

# Cortana: (Un)finished Journey from NPC to Virtual Ambassador?

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Zdenko Mago is an associate professor at the Faculty of Mass Media Communication at the University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, Slovakia. He particularly focuses on interconnections between digital game studies, marketing communication and popular culture. Among others, he is the author of the monograph *World of Advergaming: Digitálne hry ako nástroje reklamy* [World of Advergaming: Digital Games as Advertising Tools] and the textbook *Dizajn reklamnej hry (nielen) pre nezávislých vývojárov* [Advergame Design (not only) for Independent Developers]. In 2014 and 2017, he was a program committee member of the international scientific conference Central and Eastern European Games Studies. He has been the Editor-in-Chief of the academic journal *Acta Ludologica* since 2018.

Since 2001, *Cortana* has originally been a fictional non-playable character (NPC) appearing in Microsoft's game series flagship, *Halo*<sup>1</sup>, specifically in games in which Master Chief is the main protagonist, and considered one of the most important parts of the entire franchise storyline. As an artificial intelligence with a female-looking holographic projection and voice,<sup>2</sup> she serves as the Master Chief's assistant providing him intelligence background information and (even alien) IT systems mastering.

The importance of the game character declared itself in 2014 when Microsoft introduced its own multilanguage virtual assistant named *Cortana*, although, this name was originally only a codename during the feature development.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, *Cortana* has gradually been integrated into the Windows 10 system,<sup>4</sup> joining the next-generation of virtual assistants like Apple Siri and Amazon Alexa.<sup>5</sup>

However, unlike other comparable virtual voice assistants, her outstanding advantage is that just as in the games, the US localized version of the *Cortana* application is voiced by J. Taylor, the same actress that *Halo* games players all around the world have become used to for more than 20 years.<sup>6</sup> Recently, *Cortana* has appeared in the Paramount live-action TV series of the same name as the game franchise on which it is based, *Halo*<sup>7</sup>, again with the familiar voice of J. Taylor.

*Cortana* has also another unique dimension arising from her gaming origins. She actually meets the criteria to be able to be considered as gamification – utilization of the gaming character, with the same voice actress to increase interest as well as overall engagement in interacting with the operating system's in-built 'non-game' virtual assistance service.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the launch icon of this Windows application has the form of a circle, a ring, evoking the fundamental identification feature of *Halo* games – *Halo* installations' shape (Picture 1).

Nevertheless, due to innovations in the AI-powered experience in Microsoft 365, since 2020 Microsoft has transformed *Cortana*, starting with ending support for her third-party skills, and iOS and Android apps,<sup>9</sup> causing an overall reduction in awareness of her further development together with reports of killing her off by Microsoft.

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1 BUNGIE et al.: *Halo (series)*. [digital game]. Redmond, WA : Xbox Game Studios, 2001-2021.

2 Remark by the author: For this reason and for simplifying comprehensibility in this contribution, we refer to *Cortana* as 'she' and 'her'.

3 WARREN, T.: *The story of Cortana, Microsoft's Siri killer*. Released on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2014. [online]. [2022-05-20]. Available at: <<https://www.theverge.com/2014/4/2/5570866/cortana-windows-phone-8-1-digital-assistant>>.

4 WILLIAMS, W.: *Microsoft updates Cortana for Windows Insiders*. 2020. [online]. [2022-05-20]. Available at: <<https://betanews.com/2020/04/22/microsoft-updates-cortana-for-windows-insiders/>>.

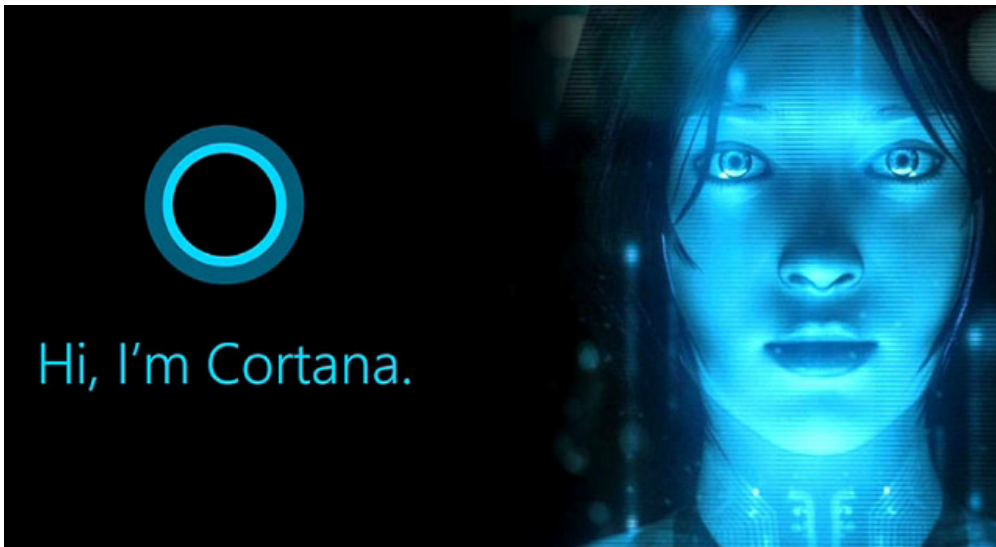
5 For more information, see: HOY, M. B.: *Alexa, Siri, Cortana, and More: An Introduction to Voice Assistants*. In *Medical Reference Services Quarterly*, 2018, Vol. 37, No. 1, p. 81-88.; KÉPUSKA, V., BOHOUTA, G.: *Next-generation of virtual personal assistants (Microsoft Cortana, Apple Siri, Amazon Alexa and Google Home)*. In CHAKRABARTI, S., SAHA, H. N. (eds): *2018 IEEE 8th Annual Computing and Communication Workshop and Conference (CCWC 2018)*. Las Vegas, NV : IEEE, 2018, p. 99-103.

6 WOOD, A.: *Cortana voice actor reflects on 20 years of Halo: "It's just a gift to get to play a character such as this"*. Released on 31<sup>st</sup> December 2021. [online]. [2022-05-20]. Available at: <<https://www.gamesradar.com/cortana-voice-actor-reflects-on-20-years-of-halo-its-just-a-gift-to-get-to-play-a-character-such-as-this/>>.

7 KILLEN, K., KANE, S. (Created by): *Halo*. [VOD]. New York, NY : Paramount+, 2022.

8 For comparison, see: DETERDING, S. et al.: *From game design elements to gamefulness: Defining "gamification"*. In LUGMAYR, A. et al. (eds.): *Proceedings of the 15th International Academic MindTrek Conference: Envisioning Future Media Environments, MindTrek '11*. Tampere : ACM, 2011, p. 9.; HUOTARI, K., HAMARI, J.: *"Gamification": from the perspective of service marketing*. In TAN, D. et al. (eds.): *CHI 2011 Workshop Gamification: Using Game Design Elements in Non-Game Contexts*. Vancouver : ACM, 2011, p. 3. [online]. [2022-05-22]. Available at: <[http://gamification-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/CHI\\_2011\\_Gamification\\_Workshop.pdf](http://gamification-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/CHI_2011_Gamification_Workshop.pdf)>.

9 *Changes to Cortana in 2020 and 2021*. [online]. [2022-05-25]. Available at: <<https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/topic/changes-to-cortana-in-2020-and-2021-2d04871e-f576-7080-58b4-7c37131c3baf>>.



Picture 1: Microsoft Windows 10 Cortana promo image

Source: WILLIAMS, W.: *Microsoft updates Cortana for Windows Insiders*. 2020. [online]. [2022-05-20]. Available at: <<https://betanews.com/2020/04/22/microsoft-updates-cortana-for-windows-insiders/>>.

Current development of the social-media-communication sphere, e.g., the increasing popularity of streaming platforms and virtual influencers, M. Zuckerberg's metaverse initiative, etc., is resulting in a reconsideration of strategies, and maybe also of previous decisions. Due to that, Cortana may still represent an invaluable all-interconnecting asset for eventual future Microsoft efforts to build its own metaverse, and may provide a marketing advantage in the competitive struggle related to mentioned ongoing trends as well. Perhaps as a fully integrated virtual brand ambassador like Lil Miquela or Bejby Blue, having already been on this path for some time, and of course already having experience of resurrection from the Halo games series.

**Acknowledgment:** *The study is a partial outcome of the scientific project supported by Cultural and Educational Grant Agency of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic (KEGA) No. 023UCM-4/2020, titled 'The development of digital game studies and design'.*

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