

# The User as the Protagonist and a Rhetorical Creation, as exemplified by the paragraph game *Batwochwał* [Idolater]

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The player is simultaneously a user of the software, a recipient of the designed entertainment, and an active, decision-making participant who acts as a character within a plot. This ambiguous status of the subject—the complex identity of the player-protagonist—was aptly described by Michał Kłosiński in *Hermeneutyka gier wideo* [Video Game Hermeneutics]: “The player therefore possesses an identity in the legal-biological sense, as well as a narrative identity, or—more precisely—a stage identity, which makes them an actor in the sense that, while remaining themselves, they are also themselves-as-other.”<sup>1</sup> This, however, is a view from the outside: it describes the player as someone who chooses an avatar or accepts it as their electronic representation. Closer to the perspective adopted here is the question Kłosiński poses in his article on the second-person narrative: “what happens at

<sup>1</sup> Michał Kłosiński, *Hermeneutyka gier wideo. Interpretacja, immersja, utopia* [Video Game Hermeneutics: Interpretation, Immersion, Utopia] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IBL, 2018): 65.

the cognitive level when the player's subjectivity is summoned onto the stage of the game."<sup>2</sup> This formulation places the game itself—its textual content, its structures of address, and the very act of “summoning”—at the center of analysis. In this context, Kłosiński also invokes Rafał Kochanowicz's concept of the player as a puppeteer: an animator who brings to life a figure prepared for the staging.<sup>3</sup> Kochanowicz further considers how the text “plays the player.”<sup>4</sup> These perspectives converge on a key problem: what elements within the game—its digital architecture, its semiotic layers, and especially its textual dimension—shape the player's integration (or failure to integrate) with the character? To what extent are the player's decisions, and the depth of their immersion in the game world through/as this “puppet,” conditioned by the game's structure, narrative strategies, and stylistic choices?

This article analyzes a text game that emerges from a deliberate transformation of a work of literature—a transformation that exposes the “behind-the-scenes” mechanisms and the strategic consequences of shaping relationships with characters. *Bałwochwał* [Idolater] is, as its subtitle indicates, *Paragrafowa gra sieciowa na podstawie opowiadań Brunona Schulza* [A paragraph online game based on Bruno Schulz's short stories].<sup>5</sup> Mariusz Pisarski and Marcin Bylak creatively adapted material from *The Street of Crocodiles* and *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*.<sup>6</sup> The originals are quoted largely *verbatim*, though in fragmentary form, yet together they form a completely new whole, occasionally supplemented with text that imitates and extends the source material.<sup>7</sup> The transformations include: 1) the selection and compilation of fragments used in gameplay; 2) their contextual adaptation to the game's needs (hypertextual and spatial rearrangements, the presence of loops and returns to the beginning, the inclusion of chat elements, simulated dice rolls); 3) significant stylistic modifications, such as shifting the narrator-protagonist Józef from first-person to second-person and inserting sentences that combine various parts of the original or pastiche its stylistic features; 4) the development of stage directions and the addition of metafictional signals within the text. The title was devised by Pisarski and Bylak, though it was inspired by Bruno Schulz's portfolio of drawings known as *Xięga bałwochwalcza* [The Book of Idolatry].<sup>8</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Michał Kłosiński, “Przekraczając horyzont inności: narracja drugoosobowa w fabularnych grach cyfrowych jako problem biopolityczny” [Crossing the Horizon of Otherness: Second-Person Narration in Digital Role-Playing Games as a Biopolitical Problem], *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich* [Literary Genres] 4 (2022): 88.

<sup>3</sup> Rafał Kochanowicz, “Cybernetyczne doświadczenia – fabularyzowane gry komputerowe w perspektywie hermeneutyki” [Cybernetic Experiences: Fictionalized Computer Games in a Hermeneutical Perspective], *Homo Ludens* 1 (2013): 119–128.

<sup>4</sup> Kochanowicz, 125.

<sup>5</sup> *Bałwochwał. Paragrafowa gra sieciowa na podstawie opowiadań Brunona Schulza* [Idolater: A Paragraph Online Game Based on Bruno Schulz's Short Stories] by Mariusz Pisarski, Marcin Bylak, score by Artur Sosen Klimaszewski (Krakow: Korporacja Ha!art, 2013). The game is free and available at: *Bałwochwał – start*, accessed 11 Jul. 2025. (Note: do not access it through the page in the Ha!art archive – otherwise, many of the links with the selection will not open.)

<sup>6</sup> See Mariusz Pisarski, “Schulz na cyfrowo. Sieciowa gra paragrafowa *Bałwochwał*” [Schulz Digitally: The Online Paragraph Game *Bałwochwał*], *Czas Kultury* [Time of Culture] 1 (2014): 70–75; Mariusz Pisarski, “*Bałwochwał* – cyfrowa adaptacja opowiadań Schulza” [*Bałwochwał* – a Digital Adaptation of Schulz's Short Stories], *Techsty* [Techsts] (28 Jul. 2022) [not paginated]; Mariusz Pisarski, “Jak powstał *Bałwochwał*?” [How *Bałwochwał* Was Created?], YouTube, 2 Apr. 2015, Bing Video, accessed 6 Aug. 2025; Mariusz Pisarski, *Figury obecności w cyfrowych mediach. Od hipertekstu do sztucznej inteligencji* [Figures of Presence in Digital Media: From Hypertext to Artificial Intelligence] (Krakow: Universitas, 2024), 73–75.

<sup>7</sup> For example, the Factory and Park sections (with a song).

<sup>8</sup> The mysterious *Idolater* is connected with the threat hanging over the imaginary *Drohobych* – see: Pisarski, “*Bałwochwał* – cyfrowa adaptacja opowiadań Schulza.” In the game, the *Idolater* section brings a less clear image – the titular character is “like a Messiah,” appearing in the sky, “weighing the fate of a brilliant era in his hands”, which turns out to be “our” era, though this is contrary to Schulz's intentions. Cf. Michał Paweł Markowski, *Polska literatura nowoczesna. Leśmian. Schulz, Witkacy* [Polish Modern Literature: Leśmian. Schulz, Witkacy] (Krakow: Universitas, 2007), 250–252.



Figure 1. Game's title screen

The game cultivates a retro aesthetic—not only because its source material was written by an early-twentieth-century author, but also through a deliberate electronic archaization. Its 1990s-style presentation aligns with retro gaming:<sup>9</sup> the typography combines a “pixelated” title and section headings reminiscent of old monitors with a body font that imitates machine-printed text; large blocks of prose dominate; and the overall visual design is markedly minimalistic. The color palette is restricted to black text on a white background, with sepia-toned stage directions. The interface is extremely simple, devoid of cinematic or VR effects, and it does not support team play. A few words are also needed about the visuals and music and their influence on the experience. The title screen features a black-and-white illustration by Katarzyna Janota:

a man with folded hands bends humbly over a naked woman, while her outstretched hand reaches toward a skeleton beside him, the skeleton pointing a forearm bone in her direction. This symbolic composition sets the tone for the game's atmosphere and frames the player's entry into its world. The presence of age-old motifs—he and she, Eros and Thanatos, the sacred and the profane—and the archaizing visual style signal a strongly symbolic message, but the image can also be read as a visual interpretation and a prelude to “idolatry,” saturated with erotic tension and the fear of disintegration characteristic of Schulz's world. The soundtrack by Artur Klimaszewski (“Sosen”), which begins as soon as the game loads, further reinforces this atmosphere, capturing the exotic and surreal aura of Schulz's prose. His improvisations draw on klezmer, jazz, and electronic music, weaving together free-form sequences of “rough” or “eerie” sounds and striking vocalizations.<sup>10</sup> From the outset, the game's semiotic and semantic layers work in tandem, preparing the user to assume the role of Józef's “animator” within an alien reality.

The game presents a clear narrative arc: it opens with a title screen (Fig. 1) and, for those who persist to the end, concludes with one (?) distinctive final page styled after film end credits (Fig. 2). This retro aesthetic once again gestures toward an earlier medium—cinema—positioned here as a successor to print. The ending also includes a link to Pisarski's own review of the game in the online magazine *Techsty*, which he edits, as well as information about achieving a score of 1,000,001 points. These elements blur the boundary between being inside the game and outside of it, showing how tightly the two realms are interwoven.

<sup>9</sup> Andrzej Strużyna draws attention to this in “Wejść w schulzowski świat. O Bałwochwale Mariusza Pisarskiego i Marcina Bylaka” [Entering Schulz's World: On Mariusz Pisarski and Marcin Bylak's Bałwochwał] *Techsty* 1 (2014) [not paginated].

<sup>10</sup> According to the publisher, it is “industrial-post-klezmer” music (original notation, DKP). “Bałwochwał” [Idolater] [no author, pagination, date], Bałwochwał – Korporacja Ha!art, accessed 5 Aug. 2025.



Figure 2. Game's final page

Along the way, the player encounters numerous dead ends, or “branch tracks of time,” as Schulz would call them, with some sections explicitly bearing that title, from which the only escape is to return to the start page. At the same time, every choice can be retraced using the Undo button on the toolbar. Progress unfolds through selecting one of several options listed beneath each passage. Every section carries its own title, usually different from those in Schulz’s short stories, and the same heading may lead to entirely different content—for example, *Movie theater* or *Underground* can recur with new meanings. Choosing a path forward earns points and grants pieces of fictional equipment noted in the marginal stage directions, while other choices may result in losing both points and equipment.

Every game contains some element of chance, but here neither tactics nor familiarity with Schulz’s short stories offer any advantage; the props and the consequences of each action are entirely arbitrary. For players who seek the adrenaline of dynamic gameplay—and who are used to more immersive forms of participation such as video games, VR, or MMORPGs, where every decision carries weight—this experience is unlikely to feel engaging. Yet, as will become evident, *Batwochwał* is less a game for the user than a subtle intellectual game with the user, perhaps even a game that plays its user.

Let us now turn to two seemingly contradictory processes that accompany the act of playing: immersion—the sensation of entering the represented world—and emersion, Piotr Kubiński’s term for the deliberate disruption of that illusion.<sup>11</sup> Schulz’s prose itself is immersive: it is sensual and synesthetic, emotionally charged, and vividly imaginative. Its intensely subjective, narrator-as-the-protagonist-centered perspective and its detailed descriptions draw the reader into the fictional world, seducing them with imaginative leaps, metaphorical density, and a pronounced erotic undercurrent that implicitly invites the reader’s participation.<sup>12</sup> In the game, long textual passages work together with the cover art and the evocative, atmospheric soundtrack to immerse the user in a phantasmagorical reality. The player becomes a fictional “Józef,” traveling through shifting spaces, meeting characters, receiving new information about locations and encounters, or being informed that they have drifted off course in the branch tracks of time. The use of the second person binds the protagonist’s experience to the user’s own, effectively “embodying” Józef<sup>13</sup> within them and heightening the sense of presence.

<sup>11</sup>Piotr Kubiński, “Emersja – antyiluzyjny wymiar gier wideo” [Emersion: The Anti-Illusionary Dimension of Video Games], *Nowe Media [New Media]* (June 2015): 161–176.

<sup>12</sup>Also because of the addressees of both volumes of Schulz’s short stories, as Jerzy Jarzębski writes in: “Schulz – ironiczny ład i dyskurs uwodzicielski” [Schulz: Ironic Order and Seductive Discourse], *Konteksty [Contexts]* 1-2 (2019): 351–355.

<sup>13</sup>See: Magdalena Rembowska-Płuciennik, “O narracji w drugiej osobie – enaktywnie” [On Second-Person Narration – Enactively], *Teksty Drugie [Second Texts]* 2 (2022): 65.

Paradoxically, the more deeply someone knows Schulz's prose, the more fully they can immerse themselves in the game's episodes—experiencing this world from within and filtering it through their own memory. Such readers no longer need to decode the logic of this space-time continuum or the rules that govern it. For younger players unfamiliar with Schulz, however, the archaic Polish, the poetic density, the unfamiliar names and historical realities, the exotic musical setting, and the sheer imaginative and erudite force of the prose can be demanding. These elements may entice them as markers of otherness and strangeness—much like the allure of role-playing games or steampunk fiction—or they may repel them, requiring repeated efforts simply to grasp what is happening. The absence of explanations encourages players to “re-immense” continually, checking and re-checking what they have encountered. Some links—like the *Underground* option, built around a complex Schulz passage on anamnesis—require close reading instead of instinctive clicking. Such moments underscore how textual immersion operates differently from digital immersion.<sup>14</sup>

Emersion arises not only from the game's built-in loops and abrupt returns to the starting point, or from the visible mechanics such as selection buttons and stage directions, but also from the digital-visual archaization. The persistent address to the “reader,” inherited from older prose traditions, further disrupts the illusion, since the player—as Józef—is not, in fact, a reader within the fiction. Another source of emersion is the unresolved question of the protagonist's gender identity, which can make it difficult for some players to inhabit the role. A twenty-first century heteronormative woman may feel disoriented when the game leads “her” into a brothel, forces “her” into a fight with thugs, or declares: “You notice a girl with dark skin and large brown eyes. Your eyes meet hers for a moment [...] you decide to fall for her [...]” (in the *Park* section). The assumed role inevitably shapes the experience, sometimes through an awareness of one's own historical, cultural, or gendered position, and this in itself intensifies the process of emersion.

The uselessness of certain pieces of equipment can itself produce confusion, irritation, or at least a sense of absurdity. Items appear or vanish not as logical consequences of the player's choices but as arbitrary punishments, rewards, or supplements—elements that feel external to the gameplay. Also, if the player hesitates too long, the music sustaining the illusion of an exotic world stops,<sup>15</sup> abruptly puncturing the sense of immersion. As Paweł Łapiński observes,<sup>16</sup> however, it can also work in the opposite direction, functioning as a kind of pressure mechanism that pushes the player toward a quick, intuitive, non-rational decision, thus paradoxically reinforcing immersion.

The game developers go well beyond narrative translation, redirecting gameplay from the level of the story to the level of metafiction. In doing so, they transform emersion—or rather the tension between immersion and emersion, that is, as Magdalena Rembowska-Płuciennik puts it, dispersion<sup>17</sup>—into a distinct mode of play. Irony and humor become key tools in this process: they gently bracket

<sup>14</sup>See: Magdalena Rembowska-Płuciennik, “Po(d)łączeni. Empiryczne badania nad odbiorem literatury wobec odbioru cyfrowego” [(Inter)Connected: Empirical Research on Literary Reception and Digital Reception,] *Teksty Drugie* 5 (2019): 271.

<sup>15</sup>It is not looped; you can play it again after finding the button.

<sup>16</sup>Paweł Łapiński, “Deklinowanie wiosny albo zgrywa z Schulza” [Declining Spring or Playing a Joke on Schulz], *Schulz/Forum* (7.03.2017): 169.

<sup>17</sup>Rembowska-Płuciennik, “Po(d)łączeni. Empiryczne badania nad odbiorem literatury wobec odbioru cyfrowego”, 272.

the experience of engaging both with an online game and with early-twentieth-century prose, destabilizing the player's expectations. As a result, the player, through their own involvement, becomes the object of a metagame. The handling of points and commentary illustrates this strategy particularly well. In the scene with Thuja and the implied erotic encounter, the player is awarded demonic 666 points, and—beneath the lexia, after three asterisks—a note appears that is, of course, absent from Schulz's original: "Please close your eyes and not look at what's about to happen." Yet the only person capable of closing their eyes at that moment is the player, and doing so would interrupt the game entirely, preventing the fictional act that supposedly requires the closing of their eyes. The sole option that then appears is a link-sentence: "After a while, you take advantage of a moment of inattention to escape the unforeseen consequences of this innocent visit [...]." It undercuts the earlier insinuations and adds yet another layer of mockery directed at the player. In another instance, in the lexia titled *Outhouse*, which contains material not found in Schulz, the scene ends with a direct address reassuring the addressee that they are not the first to have their adventures end here. The only available choice, presented under the link *The End is the Beginning*, sends the player back to the beginning of the game.

Pisarski and Bylak deliberately mix up tenses, lure the player into narrative traps, and play with expectations. In the final lexia with the "cast," the player discovers in their inventory—without any explanation—a thoroughly modern "Kazik's CD"<sup>18</sup> next to "Elsa Fluid body balm."<sup>19</sup> And reaching this moment in the game is awarded with the absurd one million and one points. Earlier, in the *Movie theater* section, the game offers cryptic, rule-breaking messages such as "you lost a lot of points" or "you earned an incalculable number of points." In the *Map* section, one of the messages reads: "You earned your favorite number of points." After completing the *Middle School* section, the player is awarded the score of 3.14159, the truncated value of  $\pi$ . Equally characteristic of *Batwochwał's* conventions is the playful manipulation of the player in the *Suburbs* section: "You have found yourself in a lateral, illegal branch track of time. At this point in history, we must branch you out; who knows—perhaps it was unforgivable recklessness to send a young boy on such an important and urgent mission on such a day" (emphasis mine, DKP). One becomes at once a reader of the lexia and a 21st-century player, subject to Pisarski and Bylak's authority through a narrative that doubles as a second-order navigation system. Simultaneously, as an inhabitant of the game world, the reader is still meant to be—is? happens to be??—the boy, Józef, yet now reframed as an adult capable of grasping metafictional cues and metaphysical allusions. The work's dual ambition is visible throughout. On the one hand, it is genuinely invested in evoking Schulz's stories and transporting them into the 21st century in a new medium. On the other hand, it gleefully undermines the seriousness of both adaptation and game design, subjecting Schulz's world to a postmodern sense of humor that questions the very possibility of faithful transposition and strict gaming rules.

Łapiński goes so far as to call *Batwochwał* "a joke on Schulz", yet the object of this joke is not Schulz himself nor the world he created, but the contemporary reader-player. Cast as the protagonist, they are confronted with a series of intellectual provocations, hints, and allusive

<sup>18</sup>Presumably: a CD by Kazik Staszewski who is still an active rock musician, born in the 1960s.

<sup>19</sup>It is a healing balm mentioned in Part IV of Schulz's *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, known from press advertisements in the 1930s.

traps. Łapiński adds that Pisarski and Bylak’s project is “more of an echo [...] of the punk fanzine tradition, the alternative culture of the 1980s [...]”<sup>20</sup> Through these metafictional maneuvers, Pisarski and Bylak, as Łapiński also notes, undercut the most basic and seemingly self-evident rationale for playing games “for a reason”, their teleological structure.<sup>21</sup> Schulz’s surrealism is structurally reenacted in the dreamlike progression of the respective scenes, the intrusion of chance, and the persistent sensation of temporal and spatial disorientation. And it is further intensified by the game’s deliberate sabotage of its own rules—through unpredictable, often absurd scoring; wry metafictional commentary; and the illusion of choice created by imposed props and predetermined decision paths.

It can therefore be said that the image of the world in *Bałwochwał*—with its capacity for sudden metamorphoses (the same headlines revealing different content, the same scene unfolding in multiple possible endings), its capricious volatility, the disappearance and reappearance of people and places, and the unveiling of blind alleys in time that keep the participant in a state of ontological and cognitive uncertainty—is a faithful reflection of what we encounter in Schulz’s prose. The principle of realistic–fantastical ambiguity is preserved, and the work successfully conveys a similarly enigmatic atmosphere. This is paired with the synesthetic intensification of sensations from Schulz’s descriptions, here heightened by Klimaszewski’s contribution. The fictional reality explored in the game—just as in Schulz’s prose—appears as something active in relation to the viewing and experiencing subject; it feels almost alive; it is a fantastical entity that affects the senses and in some way “interacts” with “you.” The fictional world is performative in nature, and at the same time, it makes “you” take part in a “game of uncertainty.”<sup>22</sup> The player navigating a sequence of tasks governed by clearly defined rules transforms into someone (the participant-protagonist) who is trying to find their way between “aporia” and “epiphany.” According to Espen Aarseth, these two notions describe the modes through which narrative unfolds in cybertexts, challenging the traditional linear model of storytelling. Pisarski summarizes this idea as follows:

The mechanism of the event field is governed by aporia and epiphany, narrative figures that shape the reader’s experience. Aporias are semantic gaps that suspend interpretation, withholding meaning from the reader. In computer games, they take the form of formal obstacles that halt progress until the player performs a specific sequence of actions. Epiphanies arise at the moment when an initially insoluble situation is finally resolved.<sup>23</sup>

In the case of *Bałwochwał*, uncertainty concerns not only the nature of the fictional world—the degree of fantasy and imaginative distortion—but also the status of the knowing, playing subject, who is simultaneously invited to play and treated with a measure of irony. Remaining themselves, they are also, to some extent, the Other: Józef on a quest—or rather a liminal

<sup>20</sup>Łapiński, 171–172.

<sup>21</sup>Łapiński, 169.

<sup>22</sup>Paulina Chorzewska, in a student cultural magazine, writes about “the feeling of helplessness in the face of a world over which one can only have illusory control;” see Paulina Chorzewska, “Gry tekstowe, czyli osvajanie literatury cyfrowej” [Textual Games, or Taming Digital Literature], *Niewinni Czarodzieje* [Innocent Sorcerers] 30 (15 Jan. 2017) [not paginated].

<sup>23</sup>Mariusz Pisarski, “Ergodyczność” [Ergodicity], *Techsty*, 29 Oct. 2023 [not paginated].

figure with a dispersed, indeed dispersive, identity. And the epiphanies in the game are not tied to the resolution of a problem but to the discovery of the ambiguity inherent in new places, people, and events.

At this point, we approach questions of the second-person narrative as well as cognitive, psychological, and ontological issues central to game studies. The very use of the second person carries significant narrative and cognitive consequences. It is an inherently ambivalent device. As Kłosiński aptly observes:

Second-person narration is, on the one hand, a completely natural and conventionalized way for the game to communicate with its players, rooted in the practices of earlier role-playing games. On the other hand, [...] it functions as a sophisticated political, aesthetic, and narrative device designed to produce in players a sense of the unnatural. [...] It is meant to challenge the subject and its boundaries. Yet this transgression can be understood as both something positive and something negative. [...] In my view, it can be described in terms of both cooperation (Rembowska-Płuciennik 2022: 69) and hostile takeover. When someone writes down our experiences (“you feel that”) or our thoughts and desires (“you would like to”), speaks to us (“you should stop”), commands us (“you must shout”), or on our behalf (“you tell them to...”), the effect is a penetration or stretching of the protective barrier that allows us to remain agents of ourselves.<sup>24</sup>

I will refer to these findings later, pointing to the immanent rhetoric of the game and the question of domination.

*Bałwochwał*'s rhetorical strategy integrates the rhetoric of text, image, sound, color, movement, and navigation—every dimension of the game that persuades players to participate. By engaging the senses, imagination, and intellect, it shapes decisions, perceptions, the fictional world's appearance, and the values attached to it. As Michał Tabaczyński notes in reference to the “game condition,” “it is not only the player who actively modifies elements of the world of the game; the game also influences the player.”<sup>25</sup> The audio-visual layer, as already discussed, plays a central role: it intensifies user engagement, appeals to sensory and emotional registers, and, together with the text, produces a form of perceptual synesthesia that deepens immersion. It reinforces the plausibility of this extraordinary, exotic world—marked by the allure of historicity and magical realism—and helps establish its distinctive, mysterious aura. In addition, the rhetoric of navigation plays a crucial role:<sup>26</sup> it prompts participation, and each mouse movement or click triggered by a link marks a decision, a shift, and the capacity to traverse the game world. The player, often without noticing, performs navigational actions aligned with the game's intended developmental paths. To proceed, they must choose, thereby accepting a predetermined progression or returning to earlier stages, even to the very beginning of the game (as in the lexis titled *Marketplace*, which itself appears in several variants). They are likewise compelled to accept a system of rewards (points, props,

<sup>24</sup>Kłosiński, “Przekraczając horyzont inności: narracja drugoosobowa w fabularnych grach cyfrowych jako problem biopolityczny”, 87, 89.

<sup>25</sup>Michał Tabaczyński, “Gdzie jest gracz, kiedy gra? Retoryki cielesności a gry wideo” [Where is the player when they play? Rhetorics of corporeality and video games], *Czas Kultury* 2 (2015): 103.

<sup>26</sup>See Ewa Szczęsna, *Cyfrowa semiopoetyka* [Digital Semiopoetics] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IBL, 2018), 57.

the possibility of advancement) and penalties (point removal or the requirement to revisit a previous lexis or restart entirely).

The presence of one to three choice paths, functioning as links, strongly signals the need for action—a call to act that is masked by second-person constative phrases (“you go,” “you choose,” “you roll the dice”), which in effect operate as imperatives: go, choose, roll. These stage directions construct a rhetoric of participation, an illusion of agency continually reinforced by language, fostering the belief that the player truly inhabits the fictional world and plays a meaningful role within it. Yet beneath this surface lies a rhetoric of domination, exercised by the rule-setter and the narrator. The participant is shaped by both the rhetoric of the lexis and the stage directions. They involve: 1) existential presuppositions about the existence of people, objects, events, states, and the relations between them—presuppositions generated through descriptions and observations; 2) the directive force of the text toward the player, which continually governs their activity; 3) a pre-constructed and limited set of choices (at times only a single option!), which steers decisions and values and even, as noted earlier, affects gender identity and the player’s entry into a specific historical and cultural context, thereby imposing a particular perspective;<sup>27</sup> and 4) strong suggestions concerning how to assess situations, what actions are necessary, and what emotions should be experienced. This applies not only to the earlier directives such as “you go” and “you say,” but also to sentences within the game that interpret events on behalf of the experiencing subject: “You conclude that...,” “...—you think,” “Bewildered by the scale of the events...,” “you decide.” Such formulations position the user as the subject of an intense rhetorical influence, capable of shaping and redirecting will, emotion, imagination, knowledge, and belief. These “hypnotic” sentences—known from persuasion psychology and NLP manuals<sup>28</sup>—manipulate the player by disrupting the formation of independent judgments, conclusions, and evaluations, as well as the articulation of their own interpretive stance.

The player, cast as the protagonist, is nevertheless compelled to assume a subordinate position in relation to the narrative and its stage directions. Despite being the central figure and the nominal agent of action, they are dominated by Józef’s imposed youth, by their status as the one who merely receives (or fails to receive) instructions and opportunities, and, through metafictional remarks and jokes, by their role as the object of verbal or situational irony. One might even say that they are—usually without realizing it—subordinated to the communicative rules that govern this world. Neither personality, age, interests, knowledge, nor experience—and not even the contemporary language or habits of the 21st-century player—are taken into account. This violates every principle of writing with the user’s experience<sup>29</sup> in mind. Instead, one is compelled to embark on an unfamiliar, ergodic path<sup>30</sup> shaped by cybertextuality, by

<sup>27</sup>It is worth mentioning the concept of “virtual tragedy,” introduced by Rafał Kochanowicz to describe situations in which the player is forced to take actions inconsistent with their personal value system, worldview, or accepted ethics, e.g., they must harm others or cheat. See Kochanowicz, 126–127.

<sup>28</sup>See Joseph O’Connor, John Seymour, *Introducing Neuro-Linguistic Programming: Psychological Skills for Understanding and Influencing People* (London: Thorsons, 1993), 181–190; Kevin Hogan, *The Psychology of Persuasion: How to Persuade Others to Your Way of Thinking* (Elmwood: Pelican Publishings, 1996): 100–143.

<sup>29</sup>Wojciech Aleksander, *Moc języka w produktach cyfrowych [The Power of Language in Digital Products]* (Gliwice: Helion, 2023), 383–389.

<sup>30</sup>This requires tremendous effort. This is of course an allusion to Espen Aarseth’s term. See Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 9.

the interactivity and multi-variant structure of the plot, by the ontological uncertainty characteristic of Schulz's work, and by the game's metafictional dimension.

In such circumstances, the player's identity comes into being—rhetorically constructed for the duration of the game. Upon entering the world of the game, a person from the outside becomes the “you-user” envisioned by the designers (to use Rembowska-Płuciennik's apt formulation).<sup>31</sup> This means assuming a role prescribed within the fictional world and becoming subject to the interactional structure and rhetorical strategy built into the game. From the perspective of the world of the game, the model player is therefore nothing more than a correlate of the game's rules and its rhetorical design. By analogy with the narrator and narratee, we can describe the player, viewed through the lens of rhetoric, as the game's *rhettoree*—the rhetorical addressee constructed by the game. The *rhettoree* is, of course, a feature of all communicative acts, yet it becomes especially visible in contexts where argumentation is deployed or immersion is deliberately initiated. The game's conditions—its rules, mechanics, and formal structures—impose on the user a set of emotions, choices, and decisions, as well as perceptions, sensory experiences, values, utterances directed at others, and interpretations of events. Taken together, these elements can create opportunities for manipulation and raise ethical concerns about appropriating someone else's “you,” a position the player is bound to occupy from the outset.<sup>32</sup> During gameplay, the player becomes an interactor<sup>33</sup> who, by entering and playing the game, activates a rhetorical trap designed for them.

In *Bałwochwał*, however, the designers offer not only a game built around a rhetorical strategy that positions the player as a *rhettoree*; they also construct a metafictional layer that exposes this *rhettoree* to additional, deliberately dispersive experiences. We are not meant simply to believe what we—as both player and protagonist—are supposed to believe. Instead, we are invited to be seduced by Schulz's text while simultaneously being inoculated against that seduction through a series of metafictional jokes that function as a kind of counterfictional vaccine. During gameplay, we slip almost imperceptibly into a state that Schulz himself captures with remarkable precision in one of his stories: “Even stranger things happen here, things that **I try to conceal from myself** and that are quite fantastic in their absurdity”<sup>34</sup> (emphasis mine, DKP). This formulation offers an additional interpretive key to the game. It points to two intertwined insights: first, that absurdity suspends the assertive force of statements, lifting them into a register of heightened strangeness that exceeds the mere

<sup>31</sup>Magdalena Rembowska-Płuciennik, “Enactive, Interactive, Social – New Contexts for Reading Second-Person Narration”, *Narrative 1* (2022): 67.

<sup>32</sup>The ethical character of face-to-face relations cannot simply be transferred to the supposed ethical relation between a narrative and its protagonist, because the narrator does not merely speak on behalf of the character but rather speaks them into being—that is, creates them. In the game, this tension becomes especially visible: the performative force of stage directions and narration stands in direct conflict with the presence of a real person who is assigned a role yet remains a separate, autonomous, self-experiencing physical being.

<sup>33</sup>The term is understood in different ways. Following Katherine Hayles, it is generally taken to refer to the player who embodies the protagonist and thereby sets a sequence of events in motion—see, for example, Tabaczyński (p. 100). This is the sense in which I use the concept here. Rembowska-Płuciennik, by contrast, applies the term to the narrator in second-person narratives; in her framework, the protagonist is instead called the initiator, since it is they who initiate the realization of what the narrator describes. See Rembowska-Płuciennik, “O narracji w drugiej osobie – enaktywnie”, 62.

<sup>34</sup>This is a quote from *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*. See Bruno Schulz, *Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass*, trans. Celina Wieniawska (New York: Penguin, 1979), 132.

oddity of events; and second, that certain experiences, though undeniably occurring, can be deliberately withheld from one's own awareness, as if self-concealment were an act of will. What, then, would such self-concealment entail, and how might it resonate with the world of this game?

The act of "concealing from oneself" points to the act of believing in or doubting what one considers too absurd or too strange. And this, it seems, is the unpredictable factor that, even in a game, can determine whether we want something for some reason (and then we do not conceal it from ourselves, simply submitting to the fiction and the game and its rhetoric), or whether we do not accept something, or do not feel comfortable with it. And then we cannot help but conceal it from ourselves, meaning we deliberately forget it, we brush it aside without giving it a second thought; we reject it so we can continue having fun—or we act against ourselves, accepting the imposed conditions, meaning we consciously conceal our lack of acceptance. The will, the intention to believe in/doubt, to accept/not accept, is the last bastion of all rhetoric, and making someone feel uncertain, strange, or unnatural removes the rational ground from under their feet, preparing them, as it were, to accept another world within their own, as well as the other within themselves.

The "you-user" is not only the user to whom a character is temporarily given and/or imposed onto, but also someone who—often for reasons opaque even to themselves—accepts the invitation to "play the other." They are simultaneously the player, consciously and unconsciously performing a designated role, and the one being played by the game's designers, be it through text, interface, music, and other rhetorical cues. Throughout the experience (and sometimes lingering beyond it), this "you" remains under the sway of the game's rhetoric, brought into being and shaped by it as the *rhetoee*. This position exceeds the simple sylleptic fusion of two basic functions—the player and the player-as-protagonist.<sup>35</sup> The rhetoric of the game, especially in a text-based work as semantically dense as *Batwochwał*, can activate and multiply layers of gameplay and versions of the engaged subject. It does so because it does not address someone who mechanically executes commands, but a situated person embedded in their own time, space, and culture, with shifting moods, needs, and self-understandings. What the game offers is not a neutral set of data about a fictional world nor a straightforward manual for navigating it. Instead, through interaction and the use of metafictional insertions, it constructs a richly performative and idiosyncratic reality, one further permeated by surreality.<sup>36</sup>

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

<sup>35</sup>See Pisarski, *Figury obecności w cyfrowych mediach. Od hipertekstu do sztucznej inteligencji*, 73.

<sup>36</sup>The concept of "surreality" reflects the complex ontology of Schulz's literary world. See Markowski, 174.

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# KEYWORDS

immersion

text game rhetoric

*rhettoree*

**ABSTRACT:**

This article examines a 2013 game designed by Mariusz Pisarski and Marcin Bylak, inspired by the short stories of Bruno Schulz. It analyzes how the game constructs and interrogates the player's identity as they inhabit the role of the protagonist. The discussion focuses on the game's overarching rhetorical strategy, its oscillation between immersion and emersion, and the ways these dynamics shape the player's experience. Drawing on the model of the narratee, the author proposes the term *rhettoree* to describe the projected persona produced by the game's rhetorical operations—a figure emerging from the interplay of narrative design, interface, stage directions, and musical cues.

# RETRO GAMING

## dispersion

## Bałwochwąt (gra)

## emersion

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