



Of Fairy Tales & Digital Games

{ a Quest for Meaning }



Of Fairy Tales & Digital Games a Quest for Meaning

Masterthesis zur Erlangung des akademischen Grades
„Master of Arts in Arts and Design“

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Vorgelegt am FH-Studiengang MultiMediaArt, Fachhochschule Salzburg

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Puch/Urstein, 28.11.2012

Eidesstattliche Erklärung

Hiermit versichere ich, Regina Reisinger, geboren am 08. Jänner 1987 in Salzburg, dass ich die Grundsätze wissenschaftlichen Arbeitens nach bestem Wissen und Gewissen eingehalten habe und die vorliegende Bachelorarbeit von mir selbstständig verfasst wurde. Zur Erstellung wurden von mir keine anderen als die angegebenen Quellen und Hilfsmittel verwendet.

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Titel der Masterthesis: Of Fairy Tales & Digital Games – a Quest for Meaning

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Schlagwörter:

1.Schlagwort: fairy tales

2.Schlagwort: games

3.Schlagwort: meaning

Die vorliegende These befasst sich mit Märchen und Computerspielen, und wie Bedeutung durch sie vermittelt werden kann. Die Arbeit untersucht wie Märchen und Spiele spannende und trotzdem relevante und aussagekräftige Erfahrungen für Erwachsene und Kinder bieten können, und welche rhetorischen Stilmittel und Strategien dabei zum Einsatz kommen. Es wird außerdem untersucht wie sowohl Märchen als auch Computerspiele in verschiedenen Zeiten oder Gesellschaften wahr genommen wurden und werden, und in wie fern Computerspiele heute Rollen erfüllen die früher noch von Märchen übernommen wurden.

Das erste Kapitel definiert und behandelt Märchen als Genre, und versucht ein grundlegendes Verständnis zu schaffen welches für die folgende Forschungsarbeit von Nöten ist. Neben einem kurzen Überblick über die Geschichte werden Funktionen und Einsatzbereiche von Märchen in verschiedenen Epochen untersucht. Es wird gezeigt wie diese Geschichten nicht nur als Unterhaltung sondern auch als Unterrichtswerkezeuge fungierten, und wie sie im Verlauf der Zeit sowohl wertgeschätzt als auch kritisiert wurden. Typische stilistische Merkmale und narrative Herangehensweisen des Genres, sowie deren Deutung durch verschiedene theoretische Schulen wie die der Psychoanalyse oder der Literaturwissenschaft werden beleuchtet. Das zweite Kapitel der Arbeit argumentiert warum eine Verbindung zwischen Märchen und Digitalen Spielen Sinn macht, und welche Verbindungen oder Ähnlichkeiten bereits bestehen. Das Kapitel definiert darüber hinaus Bedeutung als ein zentrales Konzept und mögliches Ziel für Märchen wie auch Computerspiele, und argumentiert warum sich gerade Computerspiele auf Bedeutung und Aussagekraft anstelle von klassischer Narration konzentrieren sollten. Das dritte Kapitel untersucht einige typische narrative Aspekte, The-

men und Motive von Computerspielen, und in wie fern sie den in Märchen verwendeten Motiven gleichen beziehungsweise sich von ihnen unterscheiden.

Das letzte Kapitel geht über narrative Dimensionen hinaus und konzentriert sich auf jene Potentiale und Merkmale die dem Medium Computerspiel inhärent sind, und die eine wichtige Rolle dabei spielen, Bedeutung und Aussagen in einer nachvollziehbaren und persönlich relevanten Form zu vermitteln. Interaktivität, Entscheidungen und Konsequenzen, sowie der prozedurale, regel-basierte Charakter des Mediums werden diskutiert und anhand verschiedener Beispiele illustriert. Darüber hinaus werden Spiele als Erfahrungen betrachtet welche sich mit Transformation und persönlichem Wachstum beschäftigen; ein Thema welches auch einen zentralen Aspekt vieler Märchen darstellt.

Diese Forschungsarbeit richtet sich an TheoretikerInnen und SpielerInnen, und versucht ein besseres Verständnis dessen zu fördern, wie Spiele nicht nur unterhaltsam sein können, sondern darüber hinaus auch Bedeutungen und Aussagen vermitteln können welche sowohl innerhalb der Spielewelt, sowie potentiell auch darüber hinaus für den SpielerInnen relevant sein können.

This thesis deals with fairy tales and digital games, and how they can offer meaning to their recipients or users. It examines how fairy tales and games work to create engaging yet relevant and meaningful experiences for adults as well as children as well as which rhetoric devices they use in the process. It also investigates their respective roles and reputations in society, and in how far modern digital games have come to fulfill functions formerly offered by fairy stories.

The first chapter of this thesis focuses on fairy tales and how they are defined and how they function as a genre, so as to provide the basic understanding necessary for the research work that follows. The chapter includes a short historical overview and examines the uses and functions that fairy tales have had throughout history. It shows how these stories were used not only as entertainment but also as educational devices, and how they were both valued as well as criticized by different societies during different periods of times. It also examines stylistic devices and narrative approaches typical for the genre, and how they are interpreted by different fields, such as psychoanalysis or literary theory. The second chapter explains why a connection between fairy tales and digital games makes sense, and where connections are already present. The chapter also focuses on defining meaning as a central concept and a possible aim of both fairy stories and games, and argues why it might make sense to replace the tendency toward classic storytelling in digital games with a pursuit for expressive potential and subjective meaning. The third chapter explores some narrative aspects of digital games, including themes and motifs, and how they resemble or differ from the way they are used in fairy tales. The last chapter then goes beyond narrative dimensions and focuses on the potentials and characteristics that are inherent to the game medium, and that play an important part when it comes to conveying meaning in an expressive, believable and subjectively relevant form. Interactivity, choices and consequences, as well as the procedural, rule-based nature of the digital game are discussed, and their potential to convey meaning is examined in various examples. In addition, games are explored as experiences that deal with and teach players about transformation and growth, a theme which is also crucial to many fairy tales.

This work addresses theoreticians and designers as well as players, and tries to encourage a better understanding of how gaming experiences can not only be engaging and entertaining, but also meaningful for players within the game world as well as potentially beyond it.

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List of Abbreviations

pub.	publisher, publication, published by
vol.	volume
no.	number
n.d.	no date (of publication)
n.p.	no place of publication, no publisher
et al.	and others
f	following page
ff	following pages
p.	page
pp.	pages
cf.	compare
qtd.	quoted by
etc.	and so forth
ibid.	the same place
min.	minutes

KHM “Kinder- und Hausmärchen”, pub. Brothers Grimm (1812-1858)

RPG role-playing game

GTA Grand Theft Auto

Research interest

Fairy tales are a classic narrative genre that exists in most cultures around the world in one variation or another. Although these tales are mostly hundreds of years old, and although they might not play as dominant a role today as they did in the past, they still remain not only well known but also fascinating and appealing to children as well as adults. Though simple on the surface, most people see these fantastic stories as valuable narratives that can teach people something about the world and its social implications, and that can provide meaning to children and other readers.

And yet, fairy stories are not at all non-controversial. They feature numerous aspects that are normally regarded with caution, especially when associated with children: fairy tales deal with violence and death; they feature dark places and vile characters. In these stories, children are treated badly, the creatures encountered are often scary and not to be trusted, and often times the hero, in order to succeed in his adventure, has to do things – like steal, cheat or kill – which are usually not broadly accepted by society.

A lot of these aspects and motifs are also common for digital games. Yet while fairy tales are still mainly regarded as meaningful narratives and valuable cultural goods, games are criticized for these characteristics, and are often perceived by the public as mindless entertainment that does not bear any relevance to real life. Is this critique really justified? What are the differences between hearing a fairy tale and playing a fantastic computer game? And could some of the unique characteristics of digital games turn out to hold a lot of potential when it comes to creating and conveying **meaning** to players?

In their paper *Uses of Digital Enchantment: Computer Games as the New Fairy Tales* – one of the very few works to deal with this connection – Morie and Pearce (cf. 2008: 1) argue that at least certain digital games today fill the cultural niche formerly occupied by fairy stories. And in July of 2011, the American Supreme Court banned a regulation in California that wanted to prohibit the sale of violent computer games to minors, arguing that fairy tales had similar gore and violence in them.¹

This thesis does not claim that computer games and fairy tales work exactly the same way, or that they should be judged in the same way. This would be an oversimplification that would not give credit to either games or fairy tales. Yet it is a fact that digital games have become a well-established pastime in the life of many adults as well as children, while some classic media or genres, like for example fairy tales, are no longer necessarily seen as integral parts of growing up. Instead of fighting this development, or simply criticizing it, it should be the aim

1 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2008749/Violent-video-games-fairytales-Supreme-Court-rules-18s-buy-want.html>

of everyone involved to try and improve as well as understand new media like digital games, so as to be able to bring out their full potential and make them not only as entertaining and engaging, but also as meaningful as they can be. I think that examining fairy tales and games together might provide some useful approaches and insights in this regard.

Practice, theory & relevance

When working on our master's project, a platformer game targeted at both children and adults called *The Balloon Quest*, our goal was to design a game where every aspect, including characters, story, rules, gameplay, etc. would complement and enhance each other, thus creating an experience for the player that would not only be entertaining and meaningful within the game, but potentially also be relevant for the player in his or her real life.

Designing the setting, story and gameplay of *The Balloon Quest*, we noticed that we were, at first unconsciously, making use of numerous motifs and stylistic devices commonly found in fairy tales, because they provided us with a clear and simple way of expressing things, while at the same time charging them with underlying meaning and interpretative potential for the player.

The work on this project, as well as seeing peoples' reactions to it, convinced me that pursuing such a connection or comparison in a theoretical context could reveal not only fruitful new perspectives on both fairy tales and digital games and the functions they fulfill in society, but also help designers to create even more engaging yet meaningful gaming experiences.

The aim of this thesis is not to compare singular fairy tales and computer games, or to try to transport certain fairy tales into digital games; instead, I believe that examining both fairy tales and games, and trying to draw a possible connection between them, might help our understanding of how digital games can work as expressive media, what kinds of potential they have for conveying meaning similar to as well as beyond that of fairy tales, and what kind of functions they might fulfill in our contemporary society.

Structure

As there is very little research available that links fairy tales and games, this thesis will make use of research works from different fields, including literary theory and psychoanalytical texts on fairy tales, as well as works of game studies, especially those that deal with the expressive and rhetoric potentials of digital games.

The first chapter of this thesis will deal with fairy tales and how they are defined and function as a genre, an endeavor necessary as a basis for the following research work. The chapter will include a short historical overview and will examine the uses, functions and reputations that fairy tales have had throughout history. The second chapter will take a closer look at why a connection between fairy tales and digital games makes sense, and will also pursue and define meaning as a central concept and possible aim of both fairy stories and games. The third chapter explores the narrative aspects of digital games, including themes and motifs, and

how they resemble or differ from those used in fairy tales. The last chapter will go beyond the more obvious narrative similarities, and examine inherent potentials and characteristics of the gaming medium, and how they are used or can be used to convey meaning to the player.

Summing up ...

Fairy tales are a narrative genre that has not only remained popular for so long because it is entertaining, but also because it offers a wide opportunity for and depth of interpretation and meaning by using comparatively simple forms and structures on the surface.

And while digital games can certainly be equally entertaining and engaging, they are not yet credited with being equally relevant and meaningful. The main question this thesis pursues is therefore the following:

Which possibilities are there for games to convey meaning through motifs and stylistic devices typically used in fairy tales? And in how far can games go beyond what fairy tales accomplish, conveying meaning through their own, inherent characteristics?

2.1 Introduction

Fairy tales are a common form of narrative in all European countries, and arguably in most of the world. Yet the available terms and the kinds of tales they refer to differ to a greater or lesser extent in various countries. In order to successfully discuss fairy tales (and especially if one plans to link them to other genres or media like games), one must try and reach at least a certain kind of definition and understanding of the genre one is talking about. This is what the first chapter will provide.

2.2 A Short Disambiguation and Etymology

2.2.1 Etymology

In the English language, the most widely used term is fairy tale. This term is somewhat descriptive, hinting at the magical characteristics of this kind of tale; on the other hand though, the term is also restrictive through its precise nature, stressing the appearance of one kind of character that is common for the genre, but does not by far appear in every single tale. The German term *Märchen*, in comparison, is of a more general nature, encompassing various kinds of tales. *Märchen* itself is a diminutive from the word *Mär*, which derives from the Old High German terms *mâri*, meaning “news, account, tale”. Arguing that the German term is more including and less misleading, some theorists have also used *Märchen* in texts of other languages. (cf. Lüthi 1996: 1f; Thompson 1977: 7f)

Still, in English research and literature, the term “fairy tales” is the most common, and is usually used as a synonym for *Märchen*. J.R.R. Tolkien argues that fairy tales are not named thus because of the appearance of fairy characters, but because they take place in the “realm of Faerie,” the magical world that fairies and other fantastic creatures inhabit. “The realm of fairy-story is wide and deep and high and filled with many things: all manner of beasts and birds are found there; shoreless seas and stars uncounted; beauty that is an enchantment, and ever-present peril; both joy and sorrow as sharp as swords” (Tolkien 2001: 3)

Even with a specific term to use, it is not easy to say what really counts as a fairy tale by definition. The American scholar Stith Thompson (1977: 8) defines the fairy tale as “[...] a tale of some length involving a succession of motifs or episodes. It moves in an unreal world without definite locality or definite characters and is filled with the marvelous.”

Max Lüthi (1960: 77) says that „Das Märchen ist eine welthaltige Abenteuererzählung von raffender, sublimierender Stilgestalt.“

And Vladimir Propp (1968: 92) states that “Morphologically, a tale may be termed any development proceeding from villainy or a lack, through intermediary functions to marriage, or to other functions [such as] a reward, a gain or in general the liquidation of misfortune [...].”

Although these definitions might sound simple enough, most theorists agree that only a multitude of criteria, both concerning form and content, can describe what a fairy tale really is. (cf. Lüthi 1996: 3; Röhrich: 1964: 5) These criteria are often described as following: consisting of several episodes, clear, one-dimensional narrative structure, a certain lightness and playfulness, the use of symbolism and sublimation, a subtle moral or lesson and a combination of common, real life elements with magical, fantastic aspects. All these aspects are typical for fairy tales, yet it is not always necessary for a fairy tale to feature every single one, or to put the same kind of focus on every aspect. Depending on which definition or which theorist one follows, some stories might pass as fairy tales that are categorized as myths, fables or legends by others.

2.2.2 Folk Tales and Artistic Fairy Tales

When we speak of fairy tales today, we usually mean stories based on old folk tales derived from oral tradition, which often exist in many different variations. In this thesis, the term fairy tale will usually refer to these kinds of tales, unless specified otherwise. In contrast to these tales, artistic fairy tales (also sometimes called literary fairy tales or *Kunstmärchen* in German) are stories invented by a singular author and conserved in the exact form they were first written in. They can feature similar structures or not, but they usually still contain fantastic and other typical motifs derived from traditional fairy tales. (cf. Lüthi 1996: 6)

2.1.3 Distinction from other Literary Genres

Many of the characteristics that have just been mentioned are, however, not just typical for fairy tales. Therefore, in order to offer a clearer explanation or definition of what counts as a fairy tale, it is necessary to distinguish the fairy tale from other genres. The most relevant of these are sagas (German: *Sage*), legends, myths and fables.

The German term **Sage** means a story that claims to tell of events that have really happened (often specifying place, time and names), but that have been transformed away from reality, either over time or deliberately for poetic reasons by an author. This kind of narrative deals with the mysterious and uncanny. Its focus lies on just these exceptional, supernatural hap-

penings or creatures, while the fairy tale is focused more on the story line and action, and presents the fantastic in a casual way, as something rather natural or common.

A **legend** is closely related to what is called a *Sage* in German; in English there is only one basic common term for both. The German *Legende* also tells of miraculous events or deeds, but usually in connection to religion. The origin of the supernatural in the legend is explained by attributing it to God or to a saint, while in fairy tales it is presented in a natural way that does not seem to require any explanation in the first place. In English, the term legend is used more often in the sense of an explanatory tale. Local legends, for example, explain the existence of a certain river, or tell why a mountain has a certain shape. (cf. Thompson 1978: 9)

While fairy tales and legends all involve humans, the **myth** tells about gods (or semi-divine beings) as its main characters. The gods in these tales often represent natural forces and/or have explicit human characteristics, thereby explaining the world and other aspects of collective importance. (cf. Lüthi 1996: 11; Burkert 1979: 29; Thompson 1978: 9)

The term **fable** usually means a narrative that features talking animals, plants or objects. It has the clear goal of conveying a useful moral to the recipient, and has been invented for that reason. Events and characters within the fable are not appreciated as such, but are viewed in respect to their practical meaning.

2.2.4 The European Fairy Tale

Although fairy tales around the world show similar motifs, not all tales are as easily comparable and definable as those within Europe. There are many cultures that do not really have a separate genre like that of the European fairy tale; in India, for example, there is no differentiation between fairy tale, fable, myth etc. (cf. Hertel 1919/2011: 4) This thesis will focus on European tales, which, despite their diversity and variations in different countries, feature a number of common characteristics that lend themselves well to analysis.

Content

With regard to plot, the fairy tale usually deals with a difficulty and the mastering of this difficulty; typical patterns are fight/victory or problem/solution. Vladimir Propp (cf. 1968: 92) asserts that at the beginning of every fairy tale there is a lack of something, a state of distress, an assignment or a longing for something that has to be fulfilled. Generally, most stories deal with basic human behavior and motifs like battle, solving problems, intrigue and help, imprisonment and salvation, rescue, or marriage. Recurring topics are the difference between appearance and reality, changing a situation into its opposite, or the victory of the small and weak over the big and powerful. Typical for many fairy tales is a two- or threefold

structure: after the first accomplishment, such as the slaying of a dragon, someone else tricks the knight and claims to be the dragon slayer himself. Examples for threefold structure are three brothers who try to carry out an assignment one after the other, or stories in which the hero has to undergo three trials. When it comes to characters and requisites, fairy tales and their events are carried by a hero or heroine who belongs to the “real” world. Other typical characters, like the quest giver, helper and also the adversaries, are defined by their relation to the hero and often belong to the supernatural.² The main requisite of a fairy tale is the object (in some cases also an animal or a non-physical element like a piece of advice) that gives the hero the ability to solve his problem or succeed in his quest (e.g. the knife, the animals and the necklace in *The Two Brothers*).³ (cf. Lüthi 1996: 27f)

The characters themselves are not described in detail and are not highly personalized. In their anonymity they sometimes function more like symbols or personifications of abstract concepts than real people, or they stand for a typical group of people.⁴ Another typical characteristic of fairy tales is that – although transformation is a possibility – all characters are initially divided into clear opposites like good and evil, beautiful and ugly.

Style

A common characteristic of fairy tales is that not only characters but also places are described cursorily. Recurring stereotypical settings like the dark forest or the giant castle are places that everyone knows and can imagine without difficulty; yet at the same time, in their anonymity, they could just as well be located far away in never-never land. At the same time, many settings also function as a symbol that relates to the story or the character: the dark wood for example often stands for being lost, physically as well as psychologically. Just as characters and places are usually not described in depth, events and actions also unfold in quick, linear succession, with little distraction or delay. Another typical stylistic feature are repetitions. Verses, direct speech, or also events are repeated in the same or in similar fashion. Usually the number of repetitions is a symbolic number like three or seven. A typical feature of the fairy tale is the standardized beginning and end. “Once upon a time” (“Es war einmal ...”) and

2 Archetypes are not a focus of this thesis, however, in-depth information on this topic can be found in the works of Joseph Campbell or Carl Jung, which do not exclusively deal with fairy tales, but which describe numerous aspects that are valid for folk and fairy tales as well.

3 According to Propp’s (cf. 1968: 78f, 82) system, the fairy tale is built up of various functions that are carried out by different characters, or in some cases also by objects. The helper can, for example, be a person, an animal or an object like a ball of thread that serves as a guide.

4 The poor farmer’s son can be seen as a representation of all peasants; a character like the golden girl from *Mother Holle* can be a symbol of modesty and helpfulness; the witch in many tales appears to be the personification of malice and evil etc. If characters have names, they are always very common names, like Hans; or Ivan in most Russian tales.

“they lived happily ever after” (“und wenn sie nicht gestorben sind ...”) open and close many fairy tales. For some theorists, the happy ending itself is a necessary condition for a story to pass muster as a fairy tale. (cf. Tolkien 2001: 68; Bettelheim 2010: 123)

That fairy tales often offer little detail and are simple in their presentation does not mean they are shallow, though. On the contrary, the abstract nature of fairy tales has a symbolic quality to it which offers the possibility for interpretation and speaks to the subconscious as well. Lüthi (cf. 1960: 77) and other theorists speak of sublimation, meaning that realistic elements are transformed into fantastical or magical elements. Thus the events and occurrences in fairy tales can be understood and interpreted on many different levels.

2.3 The History of Fairy Tales

Antiquity

The origin of most folk tales is unclear. While some theorists like Theodor Benfey used to think that all fairy tales might have originated in India, today it is assumed that fairy tales developed simultaneously in different cultures around the world (polygenesis), and influenced each in the process. (cf. Zipes 2006b: xiv, Lüthi 1996: 77f)

There are Egyptian tales from as early as 1250 B.C., as well as tales from Greece and Rome that feature motifs or structures similarly to those used in fairy tales today; whether these narratives should be called fairy tales in the narrower sense of the word is still a source of contention.

Middle Ages

There are not many more definite things to say about the tales of the early Middle Ages. There are again tales that feature fairy tale motifs, but the question of whether these tales should be called fairy tales or rather myths or legends cannot be determined with certainty. The *Asinarius* (a Latin tale in verse form that has its origins in France or the Netherlands in the fourteenth century) is one of the first tales that survived as a fairy tale up to the time of the Brothers Grimm, who adapted it under the name *Das Eslein*.⁵

Indian and other Eastern tales that came to Europe via Byzantium and Spain as well as through the Crusades, certainly had some influence on European tales, just as Celtic narratives did. Some other forms of narratives, for example classical medieval tales like Chrétien's grail narratives, can also be compared to fairy tales in their structure. (cf. Nolting-Hauff 1974: 175)

5 <http://www.maerchenlexikon.de/at-lexikon/at430.htm>, visited on 18 Nov. 2012.

The oral folk tales

One reason why it is so difficult to say anything definite about the earliest forms of fairy tales is that for a long time, they were only transmitted and preserved orally. During these centuries, the relationship between narrator and audience was an important aspect. Fairy tales not only had a great number of variations because there were different versions in different countries and throughout different centuries, but also because every narrator would change a tale every time he or she told it, according to personal taste, the reaction of the audience, and the context in which a tale was told. During these times, the telling of folk tales was considered entertainment for all age groups, and a narrator would, for example, tell a tale in a more humorous or lurid way when telling it at an inn at night to a drunken audience, than when telling it to a group of young children. “[T]he first noted fairy tales were told by French women to pass the hours while engaged in other activities, and these stories were a bit racy, even titillating.” (Morie/Pearce 2008: 2) In a time when tales were only told from one person to others, it was no problem to adapt the tale during narration according to the tastes and needs of the specific audience; more than that, the unique, personal performance of a good narrator even contributed important qualities to the tale as such.

The time and setting many fairy tales take place in stem from these centuries of oral narration (throughout the Middle Ages up to the seventeenth century). The people in these tales do not know any sophisticated technologies, there are hardly ever any characters that belong to the bourgeoisie or the church (most characters are kings, queens, princesses, peasants, animals or magical beings) and little villages or castles are much more common settings than cities or towns. The underlying topics of many of these tales are class struggles and struggles for power, both among the aristocracy as well as between peasants and aristocrats. This is why common people, largely peasants, were mostly attracted by these tales and became the prime transmitters. “[T]he oral folktales were those symbolic acts in which they enunciated their aspirations and projected the magic possibility in an assortment of imaginative ways so that anyone could become a knight in shining armor or a lovely princess.” (Zipes 2006a: 7) Just like fairy tales today, according to scholars like Bruno Bettelheim (2010: 24), can show a child on a symbolic level how he or she might develop into a mature, “better” person and how everything will have a happy end, the folk tales of old used to give people a way of dealing with their problems and offered them hope for a better place in society. At the same time folk tales also represented the violence and brutality of common, everyday life. Aspects like murder, rape, exploitation or cruel treatment of children are mirrored in these tales, which due to their brutal and overwhelming nature are often already in the form of symbolic abstraction. (cf. *ibid.* 7f) The narrations mostly end with a more righteous and just system being established (eg. the common hero becomes king and reigns benevolently and wisely over his land). The magic and the miraculous serve as an instrument to fulfill these wishes, they help to overcome and destroy a system or problem that would otherwise be insurmountable.

Modern era

Folk and Fairy tales changed notably when they changed their primary medium for the first time. Most critics agree that many of the European writers who first brought oral fairy tales in a literal, written form, changed and adapted these stories so that they would teach morals, values and manners to children and adults. Fairy tales were, amongst other things, meant to educate their audience and convey to them the social code prevalent at the time. Even back then, around the seventeenth century, there was a lively discourse amongst writers and institutions as to how fairy tales could or had to be used in the “civilizing process”. (cf. Zipes 2006a: 3)

During such periods of time, fairy tales often changed more drastically and quicker than when they were still shaped through oral retelling by the folk community, because now changes were made by single writer according to a certain agenda. The seventeenth-century French author Charles Perrault, for example, was not only one of the first people to write down many famous European fairy tales, but he also changed them according to what was considered to be appropriate by the bourgeoisie and the French court. Thus he, amongst other things, dropped the part of Cinderella where the evil stepsisters cut their feet to make them fit into Cinderella’s shoes, because motifs like blood and the act of mutilation were not deemed suitable for the polite French society. (cf. Bettelheim 2010: 250f)

The French were, however, not the “inventors” of this new genre of tales, though. In fact, they were heavily inspired by Italian writers like Giovan Francesco Straparola and Giambattista Basile, an influence that is often overlooked today. These Italian authors were amongst the first writers in the sixteenth century who adapted many of the tales from oral traditions in their collection of written stories. Their tales became widely popular in various European countries, and were eventually also translated into French and German.

“In short, Straparola helped initiate the genre of the literary fairy tale in Europe, and though it would be misleading to talk about a diachronic history of the literary fairy tale with a chain reaction that begins with Straparola, leads to Basile and then to the French writers of the 1690s, and culminates in the work of the Brothers Grimm, I want to suggest that they do form a historical frame in which the parameters of the early literary fairy tale were set, and within that frame there was an institutionalization of what we now call fairy-tale characters, topoi, motifs, metaphors, and plots. Their conventionalization enabled numerous writers (and storytellers in the oral tradition) to experiment and produce highly original fairy tales at the same time.” (cf. Zipes 2006a: 16)

What the French writers adapted, amongst other things, from their Italian predecessors was the readiness to use the new tales as a way to criticize and comment on society and the leading classes. Nearly all French authors of that time, men as well as the many influential

women writers, were associated with the court and belonged to the higher classes themselves. Despite this, or maybe rather because of this, they choose the fairy tale not only to teach morals, but also as a form of expression that allowed them to criticize and comment on courtly behavior, immorality, violence and social injustice without falling victim to censorship or punishment.

At the same time, the goal of these tales was more and more to teach and convey moral lessons to the audience, adults as well as children. During the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the bourgeoisie gained more power, and in a way even served as a kind of mediating class between aristocracy and the lower class of common people. The new social norms first established in the higher classes were increasingly valid and desirable for all classes, or at least for the bourgeoisie as well as the aristocracy. “Though not conspired, the rational purpose of such social pressure was to bring about an internalization of social norms and mores so that they would appear as second nature or habit, what Pierre Bourdieu described as a *habitus* [...]”(ibid. 38)

The Fairy tale boom in France lasted until the end of the eighteenth century and subsided with the French Revolution when the focus shifted more towards the immediate needs of lower classes than the formal and moral education and rules of the higher classes. But in other countries the French fairy tales were still of major influence, especially for the German writers of the nineteenth century. During these times, the written tales that were first directed mainly at the upper classes spread again increasingly to the lower classes and at the same time became directed increasingly towards children.

Nineteenth century

The most famous and most influential German authors were without a doubt the Brothers Grimm. Academics, linguists and cultural theorists, they published their first collection of fairy tales titled *Children's and Household Tales (Kinder- und Hausmärchen)* in 1812. During the ensuing decades, they continuously edited and expanded their folk tale collection, which became extremely popular and also widely recognized in academic circles. (cf. Lüthi 1996: 51) What has to be understood is that the Grimms did not, as was assumed for a long time, gather their oral folktales from peasants and laborers, but instead collected most of them from lower class bourgeois or educated middle-class families. These people had already added the views and understandings of their class to the tales, and the Brothers Grimm made their own changes as well: they did not only refine the tales for written form, but expanded them and sometimes made crucial changes concerning characters and meaning. What we today often tend to view as the original or primary fairytale is therefore only one crucial step of development in a long history of changes and alterations, both in oral and written form.

The intention of the Grimms was not to “correct” fairy tales. They stressed that they wanted their tales to stay true to the folk version. (cf. ibid. 51f) At the same time, “they wanted the

rich cultural tradition of the common people to be used and accepted by the rising middle classes.” (Zipes 2006a: 61) Thus the brothers managed not only to create a work refined in style and language, but they incorporated both “bourgeois” as well as “German” characteristics. As a sense of the middle class family was just developing in the nineteenth century, both these characteristics were very well received, and the Grimms’ collection of tales was soon considered a book to be read to children and for children to read by themselves. (cf. Weber-Kellermann 1976: 14; Lüthi 1996: 54)

What should not be forgotten either is that at the time of the Grimms, reading in general used to be an exclusive skill of the better educated classes.⁶ The lower classes, when learning to read, not only gained a skill, but at the same time adopted a set of higher class rules, since most books and written media generally stemmed from the better educated classes and mirrored their rules and values.

“To become literate means to learn how to operate within the laws of literacy that are class determined. The Grimms’ fairy tales not only were products of the struggles of the common people to make themselves heard in oral folktales – symbolically representing their needs and wishes – but also became literary products of the German bourgeois quest for identity and power.” (Zipes 2006a: 68)

The Grimms’ books became extremely popular not only in Germany but in most of Europe, being translated into many languages during the ensuing years and centuries. Even today they are often regarded as the “original” version of many well-known tales. Although this is actually a misperception, it demonstrates how much influence their works had not only in shaping the fairy tale as a genre, but also in shaping our perception of these kinds of tales.

2.4 Fairy Tales for Children – Between Education and Subversion

Although we mostly associate fairy tales with children today, this was not always the case. “In the seventeenth century, children of all classes listened to these tales. The peasants did not exclude children when stories were told around the hearth, and lower-class wet nurses and governesses related the same tales to children of the upper classes.” (Zipes 2006a: 8) These tales were not directed towards or designed for children; they were simply an inclusive past time for everyone. So how did it come to pass that fairy tales increasingly turned into tales for the young?

6 In most of Germany and Austria school attendance was already compulsory in the nineteenth century, yet it was still difficult, especially in rural areas, to have all children attend school, as they were often required to stay at home and work instead. [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schulpflicht_\(Deutschland\)](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schulpflicht_(Deutschland)), visited on 18 Nov. 2012.

As fairy tales entered the upper classes in France during the seventeenth century, they became regarded as part of the “discourse on civilization”, dedicated to communicating the values, morals and rules of a bourgeoisie class gaining in strength. At first, the tales were still directed towards adults as well as children, but as time went by children were increasingly regarded as the main audience, and the tales became increasingly moralistic. That this development corresponds with the “invention” of childhood as a cultural and social construct is no coincidence. (cf. Morie/Pearce 2008: 2)

For a long time, throughout most of the middle ages, the concept of childhood, its meaning and value was very different from our contemporary views. Babies and young children were not seen as people or “full” individuals at all due to the high rates of child mortality which caused most families to lose several children before they had grown to a more independent age. Slightly older children were mostly just viewed as smaller versions of adults. Philippe Ariès (cf. 2007: 47f, 215f), in his work *Centuries of Childhood*, describes how, with the introduction of a school system, the child started to move gradually towards the center of the family. While children were seen as a kind of cute entertainment for a while, this attitude changed in the later seventeenth and eighteenth century. Spoiling children is not regarded as proper anymore; instead child education began to be taken very seriously and parents started to pay special attention to it. Society became interested in the psychological aspects and mentality of children in order to design education accordingly. Childhood was seen as an incomplete state of being that lacked reason, and that had to be overcome with the help of proper education in order to reach adulthood.

This led not only to the emergence of a special kind of literature directed explicitly towards children, but was also one of the main reasons fairy tales were changed and adapted so much between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, by French as well as German writers. Wilhelm Grimm, for example, made many revisions and redactions to their collected tales, including the cutting of unsavoury pieces, with the outspoken goal of making them more respectable for bourgeois children. Although the Grimm’s *Children and Household Tales* was initially not intended solely for children, the collection was deliberately redesigned, edited and already sold as an *Erziehungsbuch* (education book) from the second edition on. (cf. Zipes 2006a: 62; Lüthi 1996: 54f)

From the beginning on, written fairy tales for children were designed both to instruct and to amuse, containing an educational as well as an entertaining side. (cf. Escarpit 1981: 39ff) Perrault himself in his preface to *Contes en Vers* describes how people have recognized the values of his tales.

“Ils ont été bien aises de remarquer que ces bagatelles n’étaient pas de pures bagatelles, qu’elles renfermaient une morale utile et que le récit enjoué dont elles étaient

enveloppées, n'avait été choisi que pour les faire entrer plus agréablement dans l'esprit et d'une manière qui instruisît et divertît tout ensemble.”⁷ (Perrault 1694/1939: 12)

Perrault praises tales as an opportunity to make children understand things in a playful way instead of using hard facts. This is also one of the positive potentials that Bettelheim stresses most about fairy tales.

“[R]ealistic explanations are usually incomprehensible to children, because they lack the abstract understanding required to make sense of them. While giving a scientifically correct answer makes adults think they have clarified things for the child, such explanations leave the young child confused, overpowered, and intellectually defeated.” (Bettelheim 2010: 47f)

That many writers already had pretty good insight into how a child's mind worked, and how to best offer education to children in a friendly, supportive manner was certainly a great progress for society and education in general. Still, not every aspect of these new educational endeavors – and the tales that were developed for them – is regarded as positive today. As fairy tales turned increasingly into educational devices, they were automatically turned into tools that served a certain culture and class, and its often rigid – or, as some argue, even suppressive – rules and values. While fairy tales were still told orally and targeted at all age groups, their content could be varied in every situation by the narrator, according to what he or she regarded as suitable. But as fairy tales turned into literary texts they took on more permanent forms, and were scrutinized more closely by those involved in the fairy tale discourse. As Zipes (2006a: 8) states:

“The first writers of fairy tales had to demonstrate the social value of the genre before literary fairy tales could be printed – for adults and children alike. The morality and ethics of a male-dominated Christian civil order had to become part and parcel of the literary fairy tale.”

Fairy tales thus did not only promote courage, cleverness and autonomy, but also bourgeois values like obedience, diligence, honesty, chastity and so on. Zipes (cf. *ibid.* 38) claims that a lot of times, tales and education did not primarily serve to empower children and raise them to be balanced individuals, but rather tried to make them docile, suppress natural inclinations and longings and cultivate feelings of shame and anxiety in connection with “wrong”

7 “They noticed that these trifles were not just trifles, that they contained a useful moral, and that the cheerful stories within which they were presented were only chosen so as to make them enter the mind in a more pleasant manner, and in a way that both instructs as well as entertains.” Translated by the author.

behavior. Thus fairy tales could also serve to indoctrinate children ideologically, making them bow to social standards that were expected of them.⁸

This was also the main critique of authors like Oscar Wilde or George MacDonald, who wrote so-called artistic or literary fairy tales during the second half of the nineteenth century. These newly invented stories draw inspiration from classical fairy tales using similar motifs and characters, but try to take a more critical approach with the messages they deliver, especially to children. These authors wanted to use the classic genre of the fairy tale to reflect on and point out to people what was wrong with normative education and the discourse on civilization in general. (cf. *ibid.* 107) Similar reproaches have also been made by numerous German writers towards the Grimm tales, especially during the anti-authoritarian movement of the late 1960s. Many of these authors tried to rewrite old tales to correspond to a more modern society, trying to avoid stereotypes, rigid gender roles and similar aspects they considered too constricting.

Of course, such critical conclusions are always, at least to a certain degree, a matter of interpretation. Bruno Bettelheim, for example, stresses the positive morals and meanings of fairy tales and argues that all children, independent of which century they live in, have basic fears, anxieties and wishes that fairy tales help them deal with. Zipes (cf. *ibid.* 47f) on the other hand accuses Bettelheim of ignoring that even basic aspects of humanity, like sexual feelings or anxieties, are never free of cultural and societal influences. To support his point he invokes Foucault, who has shown that even human aspects like sexuality, which seem very rooted in biology, are indeed products of historical, cultural and social developments. It is true that fairy tales often warn children of dangers, or show examples of what befalls individuals that act carelessly or unkindly. Still, learning about rules and consequences is also

8 An example would be the development of the tale of *Little Red Riding Hood*. In the oral folk tale Perrault based his version upon, Little Red Riding Hood is described as a common peasant girl tricked by the wolf but who later recognizes the danger she is in, outsmarts the wolf and manages to escape on her own. In Perrault's later version, as well as the Grimm version, Little Red Riding Hood has become more of a delicate, naïve upper class girl, who, through her own naiveté, puts herself and her grandmother into mortal danger. In the end a strong male hunter is needed to rescue them. Other than the earlier folk tale, the new adaptation does not tell the story of a strong girl that would encourage children to think and act autonomously, but functions as a warning tale in Zipes' eyes, designed to scare children and make them obedient.

Zipes' discussion of the Little Red Riding Hood tales can be read in his book *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (cf. 2006: 43-47). It has to be added that his rather pessimistic interpretation of the newer versions is not shared by everybody. Bettelheim (cf. 2010: 166-183), for example, sees much more positive potential in the Grimms' version of the tale, although it is rather similar to Perrault's in its content and motifs.

a vital skill for every individual in a community, and is thus something that should not be withheld from children either. As Emanuel Schwartz (1956: 755) states:

“[E]xperience with having to struggle for the gratification and the fulfillment of wishes results in a social adherence to and the development of an understanding of social norms and social conformities. This does not mean, however, that the reinforcement of an awareness of socialization results in submissiveness; but a certain amount of common sense, which goes into conforming with the social mores, is a realistic necessity for children and adults alike.”

Even if many fairy tales we know today have been adapted over centuries to fit children, they still also fascinate adults. Fairy tale motifs appear in contemporary literature or other media for grownups, and some more recent theorists like the psychoanalyst Carl Jung and authors like J.R.R. Tolkien have argued that fairy tales feature many aspects that speak primarily to adults. Tolkien (2001: 36) even calls the association of fairy tales with children an accident of history and states that “[t]he value of fairy-stories is thus not, in my opinion, to be found by considering children in particular.”

Independent of whether one focuses one’s attention on children or adults, it is a fact that Perrault, the Grimms and many other writers wished to educate and shape their audience according to society’s rules and ideals. From today’s viewpoint, the aim of helping people to become more fulfilled individuals might lie very close to the supposed agenda of inhibiting people’s wishes and needs and forcefully bending them into roles dictated by what – especially when looking back now – might seem a rather constricting, narrow-minded society. This is not a problem that has become non-existent today either. The line between educating children for their own good – to help them become whole, content people – and educating children to function or perform well in an existing society, is not always easy to draw. As writers already recognized in the seventeenth century, stories have always had the inherent power to teach people and make them understand things. It is precisely because of this that they can and have to change continuously, just as the society and culture these tales refer to change. This in itself is a huge potential, but whether changes have positive or negative effects often depends on the writer as well as on the audience. Some motifs can both be interpreted as empowering by one person and at the same time be seen as suppressive or restricting by another. Though there will never be a definite right or wrong approach to such matters, what must be considered when reading or designing fairy tales, especially for children, is that no tale is ever free of – often unconscious – influences and implications, be they of a historical, social or psychological nature.

2.5 The Meaning and Value of Fairy Tales

As has been shown, fairy tales have a long history, and have been playing an important role in the lives of children as well as adults. And to a certain degree, they still do. Some do criticize that fairy tales are not up to date anymore, that the world they describe cannot be compared to our contemporary world, which is becoming increasingly complex and changeable. And on the surface level, this might be the case. “True, on an overt level fairy tales teach little about the specific conditions of life in modern mass society; these tales were created long before it came into being.” But, as Bettelheim (2010: 5) continues to argue, they are instructive about “inner problems of human beings, and of the right solutions to their predicaments in any society [...]”.

So what is it that makes fairy tales so appealing, and still speaks to people even after centuries have gone by? What is it that people still gain from fairy tales?

2.5.1 Learning through Stories

One advantage that has already been mentioned is that, especially for children, it is often easier to learn from stories rather than from hard facts. This is especially valid if what one is trying to convey is not knowledge in the scientific sense, but, as Bettelheim says, inner problems, worries or feelings. “Until he can understand abstract concepts [...], the child can experience the world only subjectively.” (ibid. 49) Showing to a child a situation or problem that she can relate to is much more apt to make her understand the problem, and thus understand herself better, than to explain rationally what the problem is about. This is by no means a finding of recent times; Perrault had a similar thing in mind when he wrote his fairy tales. In ancient Greece, Plato suggested the myth as a valuable educational tool that could help make pupils understand abstract philosophical concepts that were otherwise hard to grasp. (cf. Partenie 2011⁹) Historian and writer Mircea Eliade (1963: 2) claims that myths and stories are “models for human behaviour and, by that very fact, give meaning and value to life.”

That tales bear relevance for our human lives, and thus can teach us, or help us understand ourselves and our lives better, is an important factor. Although this might be especially valid for fairy tales, it is not exclusive to them but also applies to many other narratives. What then is so special about fairy tales?

9 Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/plato-myths/#MytTeaToo>, visited on 18 Nov. 2012.

2.5.2 Psychoanalysis and the Fairy Tale

Bettelheim and Jung

Bruno Bettelheim, though controversial as a child psychologist¹⁰, did ground-breaking work in examining fairy tales and their value from a mainly psychoanalytical point of view. He thinks that the centuries during which fairy tales evolved by being constantly retold helped them become more and more refined and better tailored to the needs of people.

”[T]hey came to convey at the same time overt and covert meanings – came to speak simultaneously to all levels of the human personality, communicating in a manner which reaches the uneducated mind of the child as well as that of the sophisticated adult. Applying the psychoanalytical model of the human personality, fairy tales carry important messages to the conscious, the preconscious, and the unconscious mind, on whatever level each is functioning at the time.” (Bettelheim 2010: 5f)

Bettelheim mainly stresses the potential fairy tales bear for children. Children, he argues, are not ready to address all their fears, wishes and insecurities on a conscious level, yet it is therefore even more important for their development that they are offered a way to deal with them at all instead of suppressing them. In contrast to adults, children often can't restrain their ids, if it rises to the surface it quickly becomes overpowering. However, explaining this to a child directly will only confuse her. One way for children to deal with these often overwhelming feelings is to externalize them. This can happen in play, when various toys embody aspects of a child's personality, thus enabling the child to gain some mastery and understanding of them. Fairy tales, according to Bettelheim, are even better suited, though, because they can offer more aspects and solutions than children would come up with on their own. In fairy tales, unconscious wishes, fears, or “negative” feelings like aggression can take on the shape of characters or events, and thus be dealt with openly. (cf. *ibid.* 55)

Thus, an evil stepmother is probably not really a separate person, but might, for the child, symbolize the “evil” side of the otherwise loving mother, the side that sometimes forbids the child to have fun or withholds the instant gratification of her wishes. The child herself might also take sides with an evil character, she might be able to understand why a dragon burns down a village and why a wolf devours the hero, because the child herself sometimes feels aggression and the wish to crush or ruin things. Of course, the child usually does not understand this consciously, and is not supposed to. “[A] child who is made aware of what

10 After his death in 1990, Bettelheim was accused by several authors and former patients of having treated his patients violently and of not practicing what he preached. Other ex-patients as well as many colleagues spoke out in his favour though. Bettelheim was also accused of plagiarism, yet Julius E. Heuscher, the author he supposedly copied from, said he was not bothered and did not regard Bettelheim's works as plagiarism. (cf. Roark 1991, online at: http://articles.latimes.com/1991-02-07/news/mn-1024_1_fairy-tales), visited on 18 Nov. 2012.

the figures in fairy tales stand for in his own psychology will be robbed of a much-needed outlet, and devastated by having to realize the desires, anxieties, and vengeful feelings that are ravaging him.” (ibid. 57) Instead, listening to a fairy story provides not only an outlet for negative feelings, but also shows how such feelings might be dealt with, and that in the end, everything can still turn out well.

A psychoanalytical approach to fairy tales directed mainly towards adults instead of children has been taken by Carl Gustav Jung and his school. Jung and his pupils think that fairy tales deal mainly with the human development that takes place after adolescence, between the age of 20 and 40, when people try to find their place in the world. (cf. Lüthi 1996: 107) During this period people strive to understand themselves better; they start exploring their inner lives and try to integrate the unconscious and conscious, the inner and outer worlds. According to this interpretation, characters often stand for positive and negative aspects of one’s own personality: “The fight with the dragon would therefore be a battle with the dragon within us, the union of the princess and her savior would signify the meeting of soul and mind [...]” (ibid. 108) The approach by Bettelheim and that of Jung’s school are similar, but Jung and his followers try to explain why fairy tales can be as equally interesting and relevant for adults as they can be for children. In the case of adults, the interpretation of a tale’s events, figures and symbols can take place in a much more conscious fashion, and meaning can be pondered more openly and directly.

Images

“In fairy tales, internal processes are translated into visual images.” (ibid. 155) The tendency to work with clear images is an important feature of fairy tales. Fairy tales often do not describe inner feelings or motivations with words; instead they show them through action (cf. Lüthi 1960: 15). In *Cinderella*, for example, the audience is not told directly how sad Cinderella is about her mother’s death. Instead, we are told that “The girl went out to her mother’s grave every day and wept [...]” (KHM 021) Similarly, if a character is confused or disoriented he or she usually gets lost in a deep dark wood, showing through symbolic images what he or she is feeling on the inside. Pointing out this indirect and symbolic nature of fairy tales, Bettelheim (2010: 155) says that “If one takes these stories as descriptions of reality, then the tales are indeed outrageous in all respects – cruel, sadistic, and whatnot. But as symbols of psychological happenings or problems, these stories are quite true.”

Fairy tales do not force anything on the recipient and they do not have a definite meaning either. Bettelheim stresses that every child “will extract a different meaning from the same fairy tale, depending on his interests and needs of the moment.” (ibid. 12) If dealing with something is too troublesome for the child at the moment, she can just let it go; thanks to the symbolic nature of the fairy tale no meaning is forced on the child. The many layers that fairy tales work on and can be interpreted on offer something else to every person, both children and adults.

Criticism

The psychoanalytical approach has often been criticized by other theorists (cf. Lüthi 1996: 108ff; Zipes 2006: 48), saying that psychoanalytical interpretations are often too narrow or arbitrary, and ignore literary and other aspects. Most psychoanalysts though are very aware of the fact that their views and interpretations are only one possible approach amongst many. Hedwig von Breit and Marie-Louise von Franz, two main representatives of Jung's school, say that the abstract, unreal style of the fairy tale is a sign that they do not primarily refer to outer reality, but to inner aspects of the soul. "But in fairy tales there is much less specific conscious cultural material, and therefore they mirror the basic patterns of the psyche more clearly." (Franz 1996: 1) At the same time they point out that fairy tales are multilayered and ambivalent, telling about outer circumstances as well, and offering other meanings than that which psychoanalysis deals with.

In the introduction to his famous book *The Uses of Enchantment* Bettelheim (2010: 12) even says that "[t]he delight we experience when we allow ourselves to respond to a fairy tale, the enchantment we feel, comes not from the psychological meaning of the tale (although this contributes to it) but from its literary qualities – the tale itself as a work of art."

Of course an old genre like the fairy tale did not develop with the goal of providing psychological help to people. Psychoanalysis itself did not "invent" the unconscious; it is but a model aimed at helping people deal with their psyche and with themselves as individuals. Even for Bettelheim himself, the categories of id, ego and superego, just like the externalizations occurring in the fairy tale, are nothing but "fictions, useful only for sorting out and comprehending mental processes." (ibid. 74)

Humans have always dealt with similar feelings, anxieties and wishes – whether they had a conscious way of psychologically interpreting them or not. As fairy tales were retold and changed over the centuries, according to the narrator's as well as the recipient's tastes, some of these feelings, anxieties and wishes became part of these tales.

"In a fairy tale, internal processes are externalized and become comprehensible as represented by the figures of the story and its events. This is the reason why in traditional Hindu medicine a fairy tale giving form to his particular problem was offered to a psychically disoriented person, for his meditation. [...] From what a particular tale implied about man's despair, hopes, and methods of overcoming tribulations, the patient could discover not only a way out of his distress but also a way to find himself, as the hero of the story did." (ibid. 25)

Fairy tales definitely have an appeal to people; they speak to them as entertainment, but also potentially as something beyond that. This potential for personally interpretable underlying meaning has been stressed by many psychoanalysts, but has also been described by theorists from other fields.

2.5.3 The Power of the Abstract

Swiss literary scholar Max Lüthi also describes how fairy tales deal with relevant aspects of human nature and the world we live in, but he reaches this conclusion by taking a different approach. Being a literary scholar, Lüthi mainly examines the form and style of fairy tales.

The plane of action

Lüthi describes what he calls the planar or flat structure of the fairy tale: in the fairy tale, everything happens side by side, on the plane of action. There are no long, philosophical dialogues or inner monologues, no detailed in depth descriptions of characters or settings which would aim directly at exploring and explaining the underlying thoughts or motifs of the characters and their actions. Instead, appearing on a surface level, actions, events and characters are the main elements; they drive the story, and it is through them that we are told indirectly about motivations or other underlying principles. The same applies to the presentation of the magical and the fantastic. In the fairy tale, the magical and the realistic do not really seem to belong to different spheres, but also appear side by side on the same plane of action. In the myth, the fantastic is presented as something extraordinary or scary that is not to be trusted. In the fairy tale, fantastic things happen, magical creatures appear out of nowhere, but hardly anyone ever really seems to wonder about them. (cf. Lüthi 1960: 9ff)

The complexity of the human being is often untangled in the fairy tales. Instead of showing all aspects of being, all different feelings or contradictory emotions within one individual, the possible ways of behaving are instead represented through separate characters that appear side by side on the plane of action. To sum up with the words of Lüthi (ibid. 17), “[w]o das Märchen nur immer kann, ersetzt es Inneres durch Äußeres [...]”. This is what Lüthi means when he speaks of sublimation, or “worldliness”: fairy tales do deal with themes that bear relevance to the real world, but they do so in an abstract way, by transporting inner motifs onto another, outwardly visible plane. Or, as Katrin Pöge-Alder (2011: 216) puts it:

“In der Realität dunkle innerseelische Prozesse darstellende Vorgänge werden zu lichten Handlungsbildern sublimiert. Motive enthalten keine realistischen Schilderungen, sondern sind entwirklicht. Sublimation ermöglicht aber eine umfassende Darstellung und Abbildung der Welt. So entstehen klare schwerelose Bilder, die die Welt in ihrer Komplexität abbilden.”¹¹

According to Lüthi (cf. 1960: 6), the fairy tale as a genre is not so much defined by its motifs, but rather by the way it presents these motifs, by its form or design.

11 “Dark, psychological processes are sublimated and depicted as outer actions. Motifs are not described realistically, but are transformed into something fantastic. This sublimation is what allows for a broad display and representation of our world. It creates clear, light images which depict the world in its complexity.” Translated by the author.

Abstraction and connectivity

A keyword here is abstraction. When Lüthi speaks of the abstract, he uses the term as coined by German art historian Wilhelm Worringer. When Worringer developed his concept and explanation of abstract art in 1907, he was referring mainly to the visual arts and not to literary texts; still, his thoughts are applicable to these as well.

Worringer questioned the assumption that the main aim of all art has always been imitation of reality, or what he calls naturalism. Instead he says that there is a second, even earlier striving behind the production of art, and this is the longing for abstraction. This longing rises out of the need of (primitive) people to handle an overwhelmingly complicated world, one that is too complex and manifold to be taken in as a whole. (cf. Worringer 1921: 23) Instead, people have to abstract it in order to deal with it. This is often achieved by taking one aspect of reality and isolating it, or simplifying it to a point where one can deal with it without being distracted by its multiple aspects, dimensions or surroundings.

Therefore Worringer argues that this departure from reality, this simplification and abstraction actually allows people to better deal with or understand aspects of reality. An absolutely naturalistic, lifelike approach, on the other hand, is only useful for relating to the world if one already understands it rather well and is at ease with it. For human beings or cultures that have not yet achieved such an understanding, abstraction is a strategy to free the sensual object from its ambiguity through the means of artistic representation. (cf. *ibid.* 29)

Worringer's concept of abstraction can be applied to many aspects typical of fairy tales. In fairy tales as well as in many works of abstract art, unnecessary, potentially confusing dimensions are disposed of. Instead, all elements are presented on the same plane of action. The striving to get rid of ambiguity or overwhelming complexity can be found in fairy tales as well, where it is often achieved by creating very clear-cut extremes and opposites. For example, there are usually stark contrasts between characters that are either a hundred percent good, or completely bad. Most characters are either incredibly beautiful, or horribly ugly, and so on. The isolation of certain actions and elements, for example in the shapes of separate characters, is also comparable to the process of isolation that is used to make objects appear less complex and more understandable in abstract art. Similarly, magic and the fantastic might be used to provide simpler, clearer reasons or displays of otherwise more complex events or situations.

The often abstract and terse nature of the fairy tale is therefore not the result of a primitive inability to create anything more complex or naturalistic, but rather a stylistic device. In this sense it is this very lack of complexity, this abstract style, which gives the fairy tale its distinctive form, and which allows for what Lüthi (1960: 49) calls the fairy tale's "absolute connectivity". This means that by remaining abstract and unspecified, the fairy tale can relate to many different situations, people, and problems at the same time. The lack of details in the description of a hero, for example, is therefore not a fault, but rather a deliberate stylistic

device that designs the hero as a blank slate, making it easy for all different kinds of recipients to identify with him.

Fairy tale motifs are not devoid of meaning or of references to the inner life of humanity, but the motifs are presented in a simpler, more abstract fashion. “Sie sind selbst zwar keine Realitäten mehr; aber sie repräsentieren sie.”¹² (ibid. 75) Or to put it differently, “[des Märchens] abstrakte Darstellung läßt [sic!] uns keinen Augenblick im Zweifel darüber, daß [sic!] es Wesentlichkeit darstellen will, nicht Wirklichkeit.”¹³ (ibid. 83) Most things are displayed in the shape of images on the plane of action; the depth that might lie underneath is simply not addressed directly.

What is more, such underlying meanings are never the same for everyone. That the fairy tales are sometimes seen as mere entertainment might be rooted in the fact that they do not aim directly at lecturing or teaching certain morals to people, as fables do.

It is instead one of the strengths of fairy tales that they allow for all kinds of different interpretations. As Bettelheim (2010: 12) puts it “[a]s with all great art, the fairy tale’s deepest meaning will be different for each person, and different for the same person at various moments in his life.”

2.5.4 Transformation & the Happy End

Possible meanings of fairytales are manifold, often presented in an abstract way, and different depending on personal interpretation. If there is a common, overlying message or theme, it is probably that of personal transformation. Bettelheim stresses the importance of such tales and messages especially for children growing up.

Thus the quest or journey the hero embarks on in a fairy tale is often interpreted as the journey through life that everyone has to make. Since many fairy tale characters are personifications of wishes, actions or feelings, they may stand for either obstacles (witches, dragons etc.) or helping hands that one encounters during life. Many a fairy tale hero has flaws in the beginning; the weakest of three brothers or the stupid son are typical fairy tale archetypes. Fairy tale heroes are greedy (*Hansel and Gretel*), naïve (*Little Red Riding Hood*) or lazy (*The Three Little Pigs*), they lack restraint (*Brother and Sister*) and sometimes even kindness (the princess from *The Frog King*), but by overcoming obstacles, and through the help of others, they become a “better”, more complete person in the end.

That being a “better” person can also mean being educated towards the questionable ideals of a likely suppressive society has been discussed. Yet fairy tales might also help recipients deal

12 “They might not be reality any more, but they represent it.” Translated by the author.

13 “[The fairy tale’s] abstract representation does not let us doubt that it is depicting the relevant, not the real.” Translated by the author.

with their own problems and find their own strengths in overcoming them. The importance of fairy tales, as Zipes (2006b: 101) points out, is due, in part, to their ability to “open up future vistas for the possibility of transformations.” If this transformation is really for the better, or if it might be misused sometimes as well depends on the specific tale, its presentation, and probably also in parts on the recipient.

“[A good story] must take a moral stand against moral stands. Good literature for children provokes them to think seriously and critically for themselves, against the grain, and provides hope that they can find the moral and ethical vigor not simply to survive, but to live happily with the social codes that they create themselves and enjoy to their heart’s content.” (ibid. 2002: 231)

One fairy tale aspect that is repeatedly stressed by most theorists is the happy end. Some theorists even go so far as to say that a tale without a happy ending is not really a fairy tale at all. Especially for children, the reassurance that in the end, everything will turn out well – even if one started out weak and had to undergo a lot of hardship on the way – is important as well as empowering. (cf. Bettelheim 2010: 39)

The aim is not to tell the child or any other recipient that life will always be easy and joyful. Bettelheim (ibid. 8) says that, just like psychoanalysis itself, fairy tales can help “man to accept the problematic nature of life without being defeated by it, or giving in to escapism. Freud’s prescription is that only by struggling courageously against what seem like overwhelming odds can man succeed in wringing meaning out of his existence.” And he continues:

“Fairy tales, unlike any other form of literature, direct the child to discover his identity and calling, and they also suggest what experiences are needed to develop his character further. Fairy tales intimate that a rewarding, good life is within one’s reach despite adversity – but only if one does not shy away from the hazardous struggles without which one can never achieve true identity.” (ibid. 24)

2.6 Conclusion

Fairy tales have been around for centuries, maybe even millennia. Although they take place in fantastic worlds quite unlike our own, contemporary one, they feature motifs and symbols that are of universal relevance. At the same time history shows quite clearly that there isn’t anything like the original fairy tale. Fairy tales have always been subjected to a continuous process of change, both concerning content as well as the transition from oral form to written medium. It might be just this ongoing **process of adaption** that has kept fairy tales appealing and meaningful to both children and adults for such a long time.

Although quite simple and direct in structure and presentation, fairy tales are full of **underlying meaning**, an aspect that has been stressed by representatives of the psychoanalytical schools as well as by theorists from other fields like literature. Fairy tales speak to us in an often **abstract** form, they focus on **action and images** to present their content and convey meaning.

Apart from stylistic means, **transformation** and the search for **a way to live successfully and happily in a world full of obstacles** is the big theme or question that the fairy tales pursues.

And in our increasingly complex contemporary society, such questions are more important than ever. In a time where entertainment, narration and often also learning takes place more frequently within digital media, especially for a young audience, these media should try to present experiences that are not only equally appealing and entertaining, but also as meaningful and relevant for recipients.

But how can this be achieved? Might an old medium like the fairy tale provide valuable input and insights for a medium like the digital game, that is not only much younger, but features inherently different qualities like interactivity? And in which way might these new and unique qualities help the game to go beyond what the fairy tale can achieve, and provide meaning in more ways than that of classical story telling? These questions will be pursued further in the next chapters.

3. The Quest for Meaning

why the fairy tale – game connection makes sense

3.1 Introduction

Fairy tales are old media that are still fascinating and meaningful, though they may not hold as central a role in the lives of people as they used to. This is probably not so much due to the fact that they are no longer appealing, but rather that they simply have much more competition: For centuries, oral narratives were one of comparatively few sources of entertainment, and even after fairy tales were adopted into literary form, there was for a long time only a rather limited amount of books which were read repeatedly and handed down through generations. Nowadays, fairy tales as narrative and also as educational device are one genre amongst a multitude of others. Besides books there is an abundance of new media and genres, ranging from audio books and visual media like movies and TV programs to digital games as one of the last in the chain of development.

Is there even a place for fairy tales in a contemporary society so overcrowded with different media? If fairy tales want to maintain their relevance, do they have to compete against such new media like games? Or is there another approach that can be taken? Is it possible for the fairy tale, or at least some of its valuable aspects or stylistic devices, to adapt and become a part of these new media? Could this already be the case?

And to approach the question from another side: why should we even want to keep and preserve fairy tales, or incorporate fairy tale aspects and functions into new media like games? What is it that we consider worth conserving and passing on about these kinds of tales? Can new media like digital games become not only equally popular, but also regarded as equally relevant when it comes to **conveying meaning**?

The aim of this thesis is certainly not to find a way to adapt specific fairy tales one-to-one as a game. This would neither serve the fairy tale, nor do justice to the medium of the game and its potential. Instead, the next chapter will focus on why a connection or comparison between games and fairy tales makes sense at all, and which points and aspects might be most relevant when drawing such a connection.

3.2 Why New Media and Games are Relevant for Fairy Tales

Most writers and theorists of fairy tales agree that these stories still offers relevant aspects and messages, even in our increasingly complex contemporary society. Yet there are at the same time numerous critical voices which speak against the modernization of fairy stories and their content, and against their adaptation into modern media. Modern adapta-

tions are accused of presenting tales in an artificial way (cf. Knoch 2000: 60), of being too trivial (cf. Wardetzky 1995: 12), or overly shrill and noisy (Schernick 2004/2005: n.p.). But how can people expect these tales to stay relevant and at the same time not allow any changes or adjustments to take place?

As has already been demonstrated in the previous chapter, there is not really anything like an original fairy tale. Instead, fairy tales have been subject to a continuous process of change and development. In his book *Why Fairy Tales Stick* Jack Zipes (cf. 2006b: 7-14) compares the transmission and evolution of fairy tales to memes, saying that they are basically ideas which, due to their personal and cultural **relevance and meaning**, as well as their memorable form, are easily stored in the brain and then transmitted – through retelling etc. – from one person to another. During these transmissions they were also in turn updated and adapted according to what the sender perceived as most relevant to him and his society. “As many of the tales became irrelevant and anachronistic, they were forgotten. But those that continued to have cultural significance were ‘imitated’ and passed on, to be sure, never in the exact way they were first told.” (ibid. 13) It is therefore – maybe a little paradoxically – this very change that has made fairy tales stay. Schmitt (2003: 163) goes so far as to say “[w]äre das Märchen medial nicht wandelbar, hätten wir es längst verloren.“

And it is not only a modernization of content that is necessary to keep the fairy tale relevant and alive. As time goes by, the reception and perception of the audience changes as well. While the book was the main medium for a long period of time, visual and digital media have become much more dominant in recent times. That does not so much mean that books are less in number, but that recipients, and especially young people who have grown up with new media are much more accustomed to them and much more oriented towards them in their daily lives, no matter whether they are looking for entertainment, information or education. Many conservative theorists like Knoch and Wardetzky think that these new media endanger their notion of the “true” fairy tale. In doing so they seem to forget that the transformation of oral fairy tales into written form by the Grimms was just such a change of primary medium, and was not viewed entirely uncritical back in the nineteenth century either.¹⁴ Theorists like Klaus Maiwald (cf. 2007, 166), who are in favor of modernizing fairy tales argue that all fairy tale variations, no matter if old or new, are not connected by their media or concrete content, but through characteristics like common requisites, characters, motifs, action patterns and stylistic devices.

When a society and its forms of communication change, so do its tales. Of course, when such changes happen, some aspects and qualities might get lost in the process. Yet that does not have to mean that as a whole, new variations must be of lesser quality than old ones; it

¹⁴ In a letter to Jacob Grimm, German poet Achim von Arnim, for example, expresses his fear that the new, rigid literary fairy tale might mean death to the whole world of fairy tales. (cf. Schmitt 2003, 163)

simply means that they are different. (cf. Seibert 2007: 10) The main goal should not be to try and preserve the fairy tale exactly as it is, nor to try and transport any specific fairy tale one-to-one into a game or other medium. Instead, it might be a good approach to ask why we consider fairy tales valuable, what it is that we like and appreciate about them, and what we think is worth conserving and passing on. If we are convinced that fairy tales are **valuable** for children and adults because **they offer meaning and relevance to our lives** and can help people understand the world and cope with it, then this is what we should try to preserve and make available for people. And it must be considered that in our changing, increasingly complex contemporary society, written fairy tales might no longer be the most accessible medium or the most suitable form to do so.

3.3 Why Fairy Tales are Relevant for Games

3.3.1 Status Quo

Although computer games and classical fairy tales might seem far apart at first sight, the idea of connecting fairy tales and games is not a completely new one. Neither is it one that began with digital games; there are, for example, many board games that draw on fairy tales in their design. When it comes to digital games, it seems that many products related more directly to fairy tales often tend to be low-priced games with cheap production value, most of which are directed towards children. On the one hand this might be due to the fact that fairy tales provide narratives that can be used by everyone without needing permission or copyrights. But what is more, it might also lure less informed parents into buying quickly and cheaply produced games, simply because they see something they know and consider suitable for their children. (cf. *The Game Reviews* 2009¹⁵)

What such games often tend to do is take a specific fairy story or its characters, and put them into a game in order to easily achieve recognition, while not at all considering what the underlying meaning of the original tale might have been, and how these underlying messages could best be adapted into a new medium. Although some of these games might nevertheless be well made and worthwhile, it is a pity that many of them have likely contributed to the poor reputation that modern digital fairy tale adaptations still have in the eye of many critics. If Kristin Wardetzky accuses modern fairy tale adaptations of being too trivial, she might be right with regard to some games. But this is not due to the fact that games do not have the potential to be as meaningful or expressive as fairy tales, but rather that a lot of designers (in

15 <http://www.thegamereviews.com/article-1568-Fairy-Tales-and-Video-Games.html>, visited on 18 Nov. 2012.

the case of low-quality games) don't try to explore these potentials and apply them in the best way possible.

Yet there are also other examples where fairy tales and games meet in one form or another, and do so successfully and appealingly. Many fairy tale motifs like witches, monsters or magic objects are frequently used for games – even if some of those games might be called fantasy instead of fairy tales.¹⁶ There are also certain games that have tried to adapt specific fairy tales in their own ways, like American McGee's *Alice* series, or the game *The Path*, which is based on the story of Little Red Riding Hood. Some of these games adapt mostly concrete aspects on a story level, others try to convey an overall fairy tale feeling and mood, or offer an interpretative potential and meaning similar to that of fairy tales. This might be seen as a sign that fairy tales, or at least many aspects of them, still offer a fascination for both game designers as well as players on some level. The game *Kingdom Hearts*, which features both characters from Japanese games, as well as fairy tale versions of Disney characters, has also been a huge market success. But apart from being financially successful, what other fruitful potentials might rise out of contemplating fairy tales and games and their possible connection?

3.3.2 Meaning Through or Beyond Stories?

According to many theorists the power of fairy tales lies in the fact that there are primarily appealing and entertaining stories that recipients enjoy hearing, but that in addition (and not always consciously), they convey meaning and tell people something about themselves and the world they live in, and thus help them deal with their own nature and problems in a personally relevant way. (cf. Bettelheim 2010: 8ff; Zipes 2006b: 101; Lüthi 1960: 75)

Games are already widely regarded as a very successful medium when it comes to providing **entertainment and fun**. When it comes to being considered as valuable or relevant, they are still viewed in a much more critical manner. Is this doubt justified, or is it a reflection of an overly critical attitude? Are games already as relevant to children (and adults) as fairy tales used to be? Can they be as **meaningful**?

The most obvious (yet not the only) inspiration fairy tales can provide for games are those that concern the level of story, and the communication of meaning through means of more or less direct narration. The ability of games to tell stories, and the question of in how far they might resemble fairy tale narratives will be examined in the following pages.

¹⁶ *Trine*, for example, although rather fantasy-like in its pompous style, also incorporates fairy tale aspects, for example by following the typical threefold structure with its three archetypical protagonists.

3.3.2.1 Games telling stories?

Talking about fairy stories and their importance for children, Bettelheim (2010: 24) said that “Through most of man’s history, a child’s intellectual life, apart from immediate experiences within the family, depended on mythical and religious stories and on fairy tales.” Stories, both for children and adults, have transferred from oral into literal form, and then into audiovisual media. One of the last steps in the development of new media is the computer game. But can the digital game also be seen as the newest form of storytelling? Or are games fundamentally different media that are not concerned with narration, but only with play?

During the 90ies and early 2000s, there has been an ongoing debate that took place between ludologists who argued that games have to be seen as rule based, simulated systems, and narratologists, who argued that games could also be described as stories. Or, as Gonzalo Frasca (2003: 92) puts it in a deliberately exaggerated way “Ludologists are supposed to focus on game mechanics and reject any room in the field for analyzing games as narrative, while narratologists argue that games are closely connected to stories.”

Some more radical theorists like Markku Eskelinen (cf. 2001¹⁷) have argued that playing games is predominately a configurative practice that requires the player to perform manipulative actions, while the dominant user function in literature and film is merely interpretative. These descriptions are correct as far as they go, but what it really tells us is not that games can never feature story components or can be experienced or interpreted as narratives at all, but rather that the medium game brings some new, inherent aspects that have not been part of traditional stories before, and that have to be taken into account as well.

Of course, whether one regards games as more or less narrative media depends strongly on how you define stories in the first place. As Simon (2007¹⁸) puts it “Narratologists might agree that a narrative is a sequence of causally and chronologically linked events, but, when it comes to filling in the details, opinions differ.” Ryan (2001¹⁹), for example, names three components of traditional narrative – setting, character and action. These three components, or at least some of them, can be found in many games from different genres, thus suggesting that there is at least a story aspect to many games.

Although there is no unified definition of a narrative when speaking about games, the new consensus seems to be that digital games are – or can be – both a form of rule based play, as well as a form of narration. “Theorists and designers alike agree that there can be transformations back and forth between games and narratives as well as many intermediate forms in between the two categories.” (Howard 2008: 3)

17 <http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/>, visited on 18 Nov. 2012.

18 <http://gamestudies.org/0701/articles/simons>, visited on 18 Nov. 2012.

19 <http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/ryan/>, visited on 18 Nov. 2012.

A narrative in this sense must not be a complete classical story featuring a defined beginning, middle and end, and following a classic plot development like that of the hero's journey. Exploring what Howard might mean when he speaks of "intermediate forms", it seems that there is often some kind of narrative and meaning that comes across to the recipient, no matter how directly it was intended by the designer. Penny Sweetser (2008: 10f), for example, describes what she calls an internal story, which means a kind of narrative the player forms in her mind consisting of the decisions and actions she has taken throughout the game.

Henry Jenkins sees the narrative potential of games in a similar way, even if he approaches it from a different direction. Talking about the game spaces that players are allowed to move and act in, he describes that these game worlds are "designed to be rich with narrative potential, enabling the story-constructing activity of players. In each case, it makes sense to think of game designers less as storytellers than as narrative architects." (Jenkins 2004: 121)

Ian Bogost (2006: ix) also gives credit to the role of the recipient when he argues that both games as well as any other medium are comprised of "an arrangement of discrete, interlocking units of expressive meaning [...]." His point, as Jeff Howard (2008: 4) puts it, is "that games and literature can meet at the issue of interpretation."

Although many of these theorists still use the word story or narrative in one way or another, it starts to show that most approaches do not relate to a classical, complete story in the narrower sense of the word anymore. Openness, the **interpretation** or **experience of the user**, and an emphasis on other typical game aspects like the use of agency, rules or space, are common to all these definitions and models.

The goal no longer seems to be the transportation or adaption of classical stories or story models into games, or the analyzing of games as narratives. Instead the focus increasingly shifts towards **providing meaning and interpretative potential** for players to engage in. As Howard (ibid.) puts it "[...] many game theorists and game designers increasingly focus on meaning and interpretation as central to game design and narrative."

Simon and Frasca (cf. 2003: 96) have both stressed that the narratology debate has been a difficult one because there are no universal definitions for what a story actually is. But maybe such a definition is not really necessary in the first place. Or to put it differently: maybe we should not try to define what really constitutes a story, or in how far games are stories. Maybe, what really matters if we want to create even better, more expressive games is the ability to communicate or provide a certain kind or degree of **meaning**. Whether this meaning is conveyed through a more classical form of narrative, or through other inherent qualities of games like their interactive or rule-based nature, might then only be of secondary importance.

3.3.2.2 But what, actually, is meaning?

“That’s how we make sense of things: we attach meaning to them” (Johnson 2010²⁰)

If we want to pose meaning as a valuable and relevant aspect of games, we have to take a closer look at what meaning itself might actually be. Webster’s dictionary offers two definitions for meaning, one being “the thing that is conveyed especially by language”, the other describing meaning simply as a “significant quality”.²¹

Howard (2008: 24) gives a definition for meaning by describing it as “a theme or idea conveyed symbolically through a work of literature”. Aiming at a definition that is more suitable for games, he describes meaning as “a sense of valuable significance that complements the pleasure of action for its own sake.” (ibid.) What most of these definitions stress is that meaning is not only something that is conveyed through communication, experience, or any other kind of interaction, but that something, in order to be really **meaningful**, must also be **significant, valuable or relevant** in one way or another.

In a game there are more types or levels of meaning that can be described. Salen and Zimmermann, for example, call for meaningful play as the basis of successful game design. By this they mean that each player action, in order to be meaningful, must trigger an appropriate, “discernable and integrated” response from the system. (cf. Salen/Zimmermann 2004²²) Jeff Howard names three types of possible meaning within games. One is “the impact of the player’s accomplishments on and within a simulated world” (Howard 2008: 25), which is similar to Salen and Zimmermann’s concept. The second type of meaning is a narrative in the form of a backstory, which gives more depth and urgency to the player’s actions by explaining why the player character has to perform certain actions and to what effect. The third kind of meaning Howard describes refers to an “expressive, semantic, and thematic meaning: ideas symbolically encoded within the landscape, objects, and challenges of the quest and enacted through it.” (ibid.)

Gonzalo Frasca also says there are multiple levels or perspectives that can create meaning in games. One of the levels he focuses on is what Frasca (2007: 87) calls playworld, which includes most aspects that games “share with storytelling: texts, graphics, sounds, backgrounds, characters, cut-scenes.” Other aspects that are crucial for creation of meaning are interactivity, player performance and the rules of the game.

20 http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/134257/no_truth_in_game_design_an_.php, visited on 18 Nov. 2012

21 <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/meaning>, visited on 18 Nov. 2012.

22 Unit 1, Chapter 3, p.1

What is central for Frasca is that the meaning constructed while playing should not only be meaningful within the very game, but should also bear some relevance outside of the magic circle. As he puts it “my main concern is with play as an activity for understanding the world.” (ibid. 30) Frasca sees meaning that only concerns the gameplay within the system as too constrained. He goes beyond what Salen and Zimmermann understand by meaningful play, and beyond Howard’s impact of the player’s accomplishments within a simulated world. Instead he proposes his concept of game rhetorics. According to Frasca (2007: 86), theories that only examine meaning on a gameplay level should be called

“‘internal’ because [they] deal with the construction of meaning within the game, while game rhetoric is also ‘external’ because it **connects the game with the player’s world view**. Certainly, this is a simplification since both rhetorics can overlap and work together. Still, the differentiation may be useful to offer a simple way to illustrate on which levels these two rhetorics work.” [emphasis added]

It is this second kind of meaning – which bears **relevance not only within** but also **beyond the game itself** – that is also of primary interest for this thesis

Talking about fairy tales, Bruno Bettelheim (2010: 4) says that “[t]he acquisition of skills, including the ability to read, becomes devalued when what one has learned to read adds nothing of importance to one’s life.” Bettelheim talks about reading because he primarily refers to fairy tales in their written form, and his statement of course cannot be applied one-to-one to games. While fairy tales might lose much of their fascination when they become too shallow, games can also be fun and captivating without communicating much or even any meaning at all concerning the world beyond the game.²³ Still, in a lot of cases, the addition of some kind of meaning – be it in the form of a background story or through any other means – might enhance the gaming experience, and the value that the game has for the player as an individual, even beyond the game itself.

23 “The interest of the rules themselves is the reason why games can be abstract and without points of identification and yet be interesting.” (Juul 2005, 161) Interpreting games like *Tetris*, for example, as an allegory for the cold war or the building of the Tower of Babel (cf. Johnson 2010) might be possible, but is rather arbitrary and probably won’t add much of relevance to the game as such.

3.4 Conclusion

Human beings use different forms of narratives to make sense of the world and their lives and to process and hand on meaning and information. (cf. Juul 2001²⁴) This might be why, according to Sweetser, players create an internal story, or why Jenkins speaks of the story constructing activity of the player. However, neither Sweetser's nor Jenkins' approach asks for classical stories. Following Jenkins, game designers should offer potential for interpretation and hint at possible meanings; it must not be their duty, though, to provide a finished, hyper-specific and detailed story complete with predefined and explicit moral. Similarly, Howard and Frasca both name several kinds of meanings, only one of them referring to a classical background story.

When we look at the fairy tale, we can say that it has survived so long and is regarded as so valuable because it contains both appealing entertainment as well as manifold and relevant meaning that lends itself well to personal interpretation both within and beyond the fictional world.

What has become apparent in this chapter is that the communication of meaning is definitely also possible and desirable in games, and what is more, that it can be conveyed not only through the adaptation of classical narrative approaches, but also through the use of inherent game qualities like interaction, gameplay or rules.

Therefore I think that **meaning** is what we should pursue in games if we want to make them more expressive and want them to be regarded not only as **engaging entertainment, but also as more valuable and relevant** by society.

While the next chapter will examine more classical narrative aspects and motifs that fairy tales and games share as well as how they offer and communicate meaning through these aspects and motifs, the fourth chapter will focus on other meaning-creating aspects like interactivity and rules, and will try to find out how games can go beyond fairy stories in creating and supplying meaning.

24 <http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/>, visited on 18 Nov. 2012

4. Games as Meaningful Narratives

thematic and stylistic similarities between games and fairy tales

4.1 Introduction

Although it has already been discussed that games probably have a lot more ways of creating and conveying meaning than through the telling of stories, this chapter will nevertheless have a look at the more classic narrative potentials the computer game possesses. As fairy tales themselves are first and foremost narratives, many connections, like shared themes, motifs, or formal approaches can be easily compared on a narrative level. This chapter will also briefly discuss in how far the visual dimension that is typical for the computer game might support or hinder the way that fairy tales approach narration and the communication of meaning.

4.2 The visual – Potential or Restriction?

While computer games, apart from some rather marginal genres like text adventures, usually have an important visual component, fairy tales in their classical oral or literal forms are mostly non-visual narratives. Yet it was not the modern audio-visual or digital media adaptations that first introduced images to fairy tales. In the second half of eighteenth and early nineteenth century, printed fairy tales were already regularly illustrated, and there were also so-called “picture sheets” (German: *Bilderbögen*), large singular sheets of paper that depicted fairy tales as a succession of images, often only using very few sentences of the original text, thus resembling modern comics. (cf. Jerrendorf 1985: 43)

Nevertheless, many fairy tale theorists have taken a critical point of view toward any kind of predefined imagery accompanying fairy tales. Bettelheim (2010: 60f), for example, calls illustrations “distracting rather than helpful”, and fears that “[they] direct the child’s imagination away from how he, on his own, would experience the story. [...] if we let an illustrator determine our imagination, it becomes less our own, and the story loses much of its personal significance.” Tolkien (cf. 2001: 78) voiced similar concerns, fearing that illustrations might impose one visible form, thus inhibiting the recipient from using her own fantasy.

German psychotherapist Eckhard Schiffer (cf. 2010: 75ff) also stresses the importance of using one’s fantasy and creating what he calls “inner pictures”, especially for younger children. According to Eckhart, people who have not learned and practiced the ability to use their imagination early on, for example in play or while listening to stories, will later have problems dealing with their lives in imaginative ways and investing the world around them with meaning and purpose.

All these objections are valid, probably even more so in a time when most media are flooded with images of all kinds and where literary or exclusively oral media are no longer the primary sources for information or entertainment. On the other hand, such a visually oriented society does make the need for personal images of one's own more pressing, but at the same time it also requires people to learn how to be able to interpret and use available images successfully for their own purposes.²⁵ If images in modern media like games are prepared accordingly, for example by offering a symbolic, interpretative quality similar to that used in fairy tales instead of just aiming at spectacle, maybe they can encourage and even help children develop an ability to deal with and interpret pictures, to understand visual clues and symbols and derive information and personal meaning from them.

“Eine komplexere Welt braucht auch komplexere Märchen, die bei komplexerer Weltdeutung helfen.” (Heidtmann 2007: 106) Maybe this is not only true for the narrative content, but also for the medial representation of tales. Or, as Bertolt Brecht (1967: 327) puts it: „Es verändert sich die Wirklichkeit, um sie darzustellen, muss die Darstellungsart sich ändern.“ Gabe Zichermann (2011²⁶), for example, even claims that media like games teach children to be good at processing and interpreting various sensory inputs at the same time. He describes that this ability makes it easier for people to stay concentrated and focused while multitasking, and that games help children to learn and draw meaning from visual and auditory as well as written sources, an ability that is extremely helpful in contemporary society.

Lüthi names the use of imagery as an important characteristic of fairy tales. As he mainly refers to written fairy tales, images for him are linguistic images: for example, feelings or motivations of characters are not explained with many words, instead they are represented through certain actions, or by typical settings like that of the deep dark wood. Similarly, abstract concepts like charity or helpfulness are represented by characters like fairies. On the one hand, as has been described, turning these elements into real visual images might inhibit the fantasy of the recipient, and pose the danger of showing something in a way that greatly differs from what the recipient has in her mind. On the other hand, the linguistic imagery typical for fairy tales presents an ideal opportunity to be transferred into equally meaningful visual images.

25 W.J.T Mitchell (cf. 1995, 11ff), who has coined the concept of the pictorial turn, speaks of the fear of images that in his opinion is part of many schools of thought. As one possible reason for this aversion against images he names the concerns that language and writing, which have for a long time been seen as the primary and “highest” form of human communication, might be threatened by the new mass of images. Although Mitchell himself says that today's flood of images can take on the form of an overwhelming spectacle, he at the same time denounces the “assumption that language is paradigmatic for meaning”.

26 How games make kids smarter. Video file. Online at: http://www.ted.com/talks/gabe_zichermann_how_games_make_kids_smarter.html, visited on 18 Nov. 2012.

Although this gap might never be wholly bridged, some kind of images – maybe especially symbolic ones – might work as well on a linguistic basis as they do on a visual one. If open enough, a picture might really say more than a thousand words, and at the same time in a way also trigger the recipient’s fantasy by encouraging her to interpret what she sees in her own, personal way.

4.3 The Power of the Fantastic

4.3.1 Of Fantasy and Reality

“The world of the fairy-story is that world which is opposed throughout the world to rational truth, and precisely for that reason it is so thoroughly and analogue to it [...]” (Novalis 1798/2007: 34)

The fear of fantasy

The magical and fantastic is one of the defining characteristics of the fairy tale as a genre, and there are many computer games that also make wide use of typical fantastic themes. Especially for computer games, this “unrealistic” quality has often led to criticism and the repeated accusation that these games do not bear any relevance to real life, and therefore cannot offer anything of meaning or value to the player. Or, to put it differently, players supposedly engage in these games in order to escape the real world, not in order to gain anything from them that might apply to real life.

Of course, in most cases, the main reason why someone plays a game is to be entertained, and not to gain any direct insight or advantage out of it for real life. Johan Huizinga even says that play is defined by being meaningful in itself, and not by having any decided primary goal outside of the game world.²⁷ But the same is true for most stories as well. As even psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim (cf. 2010: 12) points out, the main enjoyment of a fairy tale comes out of its literary qualities, not out of the (valuable, yet additional) psychological meaning that the tale offers.

The fear of fantasy that shows itself in most accusations of escapism might be rooted in the fact that people think it is more important to learn how to deal with reality early on in order to master it, instead of indulging in fantastic worlds and fantastic problems that are unlike anything one will ever meet in real life, and that might even take a person’s attention wholly away from reality. (cf. Schiffer 2010: 120ff) Bettelheim (2010: 118) described even in the 1970s how, “[some] parents fear that a child’s mind may become so overfed by fairy-tale fan-

27 “As a sacred activity play naturally contributes to the well-being of the group, but in quite another way and by other means than the acquisition of the necessities of life.” (Huizinga 1955: 9)

tasies as to neglect learning to cope with reality.” Although more than 40 years have gone by since those parents were raising children, the worries of today’s parents in regard to computer games are much the same.

Unreal but not untrue – why fantasy is vital for reality

Theorists like Bettelheim that come from fields within psychology in fact take a very different, if not reversed approach when discussing the value of fantasy and the fantastic. They hold the belief that if one wants to master life successfully, imagination and fantasy are necessary abilities. They argue that, against what some people might fear, children as well as adults are usually quite capable of distinguishing fantasy from reality. Tolkien (2001: 37) says their “lack of experience makes it less easy for children to distinguish fact from fiction in particular cases, though the distinction in itself is fundamental to the sane human mind.” Children like to hear about marvels, which is why they willingly suspend their disbelief, but it does not mean that they take everything they hear to be reality. Similarly Bettelheim (2010: 62) states that “[t]he child who is familiar with fairy tales understands that these speak to him in the language of symbols and not that of everyday reality.” The same goes for games, which are not only equally common these days, but also draw upon similar motifs.

Why then, is it that children and people in general like fantasy, even though, or maybe especially because, they know it is not real? According to Bettelheim (ibid. 73) children in particular use fantasy to cope with events, unconscious wishes, fears and emotions.

“The child intuitively comprehends that although these stories are unreal, they are not untrue, that while what these stories tell about does not happen in fact, it must happen as inner experience and personal development; that fairy tales depict in imaginary and symbolic form the essential steps in growing up and achieving an independent existence.”

While adults can make use of conscious reflections, or play with ideas to test out and deal with their feelings and inner lives, direct confrontation can be too overwhelming for children. This is why externalization, be it in the form of a story or a game, can be very helpful. If listening to how Gretel pushes the witch into an oven can function as a child’s outlet for her anger against people that seem malicious and overpowering to her in her real life, then beating such an enemy in an interactive game should be at least as, if not more, compelling and satisfactory.

More than that, many psychologists like Bettelheim or Schiffer think that indulging in fantasy especially at an early age is vital in order to be able to deal with real life later on, and to be able to invest the world and one’s life with some kind of meaning. Bettelheim (cf. 2010: 51) compares a child who turns to fantasy with “primitive” human societies who make up emotional projections such as gods to explain the world and give meaning to it. Similarly, Huizinga (1955: 5) compares the functions of myth and play: “In myth, primitive man seeks to

account for the world of phenomena by grounding it in the Divine.” As a child grows up he or she becomes more rooted in reality, just as humanity, while evolving, has turned increasingly towards reason and scientific knowledge to explain our surroundings to us. And yet this is not a completely linear process. In times of distress, people still tend to turn towards religion, or in a different form, people might turn to their imagination or favorite work of fantastic fiction as a safe place of reassurance and comfort in times of need. If such fantastic, magical places and experiences have never been a meaningful part of a child’s life, later on an adult has no such safe place to turn to.

This does not mean that all children should ever hear are fairy tales, or that they should be allowed to play games all day long. With all the positive potential that fantasy holds, it is always also an issue of finding the right amount or balance which allows for the best and most fruitful connection between fantasy and real life. “[P]ermitting one’s fantasy to take hold of oneself for a while is not detrimental, provided one does not remain permanently caught up in it.” (ibid. 63)

What distinguishes a person who has learned how to deal with fantasy during childhood from someone who hasn’t is that such a person knows how to switch between fantasy and reality, or how to integrate both, without getting lost or neglecting one or the other completely. “[T]he more secure a person feels within the world, the less he will need to hold on to ‘infantile’ projections – mythical explanations of fairy-tale solutions to life’s eternal problems – and the more he can afford to seek rational explanations.” (Bettelheim 2010: 51)

Having gained the personal confidence early on that we can perform as successful individuals (even if it is in an unreal fantasy world) will later on make it easier for us to deal with a world where we are not the shiniest of heroes all the time, and yet still invest us with the confidence that we will be strong enough to deal with the problems we encounter on a daily basis.

Fantasy as critical alternatives

What is more, fantasy does not only help children to make sense of or act out their momentary fears or wishes. It also gives people in general a frame to act out desires or wishes which would be too dangerous (and maybe not even desirable) in real life. Most people would like to be as courageous and powerful as a dragon slayer, which is part of why they like to take on the role of such a character in a video game, or why they might like to identify with such a character in a story. That does not mean that they would like to bring themselves into mortal danger in real life. Or to put it differently, one can like or enjoy something, and still not wish for it in everyday life. This is what Tolkien speaks about when he says that fairy stories are not primarily concerned with possibility, but with desirability, and this might be even truer for games. Being able to slay a dragon in a game does not lose its satisfying quality because there are no dragons to slay in real life. Fantasy is clearly not reality, but that is just what makes it so valuable. It allows us to act out dangerous or violent acts, and while maybe providing some real relief, these actions do not have directly corresponding effects in the real world.

Eckhard Schiffer (cf. 2010: 15) says that if we learn to experience ourselves as powerful and valuable individuals, something that is achieved by acting out fantasies in the form of stories or play, we will grow up to be self-confident adults that are able not only to follow the rules of society, but to invest their lives with personal meaning. It will not be necessary to turn to escapism, as it is possible to change reality according to one's wishes instead.

As Schiffer (ibid.) points out based on Henning Klüver, play by its very nature questions the power of the factual, or real. A game or story does not have to be realistic to relate to reality. Fantastic games or tales relate to reality in so far as they present an alternative, and give us the courage and freedom of mind to critically question the status quo of reality as well as our own selves. Michel Butor (1973: 352) calls such fantastic worlds a "world inverted", a criticism of rigid reality.

Fantasy questions whether the momentary reality really is the only possibility. In this sense, overthrowing the ruling king in a fantasy RPG, or killing the giant in *Jack and the Beanstalk* both are fantastic experiences that one will not repeat in real life. And yet they both have one common, possible lesson which can be applied to real life as well: subversion might just pay off.

Fantasy should not replace real life; it should enlarge reality and allow different views on it. This is what Hans-Peter Schwarz calls "Expanded Reality", and what in his opinion enables "these intersections between virtual and real." (Schwarz/Borries 2007: 457)

Fantasy invests real life with more meaning, although, or simply because it is different from it, because it is fantastic or unreal. Or to say it with C.S. Lewis' (1982: 38) words:

"It stirs and troubles him [the child/recipient] (to his life-long enrichment) with the dim sense of something beyond his reach and, far from dulling or emptying the actual world, gives it a new dimension of depth. He does not despise real woods because he has read of enchanted woods: the reading makes all real woods a little enchanted."

4.3.2 Games as Transitional Worlds?

As has been shown, fantasy and fantastic experiences do not necessarily have to be seen as an escape from reality, but can also function as a connection between inner life (including personal wishes, fears and emotions) and outer reality. Here it might be fruitful to have a look at psychoanalysts D. W. Winnicott's concept of transitional objects.

Winnicott (1971: 2) argues that human beings are continually engaged in a process of defining and keeping apart their inner life and outer reality, a process he calls reality-testing. In order to do so, they make use of a third sphere beside inner and outer life:

"[T]he third part of the life of a human being, a part that we cannot ignore, is an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both con-

tribute. It is an area that is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated.”

This third or intermediate part is called a transitional object or transitional sphere. Such a transitional object is first used in earliest childhood, and standing between the child's inner life and the outer world helps her to gain an understanding of herself as an individual as well as to experience and take in her environment. An object in this sense does not necessarily have to be a material object; it can also be a song, or a story, or in the case of an adult, art or religion.

But can a computer game also take on the role of a transitional object or sphere? Traditionally a transitional object is an object that is never wholly under the child's control (since it belongs to reality and is bound by its material nature or other rules), but at the same time it is not wholly under outer control either. For example, by investing a teddy bear with a character of its own, a child creates an “illusory experience” that connects his or her inner fantasy to the outer material world. (cf. *ibid.* 3) It lets the child experience reality in a more pleasant, fantastic and secure way (due to the help of the teddy bear friend), yet at the same time makes the child accept the boundaries that the real world poses (the teddy bear is still a real object that can only be manipulated in certain ways).

For Winnicott, striving to find one's place within the real world and accept that one does not possess ultimate magical powers over it is an ongoing process.

“It is assumed here that the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience which is not challenged (arts, religion, etc.). This intermediate area is in direct continuity with the play area of the small child who is ‘lost’ in play.” (*ibid.* 9)

Today, free play is mainly seen as something that young children do, digital rule-based games though might provide a new kind of playful transitional sphere for adults to engage in besides religion, arts etc. While less personal creative imagination might be involved when playing a digital game and while a game is not primarily a material object, it still offers a suitable way for reality testing: Within a game the player is equipping with certain abilities and powers; she can control characters or parts of the game world, but at the same time she is bound by the rules of the game and confronted with an often hostile environment. Trying out her powers and agency and testing different strategies within the game might offer the player a chance to learn something about herself and gain experience in the real world as well as the virtual reality that surrounds her. Thus games might instead be called transitional worlds rather than transitional objects.

Of course there is a difference between the way children and adults handle transitional objects. With a child, nobody questions the validity of a her transitional object, knowing that the child needs her teddy bear friend as a bridge between subjectivity and objectivity, a duality that she cannot maintain otherwise. For adults, the case is different. Although Winnicott says that even adults keep testing reality against fantasy for their whole life, they are usually better at consciously distinguishing between the two, and of acknowledging that their engaging in art, religion or games is a subjective, personal way of exploring and dealing with fantasy and reality. Thus one could argue that even while engaging in a fantastic world, emotional immersion and complete suspension of disbelief is not necessarily the ultimate goal for adults. Apart from immersion, adults might also use fantastic stories or experiences – or to put it differently, transitional spheres – as an opportunity to consciously reflect on reality and their inner lives and thus connect them in meaningful ways.

Bettelheim (2010: 25), for example, describes how in traditional Hindu medicine “a fairy tales giving form to his particular problem was offered to a psychologically disoriented person, for his meditation. It was expected that through contemplating the story the disturbed person would be led to visualize both the nature of the impasse in living from which he suffered and the possibility for resolution.” In this case it is not suspension of disbelief that is applied, but rather the opposite, the conscious comparison of the fictional events with one’s real life that creates meaning.

A fantastic experience does not necessarily try to take us away from or make us forget about reality, but, through the act of presenting an alternative world and an alternative self within it, allows us to take a different angle of view on ourselves and our reality. Or, as Julian Kücklich (2008: 59) puts it, “children learn to differentiate between their selves and the outside world through transitional objects such as toys. In digital games, players have the unique opportunity to reset the parameters of that rather stable sense of agency that has been developed by the end of childhood [...]”

Winnicott (cf. 1971: 14) stresses that it is not really the object that is transitional, but rather the process of transition from one state into another, from a belief in magic into a state of accepting and being able to deal with reality. Digital games might offer a powerful tool to help us make such transitions. Games as transitional worlds show us an alternative to our own world and being, and thus not only allow for periods of escape, but also put our inner lives, wishes, and outer surroundings into new perspectives. By presenting alternate worlds games allow us to renegotiate – both consciously and unconsciously – our identity as well as the way that we live in and view our surroundings.

4.4 Shared Themes and Motifs

Having established the common use of fantasy and fantastic worlds for games and fairy tales as well as what meaning or potential this fantastic quality might provide for recipients, this section will have a closer look at two distinctive motifs that are crucial to both fairy tales and games. It will examine not only what kind of similarities are apparent on a narrative level, but also what kind of differences might be perceived in the way they are handled.

4.4.1 Death

Death is not only a frequent part of fairy stories, it is also a vital component for many game genres; especially those that feature a player avatar who can die and respawn. Adults often tend to be of the opinion that children should be shielded from grave existential topics that might worry or scare them. Theorists like Bruno Bettelheim criticize this way of thinking and the modern “safe” stories which often try to avoid conflicts or existential problems altogether. Instead Bettelheim (2010: 8) claims, for example, that topics like death and mortality are “crucial issues for all of us”, and that children do not need to be shielded from them, but should instead be provided with an adequate way of dealing with these worries. “The child needs most particularly to be given suggestions in symbolic form about how he may deal with these issues and grow safely into maturity.”(ibid.)

Can fairy tales or games provide such a meaningful concept of death and of dealing and coming to terms with it? When playing Will Wright’s *The Sims*, many people, especially kids and young adults, experiment with killing off some of their characters in creative ways, and burying or keeping them in an urn that even comes with a haunted spirit (cf. Kim 2005²⁸). While these activities might seem rather bizarre, they are not new phenomena, as a look at the history of toys and play shows us. In the nineteenth century, children, especially girls, used to enact funerals with the puppets from their dollhouses. (cf. Formanek-Brunnell 1998: n.p.) American media scholar Henry Jenkins (2006²⁹) compares the old dollhouses to *The Sims*, saying that these

“doll funerals were a recognized part of the culture of doll play, a way children worked through their anxieties about infant mortality or later, about the massive deaths

28 <http://www.digra.org/dl/db/06276.15163.pdf>, visited on 18 Nov. 2012.

As a supporting, if not strictly scientific statement in numbers, this link leads to a facebook community entitled “Purposely murdering your Sims.” which at the moment has over 38,500 fans. <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Purposely-murdering-your-Sims/276451479878>, visited on 18 Nov. 2012

29 <http://web.mit.edu/cms/faculty/WarEffectMeaning.htm>, visited on 18 Nov. 2012.

caused by the civil war. Today, players use *The Sims* as a psychological workshop, testing the limits of the simulation (often by acting out violent fantasies among the residents) but also using the simulation to imitate real world social interactions.”

What is important for this meaningful yet playful approach is that death is not presented as something wholly discouraging and devastating. In many fairy stories, death is more a symbol for temporary failure or for leaving behind an old part of oneself, than for the real, permanent death of a character. If the first two of the three pigs die, this is not a tragedy, because they stand for less mature versions of the same character. The third pig, who is not lazy and careless, but has learned that one must first make an effort in life in order to be safe later on, survives. Being without detailed distinctive characters, the three little pigs from the fairy tale may be closer to the three lives (or versions) of Mario one is given at the start of a game of *Super Mario Bros.* than three independent characters. Similar to the pigs, who try their luck with the wolf one after the other until one succeeds, the player has three tries to navigate Mario through a level. Each death is a setback, but also an opportunity to become better or try out another strategy, and thus succeed in the end.

In *Rick Dangerous*, the protagonist has to navigate levels by avoiding enemies and deathtraps. Many of these traps are hidden so that the player has no chance to avoid them if she does not know about them in advance; meaning she often has to die at least once at a certain point in the level so as to be able to overcome the trap on the next try. Some people consider these traps the result of bad level design, but one could also say that the game stages the act of dying as a sacrifice necessary to learn and advance through the game world.

Arnt Jensen, the creator of *Limbo*, also describes the playstyle of his game as “Trial and death”³⁰. *Limbo* not only features the frequent death of the player character, but is also itself set in an afterlife-like world, as can be guessed at from the title. Acknowledging that death as both a narrative background motif and also as an element of gameplay was very crucial to him, Jensen seems to agree with Bettelheim when he says that “People like The Brothers Grimm, Astrid Lindgren and Tove Jansson were responsible for a lot of my childhood memories. They dared to write about death in a much heavier way than people do today.”(ibid.) Being himself not a writer but an artist and game designer, Jensen deals with death in the form of a game.

Two other examples that do not depict death as a disaster or ultimate punishment, but rather stress the positive side of symbolic death and the potentials of trying again are Capcom’s *Breath of Fire: Dragon Quarters* and *Dead Rising*.

“Upon the player’s defeat, both games offer a chance to either revert to the last save or restart from the beginning. The latter isn’t a pure new game file, though; instead,

30 Edge Staff/Jensen 2012, <http://www.edge-online.com/features/the-making-of-limbo/>, visited 18 Nov. 2012.

it's something akin to a New Game + in which certain experience and upgrades carry over, materially changing the game your second time through and greatly improving your prospects of success." (Parish 2011³¹)

Once again, death is not only necessary if one wants to improve and advance in the game, but trying again even brings certain advantages.

What all of these tales and games have in common is that death might be a temporary punishment (having to wait patiently or having to replay an already mastered level section) but it does not mean the end of all life. Quite to the contrary, it offers a chance to try again, and become better in the process. If Bettelheim (2010: 181) says "Such [failing] persons must undergo further growth experiences, which will enable them to succeed. Those predecessors of the hero who die [...] are nothing but the hero's earlier immature incarnations" – he could just as well be talking about games as about fairy tales.

If death in a game or fairy tale is really permanent, it is mostly in connection with evil characters who deserve to die because of their evil deeds. Bettelheim (ibid. 141) argues that killing the evil stepmother at the end of *Cinderella* is meaningful and understandable for the child, because it shows him that even if life is hard, justice might be dealt out in the end. "Adults often think that the cruel punishment of an evil person in fairy tales upsets and scares children unnecessarily. Quite the opposite is true: such retribution reassures the child that punishment fits the crime." Many games, of course, present more complex worlds and stories than fairy tales do, and in some games it is possible to kill both good and bad characters, or characters whose moral standings are not altogether clear. Still, meting out punishment against an evil character in a game could not only be interpreted as a violent act, but also more positively as a chance to act out our wish for justice.

There has been an ongoing debate in game design about how to make death in games more realistic, or have it carry more (emotional) weight. The need to be able to respawn and try again in order to advance in a game arises out of the gameplay; at the same time designers worry that it restricts the narrative possibilities and the emotional weight that the death of a character has. Of course these concerns are valid on a level of character immersion and empathy. The death of a single character weighs less in most games than in a novel, for example. But the ability to respawn might communicate other things instead. On a more basic, symbolical level the respawn might change our image of death as the ultimate, discouraging, non-reversible catastrophe into something more encouraging and motivating: the belief that one might just get a second chance and the possibility to grow and better oneself in the course. If parents are afraid that a confrontation with death might be too discouraging in its realistic form, the way most games let us experience death might provide a valuable and

31 <http://www.1up.com/features/conquering-death-games-reinventing-loss>, visited on 18 Nov. 2012.

meaningful alternative. In most games death is a setback, maybe even a major one, but it is always also an invitation to not give up, to try again, to become better and more successful in the process. The strength of games in regard to death might not be to depict it in a completely realistic, emotionally empathic way. But maybe games do not need to strive for this effect primarily. Maybe the special strength of games – which is not least due to their interactive nature – is that they can believably depict death as a chance for life, investing it with an alternative meaning that is not only discouraging but also positive and motivating.

An additional approach along these lines might be to try and find a plausible (not necessarily realistic!) explanation that justifies the respawn not only in regard to the gameplay, but also within the story or universe. Some fairy tales allude to death not by making a person die in the literal sense of the word, but by turning the character to stone or letting him or her fall into an eternal sleep instead. Some games have already tried to take a similar approach: In *Fable II*, for example, the hero does not die when defeated, but instead goes to the ground and loses consciousness. Upon recovering he gets another chance, but bears a scar as a reminder of his failures. The platformer game *The Balloon Quest*, for example, is partly set in the imagination of the two child protagonists; the player accompanies them on their big adventure which is in itself child's play so to speak, since it is partly made up and brought to life by the fantasy of the little sister.

If the player gets hurt, the children do not lose health or energy, but rather their motivation and joy for playing. If the player runs out of motivation and “dies”, the game does not tell him that the protagonists have really died physically, but that they stopped playing because things were not turning out the way they wanted, and were thus not fun for them anymore. Sentences like “Hey, that’s not how it’s supposed to be. Let’s do it again!” spoken by the little sister not only give an explanation why the last part of a level has to be replayed, but are also harmonious in regard to the story and setting, and support the narrative in a meaningful way.

4.4.2 Magic

The appearance of magic is an important and for some theorists even defining, element of fairy tales. (cf. Lüthi 1996: 2; Peuckert 1938: 11) While closely connected to the fantastic in its widest, most general sense, how can magic itself be defined in a more concrete way?

The online Dictionary.com defines magic as “the art of producing a desired effect or result through the use of incantation or various other techniques that presumably assure human control of supernatural agencies or the forces of nature.”³² Webster’s dictionary says that magic is “an extraordinary power or influence seemingly from a supernatural source”.³³

32 <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/magic?s=t>, visited on 18 Nov. 2012.

33 <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/magic>, visited on 18 Nov. 2012.

There are two aspects that appear in both definitions. The first one is that by using magic, one might achieve a certain influence or desired effect over other things, persons or events; a direct influence that goes beyond normal human abilities and powers. This kind of magical control is not only fascinating but also desirable, because it promises us an easy and immediate fulfillment of all personal wishes. When *Cinderella* is in need of the proper attire and transportation to go to the ball, the fairy transforms her old rags into a dress beset with jewels, a pumpkin into a coach and a bunch of mice into six beautiful horses. The witch in *The Two Brothers* can turn humans and animals to stone and back again with a touch of her wand. If you possess *The Water Of Life* you can cure everyone from illness, just as the magic bread and sword from the same tale have the power to feed or beat everyone.

Lüthi (cf. 1996: 27f) speaks of such powerful objects as the main requisite of the fairy tale, a magical object or ability that helps the hero to fulfill his quest. Propp (cf. 1968: 43-50) calls these objects “magical agents”. These kind of special magical objects are mirrored in games in the form of special props. While these props might play a particular role in the game’s narration, they must also hold some significance for gameplay if they really are to be perceived as especially relevant and meaningful. As Howard (2008: 84) puts it, “narratological approaches to the role of objects in games must be supplemented by a ludological analysis of their role in gameplay.”

The magic dragon souls the player receives upon killing a dragon in *Skryim*, for example, are not only an important part of the story (only the dragonborn, the chosen one, has the ability to collect them), but they can later in the game be used to learn so called dragon shouts, special skills that work like spells and that are useful and powerful in battles and while exploring the world.

And it is not only the player character that is equipped with powerful magical objects and skills within the game. On a meta-level, the player himself assumes a position of supernatural power. In a way, by creating or even playing a game, a person can bring objects, characters and whole worlds to life in what resembles a magical way. Transforming a heap of polygons and code into an animated monster is of course not magic but rather technical skill, yet to most recipients it might seem close to magic. Similarly, the control that a player has over a game character by simply pressing a button is in reality due to a signal that runs from the controller to the game and triggers an accordant reaction; still, the seemingly connectionless influence the player has over another digital being is in a way comparable to a magical power. (cf. Brooks 1975: 7f)

This is where the second part of most definitions of magic comes in. Apart from the promise of heightened power and influence, what all definitions also mention is the supernatural aspects of magic. At the same time most definitions stress that magic is not *in fact*, but rather *seemingly* or *presumably* supernatural. What that really boils down to is that we do not know how or why magic is supposed to work.

In both fairy tales as well as most games, the process of magic and how it works is usually not explained, but is presented as something normal. No fairy tale character is ever really surprised or even scared when a fairy suddenly pops up in front of him. Similarly, many game worlds, at least in fantasy settings, introduce magic as a normal at least for some species or beings. Even if a dwarf cannot be a mage in the universe of *Dragon Age: Origins*, it is normal that elves and humans can have magical abilities. Even in game worlds where magic does not come with birth but has to be studied in order to learn and master it, magical schools or universities are presented as natural. There might be a need to learn magic, but it is just a profession like learning how to be a carpenter or an archer.

It has been mentioned above that many recipients might in a way perceive or experience computer games and how they work as magical to some degree. Of course, everyone nowadays knows that computers are based on technical and mathematical principles, that they have been built by humans and are therefore not inexplicable or mysterious to all of humanity. Yet for most individuals, their personal, concrete understanding of how those machines really work is not much better than their idea about how magic might work. Or, to quote the famous saying of writer Arthur C. Clarke (1973: n.p.) “[a]ny sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”

Now technology and magic at first might seem like opposing concepts, the first one being the result of science and human reason, the second being an anachronistic belief contrary to what we think we recognize as reality. Steve Collins instead proposes a definition of or approach to magic that neglects the supernatural component and instead focuses on the part of the definition that deals with influencing reality according to one’s own will. “The common theme running through contemporary magical principles is that the human mind is capable of directly influencing the state of reality, whereas conservative views of magic hold that such action is only performed through manipulation of spirits or occult forces.”³⁴ Collins’ approach does not pose technology as opposed to magic, but rather integrates them, suggesting technology as an underlying principle for or a form of magic.³⁵ As an example he names virtual worlds, arguing that they “demonstrate that a reality, albeit virtual, can be recoded, manipulated and changed in accordance with human will.” Or, to put it differently, “magic is the practice of changing and defining a state of reality through the transmission of information.” (ibid.)

34 Collins 2004, http://scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal_id=35, visited on 18 Nov. 2012.

35 A similar allusion can be found in Marshall McLuhan’s book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, which in German is called *Die magischen Kanäle*, (*The magic channels*). The German title hints at the seemingly supernatural or magic qualities and powers that the media extensions give to man by magnifying or enhancing his natural abilities.

Following Collins' updated definition of magic, the computer game can function as the perfect example. The player's input (for example by pressing a button on the gamepad) functions as a transmission of information, often in the form of a command, which then in turn shapes the new state of the virtual world, according to the outcome of a rule-based system or simulation. Without visible connection across the distance of a room, equipped only with a gamepad or mouse that could be compared with a magic wand or artifact, the player can, through the mere pressing of a button, strike an enemy with a lightning nova in *Diablo 2*, punish a disobedient village in *Black & White* or make the sea part in *From Dust*. All of this seemingly without the least effort. Just as the fairy tale hero is equipped with magical abilities or objects whenever he needs them (the magical carriage in *Cinderella*, the ability to magically spin straw to gold in *Rumpelstilzchen*, the magical chest providing *Belle Belle* with all the equipment she desires), thus the player is equipped with all the powers he or she needs in order to beat the game. Of course, bound by the game's rules, not everything imaginable is really possible, but still the player's control, or power, is usually much more than it would probably be in reality.

In games and stories, magic functions as a narrative motif. Reading about magicians and magic objects is fascinating and appealing, and being able to take on the role of a wizard or sorceress in a game is even more compelling since it allows us to conjure up monsters, throw ice and fire and turn people into stone ourselves. And yet, games have a magic quality that goes beyond that of the narrative motif: Even a game that does not feature any fantastic, magical motifs on a narrative level, casts the player in a way into the role of a magician of sorts, a person who possesses powers far surpassing those of everyday life. Instead of swinging a magic wand we press a button and watch how our actions take effect in a remote setting. Without direct touch or influence, worlds and events on the screen rearrange themselves according to our will. To quote Collins (ibid.) once more: "Magic is conducted through the utilisation of technologies, whether those technologies are computers or ancient pantheons. [...] In doing so, magic has appropriated the computer, the embodiment of technological progress, and turned it into a magical tool."

Both magic and technology can invest us with powers that not only surpass our abilities in everyday life, but that are most always also incomprehensible to us in regard to exactly how they work. Of course it is not the aim of this chapter to argue that games are, in the narrower sense of the term, magic. But, as Collins (ibid.) states, "[a]lthough the pragmatic effect of magic is typically considered to be specious, its historical persistence and adaptability suggests a deep human need to understand and bind the universe." Playing a digital game, and making use of the heightened, supernatural agency provided therein, might to a degree fulfill this deeply human wish for magical control over our environment, its inhabitants and objects.

4.5 Conclusion

Fairy tales and games both convey meaning through stories. They share motifs and often present them in a fantastic way or setting.

Both fairy tales as well as games have therefore frequently been accused of being escapist, of offering nothing of meaning or relevance to the recipients and their real lives. Yet there have also always been theorists who have argued that indulging in **fantasy**, especially during childhood, is not only good but even **necessary for** being able to successfully handle **real life** later on.

For children, fantasy lets them explore and act out unconscious wishes and fears without having to face them directly. For adults who have successfully learned how to deal with fantasy and the transition between reality and imagination, such fantastic stories, experiences and worlds are an opportunity for a more conscious self-exploration and can provide an alternative approach to real life, or to put it differently, can relate to real life exactly by providing an unreal alternative.

People know game and story worlds are not real, but they might nevertheless offer meaningful insights into ourselves and provide **alternative points of view on our real world**. It is the **fantastic contrast** that allows us to take a step back and gain meaning for or draw conclusions about our real life and selves.

And it is not only the general fantastic nature that is often shared by fairy tale and game narrations; there are also some common **motifs** that frequently appear in both fairy tale and game settings and stories. Death for example is always a symbolic chance for rebirth, but the game in addition (and independent from what its background story might be) lets the player respawn and try again, effectively showing her that she will have to grow and improve if she wants to advance through the game world. Similarly, magical powers can be experienced more directly thanks to the interactive nature of the game which does not only let the player assume the role of a magician, but also equips herself with quasi-magical abilities that she has to use in order to influence the game world and its characters according to her will and goal.

What shows here is that while games can provide meaning on an interpretative narrative level similar to that of classical tales, they always deliver a kind of **experience or meaning** that **goes beyond that of the background story of the game**, and is rooted in the games nature as an interactive medium. The kinds of unique meaningful experiences that might be conveyed through these qualities will be examined in the next and final chapter.

5. Beyond the (Fairy) Story meaning through inherent game potentials

5.1 Introduction

While the last chapter dealt with meaningful narrative aspects and motifs in games, this chapter will focus on the inherent qualities and potentials of the game medium, and how they might create meaning. Espen Aarseth (cf. 1997: 2ff), a researcher in the fields of video games studies and electronic literature, described two levels through which games and hypertexts convey meaning. As Frasca (2007: 17) sums up “[o]ne level is shared with other texts: signs are interpreted in many possible ways [...]. However, games and other cybertexts include a second level of interpretation: the ergodic level.”

The first level resembles Frasca’s playworld perspective and also loosely corresponds with the narrative aspects as examined in the previous chapter of this thesis. The second level, which Aarseth calls ergodic, is the one inherent to interactive fiction and even more so games. On an ergodic level, meaning is not only consumed or interpreted, but also manipulated, changed and influenced by the user. The opportunity to do so at all arises out of the characteristics of the game medium, its interactivity, its rules and mechanics, its simulation-based nature.

That games might convey meaning, or in a narrower sense even messages or distinct ideologies, is not a new idea of course. While the ancient Japanese game of *Go*, for example, was used to provide military teaching and training, *The Landlord’s Game*, which is considered to be the direct inspiration for *Monopoly*, was invented with the aim of teaching people about how new tax laws could establish a better and more just system for land owners.³⁶ (cf. Frasca 2007: 100)

Although setting, playworld or narrative aspects might have their share in conveying such messages, they are rather scarce and abstract in the examples of both *Go* and *The Landlord’s Game*, and can be said to be of a supportive rather than constituting nature. That games have been chosen as a suitable medium to illustrate and teach these meanings or messages must lie in the potentials and aspects that games offer beyond the narrative qualities of other media. Today, the attempt to convey ideologies or specific messages through games continues, most obviously in the form of so-called educational or also adware games. Striving for a more

36 Elizabeth Magie Phillips invented *The Landlord’s Game* (and got a US patent for it in 1904) to illustrate the effects of the “single tax” reform that had been proposed by a political economist of her time. “The object of the game is not only to afford amusement to the players, but to illustrate to them how the landlord has an advantage over other enterprises and also how the single tax would discourage land speculation.” (US Patent Office 1923/1924: patent 1,509,312)

general term, Frasca and Bogost have proposed to call these games “games with an agenda”³⁷. Frasca (2007: 26) describes these games, which might be called serious games by others, as “games that aim to communicate in addition than [sic] entertaining.” What the desired meaning or moral is in such games can usually be figured out rather easily, because they have been designed for and around a certain aim or message: That a game like Frasca’s *The Howard Dean Game for Iowa* wants to coax people into dealing with Dean’s electoral campaign, or that the game *Turn It All Off* clearly deals with showing how important it is to save electricity by switching of devices, is rather obvious.

There are certainly good educational or serious games which use both gameplay as well as setting and narrative to successfully illustrate a certain concept. A lot of them still tend to be rather blunt, though, and aim at conveying one distinctive message to the player instead of offering potential for personal, interpretative meaning or critical thought.³⁸

One thing that researching fairy tales and their potential for meaning has shown is that these stories might be simple, but they are never overly explicit or unambiguous. Going beyond “games with an agenda”, commercial games³⁹ might be a way to find less outspoken, and yet more manifold or subtle meaning. Commercial games are what most of us play most of the time, those that we not only spend time on but also money for. At first it might seem odd to

37 Frasca and Bogost maintained a blog called watercoolergames.org, dedicated games with an agenda. The blog itself is discontinued, but can still be viewed at http://www.bogost.com/watercoolergames/archives/cat_social_games.shtml, visited on 18 Nov. 2012

38 Though it is an admittedly rather worst-case example, the infamous Austrian political game *Moschee Baba* might be used. The flash game provided online by the Freiheitlich Partei (Freedom Party of Austria) in 2010 was a simple fixed screen 2d shooter that required player to target muezzins and mosques in order to keep the province of Styria free from a supposed Islamic “threat”. The game thus serves as a negative example both in the way the party’s questionable ideology is put on top of the gameplay in a very simplistic and superficial way, as well concerning the highly offensive message itself. That the game was perceived as more than mere play unrelated to reality can be seen by the vast reactions the game generated, causing several lawsuits to be filed and finally leading to the game being taken off the web. (cf. Riegler 2010: <http://derstandard.at/1282978601717/Game-Moschee-Baba-FPOe-Werbung-laesst-Muezzins-abschiessen>, visited on 18 Nov. 2012)

Additional information in English language can be found in this online article written by Owen Good (2010) at <http://kotaku.com/5628025/austrian-anti-muslim-game-stokes-outrage>, visited on 18 Nov. 2012.

39 The term commercial games here means games that have not been made for an outspoken educational or “serious” purpose, but primarily for providing entertainment. These games are what is usually perceived as “ordinary” or “normal” games and constitute the majority of games on the market.

examine games which that are designed to be entertaining for the people who play them and make large amounts of money for the people who created them when looking for meaning. On the other hand, what fairy tales demonstrate is that an experience need not be targeted explicitly at education or the distribution of a certain message in order to be meaningful. If fairy tales have taught us something it is that personally significant and relevant meaning might be best conveyed through an engaging, appealing and subjectively interpretable experience. I think this is what games can offer as well, even those primarily made for entertainment, and that is also what this last chapter will look into.

Games are more than narratives, and they convey meaning though more than their narrative aspects. Of course it would go beyond the scope of this thesis to explore all game aspects that might have a potential for meaning and interpretation, but just as the previous chapter examined some exemplary motifs in detail, this chapter will focus on some of the most crucial characteristics of games, and how they relate to the production of meaning. One of them will be the interactive quality that video games feature more than any other medium. Another focus will be on the rule-based nature of games, and what kind of potential arises when we look at games as simulations.

5.2 Meaning through Interactivity

“We grow, we find meaning in life, and security in ourselves by having understood and solved personal problems on our own, not by having them explained to us by others.” (Bettelheim 2010: 19)

Interactivity is usually the first quality that comes to mind when pondering the nature of games and in how far they differ from other media. Interactivity promises to put the player in the position of a communicating, influential party instead of having him play the role of a passive consumer. But how does this concern the production or communication of meaning? As mentioned above, Espen Aarseth (1997: 1) coined the term ergodic for hypertexts and games.

“In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text. If ergodic literature is to make sense as a concept, there must also be nonergodic literature, where the effort to traverse the text is trivial, with no extranoematic responsibilities placed on the reader except (for example) eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages.”

Of course it can be argued that interpreting the meaning of a non-interactive text can also be a non-trivial undertaking. Howard (2008: xiii f), for example, argues that meaning is always

“produced by cognitive and imaginative activity rather than passively consumed. In other words, readers shape the meaning of a text in the way that both designers and players shape the outcome of a game.”

Yet there is one rather definite difference between reading a story or playing a game: A story will take the same turns and reach the same end; it has a stable form, no matter how the reader personally interprets it or draws meaning from it. In contrast, “videogames need the active participation of the user not just for interpretational matters, but also for accessing its content.” (Frasca 2004⁴⁰) Or, as Eskelinen (2001⁴¹) puts it, “the dominant user function in literature, theatre and film is interpretative, but in games it is a configurative one.”

The comeback of agency

The kind of interactive involvement, the agency and influence that the player has seems to be something new, a characteristic exclusive to the medium game. But looking back in history, this is not really the case. In times of oral storytelling, for example, not only the narrator had a great deal of influence on the story he or she was telling, but the audience could also get involved, for example by expressing their feelings towards the story and having the narrator react to their wishes. In fairy tale theory, the term performance has been used since the 1970s to describe this changeable, interactive and communicative quality that the oral telling of fairy stories had for a long time:

“P. ist eine Leistung, die darin besteht, daß [sic!] der Vortragende überliefertes Erzählgut den Erfordernissen des situativen Ereignisses anpaßt [sic!]. Dabei können Erzähltext, Bedeutung, Funktion und selbst die sozialen Beziehungen durch Interaktion zwischen Vortragendem, Publikum und Kontext neu gestaltet werden.“ (Braid 2002: 735f)

This kind of definition describes the process of telling a story as a form of interactive dialogue, rather than a monologue or passive experience. When fairy tales were increasingly written down in books and often read alone instead of being a collaborative experience, this initial degree of agency or influence diminished widely.

From this point of view, games can actually be seen as a step back into a more including, influential way of consuming stories or experiences in general. Bettelheim (2010: 151f) for example says that children “have their own ways of dealing with aspects that run counter to their emotional needs. They do this by changing the story around and remembering it differently from its original version, or by adding details to it.” In a game, such acts that have an influence on what is going on are not so much corrections (which take place when something is perceived as “wrong”) but rather are integral, vital and expected parts of the gaming experi-

40 <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/firstperson/Boalian>, visited on 18 Nov. 2012.

41 <http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/>, visited on 18 Nov. 2012.

ence. Or, as Aarseth (2001⁴²) puts it, “[t]he creative involvement is a necessary ingredient in the uses of games.”

Games often offer the player a choice for how to act, and thus a way to change the course of events and maybe even the game’s end. Even if playing a digital game is in many cases not a dialogue between two real people, it can be seen as a dialogue or act of communication between the player and the game. (cf. Frasca 2007: 196) In this case, the performance that shapes a narration or experience is taken over by the player himself.

Considering that digital games often still have a rather poor reputation as mindless, passively consumed entertainment, the similarities that actually appear when comparing the process of oral story telling sessions to the act of playing digital games casts a new light on this point of view. In a lot of ways of course, digital games are premade products bound to a vast degree by their predefined programming and content, and distributed to thousands of users in the exactly same form. On the other hand though, the interactive nature of the digital game, which involves many possible actions and choices, also provides a by far more subjective and changeable experience than other media such as movies or books do.

Digital games might bring back the involvement and influence of the recipient in a way that has not existed since the oral, communal telling of stories. Walter Benjamin (1963: 20) says that „[d]er einzige Wert des echten Kunstwerkes hat seine Fundierung im Ritual, in dem es seinen originären und ersten Gebrauchswert hatte.“ Similar to the concept of performance, Benjamin sees the biggest fascination of a work in the process that is the work’s creation. This original quality, as he calls it, may both be at work while telling a fairy story as well as while playing a game. Play always has a certain original and also creative quality; it not only means that no two play sessions are ever exactly the same, but it also requires a direct involvement of the player, a creative investment that is used to interpret what one experiences, to draw meaning out of it and to find strategies and solutions for encountered problems and obstacles.

Players constructing meaning

This interactive quality or agency of the player is one of the big strengths of the game medium. But how exactly does it influence the creation and reception of meaning within games? If the player is perceived as a kind of author himself who can change and influence the course of events taking place, then one of the consequences is probably that it is harder for authors and designers to convey a predefined meaning to the player. Or to say it in Frasca’s (2007: 20) words: “The objective of understanding how games convey meaning can be also rephrased as how players construct meaning while playing games.”

This discourse about the author’s loss of control is not one that has first taken place when talking about games. Roland Barthes (cf. 1967⁴³) talked about the death of the author, a

42 <http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html>, visited on 18 Nov. 2012.

43 <http://tinyurl.com/barthesautor>, visited on 18 Nov. 2012.

notion typical for postmodern literature theory. Barthes says that the author as the most important producer not only of a work but also of its meaning is really a modern concept, established in our society since the Age of Enlightenment. In the earlier times of oral narratives, the narrator was probably admired for his or her great performing skills while telling a story; he or she was, however, not perceived as the primary producer of meaning. In the case of oral fairy tales, for example, no author is known. “It was mentioned before that the folk fairy tale, as distinct from more recently invented fairy tales, is the result of a story being shaped and reshaped by being told millions of times, by different adults to all kinds of other adults and children.” (Bettelheim 2010: 150) In postmodern literature, the author once again has to give up the role as an expressive genius who determines and communicates his or her meaning or message to a passive audience. Instead the recipient or user is credited with the task of creating meaning. Fairy tales, through their symbolic, abstract and ambiguous nature lend themselves especially well to the creation and interpretation of subjective meaning. Games through their interactive and emergent nature are also excellent at providing a possibility for manifold personal experiences and meanings. Just as an ever changing and varying performance was at the core of early storytelling, thus the constantly varying performance of the player is one of the core elements for creating experiences and meaning in digital games. “[F]or unlike fairy tales, the game player is responsible for unfolding the story by actions and choices [...]. This makes him or her an active teller (rather than recipient) of the tale.” (Morie/Pearce 2008: 5)⁴⁴

In role play games for example –especially those of an open world type that put more focus on personal experience than on a predefined course of events – the player’s choice of character class and abilities often influences the feeling of the gameplay experience and thus potentially the meaning that might come across. A player who plays a thief or rogue character might experience how important it is to be cunning, prepared and patient if one wants to succeed as a physically frail character in a hostile world, while the feeling or meaning that comes across when playing as a well-armored, hammer-wielding Orc warrior might be very

44 An example where this perspective can be said to take shape on a meta level is the design of *Bastion*. In *Bastion*, the protagonist, (a little boy who, in the best fairytale tradition of nameless heroes is simply called The Kid) is forced to leave home and explore foreign parts of his world in order to find powerful magic shards and cores. While the player explores the levels, collects objects and fights monsters, the kid is always accompanied by the voice of Rucks, the narrator, who comments his every step. In contrast to many other games, these voice overs do not just appear during cutscenes or at relevant story points that are the same for every player. In *Bastion*, Rucks’ voice really tells what is happening at the moment; he does not recount the game’s general background story but instead narrates the personal story that takes shape through the player’s actions, including every victory, defeat, and fall that the player takes. Thus not only the player’s gaming experience can be said to be performative, but also the resulting story or narration itself.

different. While one gameplay experience might be better described as playing a stealth game, the other might take shape as a combat based-action game.

And there are yet more extreme approaches that could even be said to subvert the gameplay or meaning intended by the author to a certain degree. In many RPG games like *Skyrim* or *Oblivion*, some players have chosen to play non-violent – or pacifist – characters. These players try not to kill any person or beast within the game, and instead rely on strategies that use stealth, good speech skills and illusionary magic to master quests and achieve their goals. Of course, in most games not every single quest can be completed without using any violence at all, possibly forcing pacifist players to miss some quests and also some achievements, rewards etc. Yet this restriction can in itself be said to convey a certain meaning, namely that one can advance far in a world without using violence, but also that there are things one might never get or positions one might never reach if one chooses not to harm anyone in the process. Although the game itself might be set in a fantastic world, this kind of meaning can be said to be applicable to the real world as well.⁴⁵

In some cases, players might even choose to play games in ways that were completely unintended by the designers. The game *Formula One Grand Prix* is a racing simulator that, according to its genre, requires players to complete laps on a racetrack and win by being faster than the other contestants. Although the game was known for its detailed rebuilds of real-life racing tracks and for its comparatively realistic racing physics, there were also some driving aids that could be switched on to make the game easier. One of them was an indestructible mode that would prevent players from incurring damage. Some players, instead of driving fast to win a race, would turn on the indestructible mode, turn around on the track, and aim at crashing into every other car in the race until the track was cleared. This alternative, self-posed goal turned a game about racing and winning by being the fastest and most skillful driver into a game about wrecking cars and beating other contestants using a brute force approach.

When a multiplayer component is added to a game, possible ways of interacting and playing together – or against one another – become even more numerous. The game *New Super Mario Bros. Wii* allows four players to play at the same time. The decided goal of the game is of course to complete a level; the players are, however, free to set what could be called a sub-goal amongst them, which might influence the way they play and thus construct meaning. Players might, for example, try to collect and complete all sets of coins within a level; a goal that is best achieved by cooperating and helping each other. The meaning one could draw from such a play session could be described as “together we are strong”, and could be said to teach players how to work as a team in order to achieve a higher goal, or how some tasks might only be fulfilled by trusting others and relying on their help. In contrast, players can choose to play *New Super Mario Bros. Wii* as a kind of “Last Man Standing” game. Instead of

45 An exemplary account of a non-violent playthrough of *Skyrim* by Randy Yungkans can be watched online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDD71MCTeNo>, visited on 18 Nov. 2012.

helping and supporting each other, the goal of each player might be to sabotage and surpass the others while keeping all her own lives and being the only one left when reaching the end of the level. The possible meaning or message actualized during such a play session might be a variation on the “survival of the Fittest” theme.

Although it is hard to say what kind of meaning an individual player might gather from all these experiences, the examples described here illustrate that the player can definitely play a big role in shaping a gaming experience and what that experience might communicate. A term connected to these alternative ways of playing is “emergence”. Jesper Juul (2002⁴⁶) says that “the concept of emergence can be used for explaining how games can feature huge amounts of variation even though they are based on simple rules [...]”. Harvey Smith (2001⁴⁷) and Penny Sweetser (cf. 2008: 8, 160) often also stress the element of the unplanned or unexpected within emergent strategies or actions: when a player in a racing game turns around and starts to drive into other cars in invincible mode, she is using a way of playing that is made possible by the game’s rules, but that was most probably not intended and possibly not even predicted by the game’s designers. While emergence and interactivity in general offers more different ways to play and thus create personal meaning, they also limit the author’s or designer’s control. As Craig Reynolds puts it:

“An emergent game world is unpredictable and so it is hard for the designer to impose the same sort of fine-grained control over progress of the story, dramatic tension, and other aspects that are important to many of today’s games and form the very basis of other art-forms like novels, plays, and movies.” (Reynolds/Sweetser 2008: 299)

Of course none of this means that a game experience becomes completely arbitrary through the interactive freedom that the player has. The game itself – the simulation, its world and rules – has been designed in advance, and although different or even unexpected things might happen, it always plays a role in what is going on. Or to put it in Frasca’s (2007: 196) words, “from a rhetorical point of view, the question is how does the game and the player collaborate –communicate– in order to reach those interpretations.”

Some of the examples described above, as well as some of the definitions one can find for the term emergence might seem to suggest that players deliberately try to subvert the gameplay intended for the game, or try to derive from the game a meaning contrary to the one intended by the designers. In some cases this might be true, and even reveal interesting alternative experiences. In most cases though, players tend to be willing to look for offered meaning or follow an intended path at least to some degree. Howard (cf. 2008: 31f) uses the *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar* game as an example to illustrate this. *Ultima IV* features a rather elaborate

46 <http://www.jesperjuul.net/text/openandtheclosed.html>, visited on 18 Nov. 2012.

47 http://www.igda.org/articles/hsmith_future, visited on 18 Nov. 2012.

virtue system, based on eight virtues which each have a corresponding color, village, dungeon, companion etc. within the game. In order to successfully complete the game's quests, players have to act out these eight virtues and understand how they are connected to the actions and choices they have to make. *Ultima's* designer, Richard Garriott explained that he only created this virtue system because fans and critics of his former games had been "reading things into my games that were simply statistical anomalies in the programming." (Borland/King 2003: 72) Realizing the potential that this hunger for meaning in players had, yet at the same time not wanting to be dogmatic, Garriott instead developed his system of virtues, which lends itself to versatile subjective interpretation through exploration and enactment by the player. To put it differently, he "wasn't interested in teaching any specific lessons; instead, [*Ultima IV*] would be about making people think about the consequences of their actions". (ibid. 73)

Meaningful actions

What this example shows once more is that games do not need an elaborate classic story, expensive cutscenes or similar in order to be expressive and convey meaning. If interactivity is taken as one of the core qualities that digital games offer, then it makes sense to put a focus on how meaning arises out of action instead of mere narratives. In this regard Howard (cf. 2008: 21, 29ff) speaks of what he calls "meaningful action", describing that a player can change or create meaning by shaping an experience through her actions. Chris Crawford (cf. 2003: 165ff) uses the term "verbs" for actions that a player can perform within a game. Verbs like walking, running, jumping or shooting define the actions a player can take, but they can also "shape the interpretation of the playing experience. [...] For example, parents might change their mind about buying a specific videogame just based on if the game allows players to kill or not." (Frasca 2007: 120) Actions have an expressive power; in fact they might often communicate more directly and more powerfully than lengthy descriptions of something. Fairy tales therefore use actions to communicate meaning in simple and direct form, without the use of many words (cf. Lüthi 1960: 15; Pöge-Alder 2011: 216). Games, according to their interactive nature, are even more apt to use actions instead of indirect descriptions in the first place. And what is more, acting out meaning oneself holds the potential of making this meaning appear even more personal. According to Bettelheim (2010: 49), especially a younger child "can develop only highly personalized concepts about what he experiences."⁴⁸ Instead of just witnessing the actions of a fairy tale hero, the player can not only be said to become the hero herself within a game, she also has to make all the hero's choices, fight his fights, etc. This can be seen as one kind of non-trivial effort that Aarseth (cf. 1997: 1) speaks of. In movies, the common approach is "show, don't tell"; in games it might be described as "do, don't show".

⁴⁸ Bettelheim in this case refers to Michael Polanyi's (cf. 1962: xiii f, 17) concept of personal knowledge, which states that, in contrast to the positivist view of science, even factual knowledge is based on or influenced by a person's commitment, passion, personal judgment and belief.

Our Western worldview is still widely based on a dualism between mind and body, between thought and action, that can be traced back to the seventeenth century and Descartes' philosophy of mind. We assume that we make sense or gain meaning out of the world by thinking about it and using our mind. That meaning might not only arise by using our cognitive skills, but also through how we act is often ignored. Computer scientist Paul Dourish (2004: 206) sees performance and action as a factor closely connected to thinking and reason when it comes to the creation of meaning:

“Embodied Interaction is about the relationship between action and meaning, and the concept of practice that unites the two. Action and meaning are not opposites. [...] Action both produces and draws upon meaning; meaning both gives rise to and arises from action. [...] This relationship between action and meaning implies a similar relationship between the physical and the symbolic.”

Although taking an action in most digital games (apart from certain Wii or Kinect games) is different from many real-life actions in as far as it involves less physical movement or effort, gameplay actions can still be said to both produce meaning and act upon it. Coming back to the concept of games as transitional spheres or worlds for reality testing, the game world offers the player a chance to act out a variety of meanings that she might not be able to actualize in the same form in real life.

Standing up and fighting, helping other people or doing something of great importance might be easier in games than in real life, but that is okay for transitional worlds. Doing something good – or in a more neutral sense, efficient – within a game, and seeing the successful consequences that it has, might also be encouraging for the player in real life; it will confirm to her that standing up and taking action can be meaningful, relevant and effective, not only in virtual space but potentially also in the real world. This is the kind of reality-testing that transitional spheres are for, and this is also the kind of positive message a fairy tale tries to convey. But in a game it might work even stronger, because other than in a tale, where the outcome was predefined anyway, in a game the player has the possibility to choose an action herself, to perform it to the best of her own abilities, and to then see the consequences – and meaning – of what she did.

Choices and Consequences

Actions are not only powerful tools for conveying meaning because they can provide more personal involvement with an experience than passive interpretation does. What is more, performing an action is often connected to making a choice. For everything we do in life there are a dozen alternatives that we could choose instead, and most interactive games provide us with a similar, though probably smaller choice of possible actions or paths. Chris Crawford (2003: 165f) sees choice as the fundamental component that both story and interactivity share.

“Aristotle placed choice at the core of story; choice reveals character. And choice lies at the heart of interactivity; a user makes a choice with a keyboard or mouse, and the computer responds to that choice. Verbs [actions] are the vehicle of choice [...]. Whenever we make a choice, we are choosing between verbs.”

If there are many choices though, how can one secure that however the player chooses or acts, her actions will be meaningful? This once again brings up the question of how game authors or designers might offer meaning in their games, when it is actually the player who, through her actions, determines much of her own experience. What might at first seem like a paradox here could actually just require an alternative way of thinking in order to make sense.

According to Frasca, the player and the game collaborate or communicate in order to construct meaning. Interactivity itself can be defined as a kind of communication where every input or choice of the player is processed by the game and then met with an according output or response. Giving a choice to the player does not mean complete arbitrariness or the loss of all (offered) meaning. All it might need is to stop thinking in predefined messages, and instead think in terms of a system of **meaningful consequences**. Instead of an interpretative act that leads to the understanding of a message, games can be seen a kind of experience where choices or actions lead to corresponding consequences.

If a designer manages to provide expressive, meaningful consequences it is not dangerous any more to let a player make her own choices and change her gaming experience by doing so. The opportunity to witness or experience many possible consequences might even in itself convey more meaning or be more expressive than just following one continuous line of action. Often the meaning of one deed becomes even clearer if it is compared to other, alternative actions, and what they might lead to. Showing meaning by varying consequences is a strategy that is also used in the fairy tale, although the fairy tale can be said to be a strictly linear medium. Fairy tales therefore use the stylistic device of repetition, which Lüthi calls the depiction of events in three sequences. (cf. Lüthi 1996: 26)

The most common example is that three brothers set out on a quest. The first two usually try out an unsuccessful strategy or make a bad choice: the first two brothers in *The Water of Life*, for example, choose to be unfriendly and not answer the dwarf, and as a consequence he lays a spell of ill-luck on them. The third brother acts more kindly and answers truthfully, and is rewarded with helpful objects for his quest. The first of the three pigs builds his house out of straw and is eaten by the wolf after he has blown down the house; the same happens to the second pig who tries his luck building a house out of sticks. Only the third pig, who is diligent and hardworking, and chooses bricks for his house withstands the wolf's attack and survives.

Through their interactive nature and agency games offer an even bigger potential in this regard. Instead of just showing one after another how different actions might lead to different outcomes, games offer the opportunity to try out different things and make different choices

oneself. In some cases the player might even be forced to try out different strategies, because her first choice or action might prove insufficient for a certain challenge.

Of course, whereas in fairy tales only one brother succeeds, in games there is usually more than one strategy that can be applied. Yet even if two or more strategies are successful, they might still have varying consequences and thus meanings in the long run. In *Skyrim*, for example, a player can choose to just buy a desired object from a local shop, or she can choose to steal it from the owner. Both actions might get her the desired object, but committing a crime to obtain the object might lead to the hero being chased by the city's guard, who will try to put him in prison. Instead of serving her time in prison, the player once again is provided with the choice of fighting the guards or just fleeing the city. This in turn leads to her not being able to return to the city in peace though, forcing her to either avoid the place in the future or again pick up the fight upon returning. Both the honest lifestyle (or playstyle) as well as the criminal one might pay off, but the consequences will probably communicate a different meaning to the player. While being honest is shown to mean hard work in order to gain money or improve one's speech skills to buy objects for cheaper prices, the meaning of a criminal lifestyle is that one can achieve some goals quicker, but it will also mean that one is not well liked or well treated by others.

And even apart from unique actions and their meanings, the very nature of the game as a choice- and consequence-based simulation might in itself convey some kind of meaning or worldview to the player. As Frasca (2004⁴⁹) states:

“Unlike narrative, simulations are a kaleidoscopic form of representation that can provide us with multiple and alternative points of view. By accepting this paradigm, players can realize that there are many possible ways to deal with their personal and social reality. Hopefully, this might lead to the development of a tolerant attitude that accepts multiplicity as the rule and not the exception.”

Actions, choices and consequences are not only vital parts of games that arise out of their interactive nature and make gameplay itself compelling and engaging. They are also ways to offer manifold interpretable meaning, which can be the more personal because it arises in parts out of what the player himself does. Of course, seeing meaning not as a message distributed by the author but rather as something that comes out of a process of communication and personal experience requires some rethinking and a change of perspective. But maybe it is just this openness that makes meaning in games the more valuable, multifaceted and potentially appealing to a great number of people. As Ian Bogost (2007: 19) puts it: “Here, persuasion shifts from the simple achievement of desired ends to the effective arrangement

49 <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/firstperson/Boalian>, visited 18 Nov. 2012.

of a work so as to create a desirable possibility space for interpretation. [...] Success means effective expression, not necessarily effective influence.”

Fairy tales are expressive stories and experiences, yet one reason for their popularity is that they usually do not offer any definite meanings or morals, but instead provide potential for subjective interpretation. Games have the potential to do so in even more ways. Trying to provide meaningful action, offering expressive choices and designing relevant consequences are goals that game designers might try to achieve if they want to create games that can offer relevant meaning to the player, both within the game world as well as potentially beyond it. What kind of exact meaning or message the player will then draw from her personal experience can – and should not – be determined one hundred percent in advance.

5.3 Meaning through Rules

Simulations

As has been shown, consequences are an important way of constructing meaning in games. That games can provide varying yet suitable and meaningful consequences for most actions and choices a player might take is in big parts due to the simulation based – or procedural – nature of the game. Frasca (2007: 89) defines simulations as “the modeling of a source system through a second one which maintains [...] some of the original system’s behaviors.” Thus games as simulations can not only be used to recreate real life activities or scenarios (like building and managing a city in SimCity) but can also simulate fictional settings or activities (like fantasy worlds inhabited by dragons) and still offer meaningful consequences for actions taken within the system. Janet Murray (1997: 274) speaks of procedural authority in this regard. “The most important element the new medium adds to our repertoire of representational powers is its procedural nature, its ability to capture experience as systems of interrelated actions.” Or as Ian Bogost (2007: ix) puts it when speaking about the expressive potentials of video games, “I call this new form procedural rhetoric, the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures.” As can be gleaned from Bogost’s statement, rules are an essential component, if not the basic constituting elements of simulations. Even though game rules cannot work independently from components like story or setting, they are a vital means of illustrating meaning on a gameplay level, as well as supporting the expressive qualities of other game aspects. (cf. Frasca 2007: 25, 87)

Speaking about games, Frasca (cf. *ibid.* 117ff) names three kinds of rules that play a role in the creation of meaning: Model rules state how the playworld works, and as a consequence what the player can or cannot do within the game. Grade rules measure anything that creates a gain or loss within the game, thus defining what a player should or should not do, e.g.

subtracting a life when Super Mario jumps into a pit, or giving points for killing an enemy. The third category is goal rules, which define the winning or losing conditions of a game.

Rules are abstract

What is valid for every game, or actually for every simulation, is that rules are always abstract to a greater or lesser degree. Frasca (cf. *ibid.* 118) for example stresses that a simulation is usually less complex than the original system it is based on. Deciding which rules and factors are included or left out has a big influence on what the simulation might communicate. While scientific simulations aim at creating a model of reality that is as accurate and objective as possible, games might use a certain degree of abstraction as a welcome possibility to create meaning, or to focus on what one might perceive as the most meaningful. (cf. Bogost 2006: 122)

What is more, simplifying a complex situation or system might make it easier to understand it. Speaking about mathematician John Conway's *Game of Life*, a game or simulation based on three simple rules that shows how organisms grow and die over time, Bogost (*ibid.* 98) names three purposes the game serves:

“First, it offers a window into the unknowable complexity of nature. Second, it provides a simplified representation of that complexity, such that it can be meaningfully experienced. Third, it provides (potentially) fungible insight into the nature of real life, through the successful use and interpretation of the game.”

According to this description, Bogost (*ibid.*) revises Frasca's definition: “A simulation is a representation of a source system via a less complex system that informs the **user's understanding** of the source system in a **subjective way**.” [emphasis added]

Reducing the complexity of a game by reducing its rules to those that are most relevant or meaningful might thus not be a restriction at all, but might lead to more expressive, meaningful gameplay, as well as to a larger potential for subjective interpretation and understanding. In a way, a similar tendency or stylistic device can be found in fairy tales. Fairy tales are not procedural but rather strictly linear, yet they also rely on reducing their events, characters and motifs to the most relevant ones and leaving out everything that does not provide any meaning or fulfill any function for the story. The aspects that are featured in the tale in turn are abstract to a point where they are expressive, yet their exact meaning always depends on subjective interpretation. (cf. Lüthi 1996: 27ff)

Both in fairy tales and games, the reduced number of elements in general leads to a situation where every piece, motif or rule plays a relevant and meaningful part within the system.⁵⁰ Other than in real life, where influences are so manifold and situations so complex they can

⁵⁰ As Worringer (1921: 58) has put it, human beings look for abstraction and a kind of regularity in art as an “Ausruh-Möglichkeit innerhalb der Verworrenheit und Unklarheit des Weltbildes.”

hardly ever be taken in or understood in their completion, in a fairy tale or game one can rely on the fact that whatever one encounters is there for a purpose. Even though fairy stories and especially games might be full of problems, difficulties and challenges, in a way it is order instead of chaos which reigns in these worlds. Huizinga (1955: 10) even says that play in itself is or creates order: “Inside the play-ground an absolute and peculiar order reigns. [...] Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection.” Similarly, the player can usually rely on the fact that everything that happens in a game will ultimately work towards some kind of ending or goal. In a game it might not be exactly clear how this end will look, but through the fact that she is playing a game (as opposed to open, free play), the player can deduce that there is an ending that can be reached and that she will thus be able to win the game or complete it successfully.⁵¹

Here it is necessary though to distinguish between the ending of the story in a game and its ending as a goal-oriented rule-based system. While a game story might have what a majority of people will consider a sad ending, the player can at the same time say that she has completed the game successfully – met the goal rule –, by having defeated the last boss, having reached the end of the last level, etc. In *Fallout 3*, for example, the player can at the end decide whether she will sacrifice herself or her companion Sarah in order to turn on a machine and provide pure water for the surrounding area and its people. Although one could say that the game’s story takes a pretty sad ending either way, reaching the game’s end is at the same time a success in itself. This is a peculiar quality that is provided through the goal-oriented nature of the game, as well as through the connection of a rule-based system with a narrative background story, that the player can complete an experience successfully, even if – or maybe just because – her character dies in the end.

Rules are never independent

Although rules definitely play a constituting part in all games and can also be used to convey or illustrate meaning, they can never be seen as completely isolated aspects. The very abstrac-

51 It should be mentioned that not absolutely every game features a goal rule that specifies what the player has to do in order to win. There are also games like *Tetris* where there is only a losing condition (the building blocks reach the top of the screen) but no winning conditions that leads to a successful completion of the game. (cf. Frasca 2007: 193)

Another interesting game in this regard is Frasca’s *September 12th: A toy world*, which is a news-game made to illustrate how violence only begets more violence instead of solving conflicts. In the game, while trying to shoot terrorists with missiles, the player cannot help but accidentally kill civilians within the detonation radius as well, which as a consequence turns other civilians into terrorists, leading not to peace but to an ever growing number of terrorists. The game tries to convey that violence is never a solution by “sabotaging a convention that is pervasive in all games: that there is at least one solution for every each [sic!] challenge.” (ibid. 133)

tion that is typical for rules and simulations, and that can make them the more meaningful, also at the same time leads to a bigger involvement – or interpretive part – for the player. Game designer Will Wright, for example, speaks about how he deliberately relies on players to fill in gaps in the abstract design of *The Sims*. *The Sims* not only features simplified visual designs, but is also abstract when it comes to rules and the simulated behavior of the characters.

“Especially right now with current technology, there are a lot of limitations in terms of what we can do with character simulation. So, to me that seemed like a really good use of the abstraction because there are certain things we just cannot simulate on a computer, but on the other hand that people are very good at simulating in their heads. So we just take that part of the simulation and offload it from the computer into the player’s head.” (Pearce/Wright 2002⁵²)

Bogost (2006: 107) even regards the player’s participation and interpretation as so vital that he adjusts his definition of a simulation accordingly: “A simulation is the gap between the rule-based representation of a source system and a user’s subjectivity.”

This shifts the focus of games as systems towards a perspective that both considers the rules of a game, as well as the player’s role and their connection and interaction in creating meaning. And just as the rules of a game do not hold any inherent or objective meaning independent from the player, they cannot be separated from the game world, its story and setting either. This becomes apparent when examining what role rules play in the construction of morality.

Rules conveying morals

“From a systemic point of view, a game is a challenge that ‘must’ be solved. A direct consequence of this is that games define an in-game moral system stating what is good and bad in terms of goals.” (Frasca 2007: 129) Actions that work towards fulfilling the goal of a game are usually established as good and rewarded within the system, while actions that go against the goal are punished. As Frasca (ibid. 197) continues:

“The rules that define the game’s final objective create a moral system within the game that can be interpreted as supporting the objective as good and dismissing anything that goes against it as bad. Other rules define what can be done and what should be done (because it offers a reward) within the game.”

Or to put it differently, rules tell a player what is a “good” or “bad” action within the game by using consequences. In the game *Under Siege*, presented as a documentary game by its producers and dealing with the occupation and revolution in Palestine between 1999 and 2002, the player has to fight against the Israeli occupation forces, using first person shooter-like

52 <http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/pearce/>, visited on 18 Nov. 2012.

gameplay. Although using violence is a – sometimes necessary – component of the game, the game ends when the player kills a civilian. By using a goal rule for this case (instead of for example a grade rule that would just cost the player some points or a bit of health), the game sends the strongest message possible by ending the game: killing civilians is bad.

In a similar yet less grave way, the game *The Balloon Quest* also sends a message by using gameplay and rules: in the game, the two siblings and main characters can never be too far or too long away from each other. If they are, the game ends and the sister declares that she does not want to play anymore because she is scared. Thus the goal rule, by establishing a losing condition for this case, clearly states that abandoning or leaving behind your little sister is a bad thing.

What becomes visible again here is that rules are hardly ever objective, abstract entities. They do convey meaning, but they usually do not do so completely on their own. “In many cases it may be hard to clearly differentiate between the role played by mechanics and playworld in the player’s creating of meaning. This is because rules and game elements go generally very close together, especially in videogames.” (Frasca 2007: 115) A game where the player has to kill Orcs is usually far less controversial than a game like *Grand Theft Auto*, where a quest prompts the player to kill Bulgarian hitmen. The rule of “kill X to win the game” is the same in both cases, but the meaning is obviously still different.⁵³

As mentioned before, the player of course also has the chance to subvert the intended gameplay, for example by ignoring the established goals or setting her own goals, thus changing not only the way she plays but also the meaning of her actions or the game as such.

With *GTA*, for example, it could be said that the meaning or the worldview illustrated by the designers both through the game world as well as through the gameplay and rules is that of a merciless city where not only the most cunning or strongest one, but above all the most ruthless person tends to win out. Goal rules for certain quests tell the player that killing is a way to succeed; robbing a prostitute gets rewarded through grade rules by giving the player more money, etc. In other words, it is might not be that hard to see why *GTA* and its moral code is so frequently used as an example for controversial games. Yet at the same time, because *GTA* is not a linear predefined novel or movie, but an interactive simulation that is in parts realized through the player’s actions, the player has at all times the freedom to act differently in the open world of the game, and thus potentially change the meaning of what is going on.

⁵³ It should be added here that, although they tend to go together, right or wrong in a gameplay or rule based sense must not necessarily be conform to the moral system presented on a narrative level. In the game *Fable*, for example, you can complete the main questline both by behaving nicely along your journey, or by being mean and selfish and scaring people instead of helping them, etc. The consequences are not that you cannot win if you behave badly in a moral sense, but instead it will affect how other characters behave towards you, how easy it is to acquire money, etc.

In an article on Bitmob, writer Matthew Orona (cf. 2010⁵⁴) describes the experience of playing *GTA* with his four-year-old son. Not familiar with the goal rules of the game, Orona's son intuitively set his own goals according to his subjective worldview by spending most of his times driving wounded NPCs to the hospital in an ambulance car, or driving a fire truck around and extinguishing fires.

“In all his time with Grand Theft Auto, my son never once encountered any of the controversy surrounding this notorious title. He didn't beat any hookers with a baseball bat. He didn't deal drugs. [...] He didn't avoid these things because I told him he couldn't try them; it just never occurred to him to commit these acts in the first place.” (ibid.)

Although this example is just a singular case and cannot be called representative, what it might show is that the player does play an important role when it comes to enacting meaning within a game, and that even if the game presents a dominant strategy for reaching a goal, the player must not necessarily be forced to adopt the game's moral code in every single case. The message or meaning provided on a meta level might simply be that, although there are rules in life, I do not have to bow to them in every single case; I can also choose my own goals and do other things than those expected of me by my surroundings.

A need for critical thinking?

Orona says his son did not enact any of the violence the game usually features because it never occurred to him. This corresponds with how Henry Jenkins (2006⁵⁵) sees the role of the player: “[...] they tend to dismiss anything they encounter in fantasy or entertainment which is not consistent with what they believe to be true about the real world.” Jenkins does not mean that players cannot gain any meaning out of fantastic experiences, what he aims at here is that players usually only attribute meaning to their gaming experiences if they feel that the experience corresponds or bears relevance to their real life in a way, even if it is only through an abstract or symbolic parallel. Jenkins speaks against those critics who apply a direct effects model to games, claiming that players learn to behave in real life the way they behave in games, without engaging in any conscious or unconscious reflection. Instead he proposes a model based on meaning instead of effects. He argues that meaning is created when players consciously reflect on the game, their actions and consequences within the game. Based on James Gee (2003), Jenkins argues that “role-playing enables us to experience the world from alternative perspectives.” (ibid.) According to him, players – at least if they are willing to reflect on a gaming experience – will be able to draw positive meaning even from games that,

54 <http://bitmob.com/articles/my-four-year-old-son-plays-grand-theft-auto>, visited on 18 Nov. 2012

55 <http://web.mit.edu/cms/faculty/WarEffectMeaning.htm>, visited on 18 Nov. 2012.

on a surface, seem to send a “bad” message or moral by, for example, prompting the player to act violently. As an example also described by Gee he uses the game *Ethnic Cleansing*, which was originally designed by a Neo-Nazi group called National Alliance to promote white supremacy. Jenkins argues that, “For many students, [...] playing the game will encourage critical thinking about the roots of racism and reaffirm their own commitments to social justice rather than provoking race hatred.”

While the critical thinking promoted by Jenkins is certainly a great way to consciously draw meaning from gaming experiences, it might work better for adults or older children supported by teachers, than it would for young children. As Bettelheim stresses, children often deal with problems by using their unconscious. They are able to draw a lot of deep and relevant meaning from a story or experience, even if this meaning might not be visible on the surface, but they often don’t do it by reflecting consciously and critically. Thus they might not be able to gather meaning that is actually the opposite of what is presented to them, since they lack the critical reflection necessary to subvert an openly provided meaning and turn it into something contrary.

The question about possible effects that games might have on younger or older players is a huge and highly complicated one, and cannot be pursued any further within this thesis. What this short excursion shows is that, even if we focus on meaning instead of effects, as Jenkins proposes, it is never easy to judge what kind of meaning really reaches a specific player. Or, as Gee (2003: 46) puts it, “[w]hat ensures that a person plays video games in a way that involves active and critical learning and thinking? Nothing, of course, can ensure such a thing. Obviously, people differ in a variety of ways, including how much they are willing to challenge themselves [...]” What a player draws from a game is not only due to her personal interpretation and way of playing, but might also depend on whether a player is a young child or a self-reflecting critical adult. Although subjective aspects can never be foreseen by a designer, such differences in a target group should probably be kept in mind when designing a game.

As has been seen, rules and interactivity lie at the basis of games as procedural media or simulations. They provide the chance to explore, try out actions and make choices oneself, and still get meaningful outcomes – or consequences – out of them. What is more, it has been shown that although rules themselves have a vast constituting and expressive power, they always work together with and are connected to other factors like the story and setting of the game world as well as the player’s subjective performance, experience and interpretation. In many cases, all those aspects are actually so closely connected that the creation of meaning arises out of a combination of all these factors, thus endowing digital games with a potential for conveying meaning in manifold ways that other media cannot provide. In fact, the games that are not only the most engaging in terms of entertainment, but also the most fascinating, expressive and meaningful are potentially those that support their meaning by using both the

games rules as well as its setting or story, and making them all not only experience-able but also interpretable by the player.

The last section will take a look at how games, through all their inherent potentials, can provide personally relevant meaning by dealing with one of the most common and relevant themes of mankind: that of personal transformation and growth.

5.4 Everyone Can Be a Hero – why games might be the best tools to teach about transformation

*“From the beginning, play is a symbolic act of representation, in which human life interprets itself.”
(Fink 1988: 107)*

Growth and Transformation

Fairy tales feature many recurring topics, among them the fight of good versus evil, the triumph of the weakest, the struggle between pleasure principle and reason, and many more. But if there is one greater theme or topic that is an integral component of more or less every fairytale, it is the motif of personal transformation and growth, both outwardly as well as on an internal level. The question about one’s true identity, as well as the struggle to grow into a “better”, more apt person, is often what really stands behind a hero’s quest or journey. No matter if *The Two Brothers* or *Little Red Riding Hood*, a fairy tale is ultimately a story about making one’s way through life, and doing so successfully in spite of all the obstacles and adversaries one will encounter.

Going through a process of growth while solving problems and overcoming obstacles is also a crucial component of all games. In games, such themes may not only appear on a narrative level, but are also rooted in the gameplay itself. As Frasca (2007: 129) has noted: “From a systemic point of view, a game is a challenge that ‘must’ be solved.” Similarly, Bettelheim (2010: 210) says that “[c]onflicts are what make us dissatisfied with our present way of life and induce us to find other solutions; if we were free of conflicts, we would never run the risks involving in moving on to a different and, we hope, higher form of living.”

When playing a game, the mere progress through the game, in terms of leveling up or reaching more advanced stages of the game, can be seen as enacting such a growth process. A genre that illustrates this growth process pretty directly is that of the role-playing game. Learning through experience and thus gaining more and better skills for one’s character is an integral part of such games. Just like in real life, in such games it is often not enough to cultivate one ability, like one’s fighting skills. What has to be achieved instead is a kind of balance that enables the player to solve different kinds of challenges within the game, ones that ask

for battle skills as well as problems that require stealth skills or social skills to master. Just as the integration of different parts of one's personality is a recurring underlying topic in many fairy tales (cf. *ibid.* 79), the need to develop into a balanced individual is often a requirement when trying to master an RPG.

In fairy tales, outer growth and success is usually connected to inner development as well. Only by realizing something about himself does the fairy tale hero win, and only by dealing with a child's inner anxieties or wishes does a fairytale realize its full potential. In games, the growth process also takes place on two, though somewhat different, levels: one is the advancement of the hero within the game world; the other is the **growth of the player** that takes part simultaneously in real life.

No matter whether one is playing a RPG or any other genre of game, it is not only the avatar that advances within or through the game world by getting higher ranks and levels, better equipment or more abilities. The player also has to improve her skills, for example her ability to plan ahead and manage resources, her hand-eye coordination or her problem- and puzzle-solving abilities if she wants to master the ever-increasing difficulty of the game. In the best case, the player improves skills or learns qualities that she can also use for her real life in other situations. "Tasks that players undertake within a fictional world require the cultivation of real-world qualities, such as patience, planning and effort." (Howard 2008: 35)

And more than that, just as fairy tales are said to teach us something about ourselves and our inner world, thus games can help a player to become aware of her own behavior, her strengths and weaknesses. Seeing oneself struggling to take a good or bad decisions in a game like *Fable*, becoming annoyed and impatient when forced to use a complicated logic based approach for solving a puzzle, or finding oneself in the role of head strategist or team leader in an online multiplayer game might cast a new light on one's behavior in certain situations, and help us see ourselves in a way we might not have noticed in everyday life.

Howard (2008: 7) names the "unswerving effort to reach a goal of self-expression and self-improvement" as one of the main human motifs, in literature as well as in games. Other than classic narratives, where the recipient can only admire this effort taken by the hero, games give the player a chance to try to achieve these goals himself. While writers never knew if people imagined themselves acting within the fictional world, "digital games require players to actualize this potential through goal-oriented actions in simulated space." (*ibid.* 9)

One of the things Bettelheim (2010: 127) stresses about fairy tales is that in these stories, "unlike myths, victory is not over others but only over oneself [...]." Of course, many contemporary games could probably better be compared to myths than fairy tales in terms of narrative motifs or epic scale. Yet all games can be said to equal fairy tales in one way: while a player is always trying to beat the game (on a narrative level for example in the shape of an arch enemy or other external threat), she also tries to win over herself. In a way, the player not only has to overcome the game's obstacles and problems, but also her own insufficiencies.

She has to improve her skills, stay persistent, and most likely also has to overcome her own frustration at times, etc., in order to finally succeed.

In this regard, games, just like fairy tales, can be described as focusing on the “process of change, rather than describing the exact details of the bliss eventually to be gained.” (ibid. 35) A game does not provide a real-life trophy at its end; the reward is the fun that the player had while playing, as well as the knowledge and satisfaction that she herself has managed to beat the game. And this feeling might potentially have a meaning for a player’s real life or identity as well: “The game encourages him to think of himself an active problem solver, [...] one who, in fact, does not see mistakes as errors but as opportunities for reflection and learning.” (Gee 2003: 44)

Quests

A common theme or structure both fairy tales and games make use of to motivate the hero’s struggle is the quest. “The impetus behind quests is achievement, motivated by the drive to overcome difficulties and to better oneself, both in the virtual form of one’s ‘avatar’ and in the real-world skills developed through extended playing.” (Howard 2008: 27) Writer W. H. Auden (2004: 33) argues that quests in various media continue to be so appealing for people because of their “validity as a symbolic description of our subjective personal experience of existence [...]” What Auden means is that, despite the often fantastic setting of quest narratives, real human life closely resembles the patterns typical for quests, because we tend to experience our everyday life “as a series of major and minor goals with uncertain outcome in which we struggle with good and evil impulses.” (Howard 2008: 8) Stories about quests – even if they might be fantastically exaggerated – and especially games where the player can fulfill various quests himself, thus provide us with an imaginative way of perceiving our own life, and help us to make sense of it or find the courage that we at times need for it.

Quests in games are also regarded as a way of connecting story and gameplay, or to put it differently, meaning and action. For Howard (cf. 2008: 28) quests are especially suitable tools to convey what he calls “thematic meaning” to the player. Thematic meaning is “communicated when the player acts out a set of ideas that comment upon the simulated world of the game and the ‘real’ world outside of it.” This meaning can take shape in the form of a basic theme like the conflict between good and evil enacted through battles within the game, or it can be more detailed and pieced together through various actions and choices the player makes, or through other aspects like the space the player moves in.

Symbolical spaces

Typical symbolic spaces that serve both a gameplay purpose while also conveying underlying meaning are, for example, towers where the player has to make her way to the top to fulfill her quest. Found in games like *Oblivion* or *Dragon Age*, the player’s upward movement through such a tower is not only a spatial movement, but also has a symbolic correspondence to the leveling up of the game character, the advancement through the game and its story,

and the inner and outer progress and growing skills of the avatar as well as the player. Typical for both fairy tales and games are also labyrinth like spaces that might symbolize or convey confusion and a feeling of being lost, both inwardly as well as on an external, spatial level. In games, such places are often dungeons of some kind, where the player has to explore many alternative and intertwining paths in order to find a secret, a treasure or simply the exit. Thus the feeling of being lost and confused manifests itself on a gameplay level as well as on a story level. One of the most frequently occurring symbolic spaces in fairy tales is the deep dark wood which can also be found in many games. An exemplary game that uses a forest as an explorable symbolic space is *The Path*, which is based on the tale of Little Red Riding Hood. The disorientation and uncertainty of growing up is probably one of the game's main topics, and is enacted through the gameplay mainly by roaming through a seemingly endless forest without clear goal or direction. Interpretations for the game are manifold and can differ a lot from one person to another, according to their personal experiences. Being a game, it is not only the girl dressed in red who has to make sense of her surroundings in *The Path*, but it is also the player who has to make sense or draw meaning from her personal playing experience.⁵⁶ "The player of a quest controls an avatar who passes trials to acquire greater levels of skills and accomplishment, but the close relationship between player and avatar means that the achievements of the avatar are accompanied by real development on the part of the player." (Howard 2008: 56)

Empowered Characters

Another thing that shows in *The Path*, that is relevant when talking about games as experiences of transformation and growth is empowerment. As Frasca (cf. 2007: 132) has pointed out, a game's difficulty can be used as rhetorical device to convey meaning. *The Path* is about the confusing sides of growing up, and similarly, the avatar has few abilities and the player often feels rather powerless and lost herself. Similarly, many horror games like *Amnesia* use a feeling of powerlessness to evoke an atmosphere of fear and dread, where the dominant strategy is one of fleeing instead of fighting.

Other games in contrast create a feeling of empowerment by featuring strong characters and especially by enabling the player to improve her character's abilities while playing.

56 Writer and designer Emily Short (2009) provides her interpretation in an article on Gamasutra, referring to the game's sense of spatial confusion and sometimes frustrating pacing and lack of clear direction: "[B]eing a teenager is itself often intensely frustrating and boring. The constraints on your actions often seem stupid and arbitrary. Privileges come slowly. The world is irritating not least because you are marginalized by it. You are often made to feel like a person-in-waiting."

Online at: http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/116712/Analysis_The_Path_And_Story_Pacing.php#.UIGekrauTeO

“Part of the pleasure of storytelling comes from character [sic!] who can perform beyond their assumed capacities (i.e. the beggar who became rich). In videogames, avatars are also limited but not exactly by their traits but rather by the game’s verbs. Actually, game verbs are a way to shape a game character’s personality because they define their strengths and weaknesses.” (ibid. 121)

In fairy tales, the protagonist is usually not a famous hero, but a child or normal person, often even the known simpleton of a family or the youngest of three siblings. Part of the fascination of such tales rises out of the fact that even – or especially – a supposedly weak character can rise above herself and achieve great deeds. If a game wants to illustrate the human process and struggle for growth and improvement, a good way might therefore be to start out with a weak character and allow the player to improve her character based on her own achievements and experiences within the game. This is the basic principle of most RPGs, but numerous other genres also offer additional abilities, power-ups or equipment that becomes available over the course of the game.

For children in particular, it is sometimes easier to identify with a character that at first seems as weak as they themselves might at times feel. Seeing such a character grow and win out in the end is an encouraging message all on its own. Games can send this message in an especially convincing way, because parallel to the growing abilities of the avatar, the player in the real world also improves her skills of playing the game. That the capacities of the virtual hero thereby usually surpass our real life abilities by far must not be a problem. What Bettelheim (2010: 57) says about the fairy tale hero in this regard can be applied to game avatars as well:

“The fairy-tale hero has a body which can perform miraculous deeds. By identifying with him, any child can compensate in fantasy and through identification for all the inadequacies, real or imagined, of his own body. [...] After his most grandiose desires have thus been satisfied in fantasy, the child can be more at peace with his body as it is in reality.”

Or to put it more generally “While the fantasy is unreal, the good feelings it gives us about ourselves and our future are real, and these real good feelings are what we need to sustain us.” (ibid. 126)

In narratives like fairy tales, identification is usually encouraged by using a non-specific character that is not described in much detail. This blank slate approach is also often used in computer games. The hero in the *Fable* games is indeed simply referred to as “Hero”, the avatar

in the *Halo* games wears a non-see-through helmet and is called by his rank of Master Chief, the two protagonists of *The Balloon Quest* are simply named Boy and Girl.⁵⁷

James Gee (cf. 2003: 56, 60ff) claims that one of the major learning potentials of games – what he calls projected identity – is actually this negotiation between multiple identities that the player has in real life and within the games. A game character might outwardly be very different from the everyday player, he might be a shining hero or a downtrodden creature; he must not even necessarily be human in order to be appealing to the player and convey something of meaning to him. “Powerful player-characters are often those that speak to many players’ real-life hopes, fears, and issues. They offer players a chance to enact them and explore possibilities.” (Ibister 2006: 206) That a character has some weaknesses or flaws which make her ‘human’, that she has to overcome problems, improve and grow in order to reach a goal is probably often more important for potential identification than realism is.

As transitional worlds (or training grounds, as Richard Kelly calls them) games and the role playing that is so often a part of them enables us to experience the world from alternative perspectives. “The process of training can occur most effectively when the player sees her avatar as an extension of her real-world self rather than an escape form or contradiction of it.” (Howard 2008: 35) According to Kelly (2004: 91), if players manage to see themselves and their game characters as an integrated personality, “some players even learn enough from their second lives inside the game world to improve their first lives in the real world.” How directly such learning might occur, and whether it requires a greater or lesser degree of conscious critical reflection is of course arguable.

Fear, Violence and the Scary

An important part of any personal life or growth process is always the confrontation – and overcoming – of certain threats, fears and anxieties. Games also feature a lot of conflict, problems and sometimes also violent, evil or scary content. Especially when it comes to children, though, parents often still think that they should be shielded from everything potentially bad or worrisome.

“[T]he prevalent parental belief is that a child must be diverted from what troubles him most: his formless, nameless anxieties, and his chaotic, angry and even violent fantasies. Many parents believe that only conscious reality or pleasant and wish-fulfilling images should be presented to the child – that he should be exposed only to the sunny side of things. But such one-sided fare nourishes the mind only in a one-sided way, and real life is not all sunny.” (Bettelheim 2010: 7)

57 Another strategy is to let the player customize his avatar. In a way this approach is opposed to the blank slate approach, because it relies on a lot of subjective detail instead of vague archetypical characteristics, yet the aim of customization is also to create a character the player can identify with personally.

Of course scary and violent content should be presented to children in a form that reflects their age, for example by using fantastic settings and characters. If this is the case, though, dealing with outer threats as well as inner anxieties or violent feelings can be a very important part of successful growth and self-development. Even if reality tends to be more complex when it comes to good and bad than many fairy tales or games are, it might just be this abstraction or clear-cut externalization of feelings and fears (for example in the shape of an evil antagonist) that enable players to deal with them in a satisfactory yet meaningful way.

“Every man wants to experience certain perilous situations, to confront exceptional ordeals, to make his way into the Other World [...]” (Eliade 1958: 126) More than stories, interactive games allow players of all age groups to not only fight and defeat evil themselves, but it also allows them to give shape to, enact and also confront their own aggressive or other negative feelings instead of suppressing or denying them. As Bettelheim (2010: 7) says, “the source of much that goes wrong in life is due to our very own natures – the propensity of all men for acting aggressively, asocially, selfishly, out of anger and anxiety. [...] children know that they are not always good; and often, even when they are, they would prefer not to be.” That one is not a bad person just because one sometimes has bad thoughts or feelings is a significant realization in the process of growing up.

Other than in stories, “[d]igital games put the responsibility for this violence on the payer, who must acquire the dexterity and persistence necessary to destroy his enemies as well as making choices about when and where to act violently.” (Howard 2008: 102) Once again, the simulated nature of games and the ability to display adequate consequences might be a way to show to the player that although violence is a possible choice, it might not always be the best one, or the one with the most favorable consequences.

Apart from displaying concrete violence, games can teach players on a meta level that standing up and fighting for what one believes in is a good and worthwhile endeavor, and what is more, that one has a chance to succeed, even if the opposing forces might seem overpowering at first. Fairy tales and games can be used to make children understand rules of society and teach them how to act accordingly, for example, by fostering team work, logical and strategic thinking, patience, etc. At the same time they can be used to encourage critical thinking and a certain degree of subversion. They communicate that courage, persistence and the resolution to stand up and fight against evil powers or existing orders can in the end lead to a better world.

Fairy tales and games do not deny the existence of sorrow and failure. The obstacles and challenges, and the resulting set-backs or deaths along the way are what make both for compelling stories as well as for engaging gameplay, and in the end make a final victory the more valuable and personally relevant. That one must never give up, despite initial failure, is communicated through many fairy tales and games. “The message is effective as long as it is delivered not as a moral or demand, but in a casual way which indicates that this is how life is.” (Bettelheim 2010: 32) Games can provide such ways and foster such insights by always

providing the possibility to respawn and try again, as well as through the fact that the player can usually expect a happy or successful end.

“Fairy tales, unlike any other form of literature, direct the child to discover his identity and calling, and they also suggest what experiences are needed to develop his character further. Fairy tales intimate that a rewarding, good life is within one’s reach despite adversity – but only if one does not shy away from the hazardous struggles without which one can never achieve true identity. These stories promise that if a child dares to engage in this fearsome and taxing search [...] he will succeed.” (ibid. 24)

Which tale or game might appeal the most to a certain person can never be said in advance, just as one can never determine exactly what kind of meaning a person might have gained from a gaming experience, and whether this person will be willing or able to apply this meaning to her real life. Improving one’s skills and changing one’s personal perspective while playing and finally beating a game is always an experience of transformation and growth in itself. At times all that has grown in real life will be the players skills at playing this exact game, but at times, the personal transformation might just extend further.

6. Conclusion

games as new fairytales for children and adults

Throughout their history, fairy tales have repeatedly been regarded as highly positive and valuable as well as criticized and mistrusted as being too scary, escapist, repressive or simply irrelevant for real life. Games and play as such, although always part of human life, have undergone similar changes in perception and reputation, and accusations against them have often resembled those targeted against fairy tales in many ways.

In recent years, digital games in particular have become a common pastime for children as well as adults. In some households they might even have replaced other formerly common forms of entertainment like fairy tales or possibly stories in general. That adults as well as children spend much of their free time playing digital games is reason enough to focus not only on the engaging entertainment they can certainly provide, but also to inquire about the kind of meaningful experiences they might offer to the player. So, is it true, as Morie and Pierce (2008: 1) argue, “that digital games have come to fill the cultural niche traditionally occupied by fairy tales, and that they are ideally suited to realize some of the unique characteristics of this genre of folklore and literature.”? And to take up the research question for this thesis: In how far can games go beyond what fairy tales accomplish and convey meaning through their own, inherent characteristics?

Of course, as has been shown, not every game has the potential (or the aim) to serve a similar purpose or convey any message similar to that of a fairy tale. Abstract games like *Tetris* or other puzzle games, for example, are still focused on offering engaging entertainment, and do not try to convey any kind of personal meaning beyond the game itself. Some other genres or individual games, though, show the potential to communicate meaning similar to that of fairy tales, or convey it in a similar way; what is more, digital games, beyond their narrative abilities, bring numerous other characteristics inherent to the medium which can also be used to communicate or offer meaning to the player and do so in ways that might potentially be appealing and relevant both within the game world as well as beyond.

The multilayered meaning of games

As has been explored, one of the most valuable abilities that digital games and fairy tales share is their potential to convey more meaning to the recipient or player than is visible on the surface layer at first sight. Fairy tales have a simple, direct and linear narrative structure on the outside; they use stylistic devices like symbols, abstraction, actions and externalization. According to many theorists it is exactly this simple nature on the surface which allows for more interpretative potential and subjective meaning on another, personal level. This is what Lüthi calls the fairy tale’s absolute connectivity, and what Bettelheim alludes to when he says that these stories, although on an overt level they are very different from our modern mass

society, teach readers more about the inner problems of human beings and the solutions to their predicaments than many other experiences do.

Games work on many levels as well, or at least have the potential to do so. A lot of the critique targeted towards digital games today might actually be based on the fact that many people only see what one could call the surface level. Especially if someone does not get the chance to play a game but only sees a screenshot or reads a short description, all that this person comes to know is a small part of the game's setting, its graphics, and maybe one of the main actions performed within the game. On this outside level, a game (just like a fairy tale) might seem very simple, stereotypical, or also overly violent or fantastic. And in certain cases, this first impression might really be all that there is. But, as has been demonstrated, games in many cases also have the potential to work on more than this obvious surface level, and convey meaning beyond what is apparent at first sight.

Semiotic and ergodic – beyond narration

Like classical narratives in books or movies, games can be interpreted on what one might call a semiotic level. (cf. Frasca 2007: 17) For example, visual images or **narrative** motifs of a story can be interpreted as signs or symbols that encode meaning. Motifs like death or magic, or typical characters like monsters or witches are common for both fairy tales and games.

What also shows when looking at such motifs in games, though, is that they often carry more meaning than that encoded on a narrative level. For example, magic not only appears in games by way of a magician character. But what is more, the interactive nature of the game also casts the player in a role similar to that of a powerful, influential magician himself.

Espen Aarseth has in this regard described games as ergodic, meaning that games require some kind of active involvement or performance from the user in order to advance and create meaning. What this means is that, beyond a narrative and semiotic level, games also feature inherent characteristics like interactivity or a procedural, rule-based nature, which can also be used to convey or create personal meaning.

Digital games not only bring interactivity back into mainstream media, they feature it as one of its main characteristics. Instead of being a mere recipient, the player now becomes an active force, and what is more, she not only proceeds through the game by taking actions and making choices, she also **enacts meaning** through them. By choosing between a stealthy rogue character, a powerful warrior focused on physical battle, or even a pacifist character that abstains from violence, the player of an RPG will not only determine which strategies she will have to apply, but will also enact different experiences or gain different personal perspectives. Similarly, playing as a team in *Super Mario Bros.* will show the player the meaning of “together we are strong”, while playing against each other will illustrate what it means to stand on one's own and not to trust anyone else.

Rules are another way for games to convey meaning. Rules that define what the goal of a game is, or which behavior is rewarded or punished, can often be used to create a **moral system** that the player will probably have to adhere to at least in part if she wants to be successful. In *Left 4 Dead*, shooting a zombie brings you points, while shooting one of your teammates will result in a disadvantage through health loss, meaning that the use of firearms is only legitimate if it is directed towards the undead and not towards humans. In *Skyrim*, stealing a desired object is a valid option, yet it will result in city guards trying to hunt down the player and put him in prison, thus illustrating that even if stealing might work out, it is not the moral choice in life, and not the most trouble-free either.

Consequences such as these are yet another potent rhetorical device games and game designers can use to convey meaning. While linear media usually only provide one course of action, games, through their interactive and procedural nature, allow a player to explore and test out various options, paths or choices, and experience their respective consequences.

Of course, a certain game can never provide complete freedom of choice or actions. But this does not have to be a disadvantage. By showing a more **abstract** or simplified version of a given reality (an approach also used by fairy tales), a game as **simulation** might focus on what the designer sees as most important or meaningful, and it can make the experience for the player clearer and more understandable as well.

In this regard, games might also be seen as **transitional worlds** that the player can explore, while at the same time testing out her role, function and influence in it. That a game world, just as many other transitional spheres, is thereby often **fantastic** and does not exactly correspond to reality must not be a disadvantage: being able to take on an alternative identity (avatar) within an alternative surrounding might just help us change the perspective we have of ourselves and our real life world, and encourage us to reflect critically on it.

Subjective meaning

Rules, choices, consequences and actions are all built into the game of course, yet in order to be actualized, they all need the participation or input of a player. Or, as Frasca points out, games do not just convey fixed messages; it is both player *and* game that **communicate** or collaborate in order **to create meaning**. On one hand, this increasing importance of the user means that the author or designer loses some of her control, both over the individual playing experience, as well as over the meaning or message that might be gained from it. On the other hand, the role of the author as the sole creator of meaning or truth has been in a decline since the onset of postmodern theory anyway. And just as is the case with fairy tales, the subjective experience and interpretability of games might actually be their greatest potential when it comes to conveying personal meaning.

This does not mean that designers do not have the chance to incorporate any meaning into their games. Usually many players will even try to find what they assume to be an intended

message or meaning, and in the course will also explore their own understanding. *Ultima IV* has been named as an example, just as the game *The Path*, where people had extensive discussions online about what the little girls' (and therefore players') experiences in the deep dark wood might actually signify.

Integrated design

One of the most successful strategies to create engaging and meaningful games is probably to combine all aspects – or what Frasca calls rhetoric levels – that games can make use of. If a game has a narrative game world, as well as rules, activities and consequences which all contribute to a certain experience, these games might successfully communicate something that is not only meaningful within the game world, but potentially even beyond it.

I have repeatedly brought up the game *The Balloon Quest* as an example to illustrate certain ideas, because personal work on the project provides me with more insight into both the designers' intentions as well as the experiences and meanings that singular players gained from it.

On an overlying level, *The Balloon Quest* is a game about growing up and finding oneself. More precisely, it is a platformer title that features two siblings who are only referred to as Boy and Girl within the game. One is the little sister, who due to a handicap can't walk but instead uses her lively imagination to create a fantasy world in which she can fly. Her brother, who is something like her counterpart, is a more grounded type who uses his physical strength and agility to overcome obstacles. In order to advance in the game world, the player has to successfully use and combine the abilities of both kids.

That the children need each other to advance within the game world is not only communicated through the introductory story sequence, where the girl asks her brother to carry her. The necessity of working together is also enacted through the gameplay, where certain parts can only be mastered by combining the different abilities of both characters. If the player leaves the little sister behind, or allows her to be harmed, goal rules and subsequent consequences (decreasing mood of the kids or a setback to the last checkpoint) show that this is "bad" behavior. That being left alone feels bad for the little girl, thus affecting her imaginative world, is in turn communicated to the player on a visual level by draining her surroundings of their otherwise lively colors.

That working together means being stronger and better at solving problems but at the same time also requires patience and consideration is one of the core meanings that is communicated and enacted through every part of the game.

Having all rhetorical levels of a game work together not only makes for a coherent gameplay experience (what Salen and Zimmerman call meaningful play). More than that, in some cases, this meaning might even have the potential to be subjectively relevant to an individual player, carrying over to his or her real life in one way or another.

While playing *The Balloon Quest* with kids between the age of 8 and 9, one boy for example let the little sister drop to the ground instead of catching her. One of his friends immediately scolded him, telling him in an accusing voice “You can’t drop Kathy!”, thus referring to the player’s real-life sister without hesitating. Of course, such individual cases can in no way be called representative, and do not necessarily reveal anything about the experience or meaning that any other player will draw from the game. And yet it shows that, even though a game might be fantastic or targeted primarily at entertainment, at times players can personally relate to such gaming experiences and connect them to their real life in meaningful ways.

Transformation, subversion and empowerment

That a game or story can serve primarily a purpose of entertainment, and yet at the same time teach players about things or foster understanding and meaning is not a completely new insight. Charles Perrault already stressed this potential when speaking about fairy tales in the seventeenth century. Similarly, games like *Chess* or *Go* would not have been played if they had not been entertaining, yet at the same time they were used to demonstrate strategies that were also applicable in real life.

When considering whether a game might provide meaning, the experience as a whole has to be considered. I have argued, for example, that a lot of games have the potential to serve as experiences of personal growth and transformation. This can be actualized through an according background story, but is also widely due to the inherent characteristics of a game as such: the advancement through the game’s levels towards a successful goal, the overcoming of obstacles and solving of problems on the way, the recurring need – and chance – to try again, the growing real life skills of the player that increase corresponding to the progress of the avatar within the game. As Morie and Pearce (2008: 10) put it when comparing digital games and fairy tales, “they fulfill a similar and vital role in providing today’s children a sense of ritual and power in their own hero’s journey from child to adulthood.”

Fairy tales and games have the potential to show children and other players the meaning of things like teamwork, patience or persistence, which are not only useful within a game but also meaningful for life in real-world societies. But what is more, games can also encourage critical thinking and subversive behavior. In a way, this might be one of the aspects parents have been worried about with both fairy tales and games. Besides being shaped to educate, fairy tales also always used to deal with motifs like the victory of the weakest over the strong, children over parent, etc. In such tales, the poor but just bagger replaces the powerful but mean king, shattering the prevailing social order for the better. These stories allow children to indulge in fantasies of fighting and killing monsters, of standing up and confronting evil. Many games in a way offer similar things to players today. That aspects like violence or fear are involved in such games might be frightening for parents, but it might also provide an opportunity to empower the player.

That digital games, as a comparatively young medium, still seem to belong mainly to the domain of younger generations might make them especially suited for such disruptive tendencies. While viewed critically by parents not only because of their content, but also because of the medium itself, younger people tend to take naturally to it, having by far fewer problems seeing these media as part of their lives, and maybe even as meaningful extensions of them. Davidson et al. (2008: ix) point out that these new media can help young people to critically review and stand against the systematic and institutional control they are often subject to in our society. “This is one reason why the alchemy between youth and digital media has been distinctive; it disrupts the existing set of power relations between adult authority and youth voice.”

Potentials and responsibilities

Of course, all the positive aspects that have been named here must ultimately be seen as a potential, not as a guarantee or recipe for creating a successful game or conveying a certain predefined message. As Jack Zipes (2002: 200) points out about fairy tales, “[t]heir value depends on how we actively produce and receive them [...]. They pose a predicament which we must continually confront and try to resolve anew.” And this is just as valid and relevant for digital games. Authors and designers have a great responsibility in this ongoing process of production and reevaluation, but players also always have an important role when it comes to constructing personal meaning or critically scrutinizing their gaming experiences.

Which meaning might ultimately come across to a player can never be fully determined in advance. While one recipient might intuitively understand killing a monster as a symbolic encouragement to stand up against evil, an already aggressive or unstable person might also see it as a reinforcement of his or her understanding of violence as a valid strategy in real life. One player might gain something of relevance for his or her real life, while another might find no message at all. And while one player will try to think about and reflect critically on what he or she has experienced, others might just not be interested in anything beyond an entertaining past time. And yet, the same is probably true for virtually every kind of experience provided in no matter what kind of medium. No author or designer, no matter how gifted and well expressed, can ever guarantee or predict what kind of personal meaning a specific player will gain from reading their story or playing their game. And this should not be the ultimate goal, either.

What might be worth putting some effort in, though, is encouraging and fostering something like **game literacy**. Although written media are by far not the only dominant form of medium any more, we still widely expect meaning or knowledge to primarily come across through words, an established belief that also becomes apparent when looking at how reading and writing is focused on for example in schools, while things like art education or the use of modern media is only of marginal concern.

Theorists like Sherry Turkle have already called for game literacy or similar concepts, but these concepts have not yet found their way into mainstream education. Younger generations

might have already acquired an improved skill when it comes to reading and interpreting visual images, for example, simply due to the fact that they are surrounded by them on an everyday basis. Yet there is more to it. As has been pointed out about fairy tales, sometimes an experience might actualize its potential meaning best when a child has heard a tale several times, thus coming to better understand the way the genre communicates, or when an adult is there to speak with him about the tale. (cf. Bettelheim 2010: 58) Maybe approaches in a similar direction could also be taken when it comes to digital games, for example, by discussing and reflecting on gaming experiences and their possible meanings, be it together with friends, teachers or parents might foster alternative ways of perceiving, interpreting or reading games in general. Such endeavors could also help change the often overly negative perception of digital games within certain groups, and could provide a chance for educators to use games as in various classes. Further examining the concept of game literacy, and trying to find ways to encourage and help players of all age to be able to gain even more meaningful yet engaging gaming experiences would be an interesting possible goal for future research.

And they played happily ever after...

In the end, as has been shown, there is a basic human ability in people to gain meaning from what they experience, as well as a certain longing to do so. I am not arguing that games – or fairy tales – are the best medium to provide such meaning. But I am convinced that games, through their ability to not only tell stories, but to also function as interactive, procedural, rule-based media, definitely have some strengths when it comes to offering subjective, relevant meaning to people of all age groups, meaning which, under the best circumstances, will not only be useful to them within the game world, but potentially even beyond it, helping people to understand something about themselves and the world they live in.

Games can be meaningful experiences, and they should be used for what we would consider meaningful purposes. Over the last decades, digital games have become a fixed part of many children's, youths' and adults' lives and they sometimes take up a considerable portion of people's time. Not trying to make such a medium meaningful *as well as* engaging and fun would simply be a waste of potential. As Gonzalo Frasca (2004⁵⁸) puts it, neither art nor games can directly change reality. But they might provide alternative ways of acting, perceiving and understanding things, and thus might convey to people something meaningful about themselves and their world.

“Instead of standing outside the world in utter isolation, games provide a two-way street through which players and their ideas can enter and exit the game, taking and leaving their residue in both directions. There is a gap in the magic circle [...].” (Bogost 2006: 135)

58 <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/firstperson/Boalian>, visited on 18 Nov. 2012.

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Mentioned fairy tales

Tale	Authors	KHM no.
Belle Belle ou Le Chevalier Fortuné	Madame d'Aulnoy	
Brother and Sister	Brothers Grimm	11
Cinderella	Brothers Grimm	21
Hansel and Gretel	Brothers Grimm	15
Jack and the Beanstalk	Benjamin Tabart Henry Cole Joseph Jacobs	
Little Red Riding Hood	Brothers Grimm	26 Little Redcap)
Mother Holle	Brothers Grimm	24 (Mother Hulda)
Rumpelstilzchen	Brothers Grimm	55 (Rumpelstiltskin)
The Frog King	Brothers Grimm	1 (The Frog King, or Iron Heinrich)
The Three Little Pigs	James Halliwell-Phillipps Joseph Jacobs	
The Two Brothers	Brothers Grimm	60
The Water of Life	Brothers Grimm	97

List of Games

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Title	Developer / Publisher	year of release
American McGee's Alice	Rogue Entertainment / Electronic Arts	2000
Alice: Madness Returns	Spicy Horse / Electronic Arts	2011
Bastion	Supergiant Games / Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment	2011
Black & White	Lionhead Studios / EA Games	2001
Breath of Fire: Dragon Quarter	Capcom Production Studio 3 / Capcom	2002
Dead Rising	Capcom Production Studio 1 / Capcom	2006
Dragon Age: Origins	BioWare/Edge of Reality / Electronic Arts	2009
Ethnic Cleansing	Resistance Records / Resistance Records	2002
Fallout 3	Bethesda Game Studios / Bethesda Softworks	2008
Formula One Grand Prix	Microprose / Microprose	1992
From Dust	Ubisoft Montreal / Ubisoft	2011
Go	Anonymous	
Grand Theft Auto: Vice City	Rockstar North, Rockstar Vienna / Rockstar Games	2002
Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas	Rockstar North / Rockstar Games	2004
Halo	Bungie / Microsoft Game Studios	2001-2010
Kingdom Hearts	Square Enix / Square Enix	2002-2012
Left 4 Dead series	Turtle Rock Studios, Valve / Valve Corporation	2008-2009
Limbo	Playdead / Microsoft Game Studios	2010
Monopoly	Parker Brothers	1934
Moschee Baba	Goal AG	2010
New Super Mario Bros. Wii	Nintendo EAD / Nintendo	2009
Rick Dangerous	Core Design / Rainbird Software	1989
SimCity series	Maxis / Maxis, EA	1989-2007
September 12th: A toy world	newsgaming.com	2003
Super Mario Bros.	Nintendo / Nintendo	1985
The Balloon Quest	Get Grumpy Games / Get Grumpy Games	2012
The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion	Bethesda Game Studios / 2K Games	2006
The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim	Bethesda Game Studios / Bethesda Softworks	2011

The Howard Dean Game for Iowa	Persuasive Games, Powerful Robot Games / Persuasive Games	2003
Tetris	Alexey Pajitnov / various	1985
The Landlord's Game	Elizabeth Magie Phillips	1903
The Path	Tale of Tale / Tale of Tales	2009
The Sims	Maxis / Electronic Arts	2000
Trine	Frozenbyte / Nobilis	2009-1012
Turn It All Off	1E	2007
Under Siege	Afkar Media / Dar al-Fikr	2005
Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar	Origin Systems / Origin Systems	1985