

In the Web of Metaphors

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Miłosz Babecki, *Metaforyka polskich gier przeglądarkowych. Konteksty – porównania – analizy [Metaphoricity of Polish browser games. Contexts – comparisons – analyses]*, (Olsztyn: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warmińsko-Mazurskiego w Olsztynie, 2020)

Let me begin by declaring that dr. Miłosz Babecki's monograph is interesting, informative and relevant. I encourage scholars to become familiarized with it. In light of the above, this review might as well end here.

Yet, every critical reader will be instantly wary of such statements, not least because of their evaluative nature. The present reviewer refers to the monograph as “interesting”, even though this judgement is obviously arbitrary. This must be the reason why he added “informative and relevant”. It is informative and relevant indeed because Miłosz Babecki has covered a sampling of 46 browser games, interpreted as metaphors of political events in Poland in the years 2005-2013. The variety of discursive exemplifications (e.g., references to Polish and American games and movies) and the integration of numerous research frameworks (i.e., ones related to media, literary, cultural, social and game studies) prove that browser games are not an accidental, “hybrid” or digitized “feature article”, a quasi-political entity in the context of the reviewed monograph, but an important tool of political and cultural games (sic!), which engage internet users who perform a variety of roles in social life. In the first paragraph the reviewer wrote that the book *Metaforyka polskich gier przeglądarkowych [Metaphoricity of Polish browser games]* is “important”; it is important, for example, for people studying public discourse in Poland, investigating interpersonal communication, engaging in textual studies or researching the Internet and games, including digital games.

Browser games, more than any other genre, make us constantly aware that public life in its micro- and macro-social dimensions is still based on the scheme: X plays with Y for SOMETHING. In Babecki's monograph this scheme operates within the framework of the Internet: even if Y is unaware of X's existence, the dynamics of the Web allows X to turn a blind eye (not only metaphorically and symbolically) to Y's bravado, indifference or arrogance. X is a browser game user, whereas Y can be an individual or a collective subject, a politician or a zealot of absurdities and abuses of power; somebody who becomes the "defendant" of ironic discourse (the book makes much of metaphors, their technicalities and influences, but there is no discussion of irony, metonymy and hyperbole, which – in the context of browser games – also create an emancipatory discourse of citizenship), construed on the basis of metaphors (the author of the monograph describes, e.g., "anomic images of political processes in games – explanatory metaphors" and "atrophic images of behaviours of political actors in games – expressive metaphors", cf. chapter 4). The apparent obviousness of this principle conceals a crucial hypothesis of game-studies: for many users browser games perform predominantly ludic functions; they are technologies of entertainment. For others they are a medium for releasing their frustrations, exhibiting their approaches to different issues; finally, they help articulate a range of political views.

The monograph comprises four chapters, a conclusion, extensive bibliography, index of figures, tables and screenshots, appendices (including appendix 1a, which is a list of games-explanatory metaphors, and appendix 1b – a list of games-expressive metaphors), index of names and a useful glossary. All these elements make a coherent whole, along with the English version of the table of contents, introduction and conclusion. I provide these details in order to demonstrate that the monograph is a unit in which metaphorical thinking, by creating a media- socially- and culturally mediated political discourse, reflects the boundaries of communicative activities of internet users.

The author of the monograph under review provides a historical, cultural and technological overview of browser games in Poland against the backdrop of the gaming industry and political-cultural discourses of other countries, mainly the USA. This monograph is relevant for gaming historians, and more generally for game scholars precisely because Miłosz Babecki has included many facts relating to the history of games in general and computer games in particular. Browser games, which are his focus, have been distinguished from the latter category. His matter-of-fact and systematic overview of the relevant literary, media and culture studies and related theories may well lack in originality (especially for those who study relationships between technologies and different texts of culture), but it is definitely interesting. Miłosz Babecki is methodologically alert and numerous frameworks he recalls have not been reduced to mere rhetorical flourishes. They are not autotelic either, for they have been functionalized descriptively and interpretatively. At an appropriate level of generalisation even metaphors in Babecki's understanding become "technologies" of political actions.

The author of *Metaforyka polskich gier przeglądarkowych* demonstrates that what seems to exist only in the margins of political discourses, i.e., browser games¹, has an impact on social communication,

¹ Browser games are a type of digital games, which require the use of internet browsers; in most cases downloading them is not necessary. A prerequisite for use is Şan active Adobe Flash Player or Java applications. Cf. M. Babecki, *Metaforyka...* p. 335.

by showcasing emotions and varied views of users who, via such games, make references to various people and events. Babecki repeatedly proves that the Internet does not like margins; it is a dynamic network. After all, what does not exist in the centers of discourses construed by traditional media (television, press, radio) need not be meaningless for people relying on digital media, including the Internet. Every researcher of the Web knows that its discourses are created in a bottom-up fashion, which means that individual users find a platform for themselves where they can and are able to create and stimulate all kinds of trends, reactions or discussions. At least since the times of Andrew Keen² we have known that the communication of the 21st century is created by amateurs, in a bottom-up fashion, even though it too can be influenced by means of specific monitoring tools, which simulate communicative acts. But indeed, Miłosz Babecki is right because browser games, even though they perform different roles, have been and remain forms of social activity.

I would like to acknowledge a subtle mist of melancholy, hovering over the text of the monograph under review. Of course, this is not Babecki's intended effect. Rather, it is a consequence of the reviewer's reading of that text. This melancholy reveals something incredibly important. The author of *Metaforyka polskich gier przeglądarkowych* writes that the reason he has been able to collect and analyse 46 browser games (no more or less) is because many others had already disappeared from the Internet. The reviewer's melancholy is his reaction to the transience of the phenomena and content described by the author of the monograph, making said monograph an even more relevant, if peculiar, report on events which are important and fleeting, like the beating of the internet heart, which affects social ideas of digital immigrants (and the present reviewer among them) and digital natives (i.e. those users for whom, the digital, convergent, audio-visual network is the natural and primary media environment³).

Following from this, after more than fifteen years of studying internet-based communication, the present reviewer has realised how many researchers are gone now, having been replaced by others and how some concepts have become outdated, whereas others remain sources of creative interpretations and descriptions. These have been highly dynamic and varied processes. To some degree, not only is internet content short-lasting, but so are the results of studies on various aspects of internet communication. For a metatheoretician of digital communication, including games, like the present reviewer, the most valuable element of *Metaforyka...* is the author's synthetic presentation of browser games against technologically, culturally and politically determined phenomena. The boundaries between melancholy and transience are delimited by the "poetics" of the archive, which the monograph under review belongs to. For scholars of digital games and for political studies scholars Babecki's monograph will become a source of knowledge about unique situations, unreproducible in real time, as well as about the activities

² A. Keen. *The cult of the amateur: how today's Internet is killing our culture*. Here quoted in M. Bernatowicz and K. Topolska-Ghariani's translation; Warsaw 2007.

³ *Digital natives* and *digital immigrants* are concepts first introduced by Marc Prensky. He uses them metaphorically, while maintaining their etymological meanings. A participant of culture, described as a *digital native* (DN) operates digital technologies from the very beginning of his or her social and media-supported development. A *digital immigrant* (DI) is a subject who is learning new "grammars", "dictionaries" and "situations" because his or her communicative development was taking place in the era of analog media dominance. I take the dominant medium for the DI to have been the printed book, while discourse was dominated by logocentrism. For the DN, in turn, the dominant medium are digital audio-visual media, whilst discourse is visually and interactively dominated. Cf. M. Prensky, *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants*, <http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky-Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants-Part1.pdf> (accessed: 18.07.2021).

and texts of culture, which reflect the dynamics of the not-so-self-confident and short-tempered Polish democracy.

Miłosz Babecki refers to the „classics” of digital communication (only rarely quoted nowadays): Sherry Turkle⁴ and Geert Lovink⁵; he utilizes ideas from George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s conceptual metaphor studies (the author of the reviewed monograph does not offer any new findings here but the theory he evokes is well operationalised) as well as those from works by Teresa Dobrzyńska; he refers to Anna Duszak’s works on textual studies and Bogusława Dobek-Ostrowska’s research on social communication. I am persuaded by this intricate, or better still, interdisciplinary research framework because the author of *Metaforyka...*, even at a metalevel, demonstrates to the reader that browser games are relevant and should be described using all available research tools. This is how digital content is studied. The fleeting nature of that content and messages does not exempt the scholar from treating them seriously and being open to change, which users will always notice sooner than scholars, even though it is the scholars’ reflection that is cognitively more permanent. Achilles and the turtle keep trying to prove something to each other (no element of this metaphor is negatively loaded). It is difficult to write traditional scholarly works about a reality changing as fast as the reality of digitally mediated interpersonal communication. This is why Miłosz Babecki invokes a number of theories, which is both useful and redundant. It is useful, for it shows the changeability of situations and the need for their constant oversight. It is redundant because this multiplicity of theoretical approaches hinders a seamless reading of the text. There is no denying the author’s expertise, so any instance of the reviewer’s *dubito* while reading the book was swiftly resolved thanks to the author’s logical and consistent reasoning. I make a point of not referring to the author’s conclusions on specific political events and their actors, specific games and their interpretations, because every reader should (let this be read not so much as an imperative as a suggestion) become familiarized with games, recall specific contexts and then – develop their own point of view.

As reviews go, they typically contain some elements of criticism. I am not making excuses for myself, but showing my appreciation for Miłosz Babecki’s immense work. He has created an interesting and much needed work, although, as already indicated, there are a few elements missing from his monograph.

The author of the monograph has failed to account for the specificity of the Internet because, while his focus is on browser games, Babecki has diminished the importance of the fact that such games operate in an incredibly fluid, scaleless network⁶. I was disappointed not to have

⁴ Sadly, Sherry Turkle is hardly present in Polish studies on digitally mediated communication (as far as I remember it was Maryla Hopfinger in her book *Literatura i media. Po 1989 roku [Literature and the media. After 1989]* (Warsaw 2010) who referred to the work of that American scholar. While Turkle’s publications have by now become “classics”, I appreciate Babecki’s reference to her works. I will add to this two more works central to studies on the Internet and digital communication: *Life on the screen. Identity in the Age of the Internet*, London 1996, and *The Second Self. Computers and the Human Spirit*, Cambridge 2005.

⁵ Miłosz Babecki recalls Geert Lovink’s studies, which is laudable, but he only refers to one of Lovink’s papers, co-authored with D. Garcia. While this makes sense in the context of the structure of his argument, it is worth remembering that Lovink’s “canonical” works include *Dark Fiber. Tracking Critical Internet Culture*, Cambridge: MIT Press 2002, and *Uncanny Networks: Dialogues with the Virtual Intelligentsia*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002.

⁶ More on that can be found in monographs: L. Barabási, *Linked. The New Science of Networks*, Cambridge 2002 or D.J. Watts, *Six Degrees. The Science of a Connected Age*, New York 2003.

found references to the theory of social events or to Herbert Blumer's (yet another "classic's") symbolic interactionism. I realise I have only just mentioned the „abundance” of theories only to offer criticism for a lack of those I regard as important. I am doing this for a very particular reason: if specific theoretical frameworks had been applied, some of the author's observations could have been outlined more succinctly. This would also have reinforced the author's cognitively intriguing findings. Let us imagine how symbolic interactionism might aid Miłosz Babecki's considerations on the meaning and function of primary frame and problematic frames (see chapter 2). I mention Blumer (yet another classic) because I am convinced that while Babecki does refer to structuralist and hermeneutic ideas, he treats them “unorthodoxically” (of course these are not the only traditions which could be reconstructed in his work but both the terminology – interpretation, understanding, sense, meaning – and researchers (like de Saussure or Heidegger) allow recognizing such methodological “traces”⁷), by focusing on the functions of recipient/user/player, he moves towards pragmatism, which, of course, is justified.

Browser games are interesting media, which help create, disseminate and record colloquial utterances (brought together on the level of communication codes), which reflect so-called common sense. I therefore find a discussion on the „limits” of users' rationality lacking. Of course, the author is aware of phenomena which are close to studies on colloquial speech and thought, but browser games as discursive technologies confirm the hypothesis that every user can question political reality by playing online games and becoming an expert who understands all the intricacies of the world through accessing easily assimilated “obvious” and “natural” knowledge. To quote Clifford Geertz: “Like Lear, the New Testament, or quantum mechanics, common sense consists in an account of things which claims to strike at their heart”⁸.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasise that Miłosz Babecki's monograph is a well-designed, coherent and original work. Its most important hypothesis, i.e., „metaphors included in browser games are visible and communicative for the user” (p. 23) has been appropriately supported, similarly to other key research hypotheses in the monograph. Occasional repetitions or inconsistencies in pagination (between pages 294 and 295 there is an inserted leaf containing pages 297 and 298) do not negatively impact the substantive value of the monograph.

By the way, let me just add that it is all well that we can still read research where the notion of a “hypothesis” is not so much a metaphor but a “genre” of academic publication, which the author must face by searching for the best, intersubjectively communicated arguments.

translated by Justyna Rogos-Hebda

⁷ In footnotes and bibliography we can find specific website addresses. The title of one of the sections even contains the concept of “(de)construction”, even though the author seems to be treating this notion more like a cognitive metaphor.

⁸ C. Geertz, *Wiedza lokalna. Dalsze eseje z zakresu antropologii interpretatywnej*, [*Local knowledge. More essays on interpretative anthropology*], trans.. D. Wolska, Kraków 2005, p. 91.

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KEYWORDS

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browser game

ABSTRACT:

A review of Miłosz Babecki's monograph *Metaforyka polskich gier przeglądarkowych. Konteksty – porównania - analizy* (Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warmińsko-Mazurskiego w Olsztynie, Olsztyn 2020, pp. 340) contains some positive remarks concerning theoretical foundations of the work as well as its interesting interpretations. The reviewer points out that the author of the monograph could have devoted more space to network features relevant for the functioning of browser games. The review is concluded with a positive assessment of the monograph.

theory

communication

methodology

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Marek Kaźmierczak – employed in the School of Film, Media and Audio-Visual Arts of the Faculty of Polish and Classical Philology. An unorthodox semiotician, involved in transmedia comparative studies, ecocriticism in audiovisual culture and the relationship between common sense and pop culture. He has published in “Images”, “Teksty Drugie”, “Pamiętnik Literacki”, “Przestrzenie Teorii”, “Przegląd Humanistyczny”, “Politeja”, “The Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe”.