Reflections on the Ecologic Ethics in Online Games

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Abstract:

This paper studies the reflection of ethic relations between the interests of human beings and of non-human beings in online games and eco games. It will include a philosophical analysis of the inherent value of nature, emphasized by the aesthetic characteristic of being natural etc., and on the same time it will follow the impact that online games have on the education of the young generations' ecological awareness and behaviour.

Keywords: *ecological awareness, principles of environmental ethics, ecological education, online games, animal rights*

1. Introduction

Even though the ecologic education is implemented for decades by different educational curricula both in school and outside it, some discrepancies may be observed on what concerns the ways of implementing it, as a response to the environmental problematic, which means unbalancing the relationships between man and nature. We are dealing with the intellectualist manner of practicing the ecologic education which is limited only to knowing the ecologic norms and values, norms which are not similar to and do not appear in behavioural acts. In other words, every man knows that he has to protect nature, but he does not do this out of his own conviction or initiative. This situation will impose the rethinking of the strategies of sustainability from the perspective of the instructive- educational process (Caciuc, 2003). This subject is to be considered because the tendency or the preoccupation to assimilate the ecologic education is growing, but the distance between the recommendations, the resolutions and the studies made at the international and national level and the educational practice remains still big. Even though the authors of the school curricula and programmes are placing this problematic of the contemporary world among the topics that should be included in the educational content, the practice of the ecological education is still decided only by the teachers (Caciuc, 2004). It is true that education cannot solve the environmental problems, but it can ease them, because by means of the ecological education it is easier and more economic to prevent, than to repair and to mend the damages brought to nature by the adult generations. In order to accomplish this, the ecologic education gets involved in all the disciplines that are studied, first and foremost before other exact sciences and before all the educational activities, be them of a formal, informal or non-formal nature. The interdisciplinary approaches for the ecologic education and for the computer disciplines constitute an efficient way to accomplish the objectives of the ecologic education at any age. Thus, the messages which can emerge after the analysis and the interpretation of the online ecological games or of those sold on CD's have a rich ethic meaning which represents a higher access to the norms and rules of ecologic behaviour

specific to every age. The fact that children study the computer disciplines may allow the building up and the development of the conscience and the ecologic behaviour by mentally transforming some aspects, facts and concrete situations of breaking or respecting the norms of protection and preservation of the nature, or, most of the times, of the spotting and presentation of the intrinsic values of nature. Because it is an older preoccupation, the present paper will deepen the study of the interdependences and complementarities between the two fields, especially the way in which the intrinsic value of nature is reflected which is also emphasized by means of a series of properties as it follows: aesthetic, to have interests, to be a complex system, to be a natural object, etc. in the ecologic online games used by children in school or outside it.

2. Remarks of an Ethic Nature

The existence of the complexity and reciprocity of the connections between man and nature imposes the development of society in conditions of social equity and of equity towards nature. Solving the problems of the environment can be done by improving the relationship between man and nature, between society and nature. For this, it is needed a new way of thinking, a new analysis of the system of cultural and moral values in which nature should occupy an honourable place. This means an interdisciplinary approach.

The interdisciplinarity between ethics and ecologic education is based on the fact that the ecologic ethics is the one which can provide the structure and the background for the philosophic system from the perspective of sustainability, and the ecologic education is the one which can implement it at the level of each individual because by means of education one might change one's mentality and behaviour. Alongside the educational systems, the ecologic ethics may intervene in order to improve the building up and changing of the human behaviour towards nature by rethinking the philosophic system of every individual and by using a new philosophy which should guide science and technology in their future developmental strategies.

The fact that the ecologic ethics offers viable arguments for the expanding of the moral sphere from the human beings to the non-human ones helps to change pupils' mentality on what concerns the relationship between man and nature.

Thus animals have moral value both because they **have interests**, and because they have **aesthetical qualities** – like beauty. These offer to them even an intrinsic value.

Plants, ecosystem and the biosphere have a moral relevance because they are considered **to have interests, like the interest for a long life** which might be explained by the idea that they posses a good as such, "determined by the type of being that it represents, the type of biological order it pertains and the role it has as part of a whole", an argument that, unfortunately, is not solid enough. The fact that plants and ecosystems "do not have a point of view by means of which to express life", "even though they have a natural purpose, they do not manifest any attitude on what concerns this purpose, and the steps taken in order to reach it are not understood and felt", represents objective arguments in order to make an objective distinction between the ethics focusing on humans and that on life. Other arguments, like those that refer to **the quality of being a complex living thing and that of aesthetics,** similar in the case of animals, gives them an intrinsic value (Elliot, 1995: 320].

The property of being a complex system which is specific to groups of objects between which there are certain relationships – i.e. the snowflakes, the planets that make up a solar system, the erosion textures on a cliff –, gives their moral value. Another argument in favour of attributing them

moral value is "given by certain details which are specific to the way in which things are functioning biologically", argument which is controversial (Ibidem). Holmes Rolston III argues that "nature has in people's minds a long range of values" among which the aesthetic one, thus trying to prove the intrinsic value of nature. In discovering such an aesthetic value, it is crucial to separate it both from the utility and the life support and only those who will recognize this difference can appreciate the desert or the tundra." (Holmes, 2006: 320]. The passage towards the ecological holism is made by the existence of some other moral features, even if they are being contested by the more restrictive ethics. Such an example would be **the feature of being a natural object, not one that is a result of the human created technology or of culture.** According to it, the destruction of rocks – which are natural objects – by means of mining activity, is to be condemned. Some other features like the existence of a diversity of parts, the functional integration of parts**, the existence of a balance and a self-adjusting system can be accepted as determinants of the moral significance of ecosystems and biosphere.** By analyzing the natural character and the existence of a diversity of parts, R. Elliot compares a natural rock with a synthetic one or an aria covered with rain forest with a similar one which was cleared and cultivated to prove the value of the natural ecosystem. Thus, the rain forest becomes valuable because of its diversity of flora and fauna and because of its beauty that was obtained "because of the way in which parts work in harmony in order to sustain the whole" (Elliot, 2006, 321). The conclusion is that the ecosystem of the natural rain forest is definitely superior to the artificial environment. "A reason for which a man-made forest is not as good as the natural one is the experienced eye that can make the difference … These differences can be spotted and they affect the value of the forest. The reasons for the low value of the 'fake' forests are similar to those for the low price of a forgery"(Elliot, 1995: 88). In this way one can prove that the restoration projects can be a viable solution for the destroyed environments and that their value can be restored. However, R. Elliot proves in his article that the regeneration actions "do not always bring back value because part of the reason we cherish the environment is because it is purely natural." (Ibidem: 80). In conclusion, the appreciation of a decision of environmental policy is based on the relationship between the human interests and the non-human ones. Taking into consideration the above mentioned arguments, one might state that a first step towards solving the contradiction would be finding out some alternative solutions for satisfying the human interests, especially if "the changing of ecosystems is in general against the long term human interests". (Elliot, 2006: 322). Thus, making an analogy one might say that only by making the children analyze different situations and facts which have as an effect the deterioration, respectively the preservation of the environment, and by practicing the decision making according to the principles of the ecologic ethics, one will succeed to educate the young generation so as to manifest an adequate ecologic behaviour towards the environment.

3. The Way in Which the Ecologic Ethics Is Reflected in the Online Games

The problematic of the relationship between man and nature, of the effects that the uncontrolled intervention of man has over nature must be a part of the children's universe of knowledge, even from the preschool age. Alongside the children's literature which by means of the metaphoric language of the descriptions, stories, poems, etc., it represents an efficient way to make children realize the surrounding reality, the artistic education contributes significantly, even from an early age, to the perception and expression of the beauty found in nature. The songs about nature and the living beings are the most accessible to children for them to learn about the environment and all its

components in order to understand that every living thing, plant or rock, etc. has a well established place in nature and that it is conditioned by a series of factors: the place where it lives, the food, the breeding method, the relations with the other elements of the ecosystem it pertains to. The new forms of media have a decisive role in the implementation of the ecologic values and principles in the didactic activity. The Internet helps the children to understand the relationship between man–animals/plants– environment, contributing to the rounding off of the pallet of ways to accomplish the ecologic goals and contents and to making a transfer of knowledge. Also, for children the major contribution of the ecologic online games is the fact that it eases the knowledge of the intrinsic values of nature, encouraging the living and the building up of some feelings and positive behaviours towards nature. The animals' aesthetic interests and properties – which give them a moral value – are captured with finesse and skill by the creators of the game.

In J. Bentham's vision, the ability to feel pleasure or pain gives to the animals their moral status and they are perceived as beings with rights and interests, the same as humans, their rights having as finality the protection of the interests, no matter what their subject might be. The famous question of J. Bentham regarding animals – "Can they suffer?" (Bentham, 1934: 20) – is found reflected in the online games which have as a subject penguins that are catapulted. Thus, feelings like pain, courage, sacrifice, the wish to help others in need is found in the cybernetic penguin's behaviour. But in the same time it reflects a series of negative feelings like fear, the despair which is found in the screams for help of the other penguins that are trapped in the polar bears' cages. To save the penguins that were captured and to sacrifice some for the accomplishment of this mission proves well enough the interest for survival. But beyond all these, we are dealing with the feelings aroused by the game in the children that are playing. On the one hand, we are dealing with positive feelings and experiences – the child wants to save as many penguins as possible – and for this he will try to develop a series of skills regarding the computer and also a series of operative intellectual capacities, like the sense of observation, spatial representation, precision, skill, etc., and on the other hand, a series of negative and contradictory feelings and experiences – in order to escape the bears, he has to kill them by using penguins which are catapulted; the children see the violence with which the penguins hit the cliffs, rocks, bears in order to reach their goal. Passing to the next level is conditioned by the number of polar bears one kills. The negative aspect is given by the fact that the creators of such games have used as characters two endangered species and instead of arousing children's compassion and admiration towards the aesthetic, the tenderness and the impetuosity of these animals, it actually develops some aggressive feelings towards them, a fact that is contradictory with the feelings of sufferance and the desire to live, and even with the human's responsibility to protect animals, especially those who are on the verge of extinction. The fun of the game and the desire to win are actually in opposition with the goals of the ecologic education which is done in a formal way (Tincu, 2007). As ambiguous as this one and with greater negative effects are the games which present races and contests between dogs. These offer the child the possibility to choose the dog that takes part in the race according to their emotional state, either it is a gentle and playful dog or an aggressive and furious one. Even if it is just a virtual race, this could develop in the child an attitude of neglect and of violating the animal rights (www.e-joculete.ro).

Some other games, on the contrary, may overcome these types of contradictions by means of the task at hand. This is the case of the fun whales where we find even elements of ecologic ethics focused on life. The main characters of the game are the ones from the cartoon "Sharks". It uses the scene where a whale comes to a car wash for its own personal hygiene and it is helped and cleaned

by a number of small creatures. The symbiosis and the unity of the elements which make up the aquatic environment can make the child understand what an ecosystem is and how important every species is. Besides the computer skills and the intellectual capacities, the child develops also the desire to protect the whales by cleaning them up. The care and responsibility towards today's largest and so vulnerable animals of the planet is developed by replaying the game and by solving the tasks of every level in a certain time limit (www.jocuri12.com). Elements from the ethics of the "whole" are found even in other types of ecologic games such as those regarding the pollution of the seas and oceans. This time, the main character is one adored by the children, Tweety, which by means of his looks appears to be quite vulnerable, but it is smart enough and resourceful in critical situations. In this game, Tweety has to pick up the garbage from the bottom of the ocean. In order to succeed he must learn how to avoid some marine mammals or some fishes that stop him and send him to the surface of the water, thus stopping him from finishing his mission and in the same time he learns how to use the special qualities of some marine beings. Besides the computer skills, the intellectual capacities and the creativity needed to find the easiest ways to collect the garbage, children learn also about what is specific to the life of different species of marine animals, capacities and qualities which might help or stop him from solving the task of the game. The care and responsibility towards marine animals, starting from the small and peaceful ones up until the big and aggressive ones – starting from the delicate corals up until the fearless sharks -, towards the marine environment is developed by means of the desire to collect as much garbage and waist as possible. They also have a different score according to the level of pollution they produce over the aquatic environment. The motivation is also increased by the time limit imposed by the game. Identifying themselves with Tweety, the children will learn also how to protect their own life because of the oxygen tube, and not only the life of the other living beings or the environment (www.ejocurigratuite.ro). The use of these games in the ecologic education will help pupils to have a clearer image of the situations and the facts which have an ecologic content, especially when these have a destructive effect over nature (for example, viewing some images which present different ways of polluting and the negative effects of them – the image of the oceans after the spillage of different waists, the understanding and the accessibility to documentaries made in a narrative way by means of which the pupils can better understand the effects that the destruction of the wilderness has on the lives of animals or the animals' grief resulted from the abuses which some men commit, etc.). Using the new media in the activities for the ecologic education will help children understand on the one hand, the complexity of the relationship between man and nature and on the other, the steps taken by the ecologic ethicists that militate for the expansion of the moral sphere over the non-human beings. They will learn to take decisions even from the perspective of the non-human beings. Thus they are building up a mature mentality on ecology and on sustainability. At the same time, the observations pin pointed towards the fact that these desiderata can be easier reached during the extracurricular activities which take place both inside school and outside it, and during the informal ones because they allow the pupil to earn and to practice the abilities to act and to relate according to the reality they are a part of. We are referring here to the internet and the computer games which according to their content or better yet, according to their task ahead, can on the one side have positive effects which is desirable in order to help the ecologic ethics of the formal type, and on the other, some negative effects which creates contradictions on what concerns the values and norms that are taught during the classes of ecologic education. For example, if the purpose of the game is to develop the computer abilities and the task is to water as many trees as

possible in order to move onto the next level, than the effect is a positive one, but if the subject is a shark that must catch as many seals as possible, than the effect is a negative one for the development of the ecologic conscience. This is why it is necessary to better collaborate with the non-formal institutions which offer educational programmes which have as a goal the building up and the development of the abilities to use the new media, and with the family as well for a closer observation of the children when they try to value these means in the informal educational activity.

4. Instead of a conclusion:

In conclusion, it is recommended to accomplish and to implement some educational projects and activities which should put to good use all the implementing measures of the ecologic education in the educational process. The elaboration of some curricular materials which are well made represents a high necessity in order to accomplish this goal. Maybe the introducing the obligation of studying and to pass an exam regarding the ecologic education at the end of the school cycle – as it happens in Great Britain – would determine all the categories of human resources involved in the educational act to give a greater attention to nature and to its protection. In order to reach the European qualitative standards in implementing the ecological education, it is imposed that in the educational practice to move the accent from the intellectualist side of this new education, on the attitudinal one, valuing thus the casuistry and its narrative side among the educational strategies focused on the pupil. In order to build up the pupils' convictions and the ecological attitudes it is extremely necessary to prepare and to train the future teachers from the perspective of the principles of the ecological ethics.

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