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THE LITERARY SPECIFICITY OF THE TEXTUAL ADVENTURE GAME AS A FORM OF ERGODIC LITERATURE



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Abstract. In this article we present the textual adventure game, analyzing its literary specificity and the way in which the playful and the narrative interact in its structures. Marked by cybertextuality, the game can be seen as a narrative and analyzed semantically, semiotically and emotionally. The narrative experience offered by it is accessible only in the digital space, in wich the character becomes the player, and the concept of homo ludens represents a hybrid of the reader and the writer.

Based on the theoretical visions of J. Derrida, K. Veale, B. Kuhn, H. Jenkins, O. Laas, J. Gogging etc., this article presents the textual adventure game as a literary form, with narrative functions, able to generate alterbiographies and represent a varied narrative architecture. The spatiality of the textual adventure game is defined by the four types of narrative architecture: evocative spaces, enacted stories, embedded narratives, and emergent narratives, which take this form of ergodic literature beyond what a traditional narrative entails.

This study analyzes both pre-digital works, in which the game was just a strategy, such as G. Boccaccio's "Decameron", "Composition No. 1" by Marc Saporta as well as adventure text games such as Bethesda's Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (2011), World of Warcraft etc. The evolution of the game from narrative technique to the form of ergodic literature is a premise of the initiation of an individualized theoretical approach.

Keywords: adventure text game, literature, ergodic text, cybertext, hypermedia, video game, digitization.

Specificul literar al jocului textual de aventură ca formă a literaturii ergodice

Rezumat. În articolul dat prezentăm jocul textual de aventură, analizând specificul său literar și modul în care ludicul și narativul interacționează în structurile acestuia. Marcat de cybertextualitate, jocul poate fi văzut ca o narațiune și analizat semantic, semiotic și afectiv. Experiența narativă oferită de acesta fiind accesibilă doar în spațiul digital, în care personaj devine jucătorul, iar conceptul de homo ludens reprezintă un hibrid al cititorului și scriitorului.

Fundamentat pe viziunile teoretice ale lui J. Derrida, K. Veale, B. Kuhn, H. Jenkins, O. Laas, J. Gogging ș.a., acest articol prezintă jocul textual de aventură ca pe o formă literară, cu funcții narative, capabilă să genereze alterbiografii și să reprezinte o arhitectură narativă variată. Spațialitatea jocului textual de aventură este definită de cele patru tipuri de arhitectură narativă: spații evocatoare, povești interpretate, narațiuni încorporate și narațiuni emergente, care trec această formă a literaturii ergodice dincolo de ceea ce presupune o narațiune tradițională.

Studiul dat analizează atât lucrări pre-digitale, în care jocul a fost doar o strategie, cum ar fi „Decameronul" lui G. Boccaccio, „Compoziția Nr. 1" a lui Marc Saporta cât și jocuri textuale de aventură precum Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (2011) a lui Bethesda, World of Warcraft etc. Evoluția jocului de la tehnică narativă la formă a literaturii ergodice este o premisă a inițierii unei abodări teoretice individualizate.

Cuvinte-cheie: joc textual de aventură, literatura, text ergodic, cybertext, hypermedia, joc video, digitalizare.

The intense process of digitization, the evolution of artificial intelligence and programmed machines had an impact not only on social life, but also on the cultural one, a fact visible especially in literature. The evolution of ergodic literature from print to digital media has made it expand its range of forms, excelling in cybertextual products such as adventure games.

In his work, *Comparing Stories: How Textual Structures Shapes Affective Experience in New Media*, Kevin Veale defines the textual adventure game as a narrative form of media capable of producing subjective experiences, in which creative freedom and limitation blend harmoniously. The player is a high-performance hybrid of the reader and the writer who becomes a single person who interacts directly with the text and is creatively involved in structuring the story unfolded in the accessed virtual environment. [1, p. 152-155]

Adventure textual games are considered by Espen Aarseth ergodic texts that require a much deeper kinesthetic interaction than any other ergodic forms, emphasizing the idea that this type of reactive narrative experience can only be lived and represented digitally. [2]

Located in the area of interference of the epic with the dramatic, the textual adventure game can be seen as a narrative that, even if made under the brand of cybertextuality, is able to be analyzed semantically, semiotically and emotionally, discovering not only a complex narrative architecture, but and a philosophical perspective enhanced by the "alterbiography" that its user can create.

In what follows we will present the textual adventure game, analyzing its literary specificity and the way in which the playful and the narrative interact in it.

Although the perspective of the game as literature is still debatable, that of literature as a game has sufficient reasons to be recognized. This is emphasized by Joyce Gogging in his article *Play and Games in Fiction and Theory*, in which he demonstrates that the history of literature knows many fictional texts structured according to the model of a game, such as G. Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1353) or G. Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1392). Another convincing case is that of V. Nabokov, who, being a passionate player of tennis and chess, discusses, in his works, the game as a narrative figure and motivates why it has its place in literary fiction. In a sequence from *Lectures on Literature* (1980) about J. Austin's *Mansfield Park*, he observes how the narrative thread merges with the card game, and the speculations in the game are parallel to Miss Crawford's speculations about getting married or not.

The game is also analyzed from a philosophical perspective, being placed alongside beauty as an autotelic and transcendental entity. In this regard, reference is made to F. Schiller's statement in *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (1795), where he states that "man plays when he is a man in the full sense of the word and he is a total man only when he plays" (*der Mensch spielt nur, wo er in voller Bedeutung des Worts Mensch is, und er ist nur da ganz Mensch, wo er spielt*). The impact of the game on the definition of man is due to the freedom "to play with ideas without serious consequences", to stimulate creative thinking and the fact that it is a form of education.

The concept of "homo ludens" is brought to a new light in the case of adventure text games. Joyce Gogging, in his study, refers to the essay *Homo Ludens* (1938) by the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, which presents the game in law, in art and in civilization, specifying that it has its own temporality (being clearly superior to chronological time, by creating its own chronotope in which it "juggles" with fictional worlds), is voluntary and autotelic, having no purpose outside it and transcends various forms of human experience. These ideas, enunciated in J. Huizinga's study, had a considerable impact on the study of literature and catalyzed numerous researches aimed at the interaction between playful and literary.

J. Gogging structures a route along which he places studies of the game, from Aristotle to Huizinga, parallel to which he places literary texts marked by the playful element. Starting

from *Decameron*, which he places at the beginning and continuing with *Composition No. 1* by Marc Saporta, *Pale Fire* by V. Nabokov reaches computer games, textual adventure games between 1970–80, and culminates with today's fictional worlds such as *World of Warcraft*.

Analyzing the attempts to study the game as part of literature, we notice the distancing of the game from what we call „literature", this culminating in the sudden appearance of Ludology, in the early 1990s, a science concerned with the study of games and opposed to literary studies. Thus, the relationship between games and literature is recognized, even if it continues to face challenges, especially when confused with games and „commercial" fiction, which does not fall into the area of literature, delimited above.

In relation to human existence, the game is perceived as an interface of it, consisting of a series of activities, experiences and processes, which are reduced to the "gamification" of life. In Huizinga's opinion, the game appeared long before culture, which offers the possibility to say that the game resulted in social constructions and that it is, simultaneously, a superior unit and a constituent element of the structures of manifestation of everyday life, which they transcends. In the same vein, Jacques Derrida expresses himself in *La structure, le signe et le jeu* (1967), where he presents free, indeterminate, dynamic, volatile and constantly decentralized play. Joyce Gogging's essay assembles these theoretical views on textual games to form a simultaneous launching pad for literary and game studies, given that "our lives are increasingly gamified" [3].

If the traditional literary text relies on the character and the transposition of the reader in his skin or on the lyrical self with which you can empathize, defining for the textual adventure game is his ability to generate "alterbiographies". "Alterbiography" is a concept introduced by Gordon Calleja and capitalized by Kevin Veale in his study *Comparing Stories: How textual Structures Shapes Affective Experience in New Media*, which he defines as a subset of the text in the game, as a result of the experience gained in the process of the player's interaction with the rules of the virtual world in the game. "Alterbiography" is defined primarily by ergodic [4] engagement, rather than cybertextual [5] engagement. Even if the cybertextual elements encountered and manipulated by the player condition the "alterbiography". The complexity of the virtual environment presented by the diegetic world of a game text is directly proportional to the ability to produce an increased variety of alterbiographies, which does not depend on its structural ergodicity or cybertextuality, as K. Veale observes, but on the possibility of exploration offered by the game.

An example of creating an "alterbiography" is visible at the beginning of the game *World of Warcraft*, where the player is asked to structure his own avatar/character through which he will explore the game (fig. 1):

The „alterbiography" appears as a lens used in the comparative analysis of the adventure text game. Its existence allows the argumentation of the idea that the experience offered by the games in the "open world" can be characterized by the degree to which it is open to alterbiographical employment. This concept is also relevant in the debates in the field of game criticism (such as that between John Walker and Brendan Keogh, in November 2011, on *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (Infinity Ward, 2011). [1, p. 150-152]

In her thesis *Gaming and Literature: Virtual Game Immersion in Contemporary Print Text*, Brittany Kuhn wants to answer the question of whether the cultural phenomenon – video games – began to be remedied by other narrative media, as happened with film and television. In her research, B. Kuhn observes that playfulness has always been a strategy fully used by writers (labyrinthine narratives, puzzle texts, texts that involve physical interactions through narrative means), even in pre-digital ergodic texts, such as *Pale Fire* (1962) by V. Nabokov. An example that confirms this structure is a page from *Pale Fire* where we can observe the combination of the narrative text with the po-



Fig. 1. World of Warcraft screenshot (setting of character/alterbiography).

etic one, of the notes with the impressions and indications that direct the reader in Nabokov's labyrinthine text (fig. 2).

Digital fiction writers have capitalized on the immersive sensory potential of the computer's multimedia capabilities, but this literature does not go beyond video games, which have created new strategies and managed to link the players' ergodic decisions to both his playful and narrative progression; an example would be *Bethesda's Elder Scrolls V: Skyrm* (2011). These adventure text games are remedies of video games, that is, the digital play environment incorporates structurally representative elements of older environments, such as literature. What must be delimited at this moment is that the textual adventure game is not an amalgam of borrowings from different canonical environments and no transposition of the old structures into new forms, but a remedy, a convergence of the new media.

In *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) the player has the role of the hero who must save the land of Skyrim, from the evil aroused after the king's death, to defend the land from dragons and the incursions of power-hungry neighbors. This game capitalizes on the subject of the adventure novels of medieval knights, and the actions of the gamer determine the evolution of this subject: the hero can save the declining world or perish. A rather suggestive presentation of the game is provided by the official trailer on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JSR-tYpNRoN0.

The researcher also directs her study to the question of whether video games are an integral and mature genre to be structurally remedied by the printed literature, ie to make the reverse movement in this cycle. What B. Kuhn clearly delimits is that video games are literature and can no longer be covered by a sub-branch: digital literature. As an argument for this the-

tree of knowledge at a leering young Adam in rather ordinary but clean underwear, with the front of his advertised brief conspicuously and compactly shaded, and the inscription reads: *Nothing beats a fig leaf*.

I think there must exist a special subversive group of pseudo-cupids —plump hairless little devils whom Satan commissions to make disgusting mischief in sacrosanct places.

Line 92: the paperweight

The image of those old-fashioned horrors strangely haunted our poet. I have clipped from a newspaper that recently reprinted it an old poem of his where the souvenir shop also preserves a landscape admired by the tourist:

Mountain View

Between the mountain and the eye
The spirit of the distance draws
A veil of blue amorous gauze,
The very texture of the sky.
A breeze reaches the pines, and I
Join in the general applause.

But we all know it cannot last,
The mountain is too weak to wait—
Even if reproduced and glassed
In me as in a paperweight.

Line 98: On Chapman's Homer

A reference to the title of Keats' famous sonnet (often quoted in America) which, owing to a printer's absent-mindedness, has been drolly transposed, from some other article, into the account of a sports event. For other vivid misprints see note to line 802.

Line 101: No free man needs a God

Fig. 2. Screenshot from *Pale Fire* by V. Nabokov.
https://onuploads.com/qr7kh6c8084p/Pale_Fire_by_Vladimir_Nabokov.pdf.html

sis, the researcher brings a 2014 publication of ELO (Electronic Literature Organization, 1999) which lists the forms and practices of digital texts, among which the video game is not found, which allows us to conclude that it is not digital literature, but literature, as an independent genre and equivalent to a category, not subspecies. According to ELO, digital literature includes:

- Hypertextual fiction and poetry (on or outside the Internet);
- Kinetic poetry made through platforms such as Flash;
- Computer installations;
- Chatbot – conventional character;
- Interactive fiction (point-and-click);
- Novels written by e-mail, SMS or blog;
- Computer generated poems or narratives;
- Wikis or collaborative writing projects;
- Online literary performances.

Many theorists of digital literature are against the consideration of video games literature because in them cannot be identified a stable „story" that can be critically analyzed semantically, semiotically and emotionally. [6]

This dilemma also attracts the attention of Oliver Laas, who observes in his study that the narrative vision of adventure text games comes from the works of researchers Brenda Laurel and Janet Murray, because both approached computer games in the context of literary genres such as epic and dramatic.

The structuralist poetics of Janet Murray's textual adventure games is based on the studies of Seymor Chatman and Vladimir Propp. The researcher argues that games and narratives are not diametrically opposed products, but rather the former are abstract narratives. Each game can be perceived as a symbolic drama because the player is a protagonist of it, as the reader translates into a character or narrator and every move in the game is similar to an event in the plot of the narrative.

Obviously, J. Murray's position has been challenged by ludologists and critics who believe that producing narrative (in the case of play) and being narrative (in the case of storytelling) is not the same thing, emphasizing that we must differentiate between the game – cultural product and the game – discursive object. Another counter-argument of theirs would be the impossibility of full translation without the loss of narrative content, as in the *Star Wars* game, in which only the racing sequences of the film of the same name are preserved, eliminating much of the content.

One answer to this translation problem is the concept of "transmedia storytelling" or "content flow between various distinct media", which suggests that a *Star Wars* game that excludes some of the story's content is not a failed translation of the film, but a performance of the general fictional universe of *Star Wars*. Thus, the narrative content of the film passes from the cinematographic environment to the ergodic environment of the digital game, preserving the literary character and acquiring the playful and cybertextual feature. *Star Wars* games and applications serve as examples: https://www.starwars.com/games-apps.

Another reason for controversy was the spatiality, seen as a natural component of the narratives, where it has the role of creating a chronotope for action, while the games rely on navigating through space. To this observation, Henry Jenkins contrasts the fact that space in computer games has narrative functions because they belong to an old tradition of space stories.

The spatiality of the textual adventure game can be characterized by four "types of narrative architecture":

1. *Evocative spaces*, based on the ability to evoke from the player's memory pre-existing narrative associations due to previous experiences, such as in the case of amusement parks that rely on the narrative skills of the visitors.

2. *Enacted stories*, which provide a stage for events, and the narrative is structured on two levels: general objectives and the conflicts of narrative elements and the micronarratives at the local level, such as memorable moments or "narrative hooks".

3. *Embedded narratives*, presents that information that would facilitate a possible staging of the game. These appear in decisional moments in which the player has to overcome stages or challenges to advance in the narrative space.

4. *Emergent narratives*, which are shaped by the game and develop the player's narrative potential, giving him not only a fun environment, but also a creative one. An eloquent example is *The Sims* (2000), (fig. 3).

Thanks to these categories of H. Jenkins, textual adventure games get a firm argument in their position of narrative forms. What is a disadvantage in the narrative treatment of games is that their analysis applies grids of static theories in literary studies, while the textual adventure game is a mobile/dynamic form.

The change in approach also offers broader visions, so computer games integrate into the literary space as „non-trivial semiotic machines" (Julian Kücklich), as „interactive matrices" (Gabriele Ferri) and as „rules-based systems with which players interact in the today's world" (Jesper Juul).

Adventure text games are a component part of our lives because they transpose rules and actions from the immediate reality, which creates fiction, as Roger Callois observed. What Oliver Laas wants to emphasize in his study is that "textual adventure games are neither narratives nor texts, but can afford narrative in-



Fig. 3. Screenshot from Sims 1 (2000).

terpretations from players through a semiosis based on their rules" [7, p. 33-46].

The game is no longer a free entertainment, it synthesizes the way we conceive and interact with reality, giving us a distant/foreign hypostasis to examine ourselves (Chloé Delaume paraphrases A. Rimbaud's statement "I am another" (*je est un autre*) to "game is another" (*jeu est un autre*). The revision of the relationship between literature and games leads to the revision of our life, which contains us as playful topics. [3]

The adventure text game is a form of ergodic literature that depicts the relationship of these two areas, literature and games, in which the reader/player/character is a hybrid that determines the subject of the action. Textual adventure games offer those who access them, through "alterbiography", a diegetic world of virtual text, and the narrative environments created by the games make the gamer a protagonist (character) of a "transmedia story" that involves navigating it through cyberspace.

The playful has always been present in literature as a narrative technique, however the literacy of the game proved to be a rather controversial subject. The appearance of textual adventure games has put this subject in a different light, in literary studies, claiming, motivated, a comprehensive theoretical approach.

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4. Ergodic – a phenomenon aimed at the reader's effort, using a term learned from physics that de-

rives from the Greek words *ergon* and *hodos*, meaning "thing" and "way".

The concept of "ergodic literature" comes from the studies of the Norwegian researcher E. Aarseth, who states that: "the ergodic text presents an open structure, built dynamically, which requires the reader certain actions to be traversed.

The key principle of ergodicism is the possibility of choice, from which the reader of traditional texts is deprived, because he has no power over them, is satisfied with the role of a traveler, can make assumptions, can predict the development of the subject but cannot change it. In the ergodic text, the reader has the role of co-author, depending on the choice of which the narrative thread is built. In the ergodic literature, a non-private effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text." [2, p. 37]

5. Cybertext – "(cyber – *management, binding, commands*), the term is derived from the word *cybernetics*, invented by Norbert Wiener and designating the regulation and binding of systems in the field of static mechanics, technology and systems in the world of living organisms. Cybertext is not a «new», «revolutionary» form of text, with extraordinary navigation possibilities, due to the invention of the digital computer. It is not a radical break with traditional textuality.

Cybertext is a perspective on all forms of textuality, a way to expand the scope of literary studies to include phenomena that today are perceived as being outside, marginal to the field of literature or even in opposition to it. For virtual, ergodic, digital literature, cyberspace is the place where new generation literature has already elaborated its techniques and ways of reading, writing, interpreting". [8, p. 34]

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