WERONIKA KOSTECKA ORCID: 0000-0002-2373-7326 University of Warsaw

# Getting to Know the (Cyber)World: The Literary Motifs of Playing Computer and Video Games in Two Polish Fantastic Novels for Children and Young Adults

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to analyze two examples of Polish fantastic novels for children and young adults with respect to the literary motifs of cyberspace and computer/video games. The following issues will be discussed: 1) Play as a process of exploring the (cyber)world: how does a virtual space shape the plot of the selected novels?; 2) Play as a process of shaping a player's identity: how does a cyberworld influence the protagonist's personality and attitude toward life? I will focus on the award-winning novels: Omega (2009) by Marcin Szczygielski and 5 sekund do Io (5 Seconds to Io) by Małgorzata Warda (2015, 2018). As Krystyna Miłobędzka has pointed out, many classic works of children's literature are stagings for the cognitive process of getting to know the world. In Szczygielski's novel, the heroine's knowledge about the world is formed by a variety of pop-cultural stimuli. This knowledge is then reflected in the shape of the game. At the same time, the protagonist reproduces and modifies these elements of pop culture, using them to populate her postmodern initiation scenario that is carried out in cyberspace. In a way, she shapes her own identity, and 'invents herself' (as Sherry Turkle would put it) by taking a stance on various postmodern and pop-cultural phenomena. Moreover, this is in a cyberspace where the protagonist of Warda's novel really does have causative power, and thus becomes an active participant in her surroundings, rather than a passive spectator of events. Significantly, while playing, she creates - to use Antoni Porczak's words - a shifting identity for herself.

Keywords: play, computer game, video game, cyberworld, cognitive process, identity

## INTRODUCTION

As the Polish scholar and writer Joanna Papuzińska observed at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the presence of technology in literature for children and young adults proves "not only that the media, proportionally to their presence in everyday life, are constantly present in a child's environment, but also that they become a type of plot material that is readily used by authors" (Papuzińska 2006: 17)<sup>1</sup>. Modern technology is frequently an integral part of literary characters' daily routine. Therefore, it affects and shapes their consciousness and perception of reality, and thus their ways of exploring the world. In this paper, two examples of Polish literature for children and young adults will be discussed, with respect to the literary motifs of cyberspace and computer and video games treated as important phenomena of culture.

When considering the possible impact of modern technology on young people, we usually face the ambivalence expressed by adults – sociologists, teachers, parents, etc. As David Buckingham (2009: 124) has pointed out:

Like the idea of childhood itself, technology is often invested with our most intense fears and fantasies. It holds out the promise of a better future, while simultaneously provoking anxieties about a fundamental break with the past. Whether for good or ill, these new media are seen to exercise an extraordinary power to mould children's consciousness, to determine their identities and to dictate the patterns of their everyday lives. Children are undoubtedly among the most significant target markets for computer games [...] and other forms of interactive multimedia.

Therefore, it might be interesting to examine how the experience of children and young adults with the new media – in this case: computer and video games - is reflected (or more strictly speaking, constructed) in literature for young readers. As Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer (2016: 57) indicates, "the majority of children's and young adult books that address the impact of the computer and social media on people's everyday life describe the negative causes of a society dominated by digital media [...]." In this chapter, however, I wish to concentrate on two Polish works that challenge this literary trend by presenting a multipronged approach to the problem of modern technology's influence on young people. My analysis will concern fantastic novels that were given Book of the Year awards by the Polish Section of the International Board on Books for Young People in recent years: Omega by Marcin Szczygielski (2009) and 5 sekund to Io (5 Seconds to Io)<sup>2</sup> by Małgorzata Warda (2015; published in English in 2018). While the former text presents playing a computer game above all as a complicated and productive cognitive process, the latter addresses in an in-depth way the non-obvious relations between destructive human instincts and the sense of freedom while playing a video game and acting in a cyberworld.

In reference to the novels by Szczygielski and Warda, and in considering the ambiguity of the word 'play,' which can denote 'amusement,' 'fun,' as well as a 'game,' I want to focus on two issues: 1) Play as a process of exploring the (cyber)world: how does a virtual space shape the plot of the selected novels?;

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Translations of all excerpts are by the author.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The article was written before the second part of Małgorzata Warda's novel, *Rebeliantka* (*The Rebel*), was published.

2) Play as a process of shaping a player's identity: how does a cyberworld influence the protagonist's personality and attitude to life?

# CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AS A STAGING OF THE CHILD'S COGNITIVE PROCESS

According to Krystyna Miłobędzka (1989: 259), many classic works of children's literature are frequently stagings for the process of getting to know the world: "A child creates a world for itself from data provided by other, older people [...]. By interacting with the environment of adults and playing by itself or with other children [...] the child creates its own reality" (Miłobędzka 1989: 259). A child's constructed reality includes elements of the world of adults which are not yet understood, or are understood in the child's own idiosyncratic way, as well as elements from the child's own mental states, etc. Many literary works for young readers, as Miłobędzka points out, present diverse acts of cosmogony performed by children as protagonists who usually are unaware of their own cognitive mechanisms. That is why the characters in such works function "between two worlds: a well-known, immediate one, and a weird, unintelligible reality in which incomprehensible rules prevail" (*ibidem*: 260). One example of such a construction is the Wonderland which Alice explores (Carroll 1885). She encounters various objects, words, actions and behaviours that are taken from the adult world but are grotesquely modified by her child's mind. At the same time, many creatures and themes appearing in Wonderland are borrowed from diverse children's rhymes, plays, riddles, etc. that were familiar to the child reader living in England in the second half of the 19th century, as well as from other texts of culture, recognizable symbols, and particular idioms (as mad as a hatter, etc.). Also, in Peter Pan's Neverland, the island of the Wild Things where Maurice Sendak's protagonist - Max - finds himself (also in the later novelization of this classic work by Dave Eggers), and the land of Fantasia where Bastian from Michael Ende's novel The Neverending Story winds up, are, to some degree, creations built from 'data provided by adults, as well as the child's own ideas about the way things should be, and the child's own mental and emotional states (Barrie 1911; Sendak 1963; Eggers 2009; Ende 1979). Thus, in the case of the novels by Szczygielski and Warda, when considering the concept of staging the learning process, we should bear in mind that the worlds explored by both heroines are constructed from data provided by the Internet and by television, i.e., by the omnipresent popular and postmodern culture.

As Kümmerling-Meibauer (2016: 58) puts it, "it cannot be denied that the computer, the smartphone and social media progressively belong to young children's daily routine. It is no wonder, then, that digital media not only impact on the child's cognitive development, but also crop up as topics in pic-

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turebooks and children's books." Significantly, both *Omega* and 5 Seconds to *Io* are metafictional stories of young people's cognitive development in the era of digital media. While Kümmerling-Meibauer's statement refers to children and children's literature, my goal is to discuss works addressed at both children (*Omega*) and young adults (5 Seconds to Io), including analysis of the creation of both the child character and the youth heroine (Szczygielski's protagonist is a 12-year-old girl, while the main character in Warda's novel is 17 years old).

Further discussion should be followed by a brief recounting of the plotlines of both texts. The girl using the pseudonym Omega, the protagonist of Szczygielski's novel, is given a peculiar gift for her birthday – namely, an email with a link to a mysterious computer game. After installing it, she finds that her reality has turned into the game itself – a game with unclear and surprising rules. The border between the real and the virtual worlds then disappears completely. The status of the latter (and its relation to the heroine's real world) is neither clear nor obvious. The game's virtual space overlaps with real space, transforming and deforming it, and ever modifying its constituents. Each time Omega is to get through to the next level of the game, she has to carry out a special task.

The outline of the plot of the second novel is as follows: a tragedy takes place at a school that Mika, the protagonist, attends. A young man shoots at students and teachers; people are dying, and many are injured. The subsequent investigation reveals that the massacre at the school probably has something to do with the newest video game in the Work a Dream system, which uses amazing cutting-edge technology: the player connected to the console is 'transferred' into the game world inside the body of his or her avatar. The game can cheat the player's senses so that the illusion is deceptively similar to reality. The player can experience smells, tastes, the temperature of the air, as well as physical and mental pain. Mika, a veteran player of video games, receives a console from the police together with a special task: she is to join the players residing on Io and observe everything that happens in order to find the people who are of interest to the police in the real world.

## PLAY AS A PROCESS OF EXPLORING THE (CYBER)WORLD

While progressing through the game's levels, Omega finds herself in diverse places that make up a unique catalogue of pop-cultural and postmodern phenomena<sup>3</sup>. For example, she travels to a zombie-infested cemetery, the ruins of a Gothic castle inhabited by werewolves, a house made of flesh that she-vampires are feeding on, and a settlement called Constitution that is un-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> For further reading see: Kostecka 2016.

der a totalitarian regime. She also visits an Olympic stadium, a studio-like place where a live quiz show is taking place, and a shopping centre. She also stumbles upon the banks of the Vistula River, where the ghosts of Warsaw insurgents roam, suspended in a timeless state. Therefore, what we are dealing with here is a veritable hodgepodge of spaces and motifs; thanks to the Internet and television they are perfectly familiar to the protagonist, as well as to the hypothetical reader. Superordinate to all of these places is cyberspace, which also – as part of the uncanny computer game – somehow encompasses them.

On every level of the game Omega must perform a particular task in order to progress in this fascinating cyberworld. For example, the cemetery turns out to be a place where the 'undead,' who are in fact living humans, persecute the zombies, and the heroine must prevent this from happening. In a bizarre temple of fun, Omega rescues humans who are oblivious to the threat from evil clowns that are using subterfuge to deprive the former of all joy. In the Clinic for the More or Less Unadapted, she saves children from being quite literally brainwashed, etc. At the same time, every new experience motivates the heroine - and thus, the reader as well - to consider pertinent subjects from the contemporary world that are important from both an individual and a social viewpoint. For example, in the aforementioned Clinic for the More or Less Unadapted, the subjects are 'normality,' 'being a normal human being,' and 'normal life.' Omega considers their definitions, the point of such definitions and, more importantly, what such categorization implies. In the temple of fun, the heroine fends off being entertained by force. When a clown warns her, "We're going to have fun whether you like it or not" (Szczygielski 2009: 381), it resembles a hidden message she might receive from any of the many media potentates. In the Filters of Time, the heroine faces the paradox of the postmodern surfeit of knowledge, and she realizes that, as Robert D. Abbott (1999: 14) puts it, "More now than at any time in the past we live in an age of information overload"; the more information we get, the quicker we forget it (see also: Abbott 2014: esp. 11–15).

All of these pop-cultural and postmodern stimuli mould the heroine's knowledge about the world. This knowledge is then reflected in the shape and progression of the game, in its form, and its content. Szczygielski has pop culture itself turn out to be a space where the places and themes from a range of different orders meet. Indeed, in this novel we can read, for example, about human beings persecuting zombies, some of which are of Jewish origin. Thus we have a clear reference to those chapters of Polish history that today are the subject of various conflicts between Poles over their own past. Moreover, the heroine discusses whether the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 made any sense. The lightsaber, a pop-cultural icon from *Star Wars*, appears in this story alongside an inflatable boat on which fighters are going to cross the Vistula to aid the insurgents; a comic book-style chase on ostriches oc-

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curs alongside musings on the rights of people vs. otherness, etc. Apparently, pop culture can absorb and, in a way, both present and transform current issues and motifs from various origins and discourses. However, at the same time we can say that it is the heroine – like Alice in a postmodern Wonderland – who reproduces and modifies the elements of pop culture, using them to populate her postmodern initiation scenario that is carried out in cyberspace. The staging of the process of learning about the world, which Miłobędzka wrote about, here takes place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and through 21<sup>st</sup> century strategies: Omega explores this reality by playing, gaining points, and fighting to progress to the next level, while at the same time adapting to the dynamically changing environment.

Warda's heroine, Mika, also explores a realm of cyberspace. *The Battle for Io* players have diverse tasks connected with the human attempts to settle the moon of Jupiter (as explained in the introduction to the game, living on Earth has become extremely perilous due to the depletion of natural resources and the outbreak of Ebola). Unfortunately, it soon turns out that the players' actions, as well as the relations between players, are slipping out of anyone's control. There is no imposed scenario for the game, and no limited catalog of options players might choose from. Indeed, 'hidden' in the virtual bodies of their avatars, players can do whatever they wish.

The virtual moon Io turns out to be a completely authentic world, in the sense that human behaviors and psychological mechanisms are authentic. This can come as no surprise, as real people, after all, are behind the avatars populating Io. Therefore, not only Mika recognizes the rules of the game on the basis of her experiences and knowledge from the real world. While the protagonist becomes familiar with the world of this innovative video game, she also reconstructs her own knowledge about non-virtual reality, i.e., about the functioning of the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the people and mechanisms behind human behaviours. Significantly, when she asks: "Why are they [other players] doing this? [...] Why do they cause so much pain?", her companion in the game replies: "Because they can" (Warda 2018: 247). This short exchange leads to the disturbing conclusion that perhaps drastic computer or video games can in fact trigger humanity's inborn destructive instincts.

Mika faces the ubiquitous fascination with violence, the thirst for power and adrenalin, as well as her own emotions and problems. As Maria Nikolajeva (2014: 125) points out:

[...] cognitive engagement with fiction is a two-way process: life-to-text and text-to-life (or put in a more scientific way, practice-to-theory and theory-to-practice). We use our real-life experience to understand fiction, and we gain experience from fiction to explain and understand the real world. As all dynamic systems, it is a powerful mechanism of learning.

If we agree that the notion of fiction might be referred to the virtual world (that is created and functions differently than literary works, but still is a creation), we can conclude that the game *The Battle for Io*, which was initially supposed to be only a form of entertainment, turns into a drastic and dramatic process of identifying the rules of reality.

Of course, media reports about fatal shootings in schools, as well as literary works dealing with the subject of aggression among teenagers are nothing new (see i.e., Golding 1954; Cormier 1974). However, in this case we are dealing with an attempt at a more in-depth analysis of the issue. By enabling her heroine to enter the world of a virtual game, the author recognizes both planes of the story, i.e., the real one and the illusionary one, as equal. As a matter of fact, cyberspace imperceptibly starts to dominate Mika's life, and her psychophysical relations with non-virtual reality begin to disappear slowly. The heroine has to face more players whose only aim is to destroy, threaten, harm, and kill. The author shows how the boundaries between the real world and the game world become blurred. She presents the vision of a virtual world that does not exist, but is still perceived by each player - not only by their psyche, but their entire body as well – as real in every respect. Paradoxically, it is cyberspace that is real: it can be experienced empirically, it is the place where the most important events take place, and its gradual supplanting of non-virtual reality makes the plot of the novel more dynamic.

Both Omega and Mika, citizens of postmodern, virtual Wonderlands, by exploring their cyberworlds, strive not only to understand them, but also to impose on them their own rules and principles. Omega tries to identify, to understand, and to conjoin the diverse discourses of popular and postmodern culture, whereas Mika makes attempts to identify and to understand destructive instincts and the mechanisms of destructive behaviours on which human interactions are based (and consequently, to partially join in with these kinds of interactions). Interestingly, the narrative strategies applied by both Szczygielski and Warda do not include the author's direct commentaries on the impact of computer/video games on the ways players act in both the real and virtual world. As Hans-Heino Ewers (2009: 160) indicates:

[...] young people's novels explore various young people's leisure activities – parties, alcohol, drugs, computer games, for example – and judge these things in ways that are sometimes quite different – as acceptable or at least tolerable or as problematic and unacceptable. In a literary text, value judgements like this may be uttered by the narrator or also by individual – child, youth or adult – characters.

Although we can find a few value statements expressed by the protagonists of both novels (particularly in Warda's), it is significant that the hypothetical young reader of both *Omega* and *5 Seconds to Io* has a chance to appraise the problem of computer and video games on his or her own, and to make judge-

ments based on those games' influence on the protagonists' identities, ways of thinking, and acting.

#### PLAY AS A PROCESS OF SHAPING A PLAYER'S IDENTITY

Researchers who observe contemporary cultural changes have noticed that a new way of thinking, communicating, and internalizing information is underway. They point out the significant influence of modern technology and media on the user, in particular the Internet and computers. Already in 1990s, John Thompson (1995: 207) defined the process of shaping an identity as follows:

[...] with the development of modern societies, the process of self-formation becomes more reflexive and open-ended, in the sense that individuals fall back increasingly on their own resources to construct a coherent identity for themselves. At the same time, the process of self-formation is increasingly nourished by mediated symbolic materials, greatly expanding the range of options available to individuals and loosening – without destroying – the connection between self-formation and shared locale.

At the same time, a phenomenon develops that the author referred to as a "double-bind of mediated dependency: the more the process of self-formation is enriched by mediated symbolic forms, the more the self becomes dependent on media systems which lie beyond its control" (*ibidem*: 214). As I have already mentioned, over the course of Warda's novel, her heroine develops progressively stronger ties to the game world. It is in this world that Mika creates herself: she constructs her identity anew and even falls in love. Indeed, it is on the virtual moon Io that she really does have causative power, and it is here that she becomes an active participant in her surroundings, rather than a passive spectator of events. However, in other ways she is completely dependent on the game. Having said that, we could argue that 5 Seconds to Io is a novel that represents the posthumanist trend in young adult literature; according to Victoria Flanagan (2014: 1), "Posthumanism uses technoscience as the impetus for a radical revaluation of human subjectivity, exploring the many ways in which technological innovations such as virtual reality have changed our understanding of what it means to be human in the modern era." Ironically, if Mika is truly herself on Io, then maybe the real Mika does not exist beyond this realm of cyberspace.

While exploring the pop-cultural cyberspace, Omega also creates her identity. The novel gives us the impression that all of her knowledge about the world and people (and thus, to some degree, also about herself) comes from the Internet and television. At the same time, the subsequent trials Omega must go through, and the subjects she must consider, form the heroine's process of maturation. The ante of the game is in fact Omega's identity; and her opponent is herself, or more strictly speaking, those aspects of her personality that have so far been responsible for her lack of internal maturity. From the very first pages of the work, the protagonist manifests the need to shape her autonomy and to define herself on her own. This is what Omega's initiation in the story involves: fighting for her individualism. While playing the unusual computer game, the protagonist herself negotiates the shape of her identity. In general, these ceaseless internal negotiations are between two tendencies: on the one hand, the will to completely identify with a group through unification and conformity; and the desire to establish her autonomy on the other. At a virtual stadium, during the Olympics of the Senses, she fights for her identity and her opinions. Despite losing several times to the representatives of the All-Powerful Corporation, the Urban Bedroom, the Suburban Reaches, and the Intellectual Basin, she does not succumb to the temptation to identify with any of these 'mental-intellectual' groups or to begin thinking and acting like their representatives. On the contrary, when at a shopping centre (also placed in a virtual reality) Omega spots a hat in a shop window and then tries it on, she feels it makes her prettier and much more confident. Other girls she meets in the centre become 'friends' with her, and a short yet key phrase, "you are just like us" (Szczygielski: 539), is all Omega needs to find transient happiness as an unconditional member of a group, at the cost of forsaking her individualism. According to Susan Smith (2000: 88),

Through play, children learn to understand everyday experiences and deal with their emotions. Observations of children playing indicate that they come to terms with their experiences and feelings by re-enacting situations in which they felt anxious or vulnerable until they have understood the situation and feel in control of it. [...]

Through play, children learn important lessons about making healthy relationships with others.

Although Omega's playing cannot be equated with light-hearted, joyful, and innocent play of little children as described by Smith, we could argue that through playing and thanks to playing Omega is finally able to work through her trauma and to mourn the death of her grandmother, as well as to start understanding her mother's ways of behavior. Above all, she makes a 'healthy relationship' not only with others, but also with herself by discovering who she really is, and who she really wants to be.

Sherry Turkle (1995: 10), while discussing the influence of modern multimedia reality on the identity of a person functioning within it, talks about "inventing ourselves"<sup>4</sup> in cyberspace; while Antoni Porczak (2006: 159) talks about "creating oneself as a shifting identity." The former statement applies to Szczygielski's heroine. Omega successfully carries out the initiation scenario

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> See Turkle (1995: 10): "In the real-time communities of cyberspace, we are dwellers on the threshold between the real and virtual, unsure of our footing, inventing ourselves as we go along."

and develops her identity. As has already been said, carrying out this scenario involves, to a large extent, Omega inventing herself by taking a stance on various postmodern and pop-cultural phenomena. In turn, Warda's heroine creates her shifting identity while playing, as it were. She is an ambiguous character because she is unable to get rid of the doubts concerning the situation she finds herself in. As Turkle (1995: 10) pointed out:

In the story of constructing identity in the culture of simulation, experiences on the Internet figure prominently, but these experiences can only be understood as part of larger cultural context. That context is the story of the eroding boundaries between the real and the virtual, the animate and the inanimate, the unitary and the multiple self, which is occurring both in advanced scientific fields of research and in the patterns of everyday life. From scientists trying to create artificial life to children "morphing" through a series of virtual personae, we shall see evidence of fundamental shifts in the way we create and experience human identity. But is on the Internet that our confrontations with technology as it collides with our sense of human identity are fresh, even raw.

Interestingly, 5 Seconds to Io has an open ending: Mika plans on establishing a long-term link with the Work a Dream virtual world. Thus, the initiation scenario will continue<sup>5</sup>. Mika's identity will keep evolving, depending on the stimuli she is subjected to and, as we all know, the stimuli in a virtual world are constantly changing. *Omega* is an open-ended novel as well as it ends just as the heroine is about to start a new game. Hence, while we may argue that the heroines of both novels have constituted their identities through playing, we may also expect that when starting new games, they will significantly enrich these identities, or reshape them, or even 'invent themselves' from scratch<sup>6</sup>.

# CONCLUSION

Significantly, the fantasy lands created by such authors as Lewis Carroll, J.M. Barrie, Maurice Sendak, and Michael Ende (those mentioned at the beginning of this article), are the spaces of play. At the same time, it is in Wonderland, Neverland, the island of the Wild Things, Fantasia, and many other fantasy worlds where the cognitive process is developed by children's heroes and heroines. The protagonists strive to understand the spaces they find them-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> In 2017, Warda published a continuation of this novel: *Rebeliantka* (*The Rebel*).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Nikolajeva (2014: 194) claims that: "Open endings, becoming more and more common in contemporary children's literature, lead to thought experiment: what would have happened if the character made a different choice? How would I act in such a situation? What would the consequences be of the options offered? The model of 'narrative possibilities' (Bremond 1996) can also provide good training in ethical thought experiments. Learning from independent thinking is arguably more efficient than accepting readymade solutions."

selves in, and to explore these mysterious lands through diverse kinds of play. By playing, they make attempts to grasp the very nature of human interactions, to identify their own potentials and needs, to express themselves, and to discover who they really are. As the Polish scholar Jerzy Cieślikowski (1985: 214) pointed out in his classic work *Wielka zabawa* (*The Great Game*), "childhood itself is a big game"; although neither Omega nor Mika are little children, both of them explore and learn about the world, create relations, and constitute their own identities, in a sense, through play, i.e., through a computer/video game. They are required to discover and apply the rules of these games, and also to try and establish their own rules. In this context, they can be recognized as protagonists who carry on the tradition of such literary characters as Alice, the Lost Boys and Wendy, Max, and Bastian. Considering adolescence to be a period when identity is being shaped, Nikolajeva (2014: 141) proposes a thesis and tables the following questions:

Adolescence especially is a dynamic and turbulent phase of human life, and it is perhaps young adult fiction that has the strongest potential to offer readers somewhat accurate portrayals of selfhood. If, as cognitive psychology points out, adults have a better understanding of their own (as well as other people's) thoughts and feelings, the child or adolescent perspective in fiction should logically impede the artistic project. If an adolescent mind cannot assess its own reactions, if it defies reason, if it is a pandemonium of random impressions, how then can a purportedly adolescent narrative voice convey an authentic, but at the same time comprehensible portrayal of this chaotic consciousness?

Apparently, this 'adolescent narrative voice' can be reflected in the special narrative of a computer or video game (in this case, its literary construction). Through playing their games, both Omega and Mika mature, leave childhood behind, and approach adulthood. It may thus be concluded that by interweaving the literary convention of fantasy and speculative fiction with the literary motifs of cyberspace and computer/video games, Marcin Szczygielski and Małgorzata Warda have created a type of novel that could be called a twenty-first-century Bildungsroman: playing in cyberspace becomes a postmodern staging of the process of learning about the world and the process of getting to know oneself.

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