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Portals to the Fantastical

As Walter Fisher notes, *homo sapiens* is also a *homo narrans*; humans are narrative beings who enjoy a coherent story, testing narrative fidelity and narrative possibilities in almost any communicative exchange.¹ We are a members of a narratocracy, most of whose media are story-oriented; we tell our stories in books, newspapers, television series, comic books, films and also in videogames. Amongst the oldest forms of stories are fairy tales. They originate in the beginnings of human civilisation, which some call the childhood of man. Today, they are stories of childhood, leading children into the world of the fantastical and the symbolic.

We can then regard fairy tales as dual portals. Firstly, they are portals through time and space, serving as a mirror that reflects centuries of different beliefs and world-views. Secondly, they are portals into a fantastical experience, and thus an essential arena of symbolic conflict.² Over time, fairy tales may have changed cultures and media - from oral to written and print culture to film and digital media - but they continue to play a significant role in human society. Regarding fairy tales through the complexity of their functions in human society leads us to believe that certain digital genres, such as videogames, may perpetuate that role in a new guise.

Fairy tales and videogames share many similarities, from their narrative structure and archetypal characters to their creation of a 'playing space' - a space of exploration and symbolic conflict. One of their main qualities is also their ability to generate a sense of wonder. The listener of a fairy tale and the player of a videogame are both immersed in a specially constructed, fantastical world where anything is possible. They become immersed in the new world of the story by empathising with - or even becoming - a character (through role-play), by exploring the narrative first-hand and comparing symbolic, allegorical, metaphorical and real-life experiences.

Fairy tales are not stories about fairies, but, as Tolkien states, are expressions of the "*realm of Faerie*", a space that creates the possibility for fairies (and other fantastical creatures) to exist.³ In the "*realm of Faerie*", characters, motifs and themes may change, but the general landscape remains the same - it is a fantastical world that, in order for us to enter, demands that we have "*the key*". The key is the algorithm of the fantastical that we internalise and can easily re-apply to

any medium. It is a realm into which “a man may, perhaps, count himself fortunate to have wandered, but its very richness and strangeness tie the tongue of a traveller who would report them. And while he is there it is dangerous for him to ask too many questions, lest the gates should be shut and the keys be lost.”⁴

The ‘tying of the tongue’ to which Tolkien refers is the immersion that occurs in this realm of the fantastical; while talking about it, and explaining it, breaks that immersion and brings us back to reality. This is the exact point that Bettelheim had in mind whilst regarding fairy tales as a place for the exploration of the inner world of the child (and the child’s transition to adulthood). The same happens in videogames - the realm of the fantastical becomes the platform for many archetypal characters, universal themes and messages, which can be analysed by the self-same model developed by Propp for the morphological analysis of fairy tales.⁵

At the same time, distinctions are required. There are many videogames, for example, that rely on fairy tales only paratextually - by using particular motifs and themes as in some first person-shooting games or even some of the more fairy tale-like types of adventure games, so-called RPGs - but they do not serve other fairy tale functions. While looking for the legacy of fairy tales in videogames, it is also important to note the difference between the videogames that rely on a specific fairy tale (for example *Dark Parables 5 – The Final Cinderella*, Blue Tea Games, 2013), and those that build a new narrative but according to fairy tale conventions.

This essay focuses on the latter, taking as examples *Dragon Age: Origins* (Electronic Arts, 2009), which depends on a

more linear form of storytelling, and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Softworks, 2011), which allows the player greater freedom of spatial exploration. The essay explores the use of fantastical localities as immersion points for both the reader of a fairy tale and the videogame player. It also examines characters and their functions in the story, as well as the differences and similarities in narrative construction between fairy tale and videogame.

Real and Symbolic Spaces

Both fairy tales and videogames create a space that is different from our reality, but while in it, we perceive it as reality, largely because it is governed by its own set of rules and functions; It is a world of fantasy, and yet with its own forms of recognisability. Space, for example, can be understood in two ways in fairy tales and videogames: as real physical space, and also in metaphorical terms. Fairy tales, for their part, provide an outline narrative that gives the listener the opportunity to explore the space more deeply (by imagining) or explore themselves in more depth (what Bettelheim calls "*the inner world*").

This is also true of videogames, where the child or the player in general is even more emancipated while playing a character (often in the first person) and given the means to overcome problems they encounter. Such problems - in games, so-called 'quests' - may also be regarded symbolically as projections of one's inner conflicts, which are overcome in time. Henry Jenkins argues that videogames today have replaced a physical space for children to explore, creating instead a space where there are no adults. Jenkins calls videogames 'play spaces' in order to emphasise that this

space is not just a mere representation of a physical space, but is also something that is explored and experienced in deeper terms.⁶

Regarding space in a physical sense, fairy tales in general provide open, flexible spaces, often deliberately vaguely named as 'somewhere' and 'some time', making them flexible for the hero's imaginative exploration. Spaces in fairy tales are carefully chosen as portals into different archetypal sub-spaces; the hero can therefore wander care-free and suddenly enter a magical forest, announcing the many different ways in which the story can develop. Videogames thus provide concrete physical spaces for the hero's explorations, involving hidden objects, entries into other sub-spaces, and so on.

In *Dragon Age: Origins*, the physical space of exploration built in the meta-narrative is named 'Ferelden', and is one of several countries in the mythical continent of 'Thedas'. This is a kingdom familiar to others of its kind, where different creatures co-exist (elves, humans, dwarfs, etc.). Just as in fairy tales, there are many sub-spaces, for example 'Deep Roads', an underground highway system built long ago by dwarves, where creatures called the 'Darkspawn' dwell, or the 'Fade', the unconscious realm that is the home of spirits.

In *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, meanwhile, the meta-narrative is situated in the fictional province of 'Skyrim' on the continent of 'Tamriel'. It is an open world environment for personal exploration, consisting of expanses of wilderness, cities, towns, villages, fortresses and dungeons. This open space layout may result in the hero's aimless wandering, without a set task or a quest - one might say, just as in reality. However, this idea of the open exploration of space

embodies what the fairy tale as a whole is concerned with in symbolic terms - the exploration of the fantastical as a personal quest and choice.

In *Skyrim*, the starting point is always fixed, while in *Origins* it varies, depending on the choices the player makes during character creation. Interestingly enough, especially in *Origins*, one must deserve to enter another space; one needs to finish a certain task or a quest, just as a hero in a fairy tale must, in order to be allowed entry. Finishing a given task opens up a whole new level of the world, otherwise unobtainable, which in return produces a feeling of accomplishment, and the space itself becomes a reward for the protagonist, as well as a setting for the new adventure.

Characters and Their Functions

Characters in fairy tales and videogames also share considerable similarities. In fairy tales, characters are usually polarised (good/evil), while in videogames, characters are often more developed. However, in a story that is not a tale about fairies but deals with the 'realm of Faerie', one should not merely recognise the character by name, but by the function that they perform in the story, an approach pioneered by Propp. In his morphological analysis of a large group of fairy tales collected by Afanasiev.

Propp defines seven broad character types (hero, dispatcher, helper, donor, villain, false hero, princess) and thirty-one functions which constitute the fairy tale narrative, sometimes quite independent of who is performing them. These archetypal characters and functions can also be found in videogames. *Origins*, just as many other similar videogames, relies on the player to take the role of the 'hero'. It provides

the opportunity for the player to choose the race, class and social background of the character, which, in turn, determines the plot development and changes which the narrative undergoes. Depending on the chosen character, the player begins the game with one of six predetermined stories. In *Origins* we may also choose our avatar's first name, but the character is usually referred to by other characters as 'The Warden', giving our character a fairy tale-like descriptive name, one indicating the function of responsibility or guardianship.

In *Skyrim*, the player is also cast in the role of the 'hero'. The player chooses the identity of the Hero (human, elf, orc, etc.) but with the same underlining foundation: the 'hero' is a mortal with the soul of a dragon. This constant becomes the platform for many magical events throughout the story, involving transformations of the character and his/her abilities. Much of the narrative and character development relies on established fairy tale-like elements such as magical events (spells, rituals, and transformations) as well as objects collected in an inventory. In both games, the 'heroes' can sometimes craft the objects themselves or loot them from enemies, something that also happens in fairy tales.

Both games provide powerful antagonists – the dragons Archdemon in *Origins*, and Alduin the World-Eater in *Skyrim*. As in the fairy tale convention, in order to save their respective worlds the 'heroes' of both videogames are given the dangerous task of destroying the dragons. In *Origins*, the Hero is trying to unite the shattered lands and organise an army to help prevent the ominous 'Blight', involving the destruction of the world, by slaying an arch-demon in the form of a powerful dragon. In *Skyrim*, the 'hero' finds himself in the midst of a civil war, later understanding that it is part

of the last sequence of events prophesied by the Elder Scrolls that also predict the return of the mighty dragon Alduin, a malevolent force that will destroy the world.

In their quests, 'heroes' will encounter a gallery of different characters who can be described in terms of the functions analysed by Propp. There are 'dispatchers' (for example Duncan the Grey, a Warden who recruits the player in *Origins*), many 'helpers' in the form of companions who can be recruited and interacted with, and 'donors', characters who reward the quests made by the 'hero'. At the same time, there are certain differences between the fairy tales and videogames at the level of characters.

While the characters in fairy tales largely remain constant in order to convey a specific message, characters in both videogames have the opportunity to change. They collect experiences, make decisions, and 'level up'. Fairy tales are thus often accused of offering a simplistic moral lesson, while videogames are perceived as offering greater freedom of choice. One could argue, of course, that the decisions that one makes in a game are moral lessons in their own right; what one chooses to do and say influences the world around one, just as in real life.

Decision Points and Narrative Granularity

Both videogames discussed in this essay have a strong and coherent meta-narrative that corresponds with the fairy tale algorithm: the 'hero' is sent on a mission which leads to many smaller tasks and quests; he meets 'helpers' and 'donors', collects magical objects; and he confronts his antagonist in order to save the world. The difference, however, can again be seen in the many smaller choices

made by the 'hero'. Choice in fairy tales only exists when such tales are regarded as spaces of metaphorical exploration. Choice in videogames is the essence of this digital genre: choices such as those to do with moving forward or selecting companions contribute to the branching of the narrative and to the granularity of the storyline. In this respect both *Origins* and *Skyrim* offer many decision points, places or moments of granularity that one cannot easily describe using Propp's functions.

Propp's model has been successfully applied to the analysis of many different types of videogame, but such analyses demonstrate that the analysis functions only in relation to the meta-narrative.⁷ Such elements as the choices made by a player, the shaping of dialogues, and the growth of the characters are impossible to map using this model, for they lead to different storylines. On the other hand, this granularity of the narrative can also be located in the fairy tale genre when regarding it as a palimpsest, a network of fairy tales, where a certain tale branches into many different variants. It is the granular nature of the fairy tale as an oral genre that allows a single tale to become a platform for a variety of different stories, with characters, motifs and symbols travelling from one story to another, becoming 'breadcrumbs' for folklorists to follow, in an unending trans-cultural and trans-medial storytelling.

Reading the ancient stories of the fairy tale thus allows us to peer into the world of our ancestors, as well as into the world of the symbolic and the fantastical. In recent centuries, the role of fairy tales has also expanded - they have become a gateway for children into the world of literature. The longevity of this literary genre leads us to believe that it provides *homo narrans* with something that is still

fundamental and essential. The fairy tale as a literary genre has endured many changes, but its narrative structure has remained quite solid, which leads us to conclude that its basic narrative structure has become an archetype in itself.

The aim of this essay has been to argue that there are certain narrative similarities between fairy tales and videogames, using the examples of *Origins* and *Skyrim*. My interest in videogames and fairy tales is, however, only partly focused on these mappings of similarities. My key objective is to convey the idea that the major similarity lies in the experience of the fantastical, and to emphasise our apparently constant need to create such realms. In this regard, videogames can be seen as the new fantastical narratives of our generation - a role that the fairy tale has occupied for centuries.

Notes and References

¹ Walter R. Fisher, 'Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument', *Communication Monographs*, vol. 51 no. 1, 1984, p. 270.

² Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy tales*, New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976.

³ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965, p. 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, (1928; Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2nd. ed., 1968).

⁶ Henry Jenkins, 'Complete Freedom of Movement: Video Games as Gendered Play Spaces', in Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (eds.), *From 'Barbie' to 'Mortal Kombat'*, Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1998, p. 262.

⁷ Andrew Brusentsev, Michael Hitchens, and Deborah Richards, 'An Investigation of Vladimir Propp's 31 Functions and 8 Broad Character Types and How they Apply to the Analysis of Video Games', in *Proceedings of The 8th Australasian Conference on Interactive Entertainment: Playing the System*, New York: ACM Digital Library, 2012.