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## “Press Y to Quit the Game, or X to Resume...”: On Game Culture in the Context of Hermeneutics of Didactical Experience

### ABSTRACT

Assuming the statement, according to which video games (or the entire culture related to them) can serve as a valuable teaching material, is true, it is reasonable and justified to question the still-existing opposition and dispute that digital games must face in school environments. This fact is all the more astonishing as it is the representatives of educational environment that are currently providing particularly didactically inspiring evidence, and thus also strong arguments for this claim. At the same time, the fact that computer games have always dealt with the cultural industry, or at least as much as with culture, means that the “distrustfulness” towards digital games present in the educational space does not only have to be an expression of prejudices and moral panic. Acting from the position of a philosopher involved in the educational potential of computer games, in this text I take up to formulate a possible answer/possible answers explaining the reasons for this conjuncture. Relying on the hermeneutic method, I also suggest possible ways of reading a computer game, pointing to its didactic importance. This text is therefore directed primarily to teachers and educators interested in searching for innovative and practical educational strategies.

### Keywords:

new media, hermeneutics, didactics, new humanities, video games culture.

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Despite the sometimes significant differences in opinions about feasible and didactically valuable learning/teaching strategies with the use of computer games<sup>2</sup>, the claim that such a matter as computer game culture<sup>3</sup> does exist is undisputed for researchers dealing with the so-called “new media”. Moreover, regardless of which artifacts, phenomena, customs and practices we are inclined to include in this culture, these researchers argue that the culture of digital games is already today (and most likely will remain) an active participant in the process of establishing, consolidating, negotiating, and transmitting socio-cultural reasons and meanings. Jordan Shapiro (2020) convinces that although this conjuncture has its own causes that are not always observable, but invariably clearly apparent and coming into play social and moral consequences, especially in the educational reality. One of them is that computer games are now “[...] the basic form of narration [...] while being at the same time the most advanced and innovative form of recorded communication practices” (Shapiro, 2020, p. 13). Empirical evidence to the thesis formulated by Shapiro are also the conclusions of Polish researchers involved in the Polish educational reality. The data shows that as much as 38.5 per cent of all school children play digital games every day, 29.8 per cent at least several times a week, and 8 per cent at least once a week. Moreover, the fact that over a third of them declare the participation in events related to computer games (conventions, tournaments, accompanying events, etc.), of which 6.1 per cent participated in these episodes more than 10 times in a lifetime, becomes an important argument for the thesis that the analysis of the world of digital games should also include artifacts, phenomena, events and practices related to them. And the latter are what makes us talking about games, and also discussing the culture associated with them (Dębski & Bigaj, 2020, p. 106).

Similarly, the fact that the culture of computer games has become an important participant in moral changes as well as these artifacts, phenomena, events and practices included in this culture are axiologically diverse (i.e., some of them are assessed positively as useful/beneficial, whereas others assessed negatively as harmful/negative). The fact that the representatives of school environments also share this view means that the properly formulated question is no longer “why

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2 In the language of game designers/critics/researchers/gamers, the terms ‘console games’, ‘digital games’, ‘electronic games’ are also semantically equivalent. Avoiding repetition, I will also apply these phrases interchangeably on the following pages but will not use the term ‘video games’. I share the opinion of all those researchers who argue that the expression is misleading. It consistently suggests that visuality is a constitutive feature of digital games, which is not true (see: Sterczewski, 2012).

3 For the purposes of this text, I assume culture as every human product, both physical and intangible.

Polish schools should reveal the interest in the culture of computer games” (after all, numerous teaching pieces of evidence leave no doubt that they are really involved in it), but “how and with what terms/categories to talk about computer games and the culture associated with them, raising awareness to what is pedagogically inspiring, while remaining critical, against what is educationally questionable”. It is a fundamental question in the context of this article, which encourages a reflection – and even polemics – on the responses that I am providing to this question.

## MAJOR METHODOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

First of all, I would like to explain some of the most relevant issues of a methodological nature and emphasize their connection with the disputed matter. Taking into account the nature of the problems formulated in the research and analysis of media culture, it is assumed that there are four major and differently overlapping paradigms within which these problems can be analyzed: the pedagogical paradigm, the information paradigm, the communication and cultural paradigm, as well as the integrating paradigm (Ptaszek, 2019, pp. 21–60). In terms of methodology, the author of this text is mostly adjacent to the communicative-cultural paradigm, for which the intellectual scaffolding is the cultural and philosophical perspective represented by, *inter alia*, Marshall McLuhan, Theodor Adorno, John Fiske, and Noël Carroll. Although I am talking about computer games and selected elements of culture related to them in the context of their educational significance, I am also speaking here from the position of a pedagogical philosopher, and not a philosophical pedagogue. This comment is important for a number of relevant reasons. **Firstly**, it is an answer to the question why I sometimes speak of certain phenomena using more philosophical than pedagogical language. At the same time, I do not release myself from the obligation to refer to pedagogical texts, pointing to the importance of the problems I am talking about in the pedagogical context. **Secondly**, it explains why I apply hermeneutical analysis as my major tool. Hermeneutics is one of the fundamental research tools/strategies in philosophy. It is a general theory of understanding a specific text (also selected fragments of it, as well as the relationship in which these fragments remain in connection to the entire text) (Będkowski, 2019, pp. 31–65; Carroll, 2011, pp. 5–25). Understood in this way, hermeneutics clarifies and translates the essence of certain utterances, and at the same time allows the utterance to provide with a specific meaning. In the case of the analyses undertaken here, a text for me is every well-fixed thought

about computer games, as well as a computer game itself. **Thirdly** – perhaps the most important – adopting this perspective, I focus less on the problem of “how does a specific text (a specific computer game) affect/influence its user?”, and more on an issue of “what can a user (teacher) do with a text (a computer game as such)?” The main reason for this is that I am more (if not exclusively) interested in education through a game, than in an educational game. Therefore – obviously being aware of a certain simplification – I assume that an “educational game” is a game that consciously and intentionally was designed, primarily or exclusively, for conveying or enriching knowledge, determined by the components of such a game, and/or developing certain skills through a game. Speaking of “education through the game”, I mean an educational practice in which a teacher applies a specific game or phenomena related to it, intentionally not designed to convey/enrich specific knowledge or develop specific skills, but essentially to entertaining purposes. This view strongly corresponds to the concept of so called edutainment. This means that the educational nature of such practice is not determined by the structural and constructional features of the game, but - as Małgorzata Kaliszewska and Barbara Klasińska put – by the teacher’s “hermeneutic competences” (Kaliszewska & Klasińska, 2018).

## THE ATTITUDE OF “TRUSTING GUARDIAN”

Maciej Dębski and Magdalena Bigaj, characterizing the attitude of parents and teachers towards computer games, state that on the basis of their arguments/counterarguments, this attitude can be reduced to two basic postures, which researchers call “**a trusting enthusiast**” and “**a frightened guardian**”. The first posture is characterized by

[...] understanding digital games almost exclusively as positive entertainment, mostly due to personal gaming experience. [Trusting enthusiasts] tend to trust more in children’s self-control skills in the area of gaming, less often define a rigid time frame, and contact children with the world of new technologies earlier (Dębski & Bigaj, 2020, p. 107).

The second one describes a person for whom

[...] the main motivation for engaging in the world of digital games is primarily fear resulting from the awareness of the risks associated with playing games. Such people, driven by the fear of games, tend to introduce arbitrary rules of digital hygiene, unsupported by knowledge about the rules of the digital world [...] and often inef-

fective attempts to force the child out of the world of games, without a proper recognition of its interests (Dębski & Bigaj, 2020, p. 108).

Following the suggestion of Dębski and Bigaj, and at the same time applying Noël Carroll’s terminology, we can define these attitudes as “epistemologically defective”, i.e., these attitudes are not **evidently false/erroneous**, but are based on simplified assumptions and formally flawed arguments, “true” only in strongly narrow contexts (Carroll, 2011, p. 363). The consequence of this conjunction is the fact that, acting only from the positions of a “trusting enthusiast” or “a frightened guardian”, the reliable – that is, without prejudices or a sentiment – analysis of the culture of computer games is not feasible. With this in mind, I would like to propose a new category, which I call the “trusting guardian” attitude. This attitude – generally speaking – is characterized, **firstly**, by awareness that a computer game is a multidimensional cultural artifact on an ontological level. This means that it can be understood as a machine code (i.e., a computer file containing text, graphic and sound elements), but also a text as a subject to analysis and interpretation, which – like any text – while remaining in connection with other texts, is a carrier of diverse (from the axiological point of view) essence, meanings, and symbols. **Secondly**, bearing in mind the educational potential of games, it is important to realize that the “trusting guardian” is aware of the difference between an educational game and education through the game. Thus, computer games also mean social practices related to them. **Thirdly**, the consequence of this conjunction is that the guardian’s attitude towards computer games is based on the perspective of the “sender” and the “recipient” (although due to the interactive nature of the games it would probably be better to say “user”). The “sender” perspective concerns the question of the genesis, structure and function of artifacts related to the culture of computer games. The recipient’s perspective focuses on the issue of how and for what purpose these artifacts are actually used by their users and – which is a particularly interesting question – whether the ways in which these users apply the artifacts, and the purposes for which they do so, coincide or collide with the intention of the senders.

## THE PRINCIPLE OF THE FOUR “R”

Jordan Shapiro is (and should be) an exceptionally valuable and pedagogically inspiring example of a “trusting guardian”. This still little recognized (not only in our country) researcher and educationally sensitive psychologist, on the one hand, promotes didactic strategies containing the use of computer games in educa-

tion. On the other hand, at least in some cases, distrustfulness towards computer games and related practices is sometimes justified. Let us take a closer look at the American researcher's approach and arguments that are, in fact, an intellectual scaffolding for the attitude of the "trusting guardian".

For Shapiro, the theoretical starting point is the perspective he calls "cultural-historical" (Shapiro, 2020, p. 252). It is worth adding that this perspective is close to the concept that media expert Siegfried Zielinski defines as "media archeology" (Zielinski, 2010). As in the case of archeology, it consists in analyzing historical pieces of evidence and accompanying experiences. Such analyses have a hermeneutical value in the sense that they allow to look at "new" in "the old way", but also – as the figure of the hermeneutic circle goes without saying – to read "old" in "the new way". Shapiro argues that such a perspective is extremely valuable heuristically because it allows to understand and sometimes overcome our prejudices against the culture of computer games. Referring to the words of Mark C. Taylor, Shapiro says that in this perspective,

[...] comments on the loneliness and isolation of experiences related to reading, coming from some of the first critics of the press, place them in line with modern parents, worried about their own children sitting alone in front of the screens of computers or mobile devices, playing computer games (Shapiro, 2020, p. 13).

What is particularly interesting – and pedagogically provoking – relying on this cultural and historical perspective, Shapiro formulates the thesis that computer games cannot only carry the same "significant" meanings as books, but are much more effective as teaching tools. In formulating this thesis, the American researcher refers to the thoughts of Socrates and Plato and to how these philosophers understood the studying/teaching process. If you take Plato, then Socrates was the one for whom the teaching process was based solely on live, real-time dialogue. As Socrates says, "[...] Those who think they can leave written instructions for an art, as well as those, who accept them, thinking that writing can yield results that are clear or certain, must be quite naive [...]" (Platon, 2019, p. 1638). Paraphrasing the words of Socrates with the language of today, that is, the language of new technologies, we can say that it is primarily the static nature of the book, which does not allow any interactivity, that is the reason why the learning/teaching process – as Socrates understood it – is doomed to failure and at least a defectiveness. And it is the interactivity, which is a constitutional feature of computer games, that determines the fact that "[...] [they] share a lot in common with great teachers: both are rigorous, responsive, reflective, and real" (Shapiro, 2020, p. 35). Let us discuss more the so-called Shapiro's "principle of the four Rs".

Each properly designed computer game has clearly defined rules and clearly described main tasks, which the player learns about during the game. These tasks can be performed by the player in various ways, although they are allowed only by the “game world”. The fact that the rules determining this world are clearly defined and absolutely binding makes computer games rigorous. It is also relevant that the difficulty level of these tasks cannot be either too easy (such a task must be a challenge for the player), or too difficult (a possible failure cannot be a cause of frustration). Shapiro argues that on the construction level, the world of the computer game strongly corresponds to what Lev Vygotsky calls the “zone of proximal development”, i.e.,

[...] a theoretical space where individual students encounter obstacles that can be overcome only with the support of external or social guidance. Likewise, good video games always provide players with the necessary power-ups at just the right time (Shapiro, 2020, p. 35).

Because every player’s decision that comes true in a specific action is almost immediately met with feedback, which tells the player whether his action brings him closer or distances him from success, it makes the games **responsive**. Teachers who use computer games for educational purposes know – or at least they should know – that “[...] the same principle applies to learning: assessments are only useful if they provide the learner with the feedback necessary to iterate his performance” (Shapiro, 2020, p. 35).

The fact that the games are both rigorous and responsive makes them consequently also **reflective**. There is no other way, but with a deliberate reflection, to make a decision on how to perform a specific task, taking into account the possibilities and limitations of the game itself. Understood in this way, however, reflexivity means not only planning, but also anticipating the consequences and implications of specific decisions. Shapiro convinces that considering intellectual activities that a player performs, we are dealing with “metacognition” (Shapiro, 2020, p. 36).

While all these features make games ultimately extremely engaging, it is much more meaningful that the rules determining fictional worlds of computer games also raise awareness about the rules running the real world. What is more: the skills (even manual) that we acquire during a game also turn out to be of real importance and consequences. And that is why games are **real** (Shapiro, 2020, p. 36).

In relation to computer games, however, Shapiro is by no means – in the language of Dębski and Bigaj – solely a “trusting enthusiast”. One should emphasize

immediately, however, that the researcher’s “distrustfulness” is not related to the games themselves and their alleged influence on the immoral behaviour of players (mainly children and adolescents). By claiming that “[...] rituals of digital play may not lead directly to life-world behaviors” (Shapiro, 2020, p. 31), the author shares the opinion of Andrew K. Przybylski and Netta Weinstein who, based on their research, stated that “[...] the results provide confirmatory evidence that violent video game engagement, on balance, is not associated with observable variability in adolescents’ aggressive behavior” (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2019, p. 14). Criticism of the American researcher focuses primarily on ideological aspects and is set for exploitation (profit-oriented) corporate practices. Echoing in this respect, Tom Engelhardt draws Shapiro’s attention to how childhood, theoretically only sphere untouched by the ideology of late capitalism, actually becomes its hostage. As Shapiro writes, “when my kids modify Minecraft code and upload new variations on the game – what gamer geeks call modding [‘to mod’ – to modify, to change] – they’re actually increasing the overall value of someone else’s intellectual property. Yes, my children are just having fun, but Mojang and Microsoft, which own Minecraft, benefit financially from my kids’ unpaid playbour” (Shapiro, 2020, p. 270). The notion of “playbour” turns out to be crucial in this criticism. Julian Kücklich, who is the author of this concept, deliberately juxtaposing two – seemingly – mutually exclusive words “play” and “labour”, suggests the less obvious and more conventional nature of social spaces and rituals. Shapiro – like Engelhardt – is interested in how traditional practices and social rituals are redefined in this way, as well as the categories by which we describe them. The fact that it is now increasingly difficult to establish a formal boundary between the educational and the ludic as well as home and work spheres (a boundary that was probably finally and consistently nullified by the coronavirus pandemic) means that it is something that criticism of educators should focus on – according to Shapiro – in the first place.

## **INDUSTRY CULTURE VS. CULTURAL INDUSTRY**

Rafał Kochanowicz is an equally appropriate example of the “trusting guardian” attitude. This researcher, but also a Polish language teacher with many years of teaching experience, argues that playing computer games – due to its interactive nature – is currently the most cognitively suggestive experience. The fact that computer games actually shift responsibility from an author who so far (in the case of non-interactive media – books, films) has “dictated” the course of events to a player itself, makes them such an effective and suggestive educational tool

(Kochanowicz, 2013, p. 127). It is worth noting that what Kochanowicz focuses his attention on, strongly corresponds to what Shapiro calls a reflective feature of the game. The former, however, emphasizes its hermeneutic nature to a greater extent. A computer game – as Kochanowicz argues – is an open text, “not ready”, “co-created”, dynamic, every time understood and interpreted differently, because the interpretation is strictly dependent on the player’s improvised actions, choices, experiments and thus strictly temporalized – inscribed in the dynamics of interactivity” (Kochanowicz, 2013, p. 121).

However, the Polish researcher also draws attention to the fact that computer games had more in common with the cultural industry and absolutely subordinate to it the corporate-capitalist logic than with “culture” itself. In this way, disenchanting the ludic myth of computer games, Kochanowicz writes:

[...] the hidden purpose of releasing to the market a given title is simply the addiction of a potential client, so that he/she is eager for new ‘virtual adventures’, impatiently awaiting on the continuation of the series or a new title [...]. All these procedures are well known in the world of marketing, which is accompanied by market research and, recently more and more, advertising – they function in their persuasive character analogically to the promotion of any other products (washing powders, food). Their target audience is not only an adult, but on the contrary, usually a teenager, a middle school student, a high school student. [...] This is the nature of the ludic industry that almost fully confirm the changes that have been taking place in recent years in today’s extremely dangerous MMO games – i.e., network, subscription and so-called ‘Free to Play’. Observing their evolution over the past few years, it can be said that these games are supposed to be addictive, because an addicted player will buy another scratch card with a code extending the subscription for the next month with tears in his eyes, begging his parents for access to a credit card (2012, pp. 187–191).

However, if the attitude of the “trusting guardian” is to be a truly critical attitude, it should be remembered that what we call the cultural industry is by no means limited only to digital games and related phenomena. After all, more and more suggestive and effective advertising and marketing strategies are developed also – or perhaps, first of all – with viewers, listeners and readers in mind. This means that the film, music and literary culture should also be referred to as ‘industry’, as the most engaged viewer, listener, and reader is at the same time the easiest client to obtain. What is more, in fact, it is precisely “[...] raising skepticism among learners [...] [which] is the basic goal that justifies the inclusion of commercial computer games in the education process” (Kochanowicz, 2012, p. 199). This means that both teachers who are reluctant towards computer games and those teachers who use them willingly and regularly must remember that industry, free from

cultural rules, is inconceivable, as well as talking about culture outside market conditions – at least since its mass scale – may and usually does cause pedagogical misunderstandings and prejudices. In connection with the answer to the question of what language to use when speaking of computer games, it is not a false alternative of “either–or”, but a conjunction in which the computer game is indeed a profit/exploitation-oriented product, but also a text of culture par excellence. In such optics, education through games means analysis vulnerable to hermeneutics, which makes possible to read the game on at least three levels.

## GAME AS PRETEXT

For Johan Huizinga, a reflection on ludic practices (i.e., all forms of games and plays) should be treated as an appropriate premise for research on culture in general, both in its physical and symbolic dimensions. In his most important and most popular work from 1938, *Homo Ludens: Proeve eener bepaling van het spel-element der cultuur*, Huizinga (2007) argues that the analysis of games-plays forms allows not only to notice their culture-making power, but – more importantly – to read and explain the rules governing them and, consequently, the negotiated – though not always consciously and voluntarily – principles on which social life is founded. And although Huizinga’s work is considered groundbreaking today, it is worth remembering that it was less determined by the conclusions it contained, and more by the premises that are supposed to speak in favor of them. The Dutch researcher reversed the current line of argument, arguing that it is the reflection on the title ‘Homo Ludens’ that shapes a cognitively appropriate **pretext** for reflection on ‘Homo Faber’, and not the other way around.

So if Huizinga’s concept has attracted – and continues to attract – the attention of researchers interested in computer games and the culture associated with them, it is primarily because of the methodological perspective itself. The perspective that turns out to be equally valuable theoretically and inspiring at the level of didactic practice. An interesting question then seems to be about the essence (textuality?) of computer games. Even more interesting – as Fiske would say – may turn out to be a reflection on the playing itself, which may suggest us as much about the subjectivity of the player as about the reasons why we indulge ourselves in gaming experience and make it common. As Filiciak (2009) asks,

[...] After all, is it an obsession with exercising control? Fascination with technology and new media? Or maybe introducing yourself to life in a world where simulating

and predicting certain processes, solving problems in a changing environment is the basic method of action, even in a modern workplace? Conceivably, games can be a kind of barometer that shows how new technologies are internalized into our lives and culture.

Kochanowicz seems to think similarly, arguing that formulated in this way, the question has great theoretical significance and didactic potential. Students

[...] treat ‘playing on the computer’ simply as fun, and despite strong impressions, most often they are not aware that they are dealing not only with the game, but with a syncretic text, an intentional creation, which, incidentally, was composed using a plot, narration, film dialogue, sound layer, animated acting, etc., i.e., it is based on those elements whose recognition becomes an inseparable core of the education process already in primary school. Young people ‘immerse’ in ‘texts’ composed in this way without being aware that to create them there were sometimes used the same means that the teacher discusses in the lesson when analyzing this or that reading (2012, p. 199).

So if we have the right to understand the game as a **pretext**, it is primarily due to the question of its ontological features. A question that cannot be answered without reaching for the language of literature (how are games different from books?), aesthetics (what is a work of art and is a computer game in fact one?), and even cultural studies (what is it – if that is what it is – the difference between a game and a fun?). An educationally valuable example of how a game can become a pretext for discussing important and serious topics, that can be used directly during a class, is the “Art of Gaming” programme, produced by the ARTE cultural television. Its subsequent episodes are devoted to selected issues from the areas of culture, science, art, and even politics<sup>4</sup>.

## GAME AS CONTEXT

The fact that education, whether formal or informal, directly or indirectly, always presupposes some evaluative vision of the world, it encourages the question of whether computer games can be a source of such education. In his book *The Philosophy of Mass Art*, Noël Carroll (2011) devoted almost three separate chapters to this problem, formulating an extremely interesting – and at the same time contrary to many popular theories – concept that the American philosopher calls “clarifica-

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<sup>4</sup> Retrieved September 20, 2021 from: <https://www.arte.tv/pl/videos/RC-014296/art-of-gaming/>.

tionism”. And let us immediately add that on the basis of the concept of computer games – but also of any other fictional texts – understood in this way, it cannot be the source of education. The main reason for this is the basic premise of clarificationism, based on the assumption that one can speak on all fictional works: “the direction of moral education with respect to narratives is not *from the text to the world* by way of newly acquired and interesting moral propositions [...]”, as Carroll writes, “However, in exercising these pre-existing moral powers in response to texts, the texts may become opportunities for enhancing our already existing moral understanding”. Thus, the direction of moral education runs from the world to the text (Carroll, 2011, pp. 330–331). Clarificationism seems worthy of attention (and possibly polemics) for at least several reasons.

**Firstly**, this position questions (or at least makes it not obvious) the belief that a text (a book, a film, a game) could even be a source of moral education. It should be emphasized, however, that the learning/teaching process itself is understood on the basis of this concept in a very restrictive and – I think – rather unintuitive way for many educationalists, i.e., as only a mental act, as a result of which only previously unknown information is acquired, and cannot also be logically deduced from known information. So if the reader/viewer/player understands the plot structure of the work, the axiology of the world presented in it, the motives that guide its heroes, this is why and only then – the clarificationist argues – when he/she already possesses the so-called moral presuppositions, i.e., basic knowledge on the ontological level regarding the existence of these values.

At the same time, the fact that the text cannot teach anyone anything does not mean that the text as such cannot have educational value. Although books, films and games do not provide us with moral knowledge – in the sense that we are talking about here – they indeed shape the intellectual context appropriate for this knowledge and moral beliefs, within which we are offered the opportunity to “[...] exercise our moral powers, the very process of understanding stories is, to a large extent, a form of this exercise” (Carroll, 2011, p. 315). The didactic value of games – as well as any other text – lies not in the fact that by dealing with the text we acquire a new, previously unknown moral knowledge, but instead in – the clarificationist would say – that by engaging our already existing moral presuppositions, we can strengthen them or become “forced to reorganize their hierarchical order or to reinterpret them in the context of new examples, or to reclassify previously poorly understood moral phenomena” (Carroll, 2011, p. 316).

**Secondly**, sensing to the difference between an educational text and education through a text/game, clarificationism proposes to make the didactic evaluation of a text dependent not only on its content and not only on its form, but also

on the relation between them<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, if a computer game is to be an adequate example on the basis of this assessment, then at least it is rational – although I am aware that also pedagogically debatable – the statement that what is morally outrageous in its case (content), it can also be aesthetically delightful (form). Anyway, this is not an unknown perspective to educational practitioners and at the level of school reality. After all, it is for this reason that when discussing, for example, the Sienkiewicz’s *Trilogy* in our classes, we focus on the eloquence and the literal character with which the author of *Ogniem i mieczem* [With Fire and Sword] describes the heroic exploits of Longinus Podbipięta. On the occasion of school trips to the local museum/gallery, we try to impress students with Matejko’s *Bitwa pod Grunwaldem* [Battle of Grunwald], and finally, we try to notice and appreciate Kubrick’s aesthetic sense/idea in connection with the film adaptation of *A Clockwork Orange*. Moreover, forgetting that all representations of acts of violence are, from an anthropological point of view, the usual archetype of “chess conflict” (Kochanowicz, 2012; Murray, 2010; Murray, 1998), in fact – as Arthur Danto (2013) and Laura Kipnis (2017) would say – we infantilize the hermeneutic experience on its basic level. This means that brutal and bloody duels (e.g., in the game *God of War*<sup>6</sup>, awarded many times by the British Academy of Film and Television Arts) can become a source of valuable aesthetic experience par excellence.

## GAME AS PARATEXT

As I am writing these words, the echo related to events connected with the high-profile game and at the same time the most anticipated premiere of last year, i.e., *Cyberpunk 2077*, continues. It is not without reason that I am making a footnote to this game, because it is in fact difficult to find a more eloquent (and literal) example of paratext (uality), strategically, the most important phenomenon for the cultural industry, for which *Cyberpunk 2077* could in fact be an ostensive definition. In order to grasp the core and meaning of the term ‘paratext’, suffice to say, as the new iPhone model is never just another next-generation gadget in the

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5 I assume – being aware of a simplification of course – that the “educational game” is the game that is consciously and intentionally designed primarily or exclusively for providing the specific content and meanings. “Education through the game” is a didactic practice with the use of a game, which may or may not be an educational game, hence it follows that the purpose of such an action is not or does not have to be determined by the content and meanings intentionally included in the game.

6 Retrieved September 20, 2021 from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1rJBP0jz95M>.

series, a computer game is not – if it ever was – only a materialized (or otherwise fixed) audio-visual artifact. So if *Cyberpunk 2077* is to be an adequate example of paratext (uality), it is primarily because it is something more, but also something less than the game itself.

Existing at the convergence of the pretext and the context, a paratext can be understood as fixed in any way, and by any means of expression and a side content in relation to the main/base text. Such content can then be purely commercial products (t-shirts, posters, toys in various ways associated with a specific brand), but it can also be specific messages (announcements, advertisements, events, discussion panels), as well as – and perhaps above all – amateur forms (art, music, literary, film) of grassroots creativity. Although, taking into account the sometimes exceptionally high level of their craftsmanship, one can doubt whether the adjective “amateur” is indeed a formally adequate concept (Androsiuk, 2017). Unofficial diaries written by the fans of *The Last of Us* game, telling the further lives of the main characters, may be an extremely valuable educational illustration of this issue<sup>7</sup>. Paratextuality means that you do not even have to be a game owner to participate in the event of the premiere of *Cyberpunk 2077* (Wiśniewski, 2020). The phenomenon is aptly captured by journalism devoted to computer games: “It is believed that movies, books or games are used for watching, reading or playing, but they are used for something else – participation in an event. You do not need a PC or a console to take part in the multimedia event, which is the premiere of *Cyberpunk 2077*. The game is just the ‘icing on the cake of hype’ – expectations, marketing, and hope [...] Games cost as much as PLN 200–300, so substitute emotions allow you to participate in an important pop culture event without reaching for your wallet. [...] Isn’t merchandising the purest form of experiencing a work of pop culture in late capitalism?” (Wiśniewski, 2020). Thus understood paratextuality is equally a form of participation in culture, as much as a culture of participation, which in itself is already didactical.

## THE GAME IS NOT OVER

A popular anecdote says that the outstanding physicist Niels Bohr decided one day to hang a carefully forged horseshoe over the door of his office. Since he was considered a consistent rationalist, friends and acquaintances would then ask him,

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<sup>7</sup> Retrieved September 20, 2021 from: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/12430630/1/The-Last-Of-Us-Novelization>.

“Dear Sir, do you really believe that this will bring you happiness?” In response, they were to hear: “Of course not, but the horseshoe hanging above the door is said to bring good luck even to those who do not believe in it”. Regardless of the event mentioned above, the moral of the story seems particularly clear and valuable in the context of the problem discussed here. For just as Bohr himself, who did not believe in the happiness that the horseshoe was supposed to bring him, having in fact nothing to lose, decided to suspend his disbelief, the teacher, who is not entirely inclined to believe in the didactic potential of computer game culture, perhaps should do the same. And although, as in the case of Staniszewski, reliance on computer games in the process of education does not ennoble the culture associated with them in the minds of students (because in their awareness this culture does not need ennoblement), it can make the school, and with it the teachers themselves, a little less archaic. Although the latter will not cease to be “intrusive moralizers”, they will also become “game experts” with whom they were not associated yesterday (Kochanowicz, 2012, p. 200).

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## Filmography

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## Ludography

*Cyberpunk 2077* (2020). CD Projekt RED.

*God of War* (2018). Santa Monica Studio.

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