

Fairy tales and video games: Folk culture in the digital age. A literature review

Cuentos de hadas y videojuegos: La cultura popular en la era digital. Una revisión bibliográfica

Contes de fades i videojocs: La cultura popular en l'era digital. Una revisió bibliogràfica

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Abstract

Fairy tales are timeless stories that introduce people to the literary, social, and cultural heritage of diverse cultures. These stories evolve to reflect contemporary social culture. Today, as the field of Folklore Studies expands and acknowledges the contributions of the internet and virtual reality to the preservation, dissemination, and creation of forms of folk culture, fairy tales are being adapted for mainstream media platforms. They enter into a complex media space that stimulates children's cultural literacy. Thus, fairy tales are not merely simplified representations of reality, but are rather engaging metaphorical convergences of symbols and social expectations. They are transformed into video games that, according to Morie and Pearce, are now occupying the space fairy tales were granted throughout time (2008). This article offers a literature review aimed at contributing to the understanding of how folk narratives create new collectivities that chart a new course for the evolution of folk tradition; elaborates on the dichotomy between folktales and fairy tales, as well as between traditional and video game narratives; explores the intersections between fairy tales and video games; provides examples of contemporary transformations of the particularly popular Grimm's folk tales into video games; and discusses the applicability of Propp's morphology to game stories.

Keywords: fairy tales, video games, narrative, Propp's morphology

Resumen

Los cuentos de hadas son historias atemporales que introducen a las personas en el patrimonio literario, social y cultural de diversas culturas. Estos cuentos evolucionan para reflejar la cultura social contemporánea. En la actualidad, a medida que se amplía el campo de los estudios folclóricos y se reconocen las aportaciones de internet y la realidad virtual a la conservación, difusión y creación de formas de cultura popular, los cuentos de hadas se adaptan a las plataformas mediáticas dominantes. Entran en un complejo espacio mediático que estimula la alfabetización cultural de los niños y niñas. Así, los cuentos de hadas no son meras representaciones simplificadas de la realidad, sino atractivas convergencias metafóricas de símbolos y expectativas sociales. Estos se transforman en videojuegos que, según Morie y Pearce, "han venido a ocupar el nicho cultural tradicionalmente ocupado por los cuentos de hadas" (2008). Este artículo

ofrece una revisión bibliográfica destinada a contribuir a la comprensión de cómo las narraciones folclóricas crean nuevas colectividades que trazan un nuevo rumbo para la evolución de la tradición folclórica. Aborda la dicotomía entre los cuentos populares y los cuentos de hadas, así como entre las narrativas tradicionales y las de los videojuegos. El artículo también explora las intersecciones entre los cuentos de hadas y los videojuegos, ofrece ejemplos de transformaciones contemporáneas de los cuentos populares de los Grimm en videojuegos, y analiza la aplicabilidad de la morfología de Propp a los relatos de videojuegos.

Palabras clave: cuentos de hadas, videojuegos, narrativa, morfología de Propp

Resum

Els contes de fades són històries atemporals que introdueixen les persones en el patrimoni literari, social i cultural de diverses cultures. Aquests contes evolucionen per reflectir la cultura social contemporània. Actualment, a mesura que s'amplia el camp dels estudis folklòrics i es reconeixen les aportacions d'Internet i la realitat virtual a la conservació, difusió i creació de formes de cultura popular, els contes de fades s'adapten a les plataformes mediàtiques dominants. Entren en un complex espai mediàtic que estimula l'alfabetització cultural dels nens. Així, els contes de fades no són meres representacions simplificades de la realitat, sinó atractives convergències metafòriques de símbols i expectatives socials. Aquests es transformen en videojocs que, segons Morie i Pearce, "han vingut a ocupar el nínxol cultural tradicionalment ocupat pels contes de fades" (2008). Aquest article ofereix una revisió bibliogràfica destinada a contribuir a la comprensió de com les narracions folklòriques creen noves col·lectivitats que tracen un nou rumb per a l'evolució de la tradició folklòrica. Aborda la dicotomia entre els contes populars i els contes de fades, així com entre les narratives tradicionals i les dels videojocs. L'article també explora les interseccions entre els contes de fades i els videojocs, ofereix exemples de transformacions contemporànies dels contes populars dels Grimm en videojocs, i analitza l'aplicabilitat de la morfologia de Propp als relats de videojocs.

Paraules clau: Contes de fades, videojocs, narrativa, morfologia de Propp

1. Introduction

Folklore studies include "all the culture of the people" and are represented "in civilised history by strange and uncouth customs; superstitious associations with animals, birds, flowers, trees, and topographical objects, and with the events of human life; the belief in witchcraft, fairies, and spirits" (The Folk-Lore Society, 1879, p.4). Folktales are universal and indigenous narratives, told and embellished by different storytellers of a culture, and orally transmitted to future generations. Folktales, myths, and legends are the fundamentals of folklore that "use common, ordinary people as protagonists to reveal the desires and foibles of human nature" (Swann, 1995, p. 8). Although all tale types maintain a symbiotic relationship, contemporary folklorists emphasize an ideological and crucial distinction between folktales and fairy tales. On one hand, they identify folktales, particularly wonder tales, as originating from oral traditions; on the other hand, they classify literary fairy tales as deriving

from these same oral traditions but reaching us primarily through manuscripts (Haase, 2008). The latter practice continues strong today in various mediated forms.

Fairy tales occupy one of the most prominent places in the field of folk arts, and they are differentiated from other folkloric genres considered to comply with oral tradition. Still, they can be understood only by their relationship to oral tales ((Zipes, 2000). According to Maria Tatar, they “belong to the category

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of folktales, but they stand in contrast to the folk tale which is sharply biased in favour of earthy realism” (1987, p. 33).

Folklorists prefer to use the German term *Märchen* to refer to the fairy tale: a tale of some length, involving a succession of motifs or episodes filled with the marvellous (Stone, 1981).

Ruth B. Bottigheimer claims that they “may or may not include fairies, unfold along predictable lines, with magically gifted

characters attaining their goals with thrice-repeated magical motifs” (2003, p. 57). Despite the similarities between fairy tales and video games, it is surprising that few studies have focused on this topic, including the differences between traditional and digital narratives, as well as the potential connection between Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* (1958) and video games. This study aims to synthesise insights from children’s literature, adaptation studies, game studies, and game theory in order to illuminate how fairy tales resonate with contemporary audiences, thereby highlighting the need for further research in the field of children’s literature.

2. Fairy tale adaptations

The history of fairy tales and folktales becomes lost in the mists of time, as it does in the case of oral stories initially passed down from one generation to the other for entertainment, or the preservation of cultural values. Both fairy tales and folktales reflect aspects of daily life prevalent at the time they were collected, as well as the humans’ penchant for play. Their enduring power lies in the fact that they convey profound universal truths and invade our subjective world. Despite their stable and versatile structure and properties, their power also lies in their capacity to be rewritten, transformed, and adjusted to sociocultural environments (Zipes, 2002; Zipes, 2006b).

The appearance and rise of fairy tales coincide with the cultural construction of childhood: initially, they were not meant for children. Rather, they acquired the form of suitable reading material for younger audiences once the stories had undergone adaptations in terms of language, length, and content (Zipes, 2006a). However, such adaptations are not limited to instances where content is transferred across cultures or modified to align with societal norms, making it suitable for young audiences. Rather, their “survival” largely depends on various art forms—such as theatre, drawing,

photography, cinema, comics, or video games (including digital games on personal computers, tablets, consoles, and mobile devices)—which serve to socialize children according to the prevailing norms of the era (Zipes, 2012).

With fairy tales entering a complex media space and being transformed into video games where, all too often, they suffer from misinterpretations and omissions, they “still maintain their identity” (Burkett, 1979). As they “breathe” through their adaptations (Frank, 2010), they create a sense of universality amongst digital readers without being swallowed by commercial entertainments, a perspective perhaps rooted in the fact that fairy tales constitute a memetic genre deriving from oral traditions which, over time, preserve the folk cultural identity of local communities.

3. The Legacy of the Grimms’ Tales in Digitized Versions

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm are among the most famous folklorists. In their most well-known work, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, the brothers initially recorded German tales that contained the seeds of fairy tales. They wrote these tales down as they heard them and published their collection in 1812. In recent years, their tales have been adapted into video games, or as Marsha Kinder defines them, “database narratives” and artefacts “whose structure exposes the dual processes of selection and combination that lie at the heart of all stories” (2002, p. 127). In today’s era, with humanity having evolved from *homo loquens* (humans in the age of speech) to *homo videns* (humans in the age of audiovisual media) and *homo somnians* (humans in the age of the internet) (Poe, 2011), video games, amusement, and anime holding companies are adapting Grimm’s tales for mainstream media platforms. These adaptations encourage readers/players to participate in an interpretative process that involves comparing elements of the adaptation with their source material, prompting them to consistently reshape their understanding of the texts and their connection to a system of intertexts.

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One of the first such adaptations is the Role-Playing Game Grimm: *Role-Playing Adventure in a World of Twisted Fairytales*¹ released by Fantasy Flight Games in 2007. Role-playing games “fulfil the need for a modern-day ritual cultivating the archetypal symbols of myth and provide a co-created social activity for the enactment of meaningful narratives” (Bowman, 2010, p. 10). This game revolves around role-playing and storytelling, and it can also be played by a single player, with the term “player” recognised by the author both as a user who either plays with pre-constructed characters or creates

¹ <https://www.fantasyflightgames.com/en/products/grimm-rpg/>.

characters that enable monadic interaction with the game environment, and as a reader/player, according to Appleyard's theory of reader development. It shows the progression from player through hero, thinker, and critic, towards pragmatist, and refers to the kind of players who can separate fact from fantasy while still trusting in the world of fantasy (Appleyard, 1991). The "game master" acts as the narrator and rule keeper who, despite not being present as a character, leads and guides players through an eerie environment. Players can choose from a wide array of characters from the Grimm tales (e.g., Hansel and Gretel, Cinderella, Rapunzel, etc.), thereby existing "literally 'inside' the narrative space" as avatars (Manovich, 2001, p. 82). The heroes' actions are determined by the player's skilful use of the joystick and keyboard.

In American McGee's *Grimm*², released by Spicy Horse in 2008, players navigate through a virtual, dark environment enhanced by elements of gothic adventure, satire, and dark humour. Possibly based on the fact that Grimm's original version of the tales was also dark, players are called to transform into darkly twisted versions of Grimm characters across 23 episodes. Each game episode is centred around one of the world's best-known fairy tales, providing 30 minutes of gameplay. Each episode is a complete, standalone experience, and the episodes can be played in any order. The story revolves around a small dwarf named Grimm, who lends himself to a parodic treatment—usually exploited in picture books—informing players that he will not read any Grimm tale to children unless it becomes "dark enough." He wishes for fairy tales to return to their darker roots, making them more like the original stories. Players choose a story and a character from The Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, Jack and the Beanstalk, and other tales, adopting the characteristics of the chosen hero or heroine. They are also called upon to co-create the story, fill up the "Dark-O-Meter", and play the lead in an adventurous, gloomy, and unpredictable version of the chosen Grimm tale. For example, players may be required to turn flowers into dry bushes with thorns or dead trees. Characters undergo dreadful metamorphoses as well. For instance, woodcutters are transformed into bloodthirsty enemies, forest animals into hungry, carnivorous beasts, and so on. The darkness, macabre motifs, dreadful elements, cruel or bawdy passages, and fearful creatures, present in the video games, "meet the preferences and expectations of a specific audience (Kostecka & Mínguez-López, 2021).

*Cinders*³, released by MoaCube and Crunching Koalas in 2012, is an "interactive matrice" (Ferri, 2007)—a playable story described as "a story about freedom, dreams, sisterhood, and finding your own Happily Ever After that may not exactly agree with the stale morals of classic fairytales." In a playable story, it is the players' actions that define the narrative meaning, while in a narrative, the player's actions are governed by the narrative meaning (Ryan, 2009). This game produces many textual

² https://www.gog.com/game/american_mcgees_grimm.

³ <https://moacube.com/games/cinders/>.

fragments and emphasises narrative over competition. The female protagonist, Cinders, unlike those in most video games that follow the European twentieth-century fairy-tale canon, is neither passive nor submissive, as she boldly takes control of her own fate, even if it requires defying the rules. This could be considered an innovative element introduced by the creators of this video game, an adaptation of Grimm's tales.

According to Maria Nikolajeva,

“Open endings, becoming more and more common in contemporary children's literature, lead to thought experiments: what would have happened if the character made a different choice? How would I act in such a situation? What would the consequences be of the options offered?” (2014, p. 194).

Similarly, this video game offers narrative possibilities. Players are drawn into the revised Cinderella universe and, since they can choose among multiple endings, define the narrative meaning, and have total control over the main character's personality, thereby shaping the famous fairy tale in any way they like. They may be required to follow game rules but can also establish their own, while acting as literary characters. Players are also able to invent themselves, identify with their own potentials and needs, and “discover who they really are” (Kostecka, 2019, p. 273).

The aforementioned video games are just some examples of the early adaptations of Grimm's fairy

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tales into video games, each conveying different messages to the audience based on the moral values of the designers' and players' socio-cultural contexts (Trinquet, 2008). The adaptation of fairy tales into games stems from the technologically mediated convergence of virtualised expressive forms, opening up new horizons for scholars in the fields of Literature, Folklore, Ludology, Narratology, and Computer Game Studies (Sherman, 1997), who are

now discussing emergent narratives, embedded narratives, scripted narratives, and enacted narratives (Nivala, 2019).

Taking all this information into account, several questions arise that warrant further exploration: (i) How is “narrative” defined within this context? What are the distinctions and parallels between traditional and digital narratives, and in what ways might fairy tales and video games be similar? (ii) Do video games foster new forms of collectivity that could influence the evolution of folk traditions,

thereby broadening the scope of literary studies? (iii) Can a connection be established between Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1958) and the structure of video games? While these questions necessitate a more in-depth scholarly analysis to offer a comprehensive understanding, this study aims to contribute fresh insights and intriguing perspectives on these topics through a broad interdisciplinary approach.

4. Folk culture in the digital age

4.1. On narrative. Navigation and game playing as "reading"

Traditional narrative relies on representation, adhering to a linear structure comprising a beginning, middle, and end. This form is predominantly shaped by the author or director, with the reader occupying a passive role at the terminal position. This type of narrative unfolds through the establishment of story background and character information, progressing through the activities or conflicts among the characters. Complex situations in traditional narratives play a pivotal role in propelling the plot forward or in encouraging characters to make choices or undergo changes (Jin, 2021). In contrast, the video game narrative—often called "ergodic literature" (Aarseth, 1997: 1), since users employ their imagination, perception, and muscles to enact the story already programmed into the game—consists of images rather than written words and has five core traits: graphics, sound, interface, gameplay, and story (Newman, 2004). It is based on simulation, integrating games into logical series, and focuses more on how events and information are presented to players and the impact of that presentation (Jin, 2021). It includes story characters, story events, and story settings (Ryan, 2001), has a non-linear structure, and its main characteristic is interactivity. Video games introduce innovative narrative concepts such as simulation and immersion. While the video game narrative affects the players' immersive experience, it enables them not only to raise awareness and inspire motivation to influence environmental trends, but also to actively shape the quality of the images displayed (Jin, 2021).

Readers/players in computer games can have a real-world identity, a virtual identity, or a projected identity (Gee, 2003). Jenkins defines video games as a new form of popular art, placing them in the realm of art where Literature belongs, and claims that game designers might be best understood as "narrative architects" (2004, p. 120-121). Video games challenge conventional notions of Literature; they are considered "as the medium most adaptable to the form of expression once filled by fairy tales" (Morie & Pearce, 2008, p. 10) and are essentially divided into three broad categories: (i) action-adventure games, (ii) massively multiplayer online games, and (iii) strategy games (Reinhardt, 2019). Just as literature itself has a playful nature, contemporary video games also tell stories that echo the postmodern writing and reading practices of electronic literary texts. The understanding of texts as

any collection of signs that can be read or interpreted (Sanders, 2022), including literary works, films, and computer games, has expanded the realm of literary studies (Jagoda, 2013). This observation has led to a 24-year-old debate between two rival groups of critics, the so-called narratologists and ludologists in Computer Games Studies.

Narrativists claim that there are affinities between video games and storytelling arts and that video games are authorial narratives similar to literary and film narratives. Therefore, they research aspects such as visual representation, narrative space and time, character narrativity, animation techniques, and more. In contrast, ludologists theorise narrative as the recounting of events; they do not approach games for their narrative dimension and believe that in video games, it is gameplay that plays the central role. Additionally, they focus on the mechanics and functions of video games and their potential to diversify future games (Frasca, 2003; Juul, 1999). Nowadays, most narrativists and ludologists no longer hold extreme positions, accepting the premise that computer game narratives, which encompass digital games, gameplay, game art, etc., “share some of the characteristics of narrative (character, plot, setting, events) like traditional media” (Qin et al., 2009, p. 5), while acknowledging that the degree of narrativity varies in each video game (Arsenault, 2008: 5). The ludonarrative model is now considered an appropriate theoretical framework for studying video games, investigating the role of narrative in games, and discussing the interplay between narrative and gameplay (Bolay, 2018; Toh, 2018).

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As beloved fairy tales are re-created into video games that function as narratives—or at least where narrative is a vital part of their structure (Kokonis, 2014)—renowned scholars argue that video games should be considered a form of narrative media (Aarseth, 1997, p. 5). They are seen as expressive intertextual systems that facilitate aesthetic experiences which emerge from their relationships to particular intertexts (Hunicke et al., 2004; Sanders, 2022), communal rituals—especially in RPGs (Bastarrachea-Magnani, 2023)—and interactive literary texts that transform the reader from a passive consumer into an active producer of the text (Barthes, 1970).

Literary fairy tales and video games are also products of intertextual interactions between previous oral and literary versions (Smith, 2007) or, as Robert Stam calls them, “readings” of other works (2004). This intertextuality is mirrored in video games through “easter eggs”—hidden references to well-known characters, narratives, and other elements integrated into the plot by game designers, which players encounter as part of their experience (Mago, 2019).

Fairy tales and their video game adaptations are both anonymous narratives set in imaginary worlds that often begin with “once upon a time” and feature wonder and/or uncanny adventures (Papadopoulou, 2014, p. 113). As noted by Jack Zipes, the world of the fairy tale has traditionally been constructed by both the storyteller and the audience as a counterpoint to the reality they inhabit (2002). Fairy tales have allowed humans to “invent and reinvent their lives,” with a focus on finding magical instruments, extraordinary technologies, or powerful beings that enable protagonists to transform themselves and their surroundings (Zipes, 2012). Similarly, video games feature elements of wonder and transformation, where “the actual and the virtual coexist, and enter into a tight circuit” (Deleuze, 2007, p. 150-151).

The types of speech representation in fairy tales range from “purely” diegetic to “purely” mimetic, including diegetic summary, indirect content paraphrase, indirect discourse, free indirect discourse (first-person interior monologue), and direct discourse (monologue, dialogue) (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983). Video games employ similar narrative techniques, often using (extra-)diegetic narrators at the outset or interspersed between active moments. These narrators may appear as voice-overs in cutscenes, emanating either from a central or peripheral character within the game’s fictional realm or from an external narrator outside the fictional world. Additionally, dialogues and monologues in video games allow designers to convey stories and fictional worlds without disrupting the player’s sense of embodied presence (Dubbelman, 2013).

Dialogues can be static or interactive, with some games allowing players to engage actively by selecting dialogue options for their characters. In games featuring first-person perspectives, inner monologues are particularly valuable for character development due to the limited visibility of the character’s facial expressions and body language—only arm and hand movements are observable by the player. Flashbacks are used to interrupt the chronological sequence of events to introduce past occurrences. While game designers aim to make “the narration return, as it were, to a past point in the story” (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983, p. 46), they often prefer alternative methods for revealing the past to immerse the player and maintain a sense of embodied presence. To achieve this, “environmental memories” are frequently employed (Dubbelman, 2013, p. 154).

4.2. Children’s new media texts: Video Games claiming a place in the literary field

Fairy tales are characterised by their simple form and typically follow a basic narrative structure. The story usually unfolds in an indefinite time and place, centred around the archetypal conflict between good and evil. The hero, embodying virtue, embarks on a quest fraught with danger. He crosses the threshold between the known and the unknown, performs challenging tasks, encounters supernatural beings and phenomena, overcomes various difficulties, and defeats the villain with the aid of a helper

or magical objects. Ultimately, the hero acquires beauty and a royal crown, and marries the king's extraordinarily beautiful, polite, amiable daughter. If the hero loses his beloved, he ventures out on a quest to find her (a journey that may be repeated), but eventually returns triumphantly, having discovered both the world and himself (Carrassi, 2016).

In video games, the concept of home is similarly ambiguous. Heroes travel between various locations to advance the story (Bostan & Turan, 2020). Characters in video games are assigned specific tasks, and heroes undertake quests that involve journeys, encounters with wizards, trolls, or dragons, and solving riddles. A quest serves as the most accurate structural model for describing the narrative content, representing “a causal sequence of events pertinent to a character or characters seeking to solve a problem or reach a goal” (Prince, 1987, p. 91).

Both fairy tales and video games are not only interactive literary texts that make the reader a producer rather than a mere consumer (Barthes, 1970), but also cultural and aesthetic objects (Sanders, 2022; Papadopoulou, 2014). They do not yield tangible goods; instead, if any outcome arises from a game, it is primarily an emotional and aesthetic experience. They also share common elements with rituals: The fairy tale genre is deeply connected to ritualistic practices such as the ordeal, the descent into the underworld, and the sacred marriage, resulting in recurring patterns within these stories (Eliade, 1963). Video games, in turn, “fulfil a similar and vital role in providing today’s children with a sense of ritual and empowerment in their own hero’s journey from childhood to adulthood” (Morie & Pearce, 2008, p. 10).

Furthermore, fairy tales create a mythopoeic universe that draws readers and listeners into a belief in the stories, providing an immersive experience as they “immerse us through imagination in a fictional world” (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 22). Readers and listeners are not passive recipients; they must perceive and interpret the symbolic language of fairy tales and uncover their hidden meanings. Similarly, participants in video games experience the virtual spaces simulated by computers, navigating these environments, filling in gaps in the narrative design, and responding to system demands. As they engage with fictional characters and realities, immersion is understood as “the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality” (Murray, 1997, p. 98). Players dynamically recreate the plots of fairy tales adapted into video games (Kostecka, 2019), and thus should not be considered passive entities (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Instead, they play “a creative role within an authored environment” (Murray, 1997, p. 98), following rules, adopting the mindset of protagonists, facing challenges, and engaging in gameplay experiences, all while becoming informed about the source text.

According to James Paul Gee, players engaged in computer games operate with a tripartite play of identities: a real-world identity, which refers to “a nonvirtual person playing a computer game”; a

virtual identity, which is either constructed by designers or chosen by players and possesses its own personality; and a projected identity, where players project aspects of their own personalities onto avatars in the digital environment (2003). Over time, players may align their self-perceptions with their avatar characters, fostering strong bonds of identification and shared values between themselves and their in-game personas. Avatars can even become digital extensions of the self (Hart, 2017). Similarly, characters in fairy tales activate mechanisms of projection and identification, influencing the psycho-emotional experiences of listeners and readers (Jones et al., 2014; Koutsoumpou, 2016). Scholars suggest that the functions of fairy tales often mirror those found in specific types of video games. Both enhance imagination and consciousness, contribute to linguistic, emotional, social, psychological, and metacognitive development, and help individuals form their personal identities. Although neither narrative is strictly moralistic, they are linked to archetypal behaviours and encourage audiences to imagine how they might act in situations resonating with archetypes (e.g., being in control or stronger than others). These imaginings and reactions reveal much about their personalities (Dubbelman, 2013; Kostecka, 2019; Sorea, 2018).

Fairy tales reflect the contents of the collective unconscious, and their interpretation is often likened

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to the interpretation of dreams, as both lead to the exploration of the unconscious (Bettelheim, 1989; von Franz, 1993). According to the psychoanalytic approach, fairy tales address themes such as fear of abandonment, sibling rivalries, personal growth, and self-knowledge, all expressed through symbolic language and representations. When readers identify with a character, they are encouraged to examine their own ethical standards, explore their limits, authority, and morality, and acquire life skills. Similarly, games that use symbolic

mimes to represent their stories—especially RPGs where “interactive narrative” practices (Wardrip-Fruin & Harrigan, 2008, p. 85) result in a “co-created shared mythology” (Bowman, 2010, p. 23)—can bring repressed aspects of the player’s personality to the fore. These games allow players to express their feelings and develop social skills by viewing reality from new perspectives (Papadopoulou, 2014; Sicart, 2009). However, it is crucial for players to also consider the perspectives of game designers (Makai, 2011).

4.3. Propp’s Morphology of the folk tale and video games

Smaragda Papadopoulou notes that the inclusion of creatures and stock characters from fairy tales in video games “makes the connection between them and fairy tales obvious” (2014, p. 12). Sarah Lee

Bowman, who emphasises that the narrative of video games is shaped by the audience (2014), argues that Propp's functions and character types are applicable to video game analysis. Moreover, both fairy tales and digital games use the repetition of motifs to build narrative climaxes.

According to Vladimir Propp, fairy tales are "understood as acts of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action" (1958, p. 21). After studying a subset of the Russian folk tale corpus, the Russian structuralist and folklorist identified a tripartite structure in fairy tales: a brief introduction, the main narrative, and an ending. He observed a consistent structural pattern and divided the components of a tale into two categories: variables and invariables. Variables include the *dramatis personae* and items within the tale, while invariables consist of the unchanging actions of the narrative.

In the *Morphology of the Folktale* (1958), Propp refers to these invariables as "functions" and posits that fairy tales are built upon a framework of thirty-one functions, although not all functions are present in every tale. He also explores the concept of the "double morphological meaning of a single function" (1958, p. 66), suggesting that functions can combine into specific spheres that correspond to their performers. Additionally, Propp identifies seven-character types available to fairy tale tellers. In his analysis, action functions are distributed among these character roles, resulting in overlapping *spheres of action* that align with the respective performers. The set of character roles and functions in Propp's framework provides an account of the elementary structure of Russian folk tales. Notably, some character functions may be repeated up to three times.

Propp provides a clear description of how his morphological framework can be used for story generation. He notes that storytellers have the freedom to choose their linguistic means, the functions, the form through which a function is realised, and the attributes of the *dramatis personae* (1958). He deconstructed a tale into a limited set of elementary components and outlined a procedure for recombining these components to construct new tales. His morphological framework is not limited to Russian folk tales; for instance, German fairy tales, particularly those of the Brothers Grimm, align with Propp's analysis. Propp's work became a key reference point for Russian Formalism, Structuralism, and New Criticism in the early twentieth century. It has been instrumental in understanding narratology and has proved invaluable to folklorists and literary theorists for comparing, indexing, and classifying fairy tales.

Propp's model, while celebrated, has also faced criticism, particularly for its neglect of the deeper structures of narratives. Nonetheless, it can be applied to various types of narratives (Berger, 2002), including film, theatre, dance, and games (Bremond, 1980; Bizzocchi et al., 2014; Rimmon-Kenan, 1983; Vanhaesebrouck, 2004). This adaptability suggests that narratology can be transformed into a

performance-oriented method of analysis. Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* is also valuable for researchers in artificial intelligence, game theory, machine learning, and computational narratology, who revisit Propp's structural model as a potential source for story generation procedures. These researchers rely on character functions and the sequence of these functions as the backbone of a story (Finlayson, 2016; Morie & Pearce, 2008; Spierling, 2012). As Yarlott and Finlayson argue:

Within the field of computational narrative, Propp's morphology has a substantial number of potential applications for three reasons. First, Propp's morphology is one of the most formal narratological treatments developed so far, having a relatively clear method for determining and extracting theory components from text. Second, Propp's work separates content from form, allowing a description and analysis of a plot without requiring its instantiation directly into language. These two points combine to make Propp's morphology readily applicable to the creation of computational models. Third, properties of Propp's morphology—that functions always occur in the same sequence—makes them a powerful tool for story generation (2016, p. 2).

As mentioned above, videogame designers and computational narratologists are focused on the automatic construction of story plots and have employed Propp's morphology as a blueprint for story generation systems. They have explored the applicability of Propp's functions to game narratives by breaking down the stories of selected games into acts and mapping each act to Proppian functions. Just as many functions in fairy tales are arranged in pairs (e.g., prohibition-violation, reconnaissance-delivery, struggle-victory, pursuit-deliverance) or grouped together (Propp, 1958), a similar structure is often observed in video games. In these games, the fairy tale hero typically corresponds to the player's avatar, the false hero to the antagonist, the villain to the opponent, the donor to the Non-Player Character (NPC) that provides the player with necessary items, and the helpers to mounts or pets that assist the player in navigating and completing quests. The dispatcher can also be an NPC with a similar role. In fairy tales, the hero is treated kindly when receiving aid from the donor. Similarly, in computer games, the interaction between the hero and the donor NPC can be contentious, with the hero often having to complete tasks or follow orders before receiving assistance. However, the inclusion of side characters in video games introduces additional complexity, affecting the narrative and the player's interactions with these characters. This complexity often necessitates modifications to Propp's functions and the creation of new functions to accommodate these additional elements.

However, the inclusion of side characters in video games introduces additional complexity, affecting the narrative and the player's interactions with these characters. This complexity often necessitates modifications to Propp's functions and the creation of new functions to accommodate these additional elements.

Several computer scientists have utilised Propp's methodology to develop tools for indexing and analysing large videogame corpora (Djaouti et al., 2008; Alvarez et al., 2006). Specifically, Alvarez et al. (2006) aimed to study video games and establish a classification system by following game designers Salen and Zimmerman's "fundamental principles" (2004), which resemble Propp's functions. However, due to challenges in formalising Propp's model, the existence of long-range dependencies between character functions, and the need for a sequence to support a satisfactory ending, many computational narrativists have applied only certain aspects of Propp's ideas to digital storytelling (Dogra, 2017; Gervás et al., 2005; Gervás, 2013; Gervás, 2014). Some researchers have utilised parts of Propp's framework designed for analysing folktales, but have combined it with additional techniques not introduced by Propp; such as interactive storytelling. This combination has led to the argument that Propp's narratological theory might be better suited for sequential narratives or quest-oriented storylines rather than interactive ones, although it has still been employed in several game studies with a narrative focus.

Critics have identified several shortcomings of Propp's morphology: It presents a linear sequence that contrasts with the recursive and circular nature of sequences found in computer games. The fixed sequence of events risks undermining the narrative if disrupted. Propp's framework is also seen as overly restrictive for interactive dramas, where player actions significantly shape the narrative. It has limitations when applied outside its original context and corpus, and it lacks the ability to accommodate player choice or agency (Bostan & Turan, 2020). Barbaros Bostan and Orcun Turan (2020) investigated the literary potential of a specific type of videogame, focusing on RPGs. They concluded that modifications to the original functions and the introduction of new ones might be necessary to cover all acts in RPGs. They also found that the combination of narrativity and interactivity in computer games complicates the adaptation of structural analyses of texts to video games. Furthermore, they noted that Propp's model is more applicable to American videogame stories than to their Japanese counterparts.

Notably, in addition to Propp's theory, other models are helpful for understanding stories in digital games, such as the Goal-Based Scenario (GBS) (Schank et al., 1994), the Hero's Journey (Campbell, 1949), the Event-Based Model of Narrative Structure for Games (Dunfield, 2018), or the Gameplay Gestalt, Narrative, and Interactive Storytelling (Lindley, 2002). Nonetheless, the fact that game theorists and computational narrativists have drawn inspiration from Propp's analysis and attempted to apply his components to their field suggests that, upon closer examination, the seemingly unrelated concepts of folk culture and technology are intrinsically connected.

5. Conclusion

Children of today's "super-technological and super-scientific world" (Barsotti, 2015, p. 71) have undergone dramatic changes, and similarly, their favourite tales are expected to evolve with advancements in the digital world. The digital realm has the capability to generate, transmit, perform, and archive these tales. Given the historical adaptability and resilience of fairy tales to cultural and technological changes, they persistently undergo rewriting and retelling across various new media platforms. As a result, the genre "has become the de facto master narrative of several computer game genres" (Makai, 2011, p. 330-331). The adaptation of fairy tales to video games creates a boundless transmedial universe, demonstrating that these stories are timeless works that continually evolve in response to social developments. As players encounter re-narrations of their favourite fairy tales through new entry points, they engage with cultural creations. Thus, video games become carriers of ethics and perceptions, as well as bearers of a collective post-ethos.

The popularity of video games may stem from their incorporation of widespread motifs, such as the struggle between Good and Evil, notions of honour, the presence of talismans, the journey, and the role of the hero—motifs that are universal and intrinsically linked to human cognitive processes (Mínguez-López, 2014). Additionally, their popularity might be attributed to their ability to prompt players to engage with the genre and the world "with a transformed sense of possibility" (Bacchilega, 2014, p. 80), allowing them to overcome obstacles like the heroes in fairy tales, complete their "missions," achieve independence, and evolve (Lüthi, 2018: 207).

Despite the fact that Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1958) has influenced videogame theorists who revisited it as a rich source of inspiration due to its applicability to a wide range of narratives, and led them to develop a classification system based on recurrent game rule templates and to create a tool for indexing and analysing large videogame corpora (Djaouti et al., 2008), Propp's morphology requires revision to be effectively applied to game stories. It has faced criticism because its linear sequence contrasts with the recursive and circular nature of computer game narratives. The fixed sequence of events, unfolding over time, risks disrupting the tale if altered. Its application beyond the original context and corpus poses significant limitations for story generation. It is also seen as restrictive for interactive dramas, where player actions significantly influence the narrative and struggles to accommodate player choice and freedom. Despite its limitations, Propp's morphological framework remains significant due to its potential applicability to various narratives, making it an important reference point for the study and interpretation of narrative construction. Overall, this literature review illustrates that the interconnection between fairy tales and video games still remains

underexplored and aims to bring together scholars from different disciplines in order to enhance this investigation.

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