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Computer Games as Ritual Arenas

The web of culture used to be spun from the stories a child heard at a grandparent's knee. Today, it derives from that child's experience with interactive multimedia. (Ohmae 1995. 162).

In an on-going research project at Gotland University, it is my purpose to investigate what kinds of meanings active players consider that computer games communicate to them.

It is a fact that huge numbers of people devote considerable amounts of time to playing computer games. Since the beginning of the 1990's more than 700 million game consoles have been sold. In 2010, 63 million PC and console games were sold in the UK, which is more than one per person. In 2010, computer games were sold for 25 billion US dollars worldwide. The leading online game, World of Warcraft, is played by some 10 million people. One of the most popular single player games, Grand Theft Auto, sold 12 million copies in the first four months, when the third part of the trilogy was released in 2004. In the United Kingdom one in sixty people bought this game within nine days of its release (Miller 2008, 258). According to a Swedish survey from 2010, 92 % of the children in ages 9-16 years play computer games (Ungar & Medier 2010). My question is why.

Purpose

Being a folklorist, I will suggest that computer games might meet similar needs that myths, fairy tales, folk legends, and other genres of folklore did 100—150 years ago.

Folklore as a tool to handling life

One possible approach to folklore is to regard it as a set of cultural tools that allow people to interpret the experiences they make, to handle social tensions, to negotiate moral questions and to understand the eternal existential mysteries of life and death.

Myths, for example, among folklorists are usually understood as accounts about the origins of the world and its inhabitants, of societies and cultures. Generally, the function of myth is to explain not only how some Supreme Being created man in the beginning, but also that this creator put man on top of the hierarchical ladder, above all other living creatures. Myths also teach us about the eternal truths of mankind, what is right and wrong, what is good and evil, and how we are to understand the mystery of life and death (Clunies Ross 1994; Dumézil 1971; Lindow 2001).

Folk legends often handle man's relation to the supernatural forces in present times. Legends can be expected to exemplify what kind of supernormal situations we are likely to encounter and how to act if and when we do. Many folk legends illustrate the boundaries between known and unknown territories, both geographically and symbolically (Klintberg 1972; Palmenfelt 1993; Oring 2008).

Proverbs summarize universal human experiences and knowledge, often seen from the point of view of the established groups in society (Ström 1981 [1929], Taylor 1985 [1931], Mieder 2008).

Jokes and anecdotes negotiate the limits of normality and credibility by stretching or shifting the perspectives from which we regard reality. On the surface, jokes and anecdotes often demonstrate a democratic quality as they let the underdog win over the oppressor. However, since they make us laugh at this breach of the social rules, we might as well argue that their function is to demonstrate how ridiculous any deviation from status quo would be (Davies 1990; Davies 1998; Oring 1992).

There is no doubt that computer game creators have borrowed elements from myths, folk legends, and proverbs as well as of jokes and anecdotes.

Fairy Tales

The traditional folklore genre that shows the most and the closest similarities to contemporary computer games, however, is the fairy tale, at least from the point of view that I want to try here (Apo 1995; Holbek 1987; Lüthi 1983; Zipes 2012).

Both fairy tales and computer games offer playful arenas for testing the limits of the physical reality, of social and cultural norms, and of moral values.

When we are listening to a fairy tale, it belongs to the unwritten agreement between teller and audience that both parties pretend to believe that there exists invisibility hoods, seven league boots, talking animals, singing trees and dragons with seven heads. The fairy tale telling situation creates a (day)dreamlike playground, where we are invited to consider the boundaries of

reality. What would it be like if you could hear the princess breathing in the giant's subterranean cave or if you could see a fly on the church tower in the next parish?

If we regard the fairy tale telling situation from the point of view of ritual theory (Gennep 1960,[1908]; Honko 1976; Turner 1977), we could assume that it takes place inside a liminal state, where “normal” moral and ethical standards are temporarily made invalid or even reversed. What would living be like if you always got what you wished for, if you had a table that was filled with food at your command, or if the gooseherd was allowed to marry the princess?

The ritual arena of the fairy tale telling session allows for bold and maybe even subversive intellectual leaps, but, on the other hand, returning to everyday reality will reveal that the visit to the taleworld was not a *rite de passage* but only a temporary stroll in the land of the daydreams (cf Palmenfelt 2008).

Dragon Age: Origins

To compare these ideas about fairy tale listening to what happens to a computer game player, I want to use my own experiences from playing the game *Dragon Age: Origins*, produced in 2009 by the American company BioWare.

Dragon Age: Origins could be regarded as a free adaptation of Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003) film trilogy to the computer game format. At least it is safe to say that the game creators have been strongly inspired by some features of the films. The humanoids consist of three races: men, dwarves and elves, the temporal setting is vaguely medieval, clothes, weapons, and landscapes are similar in the game and the film. There are dragons

and giant spiders to fight, there are wizards to trust or distrust, there are beacons to be lit, old treaties to revive and spooky tunnels to explore. The overall assignment is to build an alliance between the good forces to oppose the representatives of evil.

The producers have created an extensive history of the game's world, including mythology, religion, culture, literature and folklore. All this fictive knowledge is gathered in a Codex, of which the player can pick up chapters and fragments during the game. The philosophical explanations to evil given in this documentation are of a quasi religious nature: seven Old Gods ruled over the ancient world. They were responsible for the original sin consisting in turning humanity away from the Maker. As a result of this, the Maker in his turn turned away from humanity, transformed the seven Old Gods to arch demons and locked them up in eternal prisons beneath the earth.

Similarities and Differences between Fairy Tales and Computer Games

When you start the game, you are symbolically transported onto the ritual arena of Dragon Age. Just like in the story telling situation you are invited to play according to other moral and ethic values and different laws of nature than you are used to. According to Victor Turner, the ritual arena of computer games should be defined as liminoid instead of liminal, since game playing cannot be regarded as a *rite de passage* that changes the social status of the player (Turner 1982, 58; Dovey & Kennedy 2006, 34ff.) Game researchers Jon Dovey and Helen Kennedy develop Turner's idea:

“...games serve as a kind of ritualized ‘condensed realm of order’, a temporary space with constraints and opportunities unlike those operating in the everyday world. Particular rule-bound spaces (for

Turner, liminal ritual spaces or liminoid leisure spaces) ritually license otherwise taboo activities, like murder and mayhem.” (Dovey & Kennedy 2006, 100).

Game researchers Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004, 94) argue that game players not only enter the famous “magic circle” of Johan Huizinga (1955, 10) but also adopt “a particular frame of mind or ‘lusory attitude’, or what child culture scholar Brian Sutton-Smith called a “subjunctive mood”, or a sense of “what if?” (Sutton-Smith 2001:4).

One of the two crucial differences between listening to a fairy tale and playing a computer game concerns the agency of the player (cf. Dovey & Kennedy 2006, 7) . The fairy tale teller will continue narrating whether you are listening or not, whereas the computer game stops at once, the second you stop entering your commands via the keyboard. The player has to be active to keep the game going. (This does not imply that computer game playing is an interactive enterprise as it is sometimes argued. As a player you are not able to perform any actions that fall outside what the game creators have allowed the game engine to permit. Basically, you are only allowed to turn the game on and off, move your avatar along the preset paths, and complete the stipulated quests more or less in a fixed order. But, on the other hand, if you do not do this, nothing at all will happen).

The other vital difference has to do with the mode of communication. The fairy tale, whether orally told or read from a printed text, is a narrative with epic qualities. It has chronology and causality; it is communicated through the mediation of a narrator (sometimes both the performer and the supposed creator of the text) and since it is a completed story it is told in the past tense (Bauman & Briggs 2003, 197—225; Uther 2008, 504—511).

Computer games certainly have epic elements, too. Within the specific quests one often finds clear causal connections, while the order between the separate episodes often appears to be random. We could compare with the classical epics (or with many fairy tales for that matter), where the story line is limited to following the main character travelling from place to place, performing one heroic deed after the other (Honko 1998; Honko2002; cf. Manovich 2001: 246f).

Computer games show a closer kinship to the literary form of drama, where we as audience watch the events in real time as they happen; we hear the actors say their lines without the mediation of a narrator, and we see the environment where the action is taking place (Booker 2004; Truby 2007). However, computer games take us one step further than the theater does. We are actually invited to step up onto the stage and share the feelings, reactions and experiences of our PC, playable character, who is not only passively present in the here and now, but also actively taking part in the action as it evolves.

It is no coincidence that computer games have been used pedagogically to train airplane pilots, test drivers, and soldiers (Haraway 1991). In front of the computer screen the trainee can practice to react accurately in complicated situations that would be too expensive or too dangerous to carry out in real life. Playing entertainment computer games puts the player in the same situation of simulation (cf. Aarseth 2003, 52). Over and over again the player has to react to similar situations appearing on the screen, analyze potential risks and possibilities, settle on the appropriate tactics, select and group the most efficient allies and take action. The game forces you to learn certain patterns of action and to repeat them until they almost become reflexes. And this rehearsal takes place in a ritual arena where we face challenges different to those we are used to in ordinary life and where we are allowed to, or even expected to, try

different patterns of action governed by different moral values than we usually do.

What does the world of Dragon Age: Origins look like?

The story line of *Dragon Age: Origins* is simple. The player is assigned the task to unite all good forces against a threatening attack from the evil powers, led by the fifth arch demon. (Four earlier “blights” have all been defeated by the good side.) To accomplish this task, the player has to fulfill quite a few side quests before being ready to face the final onslaught. Above all, it is necessary to engage in the inner politics of several societies, choosing one party to side with and consequently to defeat others.

Playing the game involves meeting **a never-ending row of quests**, each of which must be completed before you are allowed to go on to the next one. True, there are resting points between many of the quests, where you can gather your allies in the camp or watch the filmed cut scene that introduces the next quest. Whenever you are not in the middle of a fight, you are able to leave active playing and take care of your characters’ equipment, change their tactics of fighting, or just check the statistics or read the Codex entries.

Most of the quests are built around **acute or latent conflicts**. The hostile forces may attack you unexpectedly or the game may urge you to seek them out and attack them. In the first case you will be surprised, startled or scared, as the attack is often accompanied by a high or frightening sound. The enemies you have to face are violent, cruel and bloodthirsty. You are seldom given any logical reason why they want to kill you. You are not even given a reason why the darkspawn necessarily have to stage a huge blight every four hundred years. This is a quote from the game’s Codex:

No one knows what it is that drives the darkspawn in their relentless search for the sleeping Old Gods. Perhaps it is instinct, as moths will fly into torch flames. Perhaps there is some remnant of desire for vengeance upon the ones who goaded the magisters to assault heaven. (Codex Entry: Archdemon).

Did the game creators made their own task so easy that they invented all kinds of Evil creatures just because the Good ones per definition need an enemy? Did their imagination stop at the outward shape of the evil beings, their terrifying sounds and their cruel killing methods? Did they forget to explain the origins of their evil? Was it too difficult or too uninteresting? Of course not. The lack of explanation, the vagueness and the ambiguity are exactly that which qualifies the evil in Dragon Age to be apprehended as eternal. Mythical evil stands outside time and space.

The dramatic peaks of the game are the recurring fights. The game takes roughly 80 hours to play through and during that time you have to kill around 1.700 times to reach the end. Between the fights there are relatively long transport distances. You have to learn to **orientate** in unknown three-dimensional landscapes. You are often put down into unknown areas, where you get a similar feeling as when you come out on street level from a subway station in an unknown city. Large parts of the transport involve moving in subterranean tunnels, where you might experience the feeling of being caught in a labyrinth. During the game some of the environments are changed, due to warfare, so when close to the end of the game you return to the city of Denerim, where you have spent a lot of time earlier, well-known buildings are ruined, on fire or have simply been wiped out.

Although the master narrative of the game concerns the metaphysical fight between good and evil, the **materialistic elements** are remarkably strong.

All objects that the game characters are able to handle have a fixed price and can be bought and sold. Between the fights you are supposed to sell the items you have looted from killed enemies and buy better equipment for your allies. Immaterial features are measured in points and percent. The qualities, skills, knowledge and experiences of the playable characters, and even their relations with one another are quantified in numerical terms. You can collect approval and disapproval points, which give you more or less influence over your fellow characters, and all these numbers are accumulated in the game statistics. It is also possible to lose points. Like in the case of a stock exchange speculator who has invested in the wrong papers, your accumulated values may evaporate. Of course, the only way a digital game engine can handle matters like these is in terms of mathematical calculations, but it would not be necessary to make these operations part of the gaming situation.

The game invites you to explore your own **emotional reactions**. During the game you will experience what it feels like to become small as a mouse, strong as a Golem, to walk through fire and move between parallel universes. You will be caught in a nightmare, where you constantly return to the same places and see no point of escape. Many times you will experience how you react when you become scared and what it feels like to have to execute innocent people, including women and children for the sake of the higher good.

What Does Dragon Age: Origins Train the Player To Do?

If we accept the metaphor of computer games as simulation machines, what knowledge, then, does *Dragon Age: Origins* train the player to apply? Here are some of my suggestions:

You have to be constantly alert and prepared to foresee attacks and meet them when they come. Violence is the prime solution to all problems.

You have to accept that you might have to perform disgusting and horrible acts, including the killing of innocent beings, to defeat a larger evil. A good cause justifies cruel methods.

You will be trained to do fast categorizations of beings into classes and races and act according to them. You are supposed to lie, betray, break your promises, abandon your allies or kill them, depending on what will best serve your own purposes. Calculation is more important than empathy.

Your degree of success in the game is measured in numbers. You are expected to collect experience points, approval points, and money. Accumulation of material values is a supreme driving force.

Why?

Why do we find these features in a computer game produced by a US company in the post 9/11-world? It would be easy to claim that the bearing elements of *Dragon Age: Origins* reflect some of the dominating narratives of today's western market economies (see e.g. Sutton-Smith 2001: 17). Maybe they do, but rather than making that statement myself, I plan to talk to active players about their motives for playing. From a series of such interviews, it is my ambition to discuss the cultural consequences of moral and ethical values being communicated and negotiated in the ritual arenas of computer games.

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Internet Site

Dragonage.wikia.com/wiki/Codex:_Creatures

DVD

The Lord of the Rings: The Motion Picture Trilogy. Directed by Peter Jackson. Distributed by New Line Cinema.