (English support)

2) lexis loans with unchanged graphical image (EPIC League Season, Morph + Earth Spirit)

3) nominative lexis with tired semantics (Егор «epileptick1d» Григоренко, Ху 'Kaka' Лянчжи).

Lexical items which are visually represented in Latin characters can appear irrational, incomprehensible, and even barbaric in relation to the Russian language for audiences not involved in esports. Nonetheless, esports fans can interpret these names easily and consider them as vital contributions to the identity of the esports community.

Conclusion

Although similar tendencies for the extensive visualisation, creolisation and intermediality were identified in the published texts of both analysed platforms, a number of differences were

also recorded. In the texts published on the cybersport.ru, verbal elements were supported by nonverbal elements and there was a wider variety of visual mode content features targeted at non-professional audiences (including hypertext links, hashtags sections, graphic elements with tournament analyses, and photo illustrations). The main type of visual content featured in the texts published on the cyber.sports.ru portal was hypertext links and hashtag sections. The content of these illustrations is quite emotional in order to capture the attention of the audiences. Other types of visual content elements are represented by pictures illustrating the esports team virtual images, and infographics including tournament listings.

The analysis of the visual mode and selected elements in the verbal mode of Russian esports media discourses confirms the hypothesis that esports discourses are representative of typical hypermodernist and digimodernist discourses where the dominant mode is visual and the text is characterised as creolised. The visualisation of individual elements of esports discourses is influenced by extralinguistic discursive factors of digimodernist hyperconsumer societies where individuals live in the environment of visual culture. The visualisation and creolisation of the discourse contributes to the creation of specific individualised esports communities of esport players, their fans, owners and advertisers.

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