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CYBERPUNK – GAME – POETRY: Rostislav Amelin's "SimStab"¹

The article discusses "SimStab" [Simulator of Stability], a poetic performance by a young Russian poet, Rostislav Amelin, as an effective hybrid of the innovative poetry, video game, and the cyberpunk genre models. The interaction of these components produces strong, yet not necessarily obvious political over-tones, testing the limits of the audience's (or readers', or players') agency. Like many other cyberpunk texts, "SimStab" explores the conflict between the desire to resist colonization by the pervasive powers dominating contemporary society, and the absolute necessity of willingly colonizing your own body and subjectivity with the products of these powers. Both the poem, game and their shared text embody spaces of utopia reliant on repressed sites of formless abjection, which paradoxically become a source of anarchic freedom. Thus, in "SimStab" the ludic algorithmic with its procedural rhetoric (Ian Bogost) creates spaces of formlessness which repeats the liberatory promise of cyberpunk literature.

Keywords: poetic performance, video games, the ludic poetics, cyberpunk, procedural logic.

When talking about new forms and formats of contemporary poetry, one rarely takes into consideration possible hybrids of a poetic text with video and digital games. The language of video games is well recognized by younger generations as stable and formulaic, consisting of ludic idioms and structures that in many ways are similar with poetry, although much more popular than it. The fusion of ludic

¹ We want to express our sincere gratitude to Ilya Kukulín, who has introduced us to Rostislav Amelin's poetic performance.

and poetic forms, however, cannot be mechanical and requires meaningful connections. A global discourse of cyberpunk embedded in video games and serving as a metaphor for multiple global anxieties, can serve as one of such connections.

The game format is interactive by default and thus invites performative engagement of the audience/readership. This engagement can be multifold and may either suggest that the reader selects his/her sequence of poetic/ludic components thus building an individual “plot-line”, or the algorithm would simulate such a process by picking aleatory lines/textual components. There are many other possibilities as well, but they all would demonstrate a simultaneity of possible variations of the poetic text and meaning. In each case the normative linearity of a poetic text would transform into a cloud of potential trajectories and the performance of the poetic text would reproduce its creation and re-creation in constant ludic iterations. Does such a “hybrid” remain to be poetic text, a vehicle for the new understanding and vision, or would the game subjugate the poetic text to its own purposes? If the latter is true, would it automatically mean the failure of poetry, or would the synthesis of the verbal world-modelling with the ludic “magic circle”² produce an unforeseen artistic effects that cannot be achieved by any of these media if taken separately?

We are looking from this perspective at Rostislav Amelin’s³ poem/game/performance “SimStab”, or “Simulator of Stability” as an example of such productive fusion. He presented it in St. Petersburg in September, 2018, at the conference “Technology and Poetics: A Mediated Production of the Beautiful. The Writing Transforming Us” («Техника и поэтика: опосредованное производство прекрасного. Письмо превращает нас») associated with Arkady Dragomoshchenko’s Prize. In our opinion, this work is important as a poetic experiment that conflates political and social critique inherited from the cyberpunk genre with the interactive possibilities of gaming. The result is the innovative and deeply poetic performance with strong, yet not necessarily obvious political overtones, testing the limits of the audience’s (or readers’, or players’) agency.

Amelin’s performance⁴ looks like a recitation of a poem, consisting of questions/statements with three possible answers/reactions accompanied with melancholic music. Some of the questions and answers appear repeatedly, others vary. Every time, the poet picks one of the options and moves to the next screen with

² “The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc. are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart” (Huizinga 1955: 10).

³ After February 2022, Rostislav Amelin openly declared his support to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. We are not commenting on his political views since the article considers his work completed in 2018.

⁴ Its recording can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VEhOP5At-kGw&t=5800s> [26.07.2021].

another set of questions and answers. However, this impression is deceptive. In fact, Rostislav is publicly playing a game of his own design. The game, in turn, is based on Amelin’s illustrated narrative poem, or novel in verses, “Megalopolis Olos”, which has been published in 2021 by the Moscow Andrei Voznesensky Center within its new poetic series “Tsentrifuga” (The centrifuge). Almost simultaneously with the book, Amelin has released a YouTube film based on his narrative poem.⁵ Each piece of this project can exist independently, however, the performance and its meaning cannot be fully grasped without references to the novel and the game. Which is why we will first characterize the latter and then move to the former.

The novel and the game

“Megalopolis Olos” is a novel in the form of a poem. The narrative directly references a variety of cyberpunk tropes, consciously repeating familiar motifs and relying on this repetition and the familiarity it engenders to produce meaning, as the audience fills in, what, for instance, a zombie apocalypse looks like without the novel-poem needing to represent it, outside of a few expressive details. The protagonists are a cult worshipping archaebacteria; their guru leads them into hiding in the Bomzhatnik – an autonomous zone unmonitored by the utopian and omniscient cyberpunk government of the world. The government is pursuing technological immortality for chosen elites, amidst vast exploitation and natural desolation. The revolutionary resistance to this project for technological immortality subverts the ostensible princess of the whole utopia with a vision abandoned by the utopian government: a plan to send a spaceship to spread earthly life, instead of digitizing it at the cost of killing the whole planet. The protagonists initiate a revolution against the utopia by infecting the wells of the general populace with the archaebacteria they worship. Although the bacteria give the willingly-infected supernatural abilities, uninformed exposure causes something akin to a zombie apocalypse which threatens the whole society with infectious enlightenment. Amelin’s text represents an original version of cyberpunk that displays a repetition of cyberpunk tropes through a *mise-en-abyme* – in the course of the novel it is revealed that the bacteria are themselves the remnants of a hyper-advanced cyberpunk society that managed to transcend death by becoming bacterial.

This novelistic plot reveals the colonizing logic of cyberpunk that moves from social control and surveillance to the colonization of hidden, repressed zones like the Bomzhatnik, and finally to the last colonizable frontier: the interior of the body. This is in direct accordance with the stable trope of the cyberpunk protagonists as rebels subsisting on the margins and in the unsurveilled zones of the society, while at the same time guaranteeing their own survival and competitive edge

⁵ See: Амелин (2021b).

by repeatedly inserting technological improvements developed by the very corporate order they oppose into their own bodies. Consider, for example, William Gibson's genre-defining cyberpunk novel "Neuromancer" where its protagonists, Case and Molly's goal is to liberate themselves via colonizing their own bodies. Case's quest is to regain the neural links allowing him to surf the internet and Molly's to complete the insertion of artificial nerves and blades into her body, making her a flawless killing machine.

In Amelin's novel-poem protagonists colonize themselves with archaeobacteria to gain power and enlightenment, while the same bacteria turn a non-consenting subject into a zombie. The transformation into zombies exacerbates the metaphor of internal colonization by bringing the zombie apocalypse as a factor. The zombie apocalypse is a distinct genre from cyberpunk, but also represents a contemporary imagining of a problematic immortality. The zombie represents immortality as a devouring machine devoid of human qualities and has historically, at least in the work of George Romero, critiqued capitalist consumption as an intrinsically hollowing and dehumanizing social system, merely exposed and radicalized by the walking dead.

The archaeobacteria show that the process of internalizing technology in order to resist it, generates the natural tilt of techno-utopia into techno-dystopia. Simultaneously, for the protagonists of the texts, the archaeobacteria represent an imaginary return to nature, but ultimately reveal this naturalness to be fraudulent (or at least hyper-technological), exposing a perverse circle of tech-life.

The game mostly hides its affinities with the novel. The initial structure appears to be that of random mundane scenes – views from a window (not very notable), encounters on the street – falling in the mud or in love – and similar events. Choosing to drink from a well both makes a direct link to the novel where such wells hide archaeobacteria and represents an odd choice – nothing in the other scenes suggests that characters in this universe drink from wells, rather than from faucets. The archaic tone of the encounter is all that suggests to the uninformed player that the well represents a deviation from the repeating encounters and an exit to the next stage in the game. Drinking from the well and other acts of deviation lead to a situation where the player encounters a tunnel of light. At this point it is crucial to refuse the light, and enter the darkness, which initiates the symbolic transformation. Afterwards the protagonist gets administrative privileges and can access the Administrator level. This level appears to be something like a prison, with much the same options as the level before it but no ability to do things like leave the room. The next level is reached by entering the tunnel of light – it admits people at the Administrator level, and then responding to a question: what should be preserved – life, humanity or stability? The correct response is "Life" that leads to a promotion to Organizer, which aligns the player with the cyberpunk elites in the novel, who pursue immortality over humanity and historical continuity. The Organizer is even more trapped – opening a window to their room leads to instant death, suggesting that the view outside the window is no longer that of earth, but the vacuous

atmosphere of the Moon or Mars. Leaving the status of Organizer is difficult and irreparable, but on successfully being fired the organizer awakens as a homeless person, capable only of writing the awful truth as ignored graffiti on the city walls.

The game, however, in a hidden form sustains the major motifs of the novel. For instance, the link to the well implies that the protagonist's enlightenment might well follow the contamination articulated within the novel, opening the question as to whether he is not, in fact, a zombie, as the archaeobacteria are not taken knowingly. This interpretation proposes a critique of the agency of the player or reader: chastising them for imagining they have more agency than they do – imagining they are not the zombie. The cyclical movement through the various stages of enlightenment, culminating in the awful knowledge born by the homeless protagonist is emphasized as not liberatory but iterative – the revelation that the world is already dead has an inevitability that reinforces the notion that the player too is "dead": at least in the sense of having agency beyond that of a zombie.

The most vivid symbol of the cyclical movement comes after the promotion from Administrator to Organizer, where the usual choices transform, and instead of experiencing them as a subject, you project or direct them onto other subjectivities. Nothing changes about the form of the game here – you are still choosing one of the three responses with familiar text, but the framing is now that of omnipotent and unseen power. This framing directly clashes with the disempowerment of the structure – what does it matter that instead of falling in love, you direct an unseen other to do so? This disempowerment makes the progression to a fall from this privileged position into the lowly status of a homeless person writing graffiti on walls is therefore natural – at the least, it is a change from what you have been doing for a long time, a reprieve from repetition that feels significant and appears to be final (there is no way to climb the hierarchy again to Organizer after becoming homeless).

The poetry in the performance

In his commentary to the performance, Amelin emphasizes that for him the creation of this game equals the creation of poetry. He argues that each "card" that "SimStab" uses in its structure, in fact, represents a catren – indeed, three responses on each card typically are united by a syntactic parallelism and thus reminiscent of a poetic structure. According to his interpretation, the game is just a new vehicle for poetry, which preserves its polisemantic richness and freedom of associations, while opening the text for multiple variations. In the commentary to his work that Rostislav sent us, he compares the game with a labyrinth in which dissimilar choices may return to the same patterns. However, the driving force of this game dwells on the dialectics of the pre-programmed and unpredictable. Certainly, the cards and their content are preprogrammed, but their sequence and the resulting plot are mostly defined by the reader-gamer's interpretation of their choices.

Amelin's project distinguishes itself from the so-called generative poetry:

Generative poetry, produced by computer algorithms, is arranged as a sequence of words, or signs and symbols, according to a program. Some of the experimental features and structural principles of generative poetry were invented and practically applied long before the computing era and the World Wide Web. Some of them were originally used by Oulipo (Ouvroir de littérature potentielle), the workshop of potential literature established by French writers and mathematicians who create their works using combinatory techniques and constrained writing (such as lipograms, alliteratives, acrostics, palindromes, anagrams, aleatory, etc.).⁶

This model, however, completely excludes the participation of the reader, leaving the combinatorics to the computer algorithm. On the contrary, in Amelin's project, the gamer's choice is responsible for associative links and influences transitions not only between cards but also between the game's levels. Thus, "SimStab" functions as a hybrid genre in which the poem is not produced by the algorithm alone, but by the player who can, but does not have to coincide with the poet, and who generates meaning in the course of play.

More than with the generative poetry, "SimStab" resonates with Lev Rubinshtein's "card poetry," which also shuffles seemingly ready-made formulas by building a labyrinth of interrupted and repetitive trajectories, some of which may or may not lead to the "bitter truth" that nevertheless will be inevitably absorbed by the existential routine. However, the main difference between Amelin and Rubinshtein's poetic forms lies in the degree of the reader's agency. Rubinshtein minimally limits the reader's freedom of interpretations by offering multiple simultaneous paths for the poem's elucidation. Amelin further unfolds the potentialities implied by Rubinshtein's card poetry: in his game it is the reader-gamer who defines its trajectory (or multiple trajectories) and eventually its plot development(s). Thus, in this project, the avant-gardist dream about the reader as the artist's co-creator comes true in the obvious, yet not necessarily a primitive way.

Continuing on this parallel, it is important to see another continuity/difference between Rubinshtein's card poetry and "SimStab". Rubinshtein's labyrinths are situated in the realm of the language – the layers of idioms, linguistic tics, and cultural stereotypes fully exhaust the "reality" in which the subject resides, and which tries to elucidate. There is no way out of this closed-up panorama, although Rubinshtein's narrator sometimes hints on the possibility of an escape (see, for example, «Шестикрылый серафим» or «Это – я»).⁷

In Amelin's poetic game, the "question" phrases and suggested answers are stylistically neutral: «Чем вы предпочтете пожертвовать сегодня?» [What do you plan to sacrifice today?]⁸, «Вы становитесь старше» [You're getting older],

⁶ Kuchina (2018: 74).

⁷ On these aspects of Rubinshtein's poetry see: Липовецкий (2008: 326-357).

⁸ Амелин (2018). Hereafter, all quotations from the game/performance are given according to this source. All translations from Russian are by Daniil Leiderman.

«Вы падаете в грязь лицом» [You're falling into mud with your face down], «Кажется, вы влюбляетесь» [It seems that you're falling in love], «Вас оскорбляет другой работник» [Another worker insults you] etc. The only stylistic marker is associated with the "voice" of the computer: «Ошибка: Нужны права администратора, Мы всегда готовы вам помочь, Идет проверка. Ваше место в очереди (1218)» [Error: The administrator's privileges are required. We are always happy to help you. The test in progress. Your place in line (1218)]. This directly shows the presence of an authority embodied by cyber-punk conventions, within which such an authority is imagined as a flawed omniscience, according to which any given subject's horizon is locked a matrix of pre-programmed options⁹. The resulting panorama that "SimStab" produces is that of a hierarchical social/political structure, each level of which increases the subject's non-freedom – tellingly, while the administrator is locked in a room without exits, and opening the window for the organizer leads to instant death, although it's them who defines what his subordinates see in their windows («Вид из окна? – Печальный. Прекрасный» [The view from your window? – Sad. Beautiful]). The recurring motif of the ongoing hopeless protest meeting in the city square resonates with this motif, as does the returning notion of the slowly dying (perhaps already dead) planet. In other words, unlike Rubinshtein's card poetry, in Amelin's performance, the language screen is not blocking perception anymore, however, the world consists of a limited number of options neither of which offers any escape from the hopeless cycle of repetitions.

Repetitions are central for Amelin's project both structurally and philosophically. On the one hand, repetitions of the same cards produce the impression of the flexible and unpredictable but still clearly tangible rhythm within the game. These structural repetitions, however, are not formal only – they suggest both the cyclical organization of the text and the possibilities of selecting alternative trajectories, which eventually will lead to the same mundane situations: «Вы просыпаетесь. По вашему столу ползет муравей. Вы лежите и не можете встать. Вы забыли код от кабинета. На площадилюдно и шумно» [You are awakening. An ant is crossing your desk. You forgot the office entrance code. The city square is noisy and full of people]. Thus, repetition suggests the stability of the debilitating routine, which no changes in status or in the level of power can shake.

As Amelin explains:

Multiple paths lead to the same patterns: this is why during the first playthrough the player will often return to the starting room. In the beginning, it might seem to the player that the game is broken, as they are constantly spinning in the same routines 'you wake up, you go to work, you want to eat etc.,' but this is an unpleasant special effect – in life we are also caught up in these simple cycles like 'house-life-work,' we always want to eat again, and this monotony that doesn't seem monotonous in life, becomes revealed when sparse words are used to describe the situation. The

⁹ See about the cyberpunk conventions: Hafner (1991), Slusser / Shippey (eds., 1992), Murphy / Vint (eds., 2010), McFarlane et al. (eds., 2020).

player keeps coming back to ‘you wake up,’ which could be understood to represent different occurrences of the same type. Thus, by entering one such cycle (which could be just one of many similar patterns), the player isn’t going back in time, but just entering a routine. The routine prevents the player from developing, exploring the world, getting through the game, it bores and seems total, inescapable – just like in real life.¹⁰

Thus, Amelin’s game structure acquires a larger meaning of an existential metaphor through the repetition of routines. Ironically, one of the frequently repeating cards contains a meta-descriptive statement: «Вам кажется, что вы это уже делали» [It seems to you that you’ve done this already], which stabilizes the repetition on a conceptual level in addition to the formal.

Nevertheless, this effect of monotony is deceptive and, furthermore, it presents the greatest obstacle, or even a philosophical challenge that the gamer should overcome. Amelin’s game, as a true work of poetry, enacts its form as the most meaningful part of the performance. On the one hand, its repetitive structure serves as a source of repression, domination and colonization. On the other hand, this very repetition produces unpredictability and creates the spaces of freedom and agency it seeks, in order to challenge the regime of routine it criticizes. In this respect, the game procedural logic definitely dominates.¹¹

As mentioned, to learn the “bitter truth” the gamer has to turn away from the light and explore the darkness. A mysterious spring can be achieved only through plunging into a nightmare. However, this nightmare is cyclical too. In order to see the full and tragic truth, the gamer has to explore the darkness becoming an Administrator, ascend to the rank of Organizer, be fired as an Organizer and become unemployed and homeless, undergo utter humiliations but also leave prophetic and true warnings of the planet’s death on the city walls, where no one will heed them. This logic derives from the neo-mythological narrative preceding the game and not known to the gamer. But they can absorb it through multiple repetitions

¹⁰ «Есть паттерны, к которым ведут несколько разных вариантов, поэтому при 1-м прохождении игрока будет часто возвращать в комнату, из которой он начал игру. В начале игроку может казаться, что игра сломана, ведь он постоянно крутится в одном из рутинных циклов “вы проснулись, вы идете на работу, вы хотите есть и т.д.,” но это – неприятный спецэффект; в жизни мы также крутимся часто внутри очень простых циклов типа “дом-работа-дом”, мы каждый раз снова хотим есть, и эта однообразность, которая нам не кажется таковой в жизни, обнажается, когда используется мало слов для описания ситуации. Получается, что, хотя игрок возвращается к одному и тому же паттерну “вы просыпаетесь”, это можно понимать как разные, но однотипные ситуации. Таким образом, попадая в один из циклов (которых может быть много, учитывая структуру паттернов), игрок не возвращается назад во времени, а просто попадает в рутину. Рутинность мешает игроку развиваться, исследовать мир, пройти игру, она надоедает и кажется тотальной, безвыходной – как и в реальной жизни» (From Amelin’s email to Daniil Leiderman).

¹¹ See: Bogost (2016), Hanson (2018).

of the routine, which basically iterates the same principle – *escape from the colonizing routine resides in the repetitions and repeated negative choice*. These choices associated with either the abject or a breakdown into subalternity, are nevertheless, liberating. This motif was deeply explored in Davey Wreden's influential indie game "The Stanley Parable" (2013), where the protagonist's iterative attempts to escape from the omnipotence of the authorial narrator can only be successfully realized if the player chooses to turn off the game, as the ludic object is by necessity delimiting in agency and unable to offer true liberation. The motto of "Stanley Parable", repeating as a loading screen between inescapable iterations "...the End Is Never the End is Never..." asserts that the text can't end, but also that it can only end where the reader makes the choice to take agency and reject the systems offered by the authors of their epistemological horizon – in the game or outside of it. "SimStab" explores the same polemic between the endlessly appealing process of allowing yourself to be colonized by a text, and the necessity to resist this impulse and the social structures that exploit it for destructive ends. Like all cyberpunk texts, "SimStab" explores the central paradox between the desire to resist colonization by the pervasive powers dominating contemporary society, and the absolute necessity of willingly colonizing your own body and subjectivity with the products of these powers, if this resistance is to have any real impact. Both the poem, game and their shared text embody spaces of utopia reliant on repressed sites of formless abjection, which paradoxically become a source of anarchic freedom. Thus, in "SimStab" the algorithmic form creates spaces of formlessness which repeats the liberatory promise of cyberpunk literature.

Treating the poem-novel and game-poem as two perspectives on the same world reveals yet another register of interpretation that contradicts or rather complements its hidden modernist mythology. While playing the game, we inevitably understand that no escape into the alternative world ("nature") is possible because the longing is generated by the overall structure of oppression as its major mythic promise. The landscape behind the window is "selected" for subalterns by the Organizer locked in the room without doors. The archaeobacteria initially offer an escape into nature, appearing as a forbidden contrast with the hyper-technological structure of the society. Indeed, the first meeting of the engineer subverted into the cult within the novel is conducted as a park dedicated to the preservation of extinct flora and fauna and therefore unmonitored by the usual surveillance apparatus. This scene echoes the cyberpunk precedent in George Orwell's "1984" where the illicit meetings of the two protagonists in a meadow turn out to be perpetually monitored by the omnipresent surveillance. However, in Amelin's narrative the technological intruder is not the state, but the bacteria themselves, who turn out to be the products of a highly technological ancient civilization transmuting themselves into bacterial immortality.

Even nature proves treacherously to be hyper-advanced technology all along. Similarly, as the ultimate goal of the revolution is the revitalization of a project abandoned by the techno-utopian government as impractical and overly expensive

– the construction of a spaceship to spread life elsewhere. The rebellion is initiated by the archaeobacteria because the ruling elites decide to pursue immortality for themselves rather than immortality via spreading earthly life to other planets and galaxies. The paradox is that what the ruling elites are pursuing is exactly what the archaeobacteria accomplished – they are leading a rebellion against the same sort of project that created them. Instead, the archaeobacteria seek to spread themselves outside of earth, but in full consistency with cyberpunk tropes, this universal infection can hardly be viewed as a transparently unproblematic or desirable end – especially as the novel-poem expressly links it with a zombie apocalypse. Thus, the performance turns out to be an epiphany of the error. Whether we believe in the light or darkness, each of these mythologies is misleading. The world has been dead, and the source of truth is empty before we started playing. The only way towards agency is to stop playing.

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