

***Przygody cyfrowego tułacza. Interpretacje groznawcze*, by Michał Kłosiński. 2023.
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In *Przygody cyfrowego tułacza. Interpretacje groznawcze* [*Adventures of the Digital Wanderer. Game Studies Interpretations*], Michał Kłosiński (2023) proposes a 10-step method for interpreting video games.¹ To the author, a player is comparable to an unanchored wanderer who explores numerous worlds. This digital wanderer figure is inspired by the Deleuzian idea of physical nomadism, which entails the subject's treatment of value systems as non-holistic entities (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, Chapter 12). While Deleuze focuses on the position of individuals within political discourses, Kłosiński uses Deleuze's argument as a tool of interpretation tailored to video games. Throughout its ten chapters, *Przygody cyfrowego tułacza* focuses on mechanisms of power to show how hermeneutics can be used as an instrument to foster political, economic, and social critique.

Chapter 1 outlines Kłosiński's "manifesto" and codifies his hermeneutic approach. Kłosiński argues that a person living in an increasingly digitalised world ought to be taught how to interpret video games. Drawing from the work of Paul Ricoeur (1991) and Chrysostomos Mantzavinos (2009), Kłosiński proposes that when interpreting a video game, one should address its broader scope and take paratexts into account. According to him, a well-informed interpretation should include reflections of theoretical, existential, ludic, and contextual character. The player should thus create interpretations and confront them with the different voices within the game's paratextual discourse and the actualisation of one's vision during play.

The author's insistence that this proposal should be seen as a manifesto aligns with his hope to re-evaluate the structure of video game

¹ Earlier versions of Chapter 1, 4, 5, 6, and 8 have been published in English (see respectively Kłosiński, 2022b, 2021b, 2021a, 2021c, 2022a).



interpretation. Kłosiński does not aim for a single analytical approach but instead provides instructions to inspire a process of hermeneutic evaluation. This approach allows the reader to easily understand his method without prior knowledge of hermeneutics. Kłosiński's choice to devote each analysis chapter to a different game further develops his thought across titles that vary in scope, scale, and genre.

Chapter 2 uses Osmotic Studios' *Orwell* (2016), a game inspired by the novel *Nineteen eighty-four* (Orwell, 1949), to survey how the level of agency bestowed on the player can change how they experience dystopian game settings. Kłosiński argues that *Orwell* uses a "hyperrealistic" approach that "encourag[es] a critical reading by highlighting mechanisms of invigilation" (pp. 68–69, my translation), creating a realistic simulation of a dystopian system. The player participates in the dystopia as they become a cog within the system, which allows them to compare the game to the real world and critique it.

In Chapter 3, Kłosiński continues to explore dystopias through a critique of 11 bit's *Frostpunk* (2018) that highlights its utopian-messianic tendencies. To Kłosiński, *Frostpunk*'s dystopian setting quickly slips into the utopian pleasure of absolute power over the game's city setting as the player assumes an authoritarian role during the playthrough. The player's societal control over the game world thus disallows the possibility for a utopian reading of *Frostpunk*'s narrative. The author concludes that *Frostpunk*'s story can be read only as a critique of utopias and not as a utopia itself.

Chapter 4 examines the colonial foundation of survival games, such as *Don't Starve* (Klei Entertainment, 2013). As *Don't Starve* privileges the player character's position within and individual control over the shape and fate of the game world, the game world becomes available (recalling the Heideggerian concept of *zuhandenheit*, or availability), turning into an infinite pool of resources. A colonial desire for the accumulation of capital thus transforms the environment into a dystopian world of excavation.

Chapter 5 takes Wargaming's *World of Warships* (2015) as an illustration of the nostalgic tendency embedded into the retrotopian fantasy of naval warfare. Historical warships, which lost their meaning throughout history, are recycled and reinterpreted in the game as new commodified entities that operate in contrast to the natural entropy of time. Kłosiński critiques the game's lack of direction, which instead becomes a consumerist fantasy that uses history as theatre. I see this chapter as a highlight of the entire book, not only because of the scarcity of scholarly work on *World of Warships* but also because of the strength and clarity of Kłosiński's argumentative framing.

Then, Chapter 6 explores how *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019) structures a distinct relationship between the player and the game world. Kłosiński positions both in-game objects and avatar abilities as independent actors

that possess narrative agency within the game world. Kłosiński argues that this design approach structures an equal relationship between the game environment and the player and weakens the player's sense of control over the game world. This forces the player to look upon the world with care instead of a sense of superiority.

Chapter 7 shifts its focus to interfaces within spaceship-oriented games. Observing the significant difference between analogue controllers (joysticks, pedals, VR sets) and digital ones (elements of the spaceship's cockpit within the game), Kłosiński argues that the type of controller used changes how the player interprets the game. These analogue elements mediate between the physical reality, which the player inhabits, and the digital reality, where the game takes place. This mediating act informs the creation of a separate space dedicated to the game world. While this chapter analyses parts of an experience outside of the game itself and is innovative in that regard, it unfortunately feels out of place from the rest of the monograph.

Chapter 8 discusses CD Projekt Red's *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020). The author contends that the game structures its narrative around mirrors, which serve as a crucial point of reflection as the player character is invaded by the spectral antagonist Johnny Silverhand and fears losing control of their own body. Kłosiński reads this narrative device as a formalised metaphor for the neoliberal fear of psychosis.

In Chapter 9, Kłosiński approaches the narrative of *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (Guerilla Games, 2017) as a modern myth. The protagonist sets out to unravel the structure of the world, and by destroying and restoring it, she operates as an agent of the second Genesis. To Kłosiński, *Horizon* shows that society is built on the cycle of forgetting and recovering its history. While the author's analysis is insightful, I felt that the most crucial element of the game's narrative—the relation between people and technology—was omitted in favour of Kłosiński's mythological reading.

Lastly, Chapter 10 explicates the titular figure of the "digital wanderer." A defining element of Kłosiński's adaptation of physical nomadism is a lack of attachment towards a singular, holistic identity (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, Chapter 12). Physical nomadism orphans both the world and the analyst. Interpreter and interpretation are thus equally autonomous, one in service of the other. Kłosiński urges that we leave both the identity of the subject and object out of the process of interpretation, exploring instead the unknown worlds as a nomad who is not bound by anything. Paradoxically, the departure from the preconceived notions of identity highlights the subjectivity of an individual the most.

Throughout his discussions of utopias and their counterparts, Kłosiński emphasises that the player's agency and immersion within the virtual world greatly change how they are explored. To Kłosiński, video games

enable the player to be part of a social system. Interaction with the world as such operates under two modes: a utopian pleasure and a dystopian reflection. *World of Warships* or the survival games from Chapter 4 provide the player with a sense of absolute control over the world, which allows them to fulfil a power fantasy. On the other hand, *Cyberpunk* and *Horizon* confront players with a collection of modern fears embedded within neoliberal society. Nevertheless, both types of worldbuilding stem from the same root, Kłosiński argues: the fantasy of a different world ungoverned by the rules of reality and further enhanced by the player's direct participation.

The mediation of power between the player and the game world further circulates through later chapters. Whether via the interface evaluated in spaceship-oriented games, the narrative of *Frostpunk*, or the gameplay of *War of Warships*, the player is usually regarded as the sole sovereign of virtual worlds that serve as their playground. The dissection of *Disco Elysium* in Chapter 6 offers an incisive counterargument to game worlds that are only in service of a powerful player. Kłosiński's hermeneutic process requires the interpreter to enter an equal relation with the interpreted, to become a part of the world, rather than its lord. The regal control of the fictional universe transmutes into a nomadic exploration of several systems.

Overall, Kłosiński's Deleuzian-inspired notion of exploring digital worlds is radical, yet non-revolutionary in its focus on the interpreter's subjectivity. To explore the thousands of digital plateaus is to rid oneself of their identity, to participate within the interpreted world without expecting to control or identify with it. Revisiting earlier methodological approaches in game studies with this in mind might highlight the issues that fuel the field's lengthy debates about how video games ought to be seen and known. The figure of the game scholar as a wanderer gives control to the person exploring and taking their interpretations away from the world. Instead of the magic circle, the nomads employ a hermeneutic circle, and instead of belonging to one world, they decide to belong to many. Perhaps a world without a place to return to, without nostalgia or hostility towards the alien, is the reality that a scholar should inhabit.

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