

The New Tale: Locating the Fairy Tale in New Media Narrative

Adrien Robertson

Adrien Robertson's essay on "The New Tale" is a lively glimpse into an enduring topic with short narratives – the way jokes, anecdotes, and tales travel across borders, languages, time periods, and media. Because of their tight structural form, fairy tales normally travel especially well. There are a multitude of retellings of every classic tale, in oral, written, dramatic, poetic, and cinematic forms. Yet, as Robertson shows, the tales have been unexpectedly slow to be absorbed in the new medium of gaming. It may be because the open-ended, and essentially generative forms of gaming find the fairy tale (with its strict rules for resolution of conflict) too restrictive. Nonetheless, as Robertson shows, while the tales themselves have not travelled that much, the games have enthusiastically absorbed fairy tale character types and tale motifs. This is a pioneering essay. It explains why something you might have expected to happen didn't happen as it should have.

– Dr. William Barker

As methods of storytelling and narrative construction have advanced alongside technology, the genre of the fairy tale has continually been adapted to fit new modes of narrative. Given the genre's historical resiliency and flexibility in the face of change, both cultural and technical, it is no surprise that fairy tales continue to be rewritten and retold in a variety of new media: they appear on film, in Twitter feeds, in web comics, and as internet animations. By contrast, the dearth of fairy tale translations in the video game industry is remarkable, especially considering the similarities between video game narratives and fairy tales. Holbek identifies six trends in fairy tales, many of which also apply to video games in the twenty-first century: that fairy tales are told only by "skilled specialists" (storytellers or, today, those capable of designing games); that "members of higher [social] strata ... usually regarded them with condescension;" that they "were told by and for adults;" that there is a difference between male and female repertoires; that fairy tales were known to be fictional but told as if true; and that many storytellers "identified themselves with the protagonists of the tales" (41-42). These six traits are easily applied to the realm of the video game: highly skilled specialists are responsible for the narrative design and code; video games have been met with mixed reception by critics unsure of their aesthetic value; they are often marketed to adults (especially the more violent titles); they are usually targeted specifically to male or female players (although the stereotype that the majority of gamers are male has thankfully begun to erode); the games strive to create an in-world level of veracity to sustain the player's suspension of disbelief; and, in many cases, the protagonist of the game can be understood as an avatar of the player, so that the gamer's "I" becomes directly identifiable with the character.

The lack of video game adaptations is even stranger given that literary adaptations, in general, are not unusual in the popular video game market. Irrational Games' *Bioshock* draws heavily on Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead*; Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* series was inspired by Vladimir Bartol's *Alamut*; and *American McGee's Alice* is a gothic sequel to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. But nowhere is there a "Nintendo's *Little Red Riding Hood*," nor a "Square Enix presents *Bluebeard*," though there is the exception of American McGee's episodic *Grimm*. It is impossible to explain such reluctance to transfer the genre to the video game market without mass speculation. But a dearth of fairy tale titles does not necessarily mean an absolute absence of fairy tales. Certain titles, such as *Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* and *Dragon Age II*, those that fall

into the category of quest-based fantasy role-playing games, are directly comparable to fairy tales with regard to their narrative construction and cultural function. *Ocarina of Time*, for instance, structurally resembles fairy tales in several respects. *Dragon Age II*, meanwhile, explores the function of the storyteller, simultaneously acting as a “cultural artefact” which, like a fairy tale, “is an expression of, and a reflection on the culture” (Folkerts 99). In terms of narrative construction, expression, consumption, and function, titles such as *Dragon Age II*, appear to operate in a very similar manner to fairy tales. There may not currently be any successful, direct adaptations of fairy tales on the video game market, but nevertheless, they appear to have found their way onto the shelves in all but name.

Ocarina of Time relies on numerous structural fairy tale components in order to construct its narrative, and its trope-heavy plot can consequently be broken down according to Propp's narrative functions and dramatis personae from *Morphology of the Folk Tale*. In addition to similar characters and basic plot structure, elements of the game's plot resemble themes that frequently appear in fairy tales, such as the rule of three (the general prevalence of the number three). A focus on supernatural elements in an otherwise realistic world (in the sense that there are markets, towns, and a pre-industrial technology as in fairy tales) also pervades *Ocarina of Time*. The game's story of a “supernatural adventure” (Degh) is set in the “Perilous Realm” (Tolkien 113) of the fairy, or supernatural, where an ordinary person would be more strange than the main character, who is often referred to as “fairy boy.” As Martin aptly points out, the basic structure of many fairy tales can thus be “easily adapted as video game narratives because they fit the basic criteria of the games: they rely on a single hero or group of heroes who work with several outside helpers against a villain or group of villains, usually to save someone in need of rescue” (134).

In *Ocarina*, the player takes control of Link, who is tasked with saving the world, an objective which revolves heavily around fetch quests and helper characters. The first major plot arc, for instance, requires Link to obtain three sacred stones for a soon-to-be-imperilled princess. In order to obtain each stone, Link must prove his worth by completing a task set out for him by a donor-type character. Prior to Link's appearance on scene in all three searches, the false hero or villain character arrives and sabotages each area. At all times, Link is accompanied by a helper fairy, Navi, who provides advice at critical moments on how to succeed. The majority of characters Link encounters can be neatly categorized according to Propp's dramatic personae and their functions: Link the hero, Ganondorf the villain or false hero, Navi the helper, Zelda the princess, and a variety of donor characters who first challenge and then reward Link when he succeeds. Secondary quests throughout *Ocarina* follow a similar pattern: in order to get a better sword from a donor character, Link must wait three days after gathering a number of items, including a chicken, a mushroom, a saw, eye drops, and eyeballs, in order to receive his sword. This rule of three, prevalent in fairy tales like *The Story of the Three Bears* (Opie) or Grimm's *Snow-White*, appears throughout: Link must defeat *three* monsters in order to collect *three* sacred stones and he can obtain *three* different magical spells. The Triforce, a symbol of the game's Sacred Realm, has three components (wisdom, courage, and power) that must be assembled.

Ocarina of Time itself may not be based on any specific fairy tale, but the basic narrative structure is analogous to the morphology of many classic tales. A similar structure and the inclusion of traditional themes, however, do not constitute a “new” fairy tale. *Ocarina* does not emerge from an oral tradition, and it has no obvious storyteller shaping it beyond the protocols that bind it. Its closed system of telling limits the potential for cultural

migration, though fan audiences can and do alter the story in fan-based narratives and communities. Games like *Ocarina* can “emphasize ... thematic and narrative elements” (Moore 191), but are simultaneously limited by the protocols of their technology – the normative rules and default conditions of the game's use. As a result, the game “emphasizes protocols as much, if not more, than thematic and narrative elements” (191). And while the traces left by the medium of storytelling may be comparable to Benjamin's claim that “traces of the storyteller cling to a story the way the handprints of a potter cling to a clay vessel” (149), there remains a complete lack of any storyteller, even as a character, in *Ocarina of Time*. To claim that *Ocarina* is a fairy tale merely because it resembles the classical form is to engage in trope spotting: interesting, and a beginning, but not the full story.

Since the release of *Ocarina*, gaming technology has leapt and bound forward. Released thirteen years later, *Dragon Age II*'s protocols do not leave quite such a mark on its narrative. Writing regretfully of Disney's classic film adaptations of fairy tales in the mid-twentieth century, Zipes notes that Disney failed to use “technology to enhance the communal aspects of narrative and bring about major changes in viewing stories and animate viewers” (352). The shift to film especially resulted in the loss of “live contact with the storyteller” (341), which is precisely what video games allow. Players interact with the narrative in order to move it forward, engaging rather than receiving it from a storyteller. New media creates close contact between Bioware, the maker of *Dragon Age II*, and its audience, and it allows both communication between players in online forums and engagement with the story on a communal level.

Dragon Age II is set in the world of Thedas and focuses on the character of Hawke, a refugee who lands in the state of Kirkwall to attempt to rebuild his or her (Hawke can be either male or female) life. Rather than being a standard adventure narrative, where it can be safely assumed that the hero saves the world from “evil,” as in *Ocarina*, Hawke's narrative is one of an individual attempting to navigate a kyriarchy – that is, the elaborate ways in which societal structures of oppression intersect, where people can simultaneously be both the oppressor and the oppressed. A kyriarchal approach takes into account the ways a person can be oppressed in one respect (such as being female in a patriarchal society), while maintaining privilege in another (based on race, class, or sexuality, for example). Kirkwall is built in such a way that gender- and sexuality-blindness are the norm: there is no special social significance accorded to a person based on their gender expression or sexual preferences. At the same time racial distinctions pervade the game: mages and the Qunari, a species landed in Thedas, face institutionalized oppression and social opposition; elves are forced to either live in the wild or in “alienages,” the slums of the city; and peoples, whether human or elves, are commonly trafficked to nearby nations in the underground economy. Hawke can choose to travel with mages in his party and, despite it being illegal for them to operate in common society, there is the sense that economic privilege means the authorities turn a blind eye to their presence. Unfortunately, there is also heavy whitewashing of the character cast. And mental illness, in the character of Knight Commander Meredith, whose sanity slips as the game progresses, is often treated as villainy in order to maintain narrative momentum.

The narrative of *Dragon Age II* demands the character choose between supporting rogue mages or their oppressors; between partaking in slavery to make gold or saving the slaves; and how best to deal with the Qunari in the city. The player is never given an

indication that there are “correct” decisions to be made, and by the end of the game, there is no sense that Hawke has become a heroic figure. S/he only makes difficult choices under difficult circumstances, where aiding one demographic can result in the oppression of another. The racist, classist, and general social theory undertones are impossible to avoid. The “best” ending is perhaps one where the fewest people hate you. This realistically complex portrayal of social interactions, this exploration of “sensitive, even painful, subjects that cannot easily be brought into the open” (Holbek 49), is what makes *Dragon Age II* the closest existing example of a video game fairy tale. It becomes a fairy tale that depicts “both existing or desired sociohistorical and psychological contexts” (Davies 117). These contexts appear in contemporary western society, insofar as classism, racism, underground trafficking and the like all exist as social issues. And these contexts are desirable to people oppressed on the basis of their gender, sex, or sexuality, or perhaps all three. *Dragon Age II* depicts these real-world issues while maintaining the quest-based, magical story and historical narrative structure – albeit one without a definitively happy ending. If fairy tales are centrally conflict based (Barker), then *Dragon Age II* is not only conflict driven, but also prioritizes “playing out” (Moore 185) the conflict. Hawke negotiates the inevitable kyriarchy because the characters cannot exist removed from its structure.

An important part of the transmission of fairy tales has historically been the role of the storyteller. *Ocarina of Time*’s lack of a storyteller results in its medium’s narrative being unable to fulfill its entire potential (as a fairy tale); *Dragon Age II*, however, includes a storyteller as a character who frames the entire story. Benjamin laments that “the art of storytelling” was coming to an end with the rise of the novel (146), but the inclusion of a character telling the story revives the function of the storyteller. In *Dragon Age II*, the game opens with Varric, a sarcastic, charming dwarf rogue being interrogated about Hawke. He claims to have known Hawke even before he or she was the Champion of Kirkwall. This story’s veracity is immediately questioned, and so is changed to one allegedly more truthful, recalling Holbek’s idea of the traditional storyteller claiming their tale to be true. Benjamin’s traditional storyteller has not faded entirely in the face of postmodernity and new media, but has been digitized and included as a part of the story itself.

There is, of course, the function of the player as the architect of the narrative. *Dragon Age II* is modifiable in a variety of ways: Hawke can be male or female; hetero-, homo-, bi-, or asexual; and a rogue, warrior, or mage (which impacts the narrative greatly given the varying treatment of mages). Players can even choose Hawke’s personality. Three categories of dialogue options are presented when Hawke speaks: polite/helpful, charming/sarcastic, and aggressive/rude. The more a player chooses a particular category of response, the more Hawke’s personality crystallizes and influences the narrative. Every new attempt at the game can result in a slightly different version of Hawke. And, because Varric is a companion throughout the narrative, every new version of Hawke forms a slightly different relationship with Varric. When Varric relates the story to his interrogators the game uses cut scenes, which are pre-scripted and viewable like short clips of film, with no interactivity. Thus the relationship he has with Hawke does not influence his telling directly, but it is possible that, at the level of the narrative, Varric’s opinion of Hawke leaves “handprints,” in the sense of Benjamin’s storyteller, on the way he spins his tale. The storyteller is thus a part of the narrative in two interacting ways: embodied in the character of Varric and represented by choices the player makes.

Benjamin’s fear, as the novel became more popular and oral traditions waned, was

the decline of the fairy tale and the storytelling tradition. Nevertheless, as new forms of media and modes of narrative develop, the fairy tale has proven itself adaptable across both media and cultures. This tradition persists as twenty-first century new media takes hold. While direct adaptations of fairy tales remain rare in video games, the fairy tale mode is nevertheless present. In the first and second generation of video games, its structure was easily taken up by developers and turned into original narratives, like *Ocarina of Time*, with themes and structural skeletons of the fairy tale genre. As newer technology allows for more profound and complex representations of reality, games like *Dragon Age II* can, and do, fulfill the structural requirements of the fairy tale. Beyond this structural similarity, they are also reflections on and of the culture, they revive the role of the storyteller, and they essentially construct new fairy tales that are transmitted communally. I am not suggesting that classic fairy tales should *not* be adapted, but that they provide a particular challenge for new platforms that wish to simultaneously emphasize narrative over technical protocols, the genre's unique origins in history, and its relationship to the cultural context. Fairy tales do not *need* to be adapted in order to be present in new media because the technology and modes of narrative now allow for new tales, reflective on and of contemporary society.

Works Cited

- American McGee's Alice*. Redwood City: Electronic Arts, 2000. Video game.
- American McGee's Grimm*. Atlanta: Turner Broadcasting System, 2008. Video game.
- Assassin's Creed*. Montreal: Ubisoft, 2011. Video game.
- Barker, William. "The Principal Collectors." 2010 Dalhousie University Lecture, Halifax, English 4209. 31 January 2010.
- Bartol, Vladimir. *Alamut*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2007. Print.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov." *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935-1938*. Eds. H. Einland and M. Jennings. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002. 143-166. Print.
- Bioshock*. Novato: 2KGames, 2007. Video game.
- Davies, Maria Gonzalez. "Fairy Tale Retellings as Translation: Developing Verbal and Visual Intercultural Competence." *Whose Story? Translating the Verbal and the Visual in Literature for Young Readers*. Ed. Maria Gonzalez Davies and Riitta Oittinen. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Pub., 2008. 115-129. Print.
- Degh, Linda. "Oral Folklore." *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*. Ed. Richard M. Dorson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972. 53-83. Print.
- Dragon Age II*. Edmonton: Bioware, 2011. Video game.
- Folkerts, Jef. "Playing Games as an Art Experience: How Videogames Produce Meaning through Narrative and Play." *Emerging Practices in Cyberculture and Social Networking*. Eds. D. Riha and A. Maj. New York: Rodopi, 2010. 99-117. Print.

Holbek, Bengt. "The Language of Fairy Tales." *Nordic Folklore: Recent Studies*. Eds. R. Kvideland and H.K. Sehmsdorf. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989. 40-62. Print.

The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time. Japan: Nintendo, 1998. Video game.

Martin, Cathlena. "'Wonderland's become quite strange': From Lewis Carroll's Alice to American McGee's Alice". *Beyond Adaptation: Essays on Radical Transformations of Original Works*. Eds. P. Frus and C. Williams. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2010. 133-143. Print.

Moore, Michael Ryan. "Adaptation and New Media". *Adaptation* 3.2 (2010): 179-192. Print.

Opie, Iona and Peter. "The Story of the Three Bears." *The Classic Fairy Tales*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974. 264-269. Print.

Propp, Vladimir. *Morphology of the Folktale*. Trans. Laurence Scott, 2nd ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968.

Rand, Ayn, *Atlas Shrugged*. New York: Signet, 2007. Print.

----- . *The Fountainhead*. Canada: Penguin, 2008. Print.

Tolkien, J.R.R. "On Fairy-Stories." *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*. London: HarperCollins, 1997. 109-154. Print.

Zipes, Jack. "Breaking the Disney Spell." *The Classic Fairy Tales*. Ed. M. Tatar. New York: Norton & Company, Inc., 1999. 332-352.