SURVEILLANCE SOCIETY AND THE DISAPPEARING BODIES IN VIRTUAL GAMES*

Abstract

Virtual games, which are sometimes transferred from real life to virtual life or appeal to fantasy worlds with their limitless activities at various times, mostly replace real/vital activities. In the light of the uncertain relation between virtuality and reality, it becomes no longer possible for both of the terms to veil and conceal the other one. Surveillance is probably the most important problem peculiar to this ambiguous field which time, space and identity related to virtuality/intangibility engage each other.

Given that private personal information, photo, and content sharing have become tractable without the permission or consent of the virtual game players; technology oriented new surveillance forms appear as a power problem. Accordingly, disembodiment, which becomes apparent in the lives of individuals, results in disappearing bodies.

This study aims to analyze the phenomenon of disappearing bodies through the virtual games; World of Warcraft, Second Life and Xbox Live.

Key Words: Communication Technologies, Virtual Games, NSA, Surveillance, Disappearing Bodies.

Özet

Kimi zaman gerçek yaşamdan sanal dünyaya aktarılmış, kimi zaman ise hayal dünyalarına hitap edebilecek aktiviteleri ile sınır tanımayan sanal oyunlar, çoğu

1 Prof. Dr., Ege Üniversitesi, Radyo, Televizyon ve Sinema Bölümü, guliz.uluc@ege.edu.tr
2 Arş. Gör., Ege Üniversitesi, Radyo, Televizyon ve Sinema Bölümü, bilal.suslu@ege.edu.tr
3 Yrd. Doç. Dr., Bozok Üniversitesi, Radyo, Televizyon ve Sinema Bölümü, sefer.kalaman@bozok.edu.tr

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zaman gerçek/yâşamsal sosyal aktivitelerin yerine geçmektedir. Sanallık ile gerçeklik arasındaki belirsiz ilişki artı birinin diğerinin üstünü örtmesi, gizlencesi olanaksız hale gelmektedir. Sanal olana/soyut olana dair zaman, uzam ve kimlik kavramlarının iç içe geçtiği bu muğlak alana özgü sorunlardan belki de en önemlisi “gözetim” olgusudur.

Kişilere ait özel bilgi, fotoğraf ve içerik paylaşmlarının sanal oyun kullanıcılarının izni olmaksızın ya da bilinmeksizin başkaları tarafından izlenebilir hale gelmesi, bir iktidar sorunları olarak teknoloji temelli yeni gözetim biçimlerini ortaya çıkarmaktadır. Bu da nihayetinde bedensizleşme ve beden yitimi ile sonuçlanmaktadır.

Bu çalışma World of Warcraft, Second Life ve Xbox Live sanal oyunları üzerinden beden yitimi olgusunun irdelenmesini kapsamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İletişim Teknolojileri, Sanal Oyunlar, NSA, Gözetim, Beden Yitimi.

INTRODUCTION

Internet, the most important tool of new era and digital revolution, has been an essential part of daily life in a short period of time and a new dimension has been opened for interpersonal and mass communications. It has rapidly spread due to the technological progress and therefore, caused both quantitative and qualitative changes on personal and mass communications.

Communication process has begun to occur in a virtual world and individuals have also communicated with each other via these virtual spaces. For this reason, virtual games are obviously the most significant things of these spaces. They choose and create an avatar with their own characteristics in order to play these games and also, they form new identities. On the contrary, they gradually alienate to their own physical identities due to the adoption of these virtual ones and their virtual identities have become more important than the physical ones. These virtual identities are presented to the surveillance and admiration of the other individuals. Apart from this, political power/government has also kept a mass surveillance to monitor these identities.

In the first chapter of this study, definition, types and stages of surveillance, and its transformation of mass surveillance due to new communication technologies are handled.

In the second chapter, virtual games, one of the most important tools of digital world, virtual identities adopted by individuals who isolate from their real identities and surveillance of these virtual identities by political power/government are explained.

In the last chapter, virtual/digital game players, who gradually isolate from their real identities and adopt their avatars or virtual identities, are mentioned. Thus, these created identities cause alienation and loss of the real bodies. These are surveilled by other gamers in this virtual world and also, monitored and systematically surveilled by political power/government in a global extent. Consequently, this process has transformed individuals into virtual objects of the digital world and they become notable elements of mass surveillance.
Surveillance Society

Surveillance, which is done with different tools and basically, includes watching and tracking, is handled in two different meanings. The first one is to explain the encoded information that is collected to manage the behaviors of the individuals; the second includes the behaviors of some individuals that are directly watched by the other individuals who dominate them (Giddens, 2008: 24). Accordingly, it is possible to define that the first one is storing surveillance and the second is observing surveillance (Karakehya, 2009: 325).

In the historical process, Dolgun (2005: 28), who investigated surveillance in detail and conducted studies in this subject, has divided surveillance into four stages. The first stage is defined as “snitch” and its main goal is to consolidate the security and power of government and based on verbal-written information given by third person. The second stage is comprised of intelligence operations that different methods is used for the sake of government’s security such as profiling, monitoring etc. when the apprehension of nation state and national security come into prominence in an institutionalized manner. The third stage consists of the most characteristic example of intelligence operations that is based on the first examples of developing information technologies including telephone tapping and play an important role in cold war. The fourth stage involves economic concerns that begin to rise with national security and intelligence operations that are carried out via technological resources. Thus, these are observed that digital surveillance types, particularly internet, diffuse into in every point of daily life.

Surveillance, in a broad perspective, has become an important tool of social control for centuries. Families surveilled children, teachers surveilled students, employers surveilled employees, religious leaders surveilled their communities, lifeguards surveilled those who swim in the poor, policemen surveilled streets and other public spaces, and governments surveilled people in order to detect if they obey the prohibitions and obligations defined by laws (Westin, 1967: 57). However, surveillance and its importance will be inadequately understood whether it can be defined as a mean/system that is used to ensure the continuity of social life, prevent possible dangers or fix adverse incidents.

Today, which is particularly expected to be a post-modern freedom era, new power systems appear in public and private life based on technology while the trend indicates surveillance society. In this new era, which is considered to cause libertarian environment by anarchist characteristics presented in getting information and communication fields; it is thought that humanity steps into a strict surveillance process called ‘electronic panopticism” in contrast to the expectations. Governments highly enhance their social control and surveillance powers due to various methods such as tapping of cellphones, controlling the economic processes by smart cards and storing the data of consumption/consumer profiles, equipping cities or at least thoroughfares with cameras, monitoring the websites and reading electronic mails (Dolgun, 2004: 55-56).

Visible transformations occur in the basic structure of the society with these technologies that surround our life space, and its structure, which is previously named as an information society, is now defined as a surveillance society thanks to the huge impact of these technological developments. As mentioned by Gilbert (2007), in surveillance society, the largest
data that include all places, websites, destinations, messages are now seen in the digital media and hidden in it by the political power/government instead of files that consist of written information by gathering old-fashioned tracking, profiling and monitoring.

The political power/government now have invisible paths compared to past and the term defined “private” become a silhouette that is made to be a toy of invisibility of the political power/government. Furthermore, the governing power extends its coverage zone in terms of its invisibility (Köse, 2011: 10-11). All the world is surveilled by records of cameras situated every point of daily life, cellphone signals, IP addresses, e-mail tracking systems and satellites in the space (Toprak and vd., 2009: 146-147).

“IMSI Catcher”, one of the surveillance tools, cheats the encoded data of cellphones, pretends to be the relay station of its system and therefore, chats can easily be tapped by encoded frequencies. Also, it can be tapped by using the microphones of the cellphones remotely and location of the speaker can be found accurately. Using the cellphone as a receiver to tap secretly, it is not needed to be open. A closed cellphone also functions as a receiver by the method called “Passive Tapping” unless the battery is pulled out, (Dölgun, 2005: 42). In addition to that, Echelon, international intelligence system, use more powerful online tools to control diplomatic correspondences, organized crimes, terrorism and the opposing groups that are believed to be a political threat while Karnivor, FBI surveillance system, use the “hearers” to control the millions of e-mails (Lyon, 2013: 69).

Besides, people can be followed, profiled, categorized and surveilled on the internet, one of the most popular communication tools of this century. The political power/government, which believes that surveillance and control are essential things for ruling, keeping the power and deriving a profit from them, follows its people and their actions in every place and every hour, and controls them through different manipulations.

There are various ways for governments to follow/surveillance people on the internet. The most remarkable one of them is obviously the surveillance that is practiced via virtual games.

Virtual/Digital Games

Rapid growth and transformation in information and communication technologies caused to change daily life practices, identity formations and gender definitions of people in every point of life. Particularly, computer with some features such as development speed, content and extreme interaction etc. has had a dominant position among other technological developments. It is also observed that digital games, including computers, cellphones and social networks have an important role in these technologies considering the number of players, the size of market share and its effects on players (Batı, 2011: 3).

As the term “digital”, which is defined to show the data on a screen electronically, is used as a complementary for the term “game”, it demonstrates the games that visual data including logical relations of them are reflected to the users via various platforms and representation techniques such as the screens of computer, television and cellphones (Ozhan, 2011: 22).

In the beginning, the origin of digital games so-called in a video game or computer game, in fact, dates back to 1951 (TÜDOF, 2012). For the first time on this date, Ralph Baer, who is an engineer working in a television company, suggested the idea of television-based video games. Baer, who put this idea into practice after 15 years, has gone down in history as the creator of the video games. In 1958, William A. Higinbotham developed a tennis game (Tennis
for Two) played with the oscilloscope to prevent the boredom of the personnel of Bookhaven National Laboratory and it became the first computer game in the history of humanity (Chip Online, 2008).

Also, the world's first MUD (Multi-User Dungeon, Multi-User Domain, Multi-User Dimension), a real-time role playing game that was multi-played with written texts, allowed players to be fictional characters, explore fantastic virtual places and communicate each other, was created in the same period. These games, which are main basis of graphic based massive multiplayer role-playing games of 21st century, develop the interaction from the communication oriented the person and the computer to the communication oriented people via the softwares and hardwares of the linked computers.

Especially, children and adolescents have adapted this type of communication and taken their positions in this virtual world. These cyber activities done by digital games have replaced the social relationships and other cultural activities, and the virtual world interchanged the real world rapidly. Therefore, storing surveillance can be easily done and governments can control society effortlessly (Dolgun, 2004: 21).

One of the examples of this surveillance has occurred between the years of 2007 and 2009. Former CIA agent Edward Snowden claimed that virtual chats in the massive online games such as World of Warcraft, Second Life and Xbox Live were followed by secret service agents and then, he sent the related documents to Guardian, ProPublica and New York Times. NSA, which examined profiles of people in these virtual games, some of the keywords used in chats, money transfers, registered biometric photos of people via chat cameras. It is also mentioned that NSA worked together with English secret service, GCHQ, in this issue. (Ball, 2013).

Similarly, governments surveil digital games and digital game players in accordance with different purposes. Additionally, digital game players face another danger, virtual reality and this issue results in disappearing bodies.

It is seen that individuals who frequently play digital games for long periods, begin to isolate from their real identities and adopt their avatars or virtual identities. This causes them to alienate to their physical bodies, lose their selves and maintain their presences in a virtual world.

Disappearing Bodies

As digital games are the significant part of the network society, new identities apart from real life are the result of the digital and interacted media technologies. New socializations, identity and belongingness forms appear with the changes in the perceptions of time and place. Cyber-cultural experiences, wars or friendships in a fantastic online worlds of “Massive multiplayer role-playing games” affect social and personal memory of people (Sayılgan, 2012). Accounts that created in online worlds, in other words, "avatar" is not isolated from "persona" of an individual. Players, carry habitus of their real life to virtual world via their virtual identities. Ages, gender, experiences, social classes, ethnicities, ideologies, cultural and social lives of the individuals are reflected in the character/avatar of virtual world (Binark, 2014).

Actually, we need to mention the term “parallel universe” in the online worlds of virtual characters. Players spend most of their time in the online worlds and live in these virtual worlds as a real one. Emotions such as success or failure, joy, sadness are felt the same as it is in real life (Bati, 2011: 11).
At first, these games were just played to spend time but later on players changed the way of the play and virtual characters become a part of their selves. As a result, online world is thought to be equivalent to the real world. Even some of the players, who are fond of these games and spend all of their time in them, start to believe that their online characters are their real bodies. In sum, they adopt their virtual bodies and isolate from the real ones.

An interesting incident related to world of Warcraft (WoW), a legendary game of the digital world, give us a significant clue about the importance of digital games in our social life. A WoW player, Jerald Spangengberg had an intestinal knot syndrome while he was playing WoW and died at hospital at the age of 57. Afterwards, his daughter, Melissa Allen, followed his father’s way which could be defined as a “digital legacy”. She got in touch with gamer friends of her father and told them that she did not give up playing and mentioned her will to maintain the presence of her father in the game. Thanks to her diligent effort, she found the game password of her father and continued to play his game character. Therefore, life in digital world does not end up with the death in real life (Batı, 2011: 11).

Another example of the relation between virtual identity and real one occurred in the game, Second Life. A woman caught his gamer husband with a woman game character in the game in an inappropriate situation and sued him to divorce. This one is a significant example to indicate how these games are perceived by digital game players. A virtual character can cause the divorce of a married couple. As it is understood from its name, Second Life claims to form a “second life” for its players. In this game, players can choose their looks, families, jobs, sex in accordance with their wishes (Batı, 2011: 13).

As it is seen that reproduction of the same objects and terms is the ultimate goal in our contemporary age, it is not appropriate to define the reality as “an objective reality”. This subject also paves a way for the discussion of image-reality and hyper-reality. At that point, the reality faced today is a reality that consumerist society imposes us. Accordingly, the creative relation between the life and the consciousness should not be directly argued in a cause and effect relation but it should be dialectically evaluated in a simulation process that there is no difference between the authentic and the fake, the real and the imaginary. It is obviously clear that digital games have a significant impact on these things (Batı, 2011: 16).

Although these online worlds look charming, the burden of the online characters on the identities and linking to a personal computer constantly makes individuals sad and lonely because these online characters consist of a fake and falsehood that we create about ourselves. The online characters that we create in digital games reduce our potential and completely transform us to be basic functional entities (Berne, 2013: 84).

The lack of self-confidence, which occurs due to different psychological and sociological factors, is pacified with these online characters (Berne, 2013: 84). Namely, individuals who want to achieve and to be limitless in contrast to their real life, they accomplish their goals by creating virtual identities/characters. However, these virtual identities / characters cause them to be ordinary entities despite their wishes to be authentic and different.

People, who spend most and nearly all of their time in these games, are getting more attached to their online characters. As a result of this, their online characters become the only important things in their life and this problematic issue causes them to alienate to themselves and isolate from their real bodies.
Conclusion

Internet, an essential part of daily life, has replaced traditional communication tools in a short period of time and become a communication media of new era. Therefore, daily routines have been done in digital world due to this progress.

In the transformation of the society in parallel with digitalization, individuals have gradually become addicted to technology, computer and internet. Internet, a touchstone of digitalization, essentially has an importance including postmodern period. Several daily activities such as games, shopping, friendships, chats, financial investments, online education are done in virtual world and therefore, these cause individuals to adopt their physical bodies to virtual world.

There have also appeared some problematic issues such as alienation and loss of real identity or extreme adoption of virtual identity although the virtual world provides some options such as fast communications, entertainments, interactions, accesses and diversities. Particularly, individuals create identities or avatars via virtual games and these are presented with their best features. As they are respected by other gamers and succeed with these created identities/avatars, they isolate from their physical bodies and adopt their virtual identities more than real ones. As a result, this causes them to be virtual objects of digital world and alienate to their physical bodies.

The virtual identities are also surveilled by political power/government although most gamers do not realize the issue. Personal information such as game chats, uploaded photos and addresses are surveilled and stored by political power/government. In conclusion, individuals, who are surveilled and alienated to their real identities, have quietly become the elements of surveillance society and digital world due to this problematic issue.

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