

Michał Żmuda

Digital Games as Palimpsests of Literary Tradition

Extended Summary

In the dissertation *Digital Games as Palimpsests of Literary Tradition* I inspect media relations that develop between literature and digital games. This research problem is based on a recognition that computer games are media hybrids. They borrow methods of representation and meaning creation from other media. On the one hand, the digital code of games can reproduce different ways of communication, often merging them together. On the other hand, thanks to the flexibility of this code, games can imitate material aspects of the referenced media, exposing their specific nature. My main hypothesis states that the medium of digital games is influenced by the medium of literature. I assume that games not only incorporate literary semiotic devices into their structures and transform them, but also evoke ideas and technologies that are associated with literature. Therefore, I try to solve the following problems: What kind of transformation processes are involved in making literature a part of another medium? What are the goals of those processes? How games interpret cultural role and media qualities of literature?

For the purpose of my research I see the literary tradition as a media practice with its own semiotic systems, technological devices and methods of content organization (one of which is a book), and as a cultural tradition – a collection of texts, cultural institutions and reading practices. I use the broader term – literariness – to describe the phenomenon of literature as a sphere of different media aspects (semiotic, historical, technological). The category of digital games comprises of computer programs that have been designed and/or are used for ludic purposes. The media sphere of digital games also consists of semiotic, historical, and technological dimensions.

The dissertation is composed of five chapters, each one dealing with different aspects of the problem in question. The first chapter introduces the methodology of my research.

My main research methods are grounded in the theory of intermediality. This theory provides me with tools for analysis of interferences that take place between dissimilar media. I use the typologies created by Irina O. Rajewsky and Werner Wolf as a starting

point of my work. However, I revise these classifications, because they treat media as static, material objects. Following the definition of media by Lars Elleström and the theory of remediation by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, I assume that media exist not only as groups of material practices, but also as ideas that evolve with cultural changes and introduction of new technologies. Therefore, intermediality is not just a replication of material aspects of other media, but also an evocation of ideas that these media represent. I complement this research perspective with intertextuality, transtextuality, influence theory, and intersemiotics. These methods allow me to clear up the terminology that is used to describe such phenomena as: transformation, supplementation, transposition, continuation, paratextuality. Following that, I distinguish three types of intermedial relations: transmediality, intermedial combinations, and intermedial references. I use this typology to analyze the transfer of literariness into digital medium of games.

The second chapter, titled *Ludicity and Literariness*, explores differences between digital games and literature. I refer to ludology theories, which allow me to indicate potential transformations that take place during the transposition of literariness into digital games.

I arrive at a conclusion that these transformations are going to be influenced by cybertextuality, procedurality and spatiality of games. I use this finding to inspect intermedial combinations and references in the following chapters.

In the chapter *Reading Games?* I inspect intermedial combinations, which result in the transfer of literary practices onto the game mediality. I concentrate on the phenomenon of reading. I ask why games reproduce information behaviors grounded in literary textuality, especially practices involved with the interpretation and extraction of information from a verbal text. I analyze to what extent games invoke reading skills of the users, and to what degree they negate these skills by introducing different forms of communication. I establish that literary texts and literary reception practices supplement the digital medium of games. The most popular verbal forms used by games are usually fragmentary, and they include: journal entries, encyclopedic files, notes, descriptions, and commentaries. Literary texts are, for example, used in games to provide information about the diegesis or to introduce new forms of narration. They are often connected with ludic activity of the user, for example in

instances when the reading of a text is required to solve a puzzle or to correctly play the game, but also in instances where the literary text with important story information becomes available only after certain acts of the player.

Following these findings, I probe the relation between reading and playing a digital game. I find out that these two practices are not in total opposition. Thus I propose to look at the mediality of games as something that is constantly changing during the gameplay. This fluidity is caused by shifts in the semiotic systems used by the game, the ludic procedures and the player's skills, which influence how much time is going to be spend on different layers of the experience, or even the user's approach, since she can either focus on or ignore certain medialities employed by the game. As a consequence, the literariness of each game can be seen as a set of potentials that is actualized during each game session. The player's reception moves between different semiotic systems used by the game. During one game session the user can experience both: a close reading practice, which focuses only on

a verbal text, and a state of (hyper)attention, which is distributed among different ludic activities and media aesthetics. As a result, literariness and ludicity are not in conflict, but can complement each other.

The next chapter, *Literary Dimensions of Digital Games*, goes into detail about technological and ideological contexts of literariness and how they influence games. Here I analyze the purpose behind the replication of literary physical media and devices (book, paper, scroll etc.). I distinguish four forms of this process: representation, simulation, paratextuality and contextualization. I inspect games, whose graphical user interface imitates physical attributes of literary devices, and also games, which recreate literary media in virtual space. These methods can fulfill different roles: they join the extradiegetic interface with the world represented by the game, they authenticate the historical dimension of the game, they use the literary device as a metaphor for the functions, carried out by the computer program. I also notice that the games can not only represent literary devices but can also simulate them. The user not only observes or looks through a chosen device (e.g. a book), but also can be involved in meaningful interactions with it (e.g. write important information into it). The procedures of the program imitate literary processes (e.g. reading and writing).

The phenomenon in question can extend beyond the digital dimension of games. The media sphere of games is not limited to the communication practices that “take place” on the screen, it comprises of physical objects as well. To explore this phenomenon, I survey materials that are supplied with digital games. These materials consist of manuals, books, boxes, art booklets, gadgets etc. I focus on texts that display literary qualities (e.g. they present backstory of the game, imitate novels or journals, act as fictional guides of the game world). I argue that paratexts of digital games can serve three functions. Firstly, they can extend the narrative of the game. Paratexts expand the storyworld and provide additional (or essential) information about the plot of the game. Secondly, they configure the mediality of the game. In this case, paratexts act as either instructions that clarify how the game should be defined and used, or as media extensions that supplement the game with additional modes of storytelling (e.g. narrative prose) that are not used in the digital program itself. Thirdly, they increase the economic value of the game. Furthermore, I ponder the similarities between paratexts and graphical interfaces of games and conclude that they work in a very similar fashion. In addition, I show how the paratextuality can misinform the user, for example in a case, in which the literary work that the game is based upon is presented by the creators of the game as a paratextual supplement, not a source of inspiration. In the final part of the chapter I study how games interpret the cultural role of literariness. I find out that they usually focus on banal and exaggerated representation of its status.

The final chapter is titled *Intermedial References – Digital Games Inspired by Literary Works*. I investigate mechanisms that are used to create games inspired by literary works. Instead of focusing on literary means of evocation (quotes, allusions, stylization, plot similarities etc.), I turn towards methods that are grounded in game attributes not obtainable by “traditional” literature (procedurality, cybertextuality, spatiality). I examine how games use these attributes to evoke literary works. I present my finding in a series of case studies. The internet choose your own adventure game *Batwochwalis* is inspired by Bruno Schulz’s interpretation of the world as a nexus of counterfactual states. *Batwochwal* carries out this idea through the decision making mechanism and diverging narrative paths. The Japanese game *The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword* contains a level that recreates the narrative and moral philosophy taken from *The Spider’s Thread* by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa.

The experimental *Library of Blabber* allows the player to explore the library from Jorge Luis Borges' short story. *TRIHAYWBFRFYH* mirrors in its gameplay and architecture themes inspired by works of H.P. Lovecraft. *Yet one word* incorporates the values presented in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* and transports them onto the game rules. This inspection allows me to distinguish and discuss new forms of intertextual relations, in which a literary text is evoked by features that are immanent to the game medium.

The exploration of different modes of intermedial relations between digital games and literature provides a diagnosis about the place of literature in the current media system and the role that the literariness plays in the cultural network of digital technologies. In consequence, the research explains how the contemporary technological and cultural changes impact literature (in the context of digital games). Additionally, the dissertation shows how games attempt to define their own cultural status in relation to the literary tradition.