

## Phatic communication in computer games

### Introduction

Computer games provide a great opportunity to study the interaction between the player and the media text, and the role of the mediating media technologies therein. Computer games seem to involve the players bodily, in contrast to the passive, immobile spectator seated in a dark cinema theatre who refers to what Christian Metz called, an 'imaginary signifier' and whose real bodily experiences seem to have totally vanished.<sup>1</sup> For a semiotic researching modern media interaction with a special interest in the bodily involvement in media, computer games are a challenging research topic. This is particularly the case when you are working in the tradition of French semiotics, because it defines media objects as textual objects, and the spectators or players as constructed textual positions. Within this theoretical framework the study of interactivity in new media and computer games functions almost as a test case for the validity of semiotic analysis. How to study the playing of computer games, which seems to involve real bodily interaction and experiences of real, social and psychological subjects, as semiotic processes?

To gain an insight into the complex issues of interactivity in new media, and players' interaction with computer games in particular from a semiotic point of view, I propose a reevaluation of the concept of phatic communication as introduced by Bronislaw Malinowski in 1923 and reformulated by Roman Jakobson in 1960.<sup>2</sup> After a short discussion of the concept of phatic communication, I'll show how the foregrounding of the phatic function in artistically and technologically modified computer games, such as the PAINSTATION,<sup>3</sup> gives us a better

- 1 Christian Metz: *The Imaginary Signifier. Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*. Bloomington 1981.
- 2 Bronislaw Malinowski: «The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages» [1923]. In: K. C. Ogden/I. A. Richards (Eds.): *The Meaning of Meaning. A Study of the Influence of Language Upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism*. London 1949, p. 296–336.
- 3 PAINSTATION. ENHANCED DUELLING ARTEFACT (2001, //////////////fur/// art entertainment interfaces). The name Painstation is obviously a play with SONY's PlayStation and probably the designers of the Painstation had troubles with copyright because they covered the logo with a black banner with the word 'censored' and changed the name of the website in: «No pain, No gain. Official website of the Artwork formerly known as PainStation».

understanding of our interaction with computer games. At the same time I will give some indications of how the notion of phatic communication can serve as starting point for semiotic analysis.

## Phatic communication

The British anthropologist and founder of Functionalism in Anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski, introduced the notion of phatic communion in 1923 to account for the apparently senseless utterances in verbal exchange. Normally, during conversations, we do not pay much attention to utterances like «ooh» and «ahh» or apparently meaningless sentences like «nice weather» or «how do you do». These types of speech are looked upon as mere exchanges of words and seem to have another function than to convey meaning. According to Malinowski their function of speech is a social one, because they aim to create social bonds and the establishing of social relationships. Malinowski calls this function the phatic communion which he defines as «a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words.»<sup>4</sup>

Note the fact that Malinowski, speaks about «communion» and not about communication, to underline the social character of the phatic communion. He stresses the fact that language is primarily a «mode of action» and he considers the communication of ideas and thoughts as one of the most derivative and specialised functions of language: «In its primitive uses, language functions as a link in concerted human activity, as a piece of human behaviour. It is a mode of action and not an instrument of reflection.»<sup>5</sup>

The well-known Russian linguist Roman Jakobson<sup>6</sup> integrated the notion of phatic function into his famous model of communication. Jakobson distinguishes six constitutive factors of verbal communication: addresser, addressee, message, code, context and channel.

The functioning of the model is very obvious. The ADDRESSER sends a MESSAGE to the ADDRESSEE. To be operative the message requires a CONTEXT to refer to and a CODE which is fully or partially common to the addresser and addressee. Finally it needs a CONTACT, a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and addressee, which enables both of them to enter and to stay in connection.

Each of these six factors of communication correlates with a corresponding «function of language». The «meta-linguistic function» for instance, is oriented

4 Bronislaw Malinowski: «The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages», p. 315.

5 Ibid, p. 312.

6 Roman Jakobson: «Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics». In: Thomas A. Sebeok (Ed.): *Style in Language*. Cambridge, Mass. 1978, p. 350–377.

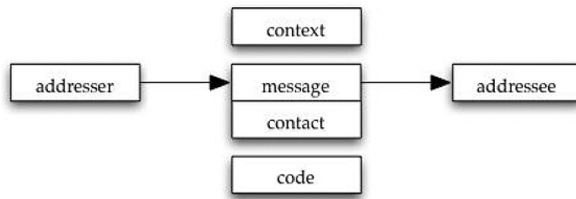


Abb. 1 Schema Jakobson

doesn't check the code, but «checks whether the channel works». In other words, phatic communication is not about the content of the message, but about prolonging the contact and the maintenance of the communication channel itself.

This means that messages in which the phatic function predominates primarily serve to establish communication («Hi!»), to prolong communication («Yes...hmm»), or to discontinue communication («Bye»). Or to check whether the channel works («Hello, do you hear me?»), to attract the attention of the interlocutor, or to confirm the continued attention («Are you listening?»).

Although the phatic function in Jakobson's model seems to be congruent with the definition of Malinkowski's phatic communion, it receives a purely functional definition. Jakobson's phatic function points at the technical maintenance of the channel and not, as in Malinowski's definition, at a «mode of action» defined as a purely social activity to create social ties of union. Jakobson's notion of phatic communication became an indispensable tool in conversation analysis to study «small talk».<sup>7</sup>

Although Jakobson initially conceived his model for the analysis of verbal communication, it quickly became the dominant model to describe human communication in general. The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard introduced the term phatic communication to media theory, but he uses the concept in a very peculiar way. Because modern communication is more and more mediated by information technologies, the modern mass media fabricate in his view a «non-communication» that blocks the real exchange and the real communication between interlocutors. In his eyes, Jakobson's model is therefore a correct and faithful description of this modern human situation of non-communication. He reproaches Jakobson for having given a «scientific» and «objective» construction of communication which in fact is rooted in a simulation model of language, and excludes from its inception «the reciprocity and antagonism of interlocutors, and the ambivalence of their exchange.»<sup>8</sup> Jakobson's model reduces communication to a single meaning which is transmitted in one direction between

on the code and checks whether addresser and addressee are using and understanding the same code. The phatic function differs from the meta-linguistic function because it doesn't

7 J. Coupland / N. Coupland: «How are you?: Negotiating phatic communion». In: *Language in Society*. Vol. 21 (1992), p. 207–230. Justine Coupland: *Special issue: Small talk: social function*. Mahwah, NJ, London 2003. Klaus P. Schneider: *Small talk : analysing phatic discourse*. Marburg 1988.

the two static poles of the transmitter and receiver. This model provides perfect evidence of the distance that separates encoder and decoder in modern society, which are both artificially held apart and only reunited by a medium or a technological intermedium.

According to Baudrillard, the mere existence of the contact category or the notion of phatic function provides evidence for the fact that Malinowski's concept of phatic communion has lost its original sense. The fact that we are communicating becomes an end in itself. The original phatic communion has been transformed into phatic communication, and communication has become nothing more than a «simulation of communication»: «Contact for contact's sake becomes the empty form with which language seduces itself when it no longer has anything to say.»<sup>9</sup> Not the natives Malinowski observed, but we, living in modernity are in need of a specific contact function: «The discovery of the «phatic» function is symptomatic of the need to inject contact, establish connections, and speak tirelessly simply in order to render language possible.»<sup>10</sup> We have lost face to face communication, we communicate through intermediaries, «such as» communication technologies, information systems, mass media, or computer games. Their «cold» seduction with its ludic qualities replaces the «warm» seduction and the enjoyment of real play of for instance chess, football, or even of the pleasures specific to computers:

the «narcissistic» spell of electronic and information systems, the cold attraction of the terminals and mediums that we have become, surrounded as we are by consoles, isolated and seduced by their manipulation [...]. We are all invited to become miniaturised «game systems», i. e. microsystems with the potencial to regulate their own random functioning.<sup>11</sup>

## Modified Games

The developers of the gaming console PAINSTATION, a modified version of the classic game PONG,<sup>12</sup> claim that their game involves real interaction between players and even with the people watching the game. They claim that particularly the inclusion of haptic and tactile interaction in the game breaks with the

8 Jean Baudrillard: «Requiem for the Media». In: Jean Baudrillard (Ed.): *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. St. Louis, Mo. 1981, p. 164–184, here p. 178.

9 Jean Baudrillard: *Seduction*. New York 1990, p. 164.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., p. 162.

12 TENNIS FOR TWO (1958, Brookhaven National Laboratory), Pong (1973, Atari).

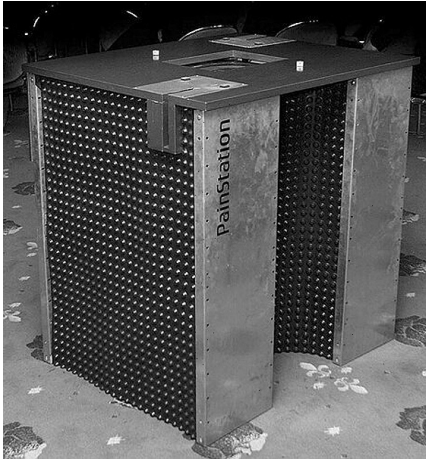


Abb. 2 Painstation

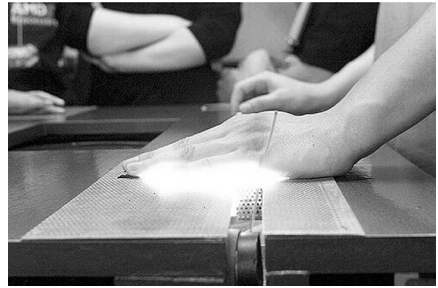


Abb. 3 Pain Execution Unit



predominance of the screen and sound, or the visual and aural perception channels in computer games. They characterise their PAINSTATION as an «Enhanced Duelling Artefact» which restores the physical context between the players, and between the players and the game. Their project seems to counter Baudrillard's critique on the hypertrophy of phatic communion and to restore the symbolic altercation or duel of words of Malinowski.<sup>13</sup>

The PAINSTATION originally started as a project of two students Tilman Reiff and Volker Morawe at the Kunsthochschule für Medien (Köln). A short description of their modification of one of the first-generation computer games PONG, makes it clear why some call the game ironically «Pain Pong».

Two players are placed opposite to each other over a table console. With their right hands they control a bat on screen, and their left-hand is positioned on a sensor field, the Pain Execution Unit. When both players place their hands on the Pain Execution Unit an electric contact is made, and the game starts. In the Pain Execution Unit is located a heat lamp, which burns the hand of your opponent, an electrical circuit, which shocks the hand, and a whip, which rapidly whips the same part of your hand with a wire, over and over again. And if you pull your hand away from the pain, you break the electric circuit and lose: «game over». Missing a ball during the play is not only annoying, but also very painful

13 Jean Baudrillard: *Seduction*, p. 164.

because your left hand suffers the consequences through the application of the heat, the electric shocks and the quick whipping on the back of your hand.

The second version of the game even included flashlights to temporarily blind the players and to distract the players from the actual gameplay. They also added the possibility to



*Abb. 4 Playing the Painstation*

adjust the pain levels, a blower with cold air, a choice of different whips and a re-designed sound system, to let the players not only hear but also feel the sound.

If you take a closer look at the screen of the PAINSTATION, you'll see the Pain Inflictor Symbols (PIS) randomly arranged along both sides of the playing field. Each represents a different sort of pain or increase in pain. For instance the rectangular game icons represent an almost unblockable ricochet, a quadrupling of pain execution time and an increase in ball speed. Players, even the most sceptical ones, like to play the game and even want to get hurt. They all end up with bruised hands, which seems to turn the English expression «No pain, no gain» into «No pain, no game». On the internet one even finds sites (pain galleries) devoted to the trophies of the PAINSTATION: red hands with bruises.<sup>14</sup>

Most of the time the PAINSTATION, which still is not commercially available, and only playable in exhibitions, is one of the few installations which makes people talk and interact with each other. The sounds and light, the cries and laughter of the players, the harshness of punishments attracts visitors and players and ensures that the PAINSTATION becomes a real social event. The real attraction of the game is probably not the actual playing of the game or the mere experience of pain, but the interaction with the other player, the bystanders and the game technology. The developers stress that the game is not about inflicting pain on your opponent, but from preventing the pain from reaching you. In other words, the real opponent is not the other player, but the computer itself. The computer seems to strike back, seems to involve the players physically and bodily in the game.

14 «Hall of Pain». URL: <http://www.painstation.de/new/gallery.html> [2004], 15. March 2005.

## Unplayable games

There seems to be no escape from the totalitarian and reactionary prison of simulation and hyperreality <designed> by Baudrillard. All efforts of the PAINSTATION developers or the constructors of physical force-feedback devices, such as handsets like the Bioforce Controller or the Xshock Controller, that rumble or give electric shocks when a player is hit or crashes, or the incredible gadget like the Force Feedback Underwear which gives a force and vibrations feedback with karate and fight games, seem to enhance the <coolness> of the medium rather than to overcome it.<sup>15</sup> As the game critic Vanni Brusadin states, the ultimate effect of all these technical or artistic modifications of the games is that they become unplayable.<sup>16</sup> The physical or conceptual hacks of popular games «not only challenge gamers' skills (as any good computer game does), but force the gamer to bring the state of things around h/er into play.»<sup>17</sup> Hence unplayable games shift the focus of the game from the <content of the game> to the bodily experience of the player and the experience of the player's body in the overall environment. They transform the communication with the game device into a predominantly phatic communication, e. g. the checking and experiencing of the communication channel itself. In the words of the developers of the PAINSTATION: «It's really about getting the body involved. That's what we are trying to do.»

The PAINSTATION is not the only modification of the classic game of PONG. The German artist Jan-Peter E. R. Sonntag created RATIO AGENDI#3 – PONG.<sup>18</sup> This variant of the historical video game PONG extends the game into real space by creating an interactive setting in which two players can interact physically without contacting each other. A video beamer projects the playing field of PONG onto the floor of the exhibition room with a tennis umpire chair installed on the edge of the court. Two bars projected at both ends of the field represent the actors, who are able to move the bars by moving along the two dimensional axes of the projected field. Their motions are monitored by a motion tracking system, and a flat screen displays the score.

15 Will Knight: «Shocking games». In: *New Scientist*. URL: <http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn831> [2001], 09. March 2005. Kevin Rose: «Dark Tip: Build an Xshok Controller». URL: [http://www.g4tv.com/screensavers/features/44543/Dark\\_Tip\\_Build\\_an\\_Xshok\\_Controller.html](http://www.g4tv.com/screensavers/features/44543/Dark_Tip_Build_an_Xshok_Controller.html) [2003], 09. March 2005. «FoFU – Force Feedback Underwear». URL: <http://www.application-systems.de/fofu/index.html> [2001], 09. March 2005.

16 Vanni Brusadin: «No Cheats for the Unplayable Games». In: *RAM1 (Re-Approaching New Media) Representation and Control Interaction in Computer Games*. URL: <http://www.ram-net.net/articles/text2.pdf> [2003], 07. March 2005.

17 Ibid.

18 RATIO AGENDI#3 – PONG (1999, Jan-Peter E. R. Sonntag/Thomas Plöntzke/Frider Weiß). See also: «Games. Computergames by artists. Exhibition 11. October–30. November 2003 Former Reserveteillager at Phoenix West». URL: [http://www.hartware-projekte.de/programm/inhalt/games\\_file/ausstellung/aus.htm](http://www.hartware-projekte.de/programm/inhalt/games_file/ausstellung/aus.htm) [2003], 09. March 2005.

Another variant of PONG was produced by the Chaos Computer Club in Berlin to celebrate its 20th anniversary. From September 12th, 2001 to February 23rd, 2002, the famous «Haus des Lehrers» office building at Berlin Alexanderplatz was transformed into the world's biggest interactive computer display called «Blinkenlights».<sup>19</sup> The upper eight floors of the building were transformed into a huge display by arranging 144 lamps behind the building's front windows. A computer controlled each of the lamps independently to produce a monochrome matrix of 18 times 8 pixels. During the night, a constantly growing number of animations could be seen. But there was an interactive component as well: you were able to play the old arcade classic PONG on the building using your mobile phone and you could place your own loveletters on the screen as well.



*Abb. 5 PONG – BLINKENLIGHTS*

The last version of PONG I found, is a prototype for SONIC PONG which is based on a sonic interface for navigating in a 3D sound space.<sup>20</sup> It makes use of the sound of the classic PONG which was created by Nolan Bushnell in the early 1970's. In SONIC PONG, the visuals, apparently the most important aspect of video games, are removed and it is only played with sound. The sound creates «bodily images of «paddles» touching the «ball» and the ball «bouncing» on a «board» since it relates to previous experiences of early computer games.»<sup>21</sup>

Other computer games were modified as well, TEKKEN<sup>22</sup> for instance was modified into TEKKEN TORTURE TOURNAMENT produced by C-level labs in San Francisco.<sup>23</sup> The players of TEKKEN TORTURE TOURNAMENT are wired into an electronic system which converts the virtual damage of the player's avatars into bracing, but non-lethal electric shocks.

Another example not of artistic modification, but of a commercial enhancement is the Playstation2 game REZ.<sup>24</sup> REZ looks like a traditional shooter but is

19 BLINKENLIGHTS PONG (2001, Chaos Computer Club Berlin). See also: Blinkenlights project group: «Blinkenlights». URL: [www.Blinkenlights.de](http://www.Blinkenlights.de) [2001], 09. March 2005.

20 SONIC PONG (2002, RAM 1 (Re-Approaching new Media)). See also: RAM 1 (Re-Approaching new Media): «Representation and control interaction in computer games – Project Room». URL: [http://www.ram-net.net/index\\_ram1.htm](http://www.ram-net.net/index_ram1.htm) [2003], 09. March 2005.

21 Ibid.

22 TEKKEN (2000, Namco).

23 TEKKEN TORTURE TOURNAMENT (2001, C-Level Lab). See also: C-level lab: «Tekken Torture Tournament». URL: <http://www.c-level.cc/tekken1.html> [2001], 09. March 2005.

24 REZ (2001, Sega).



Abb. 6 *Trance vibrator*

or, a versatile little vibrator with a soft washable pouch, which moves in accordance with the music of the game and emits vibrations that grow four times stronger than rumble controllers like Sony's Dual-shock. Although the company didn't recommend using the device as a sex toy, this vibrator became a huge success amongst Japanese women. Within several days after the introduction of this device Jane Pinckard gave a detailed account of the masturbatory delights of the REZ <Trance Vibrator> in her weblog *Game+Girl = Advance* entry «Sex in Games: REZ+Vibrator»:

That's why I was so excited by Rez's trance vibrator, since it seems to have no other purpose than to act as a masturbatory aid. Its shape is pretty nice, it can slip easily under your skirt or in your panties, it comes with a protective <glove> which you can wash, and it emits a regular pulsating rhythm that gets ever more intense and thrilling the deeper you go into the game. Damn, by the end I was writhing on the floor! Synesthesia indeed.<sup>26</sup>

Obviously not Jane, but her boyfriend was playing the game. She «found it's tough to actually play the game and use the controller in nasty ways at the same time.»<sup>27</sup> From a semiotic point of view all these observations of modified games are highly interesting because the real bodily interactions with the game block the <normal gameplay>.

Vanni Brusadin refers explicitly to Baudrillard's notions of <simulation> and <seduction> in his discussion of the unplayable games.<sup>28</sup> According to him game

25 Alfred Hermida: «Gamers set for sensory overload». In: *BBC News Online*. Retrieved URL: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/1846561.stm> [2002], 09. March 2005.

26 Jane Pinckard: «Sex in Games: Rez+Vibrator». URL: [http://www.gamegirladvance.com/archives/2002/10/26/sex\\_in\\_games\\_rezvibrator.html](http://www.gamegirladvance.com/archives/2002/10/26/sex_in_games_rezvibrator.html) [2002], 09. March 2005.

27 Ibid.

28 Vanni Brusadin: «No Cheats for the Unplayable Games».

modifications introduce a certain distance that breaks «the strategy of complete immersion» and open up again «the possibility of <seduction>.» But Baudrillard stresses that all efforts to enhance the communication process by breaking down and multiplying the poles, introducing reversibility, multiple switching points, democratising the transmission pole by having «everyone become a manipulator» are inadequate.<sup>29</sup> In other words, whether the PAINSTATION, TEKKEN TORTURE TOURNAMENT, Trance Vibrator and the PONG variants create a genuine interaction between the players, or between the game device and the player, they are doomed to fail from the very beginning. Firstly because in the opinion of Baudrillard the interaction with electronic tennis and other computerised games cannot be distinguished from other practices of information control in our society.<sup>30</sup> Secondly, because the seduction of computer games is <cool>, they lack the <hot> emotional charge of real plays just because they provoke a tactile and haptic interaction.<sup>31</sup> Thus, precisely the introduction of haptic and tactile qualities does not enhance but inhibits a real interaction and a genuine communication.

## **Semiotic analysis**

At the beginning of my contribution, I stated that the semiotic analysis of interaction and video games had to be immanent to the media text. It seems obvious that the kind of phenomena or experiences of phatic communication in computer games go beyond the boundaries of the media text because they involve a bodily interaction of the players. This seems to oppose the prevailing idea of what can be meant by the content and the limits of a media text. A semiotic analysis of the player's engagement with media objects, and especially the analysis of the player's interaction with computer games, is a difficult undertaking. This is not only because of the fluidity of the concept of interaction, but also because semiotics traditionally consider media objects as textual objects and they therefore lack the possibility to conceptualise the positions of the player versus the media text. The introduction of the enunciation theory in the 1980's, partially resolved this issue by defining the spectator's or reader's involvement with media objects in terms of the construction of an infra-textual communication situation. By doing this, semiotic theory did not violate the operational concept of the immanence principle which states that «any recourse to extra-linguistic

29 Jean Baudrillard: «Requiem for the Media», p. 164–184. Baudrillard argues in this quotation against the utopian media policies of H. M. Enzensberger and the student movement of <68.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 159.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 160.

facts must be excluded, because it breaks down the homogeneity of the description.»<sup>32</sup>

From a semiotic point of view, communication is not, like Jakobson or Baugrillard contend, a simple transmission of a message between a real sender and receiver, but a complicated (re)construction, negotiation and production of meaning by the actants of the enunciation. The discursive relation with the communication partner is accounted for by the enunciation theory, first formulated by Emile Benveniste in 1970.<sup>33</sup> Semiotic enunciation theory does not consider enunciation in terms of a real communication situation or the psycho-sociological context of the utterance. In semiotic theory enunciation is defined as a domain of mediation «which governs the passage [...] from virtual structures (to be actualised by the enunciations) to structures that are realised (in the form of discourse)».<sup>34</sup> Simultaneously with the utterance (a textual object), this domain establishes a subject of enunciation which is never the real subject of enunciation but always a simulation of this subject in the media text. We only dispose of media texts, they form the starting point for every semiotic analysis. The subject of enunciation is, in other words, only logically presupposed by the very existence of the media text itself. The real subject of enunciation has vanished, the only remains or traces are to be found in the media texts themselves. Hence, speaking about the subject of enunciation always means speaking about a reconstruction of this subject on the basis of material media objects.

This subject of enunciation is not to be equated with the sender of the media message, but covers the two actantial positions of the implicit sender of the enunciation (the enunciator) and the implicit receiver of the enunciation (the enunciatee) at the same time. They are called implicit actants of the enunciation, and are textual positions, which may never be treated as real subjects of flesh and blood. This has far reaching consequences for the analysis of the interaction with (new) media objects, especially with those objects which seem to implicate a real interaction between an actual spectator or player, and a medium. How can we speak about an <interactive spectator> or <interactive player> without violating the fundamental principle for semiotic analysis of the immanence?

The enunciator is the presupposed term and the enunciatee the presupposing term, the communication between these two implicit actants of the enunciation is not symmetrical, and implies an unilateral presupposition. The enunciator communicates to the enunciatee, but in a different manner as the opposite posi-

32 Algirdas Julien Greimas / Joseph Courtés: *Semiotics and Language. An Analytical Dictionary*. Bloomington 1982, p. 151.

33 Émile Benveniste: *Problèmes de linguistique générale I*. Paris 1966 and *Ibid.: Problèmes de linguistique générale II*. Paris 1974. Partially translated in: Émile Benveniste: *Problems in General Linguistics*. Coral Gables, Fla 1971.

34 *Ibid.*, P. 103.

tions of the sender and receiver in Jakobson's schema of linguistic communication.

Enunciator and enunciatee are look-alikes, more or less comparable positions, because the enunciatee is not only the implicit

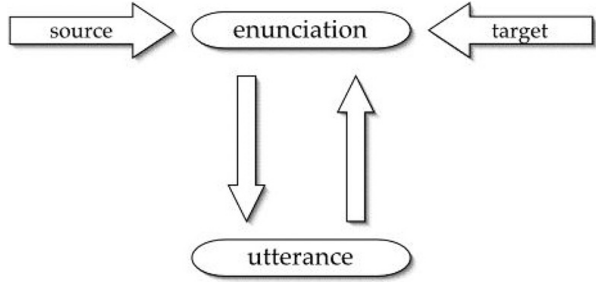


Abb. 7 Scheme enunciation

receiver of the communication but also a <discourse-producing subject>. This is because the viewing or playing (receiving) of a media text is a signifying act in the same way as the actual production of the text. The enunciatee produces a media text, just like the enunciator, but not by enunciating, but by re-enunciating the text into actual media discourse.

Reading, viewing, visiting or playing new media objects is thus primarily an act of producing media discourse whereby the enunciator manipulates the enunciatee by bringing her into a certain position, and the enunciatee negotiates with the enunciator to obtain as much information as possible to be able to sanction the content of the communication. Communicating is therefore always a polemical relation between both representatives of the implied subject of the enunciation, i. g. the actants (or figurations) of the enunciator and the enunciatee. One even could state that communication is the same as trading places, trading places between enunciator and enunciatee, between the different figurations of the enunciator and enunciatee in the text.

Emile Benveniste, who gave the first formulation of the enunciation theory, states in one of his later articles on enunciation theory, called *L'appareil formel de l'énonciation* (1970),<sup>35</sup> that the enunciation in general is characterised by an accentuation of the discursive relation with the partner. He calls this accentuation of the discursive relation between partners the figurative framework of the enunciation.

As such, this framework puts forward two figures: the source of the enunciation and the target of enunciation. Hence, states Benveniste, every enunciation presupposes a source and a target. Semioticians like Christian Metz and Jacques Fontanille introduced two decades later the same formal terminology, mainly to avoid the undesirable anthropomorphic associations of terms like <I> and <you>, or <spectator> and <film>. It is even more interesting that Benveniste, in the last paragraphs of this article, refers to the concept of Malinkowski's phatic comm-

35 Émile Benveniste: «L'appareil formel de l'énonciation». In: Ibid.: *Problèmes de linguistique générale II*, p. 79–88.

union to explain this figurative framework of enunciation.<sup>36</sup> Benveniste concludes that Malinowski describes the limits of the dialogue: «a personal relationship is created and sustained by a conventional form of enunciation which returns to itself, satisfied with the accomplishment of itself, without any object, nor aim or message, pure enunciation of the conventional words, repeated by each enunciator.»<sup>37</sup>

In other words, a semiotic analysis of the interaction with (new) media objects starts not with the analysis of the content or representational level of the messages, but with the phatic communication or the contact between the player and the game. Lev Manovich came to the same findings in his book on the language of new media in which he states that new media images stress the contact, or phatic communication.<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

Modified games teach us something about our interaction with (new) media technologies, because they shift the focus from the content of the game to the (physical) contact with the game, and accentuate the bodily interaction with the game. Their primary form of interaction is clearly a «mode of action», a continual testing of the functioning of the channel. This phatic communication is not a simple transmission of messages between a sender and a receiver, but a continuous intersubjective negotiation and manipulation between a source and target. As Malinowski pointed out, the bonds created between speaker and hearer are not symmetrical, just like the positions between source (enunciator) and target (enunciatee).<sup>39</sup> Their relation is polemical and takes place in what we could call the «tensional space» of interaction.

In the process of the enunciation (the gameplay) the game is played, e. g. the media discourse, the positions of the enunciator and enunciatee, and the meaning and experiences of the game are (re)constructed. In order to reconstruct (or in a way re-enunciate) the meaning of the utterance, the target has to adapt to the manipulation offered by the source. Vice versa, the source has to predict the actions of the target by creating manipulative strategies. In the case of the Painsation the source of enunciation has the initiative and brings a whole battery of textual strategies into action, such as physical stimuli, real or apparent mo-

36 Jacques Fontanille: *Sémiotique du discours*. Limoges 1998. Chritian Metz: «The Impersonal Enunciation, or the Site of Film». In: Warren Buckland (Ed.): *The Film Spectator. From Sign to Mind*. Amsterdam 1995, p. 140–163.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 88 (Translation J. P.).

38 Lev Manovich: *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, MA [etc.] 2001, p. 206.

39 Bronislaw Malinowski: «The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages», p. 314–315.

vements, colours, sounds, physical triggers, text, images, and other interactive strategies, to manipulate the target. This implies that phatic communication from a semiotic point of view has to be conceived of as a textual construction, as a figuration that simulates the interaction of the source and target of the enunciation within the boundaries of the media text, and not as activities of real subjects of flesh and blood.

In most discussions and critical accounts of games, gameplay is considered to be the most important factor in the success of a game and determining for its fun-factor. According to John Banks, gameplay is not about the representational aspects of the game such as the characters, the narrative or the world of the game, but all about «skill or competence, it involves the ability to effectively use the game control system or interface to navigate through the play environment».<sup>40</sup> In other words gameplay is about issues of control and controllers, about «enjoying a sense of ease, empowerment and control in a technologically mediated environment». This enjoyment, according to Banks, «derives from the blurring and confusion of the boundaries between the technological and the self.» This domain of «techno-enjoyment» invokes another materiality of the technological object because the «relation with technology is not simply or only at the level of representation, nor at the materiality of the technological object or the bodily experience and sensations of the gamer.» Banks characterises this other materiality as «a spectral interspace», a «relation between the human and nonhuman». This interspace is the same as the tensional space in which the phatic communion between source and target takes place.

Modified games give us a «better» view on this tensional interspace in which the boundaries between man and machine are blurred and confused, just because they block the «normal» gameplay. It is exactly this blurring of the technological and the self, which creates the techno-enjoyment which constitutes the fun-factor of devices like the PAINSTATION.

Malinowski stated that the primary function of language is pragmatic, and that what he calls «the narrative function», the «referential function», the «expression of thought» or the «intellectual reflection» are subordinated to the social or emotive function. In other words they are subordinated to the «phatic communion». The same can be said for the functioning of «normal» computer games, in which the techno-enjoyment is still actively present, but more silently in the back-ground. The phatic communion is constitutive for the gameplay and provides the basis for the construction of all other meanings of the game. It gives shape and form to the rules and conventions, the narrative, characters and world of the game. As a theoretical concept it gives us a better insight into the

40 John Banks: «Controlling Gameplay». In: *M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture*. Vol. 1 (1998), Issue 5. URL: <http://www.media-culture.org.au/9812/game.html>, 05. March 2005.

interaction from a more semiotic point-of-view. Further research has to show how the different forms of phatic communication influence and mould the meanings and emotive experiences in media-objects.