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Ludopoetic Interplay in *Baba is You*

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ABSTRACT:
The study investigates aspects of ludopoetic interplay in *Baba is You*, a digital puzzle game that radically reimagines the relationship between language, gameplay, and meaning-making. Through a close reading of selected game levels, we identify several features that render the game poetic: its use of emotive linguistic markers, its emphasis on verbal creation, and the player's engagement with and enjoyment of linguistic play. By analysing the game's unique mechanics of rule manipulation, we examine how players interact with language as both a procedural system and a poetic medium. The study identifies five modes of interaction between referential (metaphorical) and intraprocedural (metonymical) transfers of meaning, including exclusion, diversion, and mutual support. We argue that the game achieves its poetic quality especially by prioritising metonymy over metaphor, foregrounding the materiality of language and the performative power of words. By enabling players to dynamically reconstruct game rules through linguistic manipulation, *Baba is You* transforms gameplay into an act of linguistic creativity.

KEY WORDS:
Baba is You, ludopoetic interplay, lyric address, lyric poetry, procedural figurativity.

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Introduction

While the narrativity of digital games has been discussed since the birth of the medium, little attention has been paid to the lyricism of digital games. Some have focused on formal features, discussing digital games in connection to lyric genres and traditions (Montfort, 2005; Asad, 2011; Grace, 2011; Papa, 2014). Although the word *poetics* is often used to describe game mechanics, relatively few (e.g. Harrell, 2013; Sezen, 2015; Kubiński, 2017) have drawn clear parallels between actual lyric poetry and digital games. Ensslin (2023) has provided a theoretical framework for interpreting digital text-based works of art which she calls 'poetry games'. She notably contends that poetry games "seek to defamiliarize and innovate the gaming experience through highly idiosyncratic ludonarrative mechanics" (p. 13). *Defamiliarization*[1] through form as a mode of poetic expression is central to further research, for example, in the concept of poetic gameplay: "gameplay that is deliberately made strange, or defamiliarized, to create a poetic effect, drawing attention to the form of the work as a way to encourage reflection" (Mitchell et al., 2020, Abstract). Furthermore, Magnuson (2023) describes poetry as a "form of intervention [that] explores the tension between signified meaning and material meaning present in a given context" (p. 95) and then applies this to the mechanics of various digital games.

The tension between signified meaning and material meaning plays an important role in the puzzle game *Baba Is You* (Hempuli, 2019). It was released in 2019 by Finnish

1 Remark by the author: The concept of defamiliarization (ostranenie) was coined by Russian formalist literary critic Viktor Borisovich Shklovsky (see Shklovsky, 1917/1965). The term was applied to the study of digital games by Pötzsch (2017).

developer Arvi Teikari (Hempuli) for PC and Nintendo Switch, with an expanded version available for iPhone and Android in 2021. The game became a great success: it has an "overwhelmingly positive" rating on Steam ("Baba is You", n.d.), with over eighteen thousand positive reviews. *Baba is You* is unique feature is that the player can dynamically manipulate the rules of the game space by moving words on the screen in order to solve puzzles in radical and surprising ways. The player is constantly confronted by the performative power of language: she is taking control of the diegetic reality of the game space by creating new sentences, as well as breaking up and rearranging existing ones. Sentences, therefore, have ludic functions (they are game rules), but they also have rhetorical power. They are figurative: meaning is transferred between the words placed next to one another, often evoking the experience of reading a poem. The levels have several poetic features, such as emotive language, titles, rhythm, and lyric address. The ludic and poetic dimensions of the gameplay exist at the same time and place. They relate to each other in different ways, alternating between affirmation, distraction, indifference and divergence. This study explores this field of relationality by close reading the game levels of *Baba Is You* as spaces dedicated to simultaneous puzzle-solving and meaning-making.

Grammar and Performativity

The game has maze-like levels, consisting of various components, displayed in a top-down view. Components include objects (stones, walls, flags, grass, water, etc.), characters (e.g. Baba, a creature resembling a sheep or a rabbit), and words, some of which stand for objects, characters, empty fields and other words. All components (i.e. objects, characters, and words) are the same size, and all of them can be manipulated (they can be traversed and moved, and some of them can be transformed, produced, and destroyed) if the rules on the map allow it. The words themselves act as objects, they are physical parts of the puzzle. The rules are brought to life by sentences made out of the words. At least three of them must be arranged vertically or horizontally to form a sentence that is meaningful to the game. To do this, the player needs a word that acts as a noun (BABA, ROCK, FLAG), a verb (IS, HAS, MAKE), and a word that completes the statement (this can be a noun or a property, but not a verb or a conditional operator like FACING or NOT). Almost all the words included are existing English words, and although the syntax used in the game does not necessarily follow the rules of English grammar, sentences must adhere to the fixed word order of the English declarative sentence (the verb comes after the subject, and the other parts of the sentence come after them). A rule is binding as long as the words are connected in the way described above: if the connection is broken, the rule no longer applies.

The linguistic information in the game space can be thought of as pseudocode, that is, a textual representation of an algorithmic process, a feedback loop (Manovich, 2002). It is structurally similar to artificial languages used in programming: if one looks at a piece of code written in C#, Javascript or Python, one also sees instructions consisting of English words that differ from the morphological and syntactic features of natural English texts. In digital games, the player has no direct access to the code during gameplay. In other words, she has no say in how objects behave in the game space: she moves the player character around, she uses keys to open locks, she is stopped by walls etc. In *Baba is You*, however, some of the text that acts as code is practically put on the screen. The words decide which character is controlled by the player, which object opens the door (or possibly another object), and which object performs the function of the wall (if any is needed). The words placed in the game space as rule-making components complicate the typology

that ludologist Aarseth (1997) has devised for digital games and other cybertexts. These texts are composed of scriptons ("strings as they appear to readers") and textons ("strings as they exist in the text"), linked by a "traversal function – the mechanism by which scriptons are revealed or generated from textons and presented to the user of the text" (p. 62). Words in the *Baba is You* levels are scriptons (sequences of signs that can be interpreted by the player), but they are also textons, since they affect the behaviour of the objects in the game space.

While most digital games simulate aspects of reality (e.g. walls are hard), the gameplay of *Baba is You* entails the constant reconfiguration of the rules that govern the diegetic reality of the game, which often creates completely unrealistic situations. In the level "Sorting Facility", for example, the sentence ROCK + ON + WATER + IS + KEY turns a stone that has been pushed into the water into a key. Although most of the time the player controls the character named Baba, any component, in fact, can be the player's avatar as long as the word that represents said component is combined into the sentence [component] + IS + YOU. The player can even impersonate multiple components at the same time, including words. During gameplay, the sentence [component] + IS + YOU must be intact at all times: if nothing is being impersonated, the game is lost (although all moves can be reversed and all levels can be restarted). To solve the levels, three conditions must be met: the sentences [word representing component A] + IS + YOU and [word representing component B] + IS + WIN must be put together, then component A must touch component B; by default, Baba must touch the flag. This state is hindered by the other rules and components, but the sentences must typically act together for the puzzle to be solved.

The ability to manipulate the rules of the game this way gives the player considerable agency. The introductory video before the first level thus depicts the act of creation, more specifically, creation with words. In the background, there is a chaotic arrangement of floating grey tiles, stones and wall segments, then a flower appears and turns into the word BABA, and the iconic figure leaps out of nowhere. From another flower, the word WALL emerges, and two walls appear on the screen, one below Baba and one above it, forming a frame. From the third flower, the word ROCK is created. Three rocks block Baba's path, dividing the space enclosed by the walls into two parts. Finally, we witness the creation of FLAG, which is placed beyond the rocks. Further flowers give rise to further words, creating rules: WALL IS STOP (walls are hard, they stop moving components, including us), ROCK IS PUSH (rocks can be moved), FLAG IS WIN (the flag becomes the goal). Finally, the words BABA and IS are joined by the word YOU, and we are given instructions on how to control Baba. At this point, the intro seamlessly turns into the first, tutorial level of the game. To solve the puzzle, the player needs to push one of the rocks out of the way and then touch the flag. Right on the first level, the game makes it clear that the behaviours of the objects are defined by the bits of language in the game space.

Configurability and Uncertainty

It is not linguistic omnipotence over the created world that players of *Baba is You* experience, however, but the wonderful interconnectedness of its world. The second and third levels "Where do I go?" and "Now what is this?" are still tutorials. "Where do I go?" teaches the player that if she dislocates the first word of a sentence, the rule that the sentence was formulating no longer applies. By taking apart the combination

WALL + IS + STOP, Baba can go through the wall because it will not stop it. The player experiments with the game components, moves things around, destroys things, learns the specific language of the game. The naming of the character Baba is related to this infantile position: the labial sounds 'b' and 'a' evoke the early phase of language acquisition, when the cooing infant is trying out basic elements of language. According to the developer, the name Baba (and Keke, another character in the game) were inspired by the bouba/kiki effect (r/NintendoSwitch, 2019). Experiments show that the majority of people (even at a few months of age) associate certain speech sounds with the same visual shapes: they associate the phoneme sequence 'bouba' with rounded shapes and 'kiki' with pointy shapes (Ozturk et al., 2013). The infantilisation of the player is further reinforced by the charming, *cute*[2] characters of the game.

It is in this infantile position that the player's relationship to language is constantly evolving. "Where do I go?" teaches the player to use the undo option, which is important right from the start because sentences pushed to the edge of levels typically cannot be taken apart (as on most levels, the player cannot pull words, only push them). To make certain rules unchangeable, some sentences are placed on the edges of the levels. The edges, therefore, also mark the boundaries of the diegetic reality of the levels. "Now what is this?" makes it clear that referentiality in the game space works differently from the spaces outside of it. Although the word WALL refers to the wall object, it only carries the known property of real walls (i.e. we cannot go through them), if a sentence in the level explicitly states WALL IS STOP. In "Now what is this?", the player controls a piece of wall as a character while a set of flags act as a de facto wall. To solve the puzzle, the player is to compose the sentence FLAG + IS + WIN and then, controlling the wall object as a character, she is to touch the wall of flags.

The configurability of game rules suggests existential questions. The game levels are mostly barren, but they give a sense of completeness of existence. Even the simplest levels contain a living creature (usually Baba), some kind of obstacle (usually a wall), a tool (words, stones, etc.), and an end point (usually a flag). In the level "Out of reach", water separates Baba from the flag. The sentence WATER + IS + SINK is placed beyond a wall, so that if Baba touches the water, it sinks. Baba can die, but its death always depends on the arrangement of words in the level. In "Still out of reach", an impenetrable wall of skulls separates Baba from the flag. Beyond the skulls, however, there is also the sentence SKULL + IS + DEFEAT, which creates the rule that when the player touches a skull (the universal symbol of death), she loses the game. However, the puzzle can easily be solved by trying to move, instead of the skulls, the words of the sentence that makes the skulls dangerous. Death in *Baba is You* is thus a linguistic construct, not the inevitable end of existence. The same is true for change in a broader sense. In "Changeless", the sentence ROCK + IS + ROCK creates the rule that rocks cannot be transformed into another object (if the same two words are joined by IS, the object they represent cannot be transformed using another sentence). The stone must regardless be turned into a flag to solve the puzzle. In order to make the sentence ROCK + IS + FLAG take effect, the sentence ROCK + IS + ROCK must be broken down. The title is thus an ironic comment on rock, a symbol of stability: it is an illusion created by language.

The game makes the relationship between the player and his avatar similarly ambiguous. The claim that the title of the game makes is put into question early in "Now what is this?", as the player here controls a rock, not the title character. Apart from Baba, the characters Keke and Me also appear as characters, but since the player can take control of any object, the prior category of characters becomes meaningless: we can only think

2 Remark by the author: For the emergence of cuteness as an affect in digital games, see Bódi (2023).

of Keke and Me as characters because they both have faces, and because the sound 'keke' is not a real English word, and 'me' is a personal pronoun. The singular, independent attribute of "character" is also called into question, since several objects can perform this function at the same time. In "Volcano", for example, a lava flow separates Baba from the flag. By assembling the sentence LAVA + IS + BABA, the lava flow turns into a swarm of Babas that, astonishingly, start moving together to reach the flag.

Although only components with the YOU function attached can be controlled, other components can also be made to move by forming the sentence [component] + IS + MOVE. The components animated this way can push other components in the game space. Besides Keke, robots and ghosts are most likely to come to life this way, expressing this semi-autonomous role symbolically as well. In "Further fields", the dichotomy of animate/inanimate is further complicated: in order to solve the puzzle, nothing performs the function of YOU for a short time (it appears that the player has failed), and then the characters with the MOVE attribute attached push the player character into a position where the sentence KEKE + IS + YOU is activated, and the player is in control of Keke again. The levels "Horror story" and "Security check" invite the player to think about her avatar in radically different ways. In "Horror story", the sentence EMPTY + IS + YOU allows the player to take control of the empty black space.[3] In "Security Check", the sentence NOT + BABA + IS + YOU allows us to control all objects in the game space, with the exception of Baba, simultaneously.

Emotion and Rhetoric

While the game makes the player enjoy the relativism of its objects, it also creates affective meanings to involve the player emotionally. In "Affection", a heart, signified by the word LOVE, takes on the function usually fulfilled by the flag object. The player controls Baba, who cannot touch the heart because of the algae surrounding it (ALGAE + IS + DEFEAT). The player must send Keke, who is not affected by the word DEFEAT, to get the heart using the MOVE attribute. Love, signified by its universal symbol, is therefore the goal of the two characters, which they achieve together. In this way, the game not only guides the player towards the goal of solving the puzzle but also makes a general statement: love is a value in itself, a victory. It encourages the player to imagine Baba and Keke as beings in love with each other, and their feelings fulfilled by them reaching the heart. (This remains meaningful even in the not directly related levels: in "Blockade", the player controls the moon and must reach the star, as they belong together like Baba and Keke.) The fact that Keke also has object-like qualities (he is pushed here and there, transformed, etc.) is not even different from the romantic (lyric) tradition that often objectifies the beloved. In "Double moat", for example, Keke acts as a key, bringing into play the old metaphor of the key to the heart.

To make sense of the examples above, Bogost's (2010) concept of procedural rhetoric is useful: it is "the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures" (p. ix), or "a technique for making arguments with computational systems and for unpacking computational arguments others have created" (p. 3). In "Seeking acceptance", a claim about the nature of love (it being an important goal to be achieved through collective effort) is

3 Remark by the author: For a discussion of the gap between the absence of the signified and the presence of the signifier in the semiotics of zero, see Rotman (2016).

created by the gameplay (the procedure). The fact that Baba and Keke's joint effort is needed to pass the level argues for Baba and Keke's commitment to each other. Something similar happens in "Double moat": it is through the other that one achieves victory. However, meanings are not created via procedures exclusively. The word LONELY, for example, which occurs repeatedly, has considerable affective force. As a conditional operator in the game, it denotes an object standing alone in space, that is, a state in which the object does not overlap with any other object. However, in "Floaty platforms", the sentence LONELY + BABA + IS + DEFEAT, quite like the sentence LONELY + BABA + IS + YOU in "Shuffle", is impossible to interpret non-referentially: the game suggests that loneliness (in general) is defeat (in general), and that the player is lonely, regardless of the ludic function of the LONELY attribute. The player finds herself in a similar situation in "Love at first sight". Here, she controls a heart due to the sentence LONELY + LOVE + IS + YOU. The goal is to separate two birds adjacent to each other, then push one of them into the water (destroying it), so that the other one can eventually fulfil the function of the goal, which suggests a story of love and intrigue.

In addition to their emotional connotations, there are other qualities that motivate the player to interpret the levels as poetic works. As mentioned, each level has a title, which is displayed in large letters in the middle of the screen when a level is loaded. Sometimes they suggest a solution (the title "Double moat", for example, suggests building a moat), or they put the puzzle in context (as in the case of "Affection"), similarly to the title of a poem. The level, of course, does not look like a poem in the traditional sense, but when the player presses the Escape key, the rules (sentences) that apply to the level appear in the menu screen vertically arranged, as if they were lines of poetry. The short words give the sentences considerable power. In English-language poetry, single-syllable words, typically of Germanic origin, are of great importance, as they can make complex statements about the world in condensed manner, and they also contribute to the naturally iambic thumping of English. All words in the game are one or two syllables long in order to fit a single square. The game also takes advantage of zero derivation in English (words can be changed from one category to another without changing its form): certain words that acts as a noun can simply be placed in the position of the property (where typically adjectives are placed) to function as one. The interchangeability of words gives the player a sense of repetition, which is an important feature of lyric poetry.

The central role of the singular second person pronoun (YOU) is another such feature. The player must connect this word to a noun in order to control the object it signifies, and at the same time, she creates something like lyric address: the game "speaks" to the player through an object that is "addressed". Culler (2015) describes lyric address as a fundamental parameter of lyric poetry, central to the lyric tradition. Lyric address, according to Culler, has three agents (triangulated address): the speaker of the poem addresses the reader indirectly by addressing another addressee. Lyric address is one of the pillars of Culler's model of lyric: "Disrupting narrative, invocation, or address makes the poem an event in the lyric present rather than the representation of a past event" (p. 8), which is a fundamental difference between lyric poetry and prose. In this respect, lyric present is similar to what we call simulation: it is not a representation of past events, but a continuous occurrence in the present.

Magnuson (2023) discusses games with lyrical qualities and identifies lyric address as a basic property of such games. The three agents of address are the creator of the game, the player, and the game/character: in the digital games *Passage* (Rohrer, 2007) and *The Graveyard* (Tale of Tales, 2008) (Magnuson calls them game poems), "there exists an implicit question of how 'you' as the player are positioned in relation to each game's respective author(s) and the ambiguous 'enacted utterance' of each game"

(Magnuson, 2023, p. 42). *Baba is You* does not perfectly fulfil the criteria of a game poem as Magnuson defines them (for example, while the levels are short, the game itself is not), but it still gives lyric address an important role. It is a necessary feature in all of the levels, it is constantly present to mediate between the player, the avatar and the game space. The title (and the rule/sentence BABA + IS + YOU) suggest both the lyricism and the interactivity of the game.

The level titled "Poem" is a game version of a Valentine's Day poem. Here the word YOU, which allows the player control over Baba, becomes associated with 'you', the person addressed in the love poem. In the level, words are arranged side by side and underneath each other to produce a regular, rhyming, rhythmic poem. The original, oft-parodied, well-known poem is the following: 'Roses are red, / Violets are blue, / Sugar is sweet, / And so are you'. The poem makes use of a simile: you are as sweet as sugar. Roses and violets are used as parallels: the colours red and blue are natural, familiar attributes of flowers. Therefore, the poem implies that it is a well-known, obvious, natural fact that you are sweet. The puzzle, however, disrupts the clarity of the original, and reinterprets the naive, kitschy poem. In order to solve the puzzle presented in "Poem", the player is to think metonymically, not metaphorically. The flowers around the poem (and Baba, the flag, the wall) are not illustrations: if the words RED and BLUE are switched (ROSE + IS + BLUE, VIOLET + IS + RED), the flowers change colour. One of the solutions is to push the word VIOLET to the left, then push the words from up from the bottom. This turns the flag blue (FLAG + IS + BLUE), BABA becomes the goal (BABA + IS + WIN), and the nine roses are controlled by the player (ROSE + IS + YOU). The player must then touch Baba with one of the roses to win.

The three agents of triangulated address are, from another perspective, text and the two readers it 'addresses': the computer and the user. They both interpret the sentence ROSE + IS + YOU, yet the metaphorical reading is created only by the user. It may be useful to interpret the game as a special case of codework. Cayley (2002) defines codework as "literature which uses, addresses, and incorporates code: as underlying language-animating or language-generating programming, as a special type of language in itself, or as an intrinsic part of the new surface language or 'interface text,' as [he] call[s] it, of writing in networked and programmable media" (para. 3). The starting point for these experimental texts is that computer code and literary texts are composed of the same signifiers. Their aim is to reveal the code that is usually hidden from users in our digital world. The basic assumption of critical code studies is that computer code is meaningful and can be interpreted (Marino, 2006). In this respect, an important question is whether codeworks can be run: it is rare that these texts can be simultaneously read and decoded not only by humans but also by computers (Cayley, 2002). If we interpret *Baba is You* as an example of codework, it clearly falls into the latter category. Cayley (2002) calls the distinguishing feature of codeworks that can be run on a computer an *ambiguous address*: the work is read both as code and as text. The sentence ROSE + IS + YOU, for example, is read by the computer as code, not as text. In other words, ROSE + IS + YOU is interpreted metonymically, as meaning is transferred on the basis of the proximity between words and not the similarity of their meanings.

Procedural Figurativity

There is a fundamental difference between referential (metaphorical) and intraprocedural (metonymical) transfer of meaning: the former refers to something within the universe outside of the game, while the latter refers to objects in the game space, it has

to do with the rules of the game and the solution of puzzles. De Man (1979) makes a distinction between metaphor as a paradigmatic structure based on the logic of substitution that presupposes a real unity between the agents of the metaphor, and metonymy as "a syntagmatic structure based on contingent association" (p. 15). He criticises the Romantic idea that metaphor is superior to metonymy. In his reading of Proust, he stresses that metaphors are also metonymies: "precisely when the highest claims are being made for the unifying power of metaphor, these very images rely in fact on the deceptive use of semi-automatic grammatical patterns" (p. 16). In *Baba is You*, the referential (that is, metaphorical, universal, rhetorical, text) and intraprocedural (that is, metonymical, ludic, grammatical, code) transfer of meaning[4] can relate to each other in several ways.

a) Only intraprocedural meaning is created

In this case, words and objects may represent phenomena from the world outside the simulation, but the sentences put together have no poetic value and do not prompt referential interpretation. They only make statements about things in the game space. In the level "Lava flood", the sentence LAVA + IS + MORE + AND + HOT causes lava to start flowing from the four corners of the level. However, the sentence BABA + IS + HOT makes the lava harmless and Baba can walk on it. The task here is not to preserve the character's health, but to preserve the goal (the sentence FLAG + IS + MELT makes it vulnerable), which the player can do by pushing the word IS onto it. It would be difficult to attach any referential meaning to this act. In some cases, the level does not even try to imitate outside reality. In "Keep out!", for example, the sentences TREE + IS + HOT or FUNGUS + IS + MELT cause the mushroom to melt when touched by the hot pine tree. Of all the categories of meaning transfer, this one is the most common and the most unimaginative. Since this does not produce general statements, Bogost's (2010) notion of procedural rhetoric does not apply to this category.

b) Only referential meaning is created

"Lonely Flag" presents a female character with a heart above her, the sentence ANNI + IS + BEST below her and a few stars scattered about randomly. The name Anni is clearly a reference to the woman, but the words ANNI nor BEST do not do anything, their presence is not relevant to the puzzle. They have a purely referential / poetic function: after the completion of the game, the credits give thanks to a certain Anni Leskelä for her "encouragement, feedback and support throughout the project" ("ANNI", n.d.). The sentence ANNI + IS + BEST is thus a confession or dedication disguised as a game rule in a playful context, and in this respect can be considered an Easter egg (for more details see Mago, 2019). As far as we know, this is the only example of this category in the game. We cannot speak of procedurality here, so Bogost's (2010) notion of procedural rhetoric cannot be applied to this category either.

c) Intraprocedural and referential meanings are created simultaneously, but the latter merely hints at something outside the game

Even though the puzzle does not actually bring these referential meanings into play, the association provokes some thought in the player. The sentences with the operator HAS are examples of this. The English verb 'has' expresses possession, yet the function

4 Remark by the author: This dichotomy is similar to Magnuson's (2023) distinction between signified meaning and material meaning. Signified meaning refers mainly to the metaphorical meanings of poems and game poems, while material meaning refers to formal features such as rhythm, rhyme, line breaks, as well as the interplay of image, sound and interaction. We cannot apply Magnuson's terminology to *Baba is You* because the words are placed in the game space.

of the word HAS in the game is different: when an object is destroyed, it is replaced by another object. For instance, if the sentences KEKE + HAS + KEY and KEKE + IS + SINK are active, KEKE will become a key if it is placed on water. The meaning that Keke is in possession of a key is merely associative. In "Tunnel Vision", the player transforms Baba into a rock, then assembles the sentence ROCK + HAS + ROCK, and pushes the rock into the water by controlling Keke. The rock disappears but is immediately replaced by another rock. The player is to repeat this three times, then touch the flag with the thusly preserved rock to win. In the meantime, the player might ask, if one possesses only oneself, does one remain oneself after one is destroyed? This philosophical question is in no way addressed by the game. A similar train of thought is induced by the combination of the sentences BABA + IS + YOU and BABA + IS + WIN: if one takes oneself as their goal, what else is needed but oneself? Even so, it would be ridiculous to treat these as serious revelations. Bogost's (2010) notion of procedural rhetoric may apply to this category, but the claims being made are trivial.

d) Intraprocedural and referential meanings are created simultaneously in a way that the referential meaning diverts the player's attention from the intraprocedural meaning

To solve the puzzle, the player must ignore referentiality in favour of intraprocedurality. Besides "Poem", "Bottleneck" can also be put into this category. In this level, there are three components next to each other that seem to form a sentence: SKULL + IS + [the actual skull object]. This is, of course, not recognized by the game as a valid sentence. When read as a line of poetry, it is a meaningful sentence (the skull is the same as the picture of the skull), but when read intraprocedurally, it is an incomplete sentence consisting of two elements and an obstacle (the skull). The player solves the puzzle by connecting the word DEFEAT to the skull object, which also connects the sentence FLAG + IS + WIN indirectly. It is important to note that although intraprocedural meaning is the dominant one in this category, referential meaning is certainly brought into play as well, and it is part of the puzzle. Bogost's (2010) notion of procedural rhetoric can be applied at the meta-level: the puzzles argue for the primacy of intraprocedural meaning. It is the category most closely related to what Mitchell et al. (2020) call poetic gameplay: the game draws attention to formal particularities, thereby defamiliarizing the player and creating rhetorical meaning.[5]

e) Intraprocedural and referential meanings are created simultaneously, and they have a mutually supportive relationship

Referentiality adds to intraprocedural meaning, which in turn brings into play referential meaning. In "Love is out there", Baba is surrounded by a wall, outside of which is the goal/heart (LOVE + IS + WIN). The title can therefore be interpreted in two ways: on the one hand, the heart object is literally beyond the wall in the game space, and on the other hand, love is available in the world, it is just a matter of finding it. There is no strong contrast between the two statements, they do not cancel each other out. In fact, "Love is out there" encourages the player to see herself as Baba enclosed within the loveless walls and ponder her way out. The level can be read as a ludic adaptation of life wisdom as well. In "Heavy words", the sentence TEXT + IS + FALL causes the words to 'fall' (move)

5 Remark by the author: Mitchell et al. (2020) identify five categories of techniques (interaction, gameplay, agency, time, and boundaries) for the defamiliarization of player expectations. "Poem" and "Bottleneck" defamiliarizes gameplay. Like in the game *Akrasia* (Team Aha!, 2008), the game objective is not what it first seems. There, "the player initially thinks the goal is to collect all the 'pills', but these pills, while keeping the player in the 'high' state, actually negatively impact the character's life. The 'true' objective is to stay 'sober' by avoiding the pills" (Mitchell et al., 2020, para. 32).

downwards when they are pushed. The words certainly seem to be affected by gravity, yet at this point it is very clear to the player that the words have a symbolic weight, that is, they determine the way the level (and our world) works. The sentence TEXT + IS + FALL thus applies to the game space and to the world outside the simulation too. Bogost's (2010) notion of procedural rhetoric applies to this category, moreover, the game reflects on its own procedural rhetoric.

Conclusion

With the above typology, we would like to show not only the possible ways referentiality and intraprocedurality can relate to each other, but also that *Baba is You* emphasises its preference of intraprocedural meanings: the concrete to the abstract, metonymy to metaphor, code to text, simulation to representation, and, overall, a preference of play to the lyric and lyricism in the conventional sense. The abstract associations, the metaphors, the lyricism, the referentiality provide much needed colour, without which the game would be dry and boring. The dominance of intraprocedurality is, however, very appropriate, both from a ludologist point of view (which is sceptical about the territorialism of literary studies [see Eskelinen, 2001]) and the point of view of literary pedagogy.

Baba is You, after all, is undoubtedly a poetic game: it uses emotive linguistic markers, it imagines language as performative, it assigns importance to the way the player engages with language, and the pleasure she takes from playing with language. But above all, it is poetic because it draws attention to the materiality of language, quite like codeworks that reveal the hidden computer code. It does not allow the player to ignore the bearer of meaning, primary meanings, and puts emphasis on the signifier. These are important steps in learning to appreciate lyric poetry. Students who find it difficult to engage with poetry in school tend to see poems as puzzles to be solved, in which the figurative meaning of the encoded text has to be deciphered. Ironically, in *Baba is You*, the figurative meaning is often found when the player is not actively trying to solve the puzzle, but when she is contemplating and being playful.

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