

Micropoetics and Video Games, or a Minimalistic Encomium to Short-sightedness

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Wisława Szymborska's poem "Wszystko" (Everything) is an example of a work exceptionally filled with content.¹ On a first reading, the text appears to many readers to be a simple reflection on semantics, the meaning of words, the boundaries of language – and, by implication, the boundaries of knowledge. Those interpretations also frequently are the first to arise when I discuss the work with students. Often, only a more penetrating group analysis of the text allows them to perceive that this text is capable of generating meanings on a completely different level: a philosophical or existential one. And it often turns out that this short work, barely 28 words long (32 in the published English translation), stimulates such deep and rich interpretations that one class is not sufficient to have a satisfying discussion of it. Approached closer, the poem – seen in close-up, through a magnifying glass – expands and gives birth to new meanings.²

¹ "Everything – / a bumptious, stuck-up word. / It should be written in quotes. / It pretends to miss nothing, / to gather, hold, contain, and have. / While all the while it's just / a shred of gale." Translated from Polish by Stanisław Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh. In Szymborska *Monologue of a Dog*, New York 2006, p. 89.

² See e.g. E. Kasperski, *Współczesny neotranscendentalizm? (Wisława Szymborska: «Platon, czyli dlaczego»)* [in:] *Komparatystyka dzisiaj*, vol. 2: *Interpretacje*, ed. E. Kasperski, E. Szczęsna, Warszawa 2011.

We could obviously list many texts of this kind – and the list would not consist only of poems, either. The first chapter of *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov’s prose masterpiece, might be a completely different (though again selected arbitrarily from a vast sea of other possibilities) example of such a text, which is particularly rewarding for close readings using the tools of literary studies (particularly during re-readings, taking the context of the whole work into account; in fact Nabokov himself declared that a true reading can never be the first reading of a book, but only begins with the second approach to the text³).

This article, however, deals neither with Szymborska nor Nabokov, nor literature as traditionally understood, but rather with digital texts, and in particular, video games. Is not the juxtaposition of poetry with video games a confusion of orders? An outrage against decorum? Do not studies of games – as one literary scholar recently asserted to me – grant unearned legitimacy to a purely commercial phenomenon?

To take such a radical position would seem to imply not only disregard for or even elimination of many years of scholarly practice (taking into consideration, for example, the tradition of the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics, which treated the category of “text” very broadly,⁴ or the work of Roland Barthes on advertising texts⁵), but also imposing unjustified limit on the horizon of knowledge. There appear to be two fundamental causes leading to such an approach.

The first stems from belief in the legitimacy of maintaining a clear division between high culture (worthy of attention and reflection) and low culture (which according to this position should simply not be given consideration) and from the attribution to the latter of all manifestations of the ludic. In fact, however, Johan Huizinga in his classic work *Homo Ludens* showed that play is by nature culture-creating and is therefore not opposed to culture.⁶ Furthermore, that Dutch scholar noted that play and games represent a space of true freedom, because no coercion is required to get people to engage in play (it would then cease to be play) nor can people be completely deprived of it (as witnessed by reminiscences of the Nazi concentration camps: even in those terrible places, play and games were an element in everyday life⁷). Huizinga’s perception in play and games of a space of profound human freedom seems even weightier when we place *Homo Ludens* in its historical context – the book was published in 1938.

The second reason for this attitude seems to stem from the belief that works which generate important meanings worthy of reflection can only emerge through the media of chosen, time-honored semiotic systems – with the system of language at the top. It is true that even today, there is no way to question the privileged position of the word (specifically predisposed, as Barthes, among others, has observed, to comment on other systems and itself).

³ This concept of literature in fact is a direct outgrowth of Nabokov’s authorial strategy, based on constant deception of the reader and playing games with him. See the afterword to *Lolita*.

⁴ See Y. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind*, trans. Ann Shukman, New York 1990.

⁵ See R. Barthes, *Rhetoric of the Image*, trans. Stephen Heath, London 1977.

⁶ J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, translator uncredited, Boston 1971.

⁷ See *Commandant of Auschwitz: The Autobiography of Rudolf Hoess*, translator uncredited, New York 1961.

And yet the exclusion of games from the aggregate of media capable of generating texts susceptible to deeper interpretation can only result from lack of familiarity with the phenomenon at hand. Putting aside the stipulations by Huizinga mentioned above, assigning video games to the realm of commerce and intellectually undemanding entertainment must be seen as a groundless trivialization of them and a rash reduction of the genre to a single dimension, in which it undoubtedly fits but to which is not restricted. Cultural texts of this type can also be a space of artistic creation or an instrument of journalistic commentary on current events.⁸ What is more, the aesthetics of games also influences works that are created in other media – particularly in the area of interactive art,⁹ but also in literature.¹⁰ Exclusion of games from the space of poetological (or, more broadly, humanities) reflection will not bring about better understanding of other manifestations of culture, but will rather hinder such understanding.

A problem very frequently encountered in discussions of video games is thus the failure to consider their enormous variety. In the same category labelled “video games” we place both simple games of manual coordination and logic such as *Tetris*¹¹ and narrative action games such as *Grand Theft Auto V*,¹² highly complex in terms of its mechanics of play as well as the content of its represented world. On the one hand, the sphere of digital games includes both textual games (meaning those that exclusively use a text interface, such as *Zork I: The Great Underground Empire*¹³) and those that relinquish the use of words entirely, relying purely on visual and aural signs (such as *Flow*¹⁴). Video games are both re-mediatisations of already existing analogue games (such as chess in its mobile computerized or tablet form) and formal experiments like *The Graveyard*¹⁵ – a product which is an artistic search for the boundaries of medial forms of digital play (and which will be the main object of inquiry in the remainder of this article). Oppositions such as these, displaying the broad heterogeneity of games, could be multiplied ad nauseam. In the face of such great diversity of examples of the phenomenon we are interested in here, great care must be taken and restraint exercised when formulating generalized judgments.

⁸ I have previously tried to draw attention to this in my book *Gry wideo. Zarys poetyki* (Video Games. Outline of Poetics; Kraków 2016).

⁹ On the subject of interactive art, see: R.W. Kluszczyński, *Sztuka interaktywna. Od dzieła-instrumentu do interaktywnego spektaklu* (Interactive Art: From the Work-Instrument to the Interactive Spectacle), Warszawa 2010; M. Krawczak, “Programowanie interakcji: software i sztuki performatywne” (The Programming of Interaction: Software and the Performative Arts), *Didaskalia* 5/2012.

¹⁰ See e.g. M. Olesińska-Górska, “‘Playable poetry’ i gry komputerowe. Krytyczne negocjacje” (“Playable Poetry” and Computer Games. Critical Negotiations) [in:] *Olbrzym w cieniu. Gry wideo w kulturze audiowizualnej* (The Giant in the Shadows. Video Games in Audiovisual Culture), ed. A. Pitrus, Kraków 2012; A. Przybyszewska, *Liberackość dzieła literackiego* (The Liberating Aspect of the Literary Work), Łódź 2015.

¹¹ *Tetris* (Aleksiej Pażytnow and others, 1984).

¹² *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North, 2013).

¹³ *Zork I: The Great Underground Empire* (Infocom, 1980).

¹⁴ *Flow* (Thatgamecompany, 2006). At the same time, it should be stipulated that text appears in *Flow* in those parts of the work which – to paraphrase Gérard Genette’s typology – could be called paratextual, and thus, for example, in the end credits.

¹⁵ *The Graveyard* (Tale of Tales, 2008).

It should also be noted, in view of these stipulations, that the category of text acquires new properties in the digital medium, features absent in analogue texts (the properties of digital texts have been noticed by such scholars as Espen Aarseth, Lev Manovich and Markku Eskelinen). This fact forces the scholar to adopt a different interpretative strategy than in the case of non-digital works – a strategy which must take into account the specifics of the new reception situation, and therefore should consider such factors as interactivity, ergodicity, the performative character of the text's use or the immersive aspect of how it is experienced. In this context, the postulate set forth by Roberto Simanowski seems particularly important and relevant. The scholar of new media declares the need to construct a new hermeneutics within digital media, one that would take into account such factors as those indicated above (“we have to shift from a hermeneutics of linguistic signs to a hermeneutics of intermedial, interactive, and processing signs”¹⁶).

In the area of game studies, the answer to that need appears to consist of conducting close textual interpretations, focused on the detail and scrupulously catching significant nuances at various levels of cultural texts. Naturally, bringing the tools of poetics to bear on chess does not bring such satisfying results as, for example, in-depth analyses of narrative games (or even selected elements of such games). Yet on the other hand, as I have already demonstrated in a previous article in *Forum of Poetics*¹⁷ – the tools developed by poetics can sometimes also be helpful for analyses of games not focused on a plot or even those not using linguistic signs. One example among many could be *Flower*,¹⁸ in which a metaphor is developed “separately from the medium of language.”¹⁹ Poetological analysis can thus show itself to be useful not only where narrative games are concerned, but also for games featuring formal experimentation or aspiring to be works of art.

The game mentioned above entitled *The Graveyard* is in fact a splendid example for use in the context of this issue of *Forum of Poetics*, because it enables us to show how micropoetics can become an effective tool for studying video games. A study using micro scale is all the more appropriate here in that we are dealing with a very small cultural text – a kind of microtext, in fact. Whereas certain games demand several dozen hours of use or more to reach their final stage, it is possible to play an entire round of *The Graveyard* in a mere... few minutes. This is due to the game's structure having been developed by authors from the Belgian studio Tale of Tales.²⁰ In the game, the player identifies with an old woman visiting a graveyard.

¹⁶Roberto Simanowski, “What is and toward what end do we read digital literature?” [in:] *Literary Art in Digital Performance. Case Studies in New Media Art and Criticism*, ed. F.J. Ricardo, New York 2009, p. 14.

¹⁷“W stronę poetyki gier wideo” (Toward a Poetics of Video Games), trans. Tim Williams, *Forum of Poetics* 2/2016. http://fp.amu.edu.pl/please-translate-in-en_us-w-strone-poetyki-gier-wideo/ [accessed 16.05.2017].

¹⁸*Flower* (Thatgamecompany, 2009). [skoro podajemy link do angielskiej wersji tekstu, to chyba tytuł też od razu trzeba podać angielski (z pominięciem polskiego)]

¹⁹“W stronę poetyki gier wideo,” *Forum Poetyki* 2/2016, p. 23.

²⁰The founders of the studio and the main creators of several of its games are Aureia Harvey (from the US) and Michaël Samyn (from Belgium).



Illustration no. 1. Screenshot from the game *The Graveyard* (Tale of Tales, 2008)

The player's operational possibilities are very limited in this game. He can only steer the gray-haired heroine and direct her through the graveyard street in order to lead her to a nearby bench located next to the chapel. The protagonist, who walks with a cane, moves very slowly, so that getting to the bench takes her at least a minute and a half – on condition that the player decides to go straight toward the chapel. There is no real reason for him to head in a different direction, because the side streets have no actions or interactions to offer. At the same time, when the woman enters there, the camera does not follow her, and the old woman eventually ceases to be in the centre of the frame – thus giving a clear signal that the side street selected by the player is not the right direction in which to be heading. When the woman reaches the bench, she can sit down on it – then, a moment later, music begins to play in the background, and next the words of a song telling about cleaning the graves (an English translation of the Dutch text is provided via subtitles); there then comes some in-camera editing, by means of the superimposition of one shot on another: a close-up of the woman's face superimposed on the image of her sitting on the bench, suggesting the scene's intimate, emotional meaning. At the same time, this simple montage procedure allows us to interpret the text of the song as an expression of the woman's personal situation. The listing of people who have died and the manner of their passing (and to a considerable extent, the lyrics of the song sung represent just such a list) may contain the stories of the people buried in the graveyard, or perhaps of the woman's loved ones.²¹

²¹On the topic of the song's content, see M. Samyn, *Postmortem: Tale of Tales' The Graveyard*, Gamasutra.com [available online at: www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/132258/postmortem_tale_of_tales_the_.php?].



Illustration no. 2. Screenshot from the game *The Graveyard* (Tale of Tales, 2008)

When the song, which lasts nearly three minutes, comes to an end, nothing more remains for the player in this place. He can, if he wishes, stay there and contemplate the graveyard, listening to the sounds of birds and trees that dominate the scene. A more concrete action he can take, however, is to rise from the bench and go to the gate, so as to leave the graveyard (at which point the game is over). Importantly, the player can rise before the song ends (and then the song will go quiet for a moment); he can also turn around and go to the gate before he reaches the bench. Regardless of his decision, reaching the gate ends the game – and regardless of what action is taken, *The Graveyard* always ends the same way (there is no concrete result that would measure the scale of difficulty, nor is there any particular point). The difference in how the game plays out – and it is highly significant – appears when the player makes the decision to stop using the basic version of the game, available free of charge, and proceeds to purchase the full version. In the paid version, the old woman may, at a certain moment, die (depriving the player of subjectivity – a point to which I shall return in a later part of the article). In any case, all of the actions available in the game can easily run their course in a period of less than ten minutes.

In the course of a close text analysis, it is worth paying attention to various elements of the game, including the steering interface. I have already noted that the protagonist moves very slowly. We should also heed as relevant the way the player can cause the old woman to sit down on the bench. According to the conventions to which experienced players are accustomed, one push of the button responsible for interaction should be enough to issue an order to the avatar. After clicking on it, the player might expect the protagonist to immediately execute his command. However, the situation in *The Graveyard* is different – the player must approach the bench at a certain proximity and, holding the button down, cause the woman to turn her back to the bench; then, after a moment of waiting, she takes the seat by herself, when she is ready to do so.

Why do these minor subtleties in the design of interaction hold such significance? In view of how few forms of interaction the player has at his disposal. In fact, the only operations he can carry out are the following:

1. walking to the bench;
2. turning the protagonist's back to the bench, so that she can take her seat there;
3. getting up from the bench (while the song is still playing or after it ends);
4. walking back to the gate, leaving the graveyard and thereby ending the game (this can be done at any moment – also before walking to the bench).

Such a radical reduction of the scope of the player's influence on the world and the course of events should be seen as a very expressive authorial gesture and that is precisely why these few possibilities left to her/him should be very attentively examined – they are of singular importance. At the technical level, we might say that the game's interface is very slow and unresponsive, lacking any trace of the instantaneous: the old woman reacts to the player's commands with palpable delay, moves significantly more slowly than the typical protagonist of a video game whose action is seen from a third-person point of view (the perspective in which the camera is set behind the character's back is typical of, for example, action games). The arduous walk to the bench, during which “nothing happens,” is hardly riveting – nor is it intended to be. Similarly, the moment of the woman's turning around in front of the bench lasts long enough that less patient players may even get irritated.

All of these procedures based on taking away the player's causative agency – and on endowing the actions he does undertake with a palpably laborious and unhurried quality – correspond to the theme of the game and the status of its main character. There is no denying that her main distinguishing characteristic is, after all, her advanced age. In video games we rarely take on the personae of people who are elderly and whose agency or mobility is thereby limited. In the case of *The Graveyard* it is precisely those attributes that become the main subject of the game. Crucially, this happens not only at the level of linguistic text (the words of the song), aesthetics (the black and white filter) and accessories and props (the graveyard, the chapel, the cane). The game thematizes the problem of old age at the level of the interface as well – the lack of instantaneousness and the need to use a slow avatar constitute a certain kind of equivalent to the experience of old age, which the authors have here identified primarily with limited agency and the resistance of one's own body, its lack of agility. At the same time, it is worth noting that the course of play presented in *The Graveyard* resembles a story more than it does a game – having as it does an end and a beginning, but no talk of a situation of victory or defeat. The game does not present any result to which the player might feel attached (not surprising, given that we do not encounter any difficulties or challenges in the game). Of course, it is true that in the paid version of the game there is a kind of ending in the death of the protagonist – but it is hard to say whether arriving at such an ending represents a failure or a win. In the context of the production as a whole and in the context of the player's lack of influence on the protagonist's condition, death here appears to be simply nature running its course. In this sense, it is a view of death opposite to the one action games usually invoke.²²

²²For more on this topic, see: H. Strużyna, A. Strużyna, “Wyjątkowość doświadczenia śmierci w artystycznych grach wideo” (The Exceptional Nature of the Experience of Death in Artistic Video Games), *Replay. The Polish Journal of Game Studies* 02/2015.

We thus deal in *The Graveyard* with a peculiar kind of reduction of:

1. the player's causative agency;
2. the instantaneous nature of the functioning of the interface;
3. typical video game elements (the elimination of challenges and, especially, a result in which one could be invested).

The creators at the Tale of Tales studio have turned this reduction into their trademark, programmatic creative method. They refer to their games as “notgames.” According to their own explanation, the idea is based on:

The idea is to explore the potential of digital entertainment and art that is not games. By explicitly rejecting the typical game elements of rules and goals and challenges and rewards, we hope to discover new ways to delight and enlighten our audience. Ways that give us more freedom in terms of choice of subject matter and emotional response.²³

It should also be noted that the authors' apparent rupture with the tradition of digital entertainment consists not of turning their backs on it, but rather deliberately overturning it, standing in opposition to it. That is simultaneously a gesture intended, on the one hand, to be a critique of games in their previously existing popular form, and on the other to inscribe Harvey and Samyn's experiment in the space of art. This intention is also demonstrated by the description of the game located at the company's official page, where *The Graveyard* is defined as an “experiment with real-time poetry, with storytelling without words.”²⁴

This article is not the proper place for discussion of the utility of “notgames” as a category, though such a discussion is an important and necessary one.²⁵ At the same time, it seems that the category itself arose more as an element of a peculiar kind of creative manifesto than as an attempt to propose a precise academic tool. Regardless of these reservations, *The Graveyard* is a game that deserves to be treated as an eloquent case study for micropoetological analysis. In relation to this production, we could even use the category of close playing, devised by analogy to the tradition of close reading²⁶ – such close scrutiny of a game and intense playing of the game would be characterized primarily by treating the object of study with full seriousness and philological precision, while at the same time taking into account the work's many levels. It is worth noting that in the case of *The Graveyard*, the gesture discussed above of weakening the player's subjectivity is so conspicuous and meaningful that in many people's interpretations it pushes the text of the song (which takes up half of the length of the game!) into the background. The melic work contained in the game is often reduced to the level of the occurrences in the game themselves (the text of the song is not analyzed) or even

²³A. Harvey, M. Samyn, *Over Games*, 2010 [text available online at: <http://tale-of-tales.com/tales/OverGames.html>].

²⁴There is a description of the game at <http://tale-of-tales.com/TheGraveyard/>.

²⁵For more on this topic see e.g. P. Schreiber, “Eksperymentalne komputerowe gry tekstowe lat 90. a ruch ‘notgames’” (Experimental Textual Computer Games of the ‘90s and the “notgames” Movement), *Homo Ludens* 1/2014.

²⁶The term “close playing” is used by Espen Aarseth, who treats it as simply a term for studying individual games (making case studies): E. Aarseth, “I fought the law: Transgressive play and the implied player,” *Situated Play, Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference, Tokyo 2007*, p. 131.

completely ignored (this is understandable to a certain extent, since the authors themselves define the game as storytelling without words, as if the fabric of language were not relevant here – though that is clearly not the best interpretative strategy to take).

At the same time, such an approach, involving a short-sighted reading of the game and playing of it, can constitute a valuable point of departure for comparative analyses. Because on the basis of that reading, a comparison can be made of how old age can be thematised and conceptualized within games and other texts of culture. To experience a feeling of powerlessness and related frustration was made possible in *The Graveyard* through the negation of the fundamental element in video games represented by the player's activities and his influence on the final shape of what happens in the game. What was thus rejected was the very factor that determines the peculiar nature of games and their poetics. In this case an extremely minimalistic game design – and thus the most basic fabric of the game – created the space for the maximalization of meaning.

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT:

The article demonstrates the need to construct a new hermeneutics in the area of digital media. According to the author, the answer to this need within game studies consists of executing close textual interpretations, concentrated on detail and scrupulously grasping significant nuances at various levels of such cultural texts. As examples of digital texts particularly susceptible to such analysis, he refers not only to narrative games but also games experimental in form and aspiring to be works of art, such as *The Graveyard by Tale of Tales*.

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Piotr Kubiński, PhD, is a literary scholar who studies digital media. His doctorate was awarded on the basis of his work *Poetyka gier wideo* (Poetics of Video Games), which received the Polish Communication Association award for Best Doctoral Thesis in the area of Media and Communication Studies in its “Doktorat '14” contest. Employed in the Department of Comparative Studies at the Faculty of Polish Studies at the University of Warsaw, he is the secretary of the Section for Intersemiotic and Intermedial Studies at UW, and recipient of a grant from the Foundation for Polish Scholarship. He is the author of the monograph *Gry wideo. Zarys poetyki* (Video Games. Outline of Poetics).