

Epilogue: Life in Mixed Reality

Interactive Storyworlds in Game Cultures

Frans Mäyrä

Particularly within fantasy and science fiction genres there appears a strong link between the ‘worldliness’ and the narrative fiction (cf. McHale, 1987). Rather than “reading for the plot” (Brooks, 1985), some of us are primarily “reading for the world”. This is certainly true to my personal history: at one point I was reading “everything Tolkien” in just in order to spend more time in the Middle Earth. This was also true when the excellent *Lord of the Rings* movies, directed by Peter Jackson, were followed by his rather mediocre *The Hobbit* movie trilogy – those were, after all, an opportunity to spend more time in the world that I knew and had learned to love, and that carried me through and helped to (mostly) forgive the curiosities of that latter movie trilogy.

Later, when I was already a university student, I was playing and reading “everything Forgotten Realms”. *The Realms* are a franchise, Dungeons & Dragons role-playing game campaign setting – a fictional world, originally created by Ed Greenwood. In contrast to mainstream narrative fiction, where one is often deeply focused and concerned with the lives, thoughts and actions of main characters, the destinies of role-playing game characters are in many cases most important as tools for solving game challenges, and for exploring the vast fantasy worlds, e.g. in the case of Realms for me, the fictional continent of “Faerûn”.

The links between books, movies and games are no random occurrences these days. The transfer of characters, plot lines, and other fictional worlds’ elements between for example movies, games, television series, comics, and web content has constantly accelerated over the years. In one sense, this border-crossing is fundamental for all our culture. One can even say that by essence, all media is transmedial. This is based on the intertextuality in the levels of content and substance of cultural materials, as well as on the styles and structures of human expression. This polyphony of cultural materials is also accompanied by contextual character of our sense-making processes: we easily read stories, characters or settings through the eyeglasses provided

by our experiences with other cultural frames – be them related to the Bible, or to Marvel comics, for example.

Technologically, the mixing and augmentation of multiple media forms with each other, and embedding them into our perceived daily reality is an increasing trend. In addition to printed and digital books, cinema and movie theatres, screen based electronic media, also virtual reality, holographic illusions and mixing of fictional with physical are currently being designed and manufactured for our future storytelling, social, and information related needs. It is nevertheless important to remember that we all live in mixed reality by definition. In our thought and perceptions of reality the material, semiotic and ludic realities overlap and interplay in many ways. Concepts, rules and norms inform what we perceive, and how we relate to the reality.

Regarding these underlying and fundamental developments, one influential view is that we are entering the Ludic Society or the Era of Games. Rather than living in a culture dominated by static texts or linear narratives, the future culture and society will be increasingly dominated by data, interactive media and ability to engage purposefully with games and simulations of dynamic systems will be one of the core skills. (Zimmerman, 2015.) The research into whether such cultural change is taking place, and to which degree, is currently ongoing. We can nevertheless say that at least in public discussion the active audiences, participation economy, games and the expectations of playful engagement with applications and services has become increasingly typical. Whereas ‘gamification’ is a concept that is focused on application of game mechanics and features to multiple, non-entertainment purposes, it is the concept of ‘ludification’ that is most useful in describing what is taking place in a wider perspective – the increasing acceptance, adoption and pervasive spread of play, playfulness and game-like elements in many areas of culture and society. (Montola et al., 2009; Stenros et al., 2007.)

Pioneer of the field, Marie-Laure Ryan in her book *Narrative as Virtual Reality* (2001) addressed some key questions: “Is there a significant difference in attitude between immersion in a game and immersion in a movie or novel? What are the new possibilities for representation offered by the emerging technology of virtual reality?” Our gameplay experience studies do suggest that such significant differences do exist. The immersion or engagement in games includes active agency, immersion to action, problem-solving and sensory immersion in different forms and degrees as compared to either textual fictions, or movies, for example. But there are also significant continuities and overlaps between the experiences of enjoying a novel, a movie and a virtual-world computer game: if some of the

characters, fictional setting or themes are shared, then a significant part of imaginative engagement by the audiences (readers, watchers, players) are also likely to be closely similar, or closely related to each other.

Differences are nevertheless important to recognise, and when study of games entered the modern academic agenda, there was a much publicised debate that took place scholars who were associated with “ludology” and “narratology” (or: who were perceived as “ludologists” or “narrativists” by others). In practice, this boiled down that different researchers were interested in different kinds of games, different experiences, and in different dimensions of game design. Games are, after all, a highly variable field, and there are not necessary any single feature that would link together a free-form live action role-playing game, a *Sudoku*, or a digital first-person shooter game, for example – yet all of them are discussed under the heading of game cultural phenomena, and are linked by family resemblances (cf. Wittgenstein, 1968). The ludologist position can be found e.g. in Gonzalo Frasca (1999), who wrote that even while video games may share e.g. characters and settings with narratives, it is important to study them “as games” (i.e. as ludic activities based on e.g. rules and simulation). On the other hand, Janet Murray’s allegoric reading of *Tetris* as a ludic representation of the overworked lives of Western people in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997) is often used as cautionary example about the dangers of misrepresenting games as “interactive drama”, or narrative, when the form of Tetris itself is rather abstract, and based on dynamic, mathematical-spatial puzzle.

Living at the boundaries and intersections of media mixtures, a transmedial storyworld is an assemblage of characters, storylines and milieu that extends beyond the borders of a single medium (Harvey, 2015). The original introducer of ‘transmedia’ into critical lexicon, Marsha Kinder wrote (1993) about the “dual spectatorship”, which means that the child audience for Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles is positioned both in active and passive modes. They are invited to participate in the active utilization and exploration of narrative potentials of Turtles’ storyworld, but this activity takes place within the frame of consuming various Turtle branded products. This kind of ambiguous agency can also be dubbed as “consumerist interactivity”.

Another key scholar of transmediality, Henry Jenkins (2006) heralds the fragmentary and dispersed character of transmedia storytelling as intellectually stimulating and social. One can always reflect whether these features are a stimulant for “collective intelligence” to be developed, or an efficient franchising and marketing strategy? Considering how the

intertwined logic of late capitalism and networked society work, answer is probably: both.

For a game scholar, the LEGO bricks are an interesting domain to reflect on the operations of transmediality. Originally, the plastic bricks existed as the classic, open-ended construction toys, but the “LEGO ecosystem” has evolved considerably since then. During the 1990s LEGO started producing narrativized LEGO products, that were cross-branded with Star Wars, Disney, or Harry Potter characters, storylines and settings. The designed and marketed uses (or “scripts”) offered for consumer-players do not, however, ever completely restrict or bind the actual uses. Playing with traditional LEGO bricks, children take also inspiration from media, popular culture and surrounding society, so that even while the toys would be scripted as “non-violent”, it is perfectly possible for children themselves to use the bricks for building guns, and then playing “cops & robbers” with them. There is still a clear difference in available affordances when the classic LEGO bricks are changed into a Star Wars LEGO set, for example. The narrativized LEGO bricks have the media narrative “built-in” to the toy itself.

I have personally studied both the Middle-Earth as the storyworld J.R.R. Tolkien created, as well as Tolkien’s story elements as distributed and re-imagined in different media. In digital, interactive form, *LEGO The Lord of the Rings* game (2012) is based on a series of transformations – first the translation of Tolkien’s novel into a movie, then into the narrativized LEGO toys, which on their turn are coupled with a video game translation of both the play behaviours of LEGO bricks, and the movie visuals and narrative. The translation of *The Lord of the Rings* (the novel) into a character and action focused movie narrative involves substantial alterations and adaptations. Translation of the same material into a video game involves even more substantial changes. During these transformations, while producers interact with the medium specific strengths, conventions and commercial realities, the focus moves away from narrative continuity and emotional drama, towards overcoming a series of individual gameplay challenges. Overcoming the cave troll or Balrog in the game version might involve repeated attempts, careful preplanning, learning from mistakes and skill development. The game player of LoTR is more like an athlete, than a member of a narrative audience: participating in a training ground, receiving narrative cutscenes as rewards.

Further studies in the alternative and sometimes surprising uses of transmedial materials are reported in my study “Little Evils” study (Mäyrä, 2015), included in *The Dark Side of Game Play* volume. The analyses in this work suggest that such moral or normative qualities as the “bad” or “evil”

play are not directly dictated by the designed content of games as such. This is an important lesson about the inherent freedom of use in games and interactive media in general. As was clear already in the case of classic LEGO bricks, children are quite capable themselves of using games as toys, and play is fundamentally free ambiguous by moral character – “peaceful” toys or games can be used for innumerable purposes, also for aggressively or destructively themed play. Another example are the inventive and sometimes rather sadistic uses the players have come up for small simulation creatures in the popular *The Sims* life simulation game. The designed content of games are just providing starting points for play – and the final character of game play can sometimes diverge from the designers’ intention to rather surprising directions. Yet, the key design choices do matter, as the player behaviour is informed by them, whether player decides to “play along” the designed and readily available paths, or if he or she decides to “play against the grain” and do something surprising instead.

To conclude, it is important to understand the fundamental differences between experiences and forms of engagements that are related to the characteristics of different forms of agency and (or) spectatorship that are realized in different areas of today’s transmedial landscape. Reflecting on the nature of player creativity, as well as on the differences between pretence violence and real aggression (Schott & Mäyrä, 2016), for example, are some ways of creating reflective openings into this multi-layered and intermixing media-reality of today – and tomorrow.

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Per Holmberg är professor i svenska med inriktning mot språkbruksforskning vid Göteborgs universitet. Empiriskt har hans forskning under senare år gällt gymnasieelevers skrivande och vikingatida runristningar. Teoretisk har han varit med och utvecklat systemisk-funktionell grammatik för beskrivning av svenska texter. I föreliggande artikel undersöker han tillsammans med Anna Nordenstam det svensksdidaktiska forskningsfältet.

Karin Jönsson är lektor i svenska med didaktisk inriktning vid Malmö högskola, Sverige. Hon arbetar inom lärarutbildningen och hennes forskning handlar om litteraturläsning med yngre elever, kritisk literacy och digitala resurser i den tidiga literacyutvecklingen i förskola och skola.

Ylva Lindberg är docent i litteraturvetenskap vid Jönköping University, Sverige. Hon är forskningschef vid högskolan för lärande och kommunikation och har arbetat i många år med att utbilda ämneslärare i svenska. Kommunikation, texten och bildens samspel i olika typer av medier och genrer står i fokus i hennes forskning. Lindberg forskar också om globala perspektiv och litteraturens cirkulering i världen. Artikeln belyser litteraturredidaktikens potentialer utifrån styrdokument och en empirisk studie i en virtuell värld.

Ulrika Magnusson är lektor i svenska som andraspråk vid Institutionen för språkdidaktik, Stockholms universitet. Hon undervisar och handleder i svenska som andraspråk och hennes forskning handlar bl.a. om skrivande och läsning på ett andraspråk samt andraspråksundervisning. Artikeln är knuten till projektet Skrivkompetens i samarbete med Åbo Akademi och Vasa universitet.

Lena Manderstedt arbetar som universitetslektor i svenska med didaktisk inriktning vid Luleå tekniska universitet. Huvudsakligen undervisar hon i ämneslärarutbildningen. Hennes forskningsintressen rör främst litteratur och litteraturredidaktik i relation till medier, ungdoms- och onlinekulturer samt olika aspekter på ideologi och makt.

Frans Mäyrä är professor i Information Studies and Interactive Media med specialiseringsområden digital kultur och spel vid Tammerfors universitet, Finland. Mäyrä leder the University of Tampere Game Research Lab och har undervisat i digital kultur och spel sedan tidigt 1990-tal. Hans forskningsintresse sträcker sig från spelkulturer, meningsskapande genom lekfull interaktion och online spel, till gränsland, identitet samt transmedial

fantasy och science fiction. Hans artikel är knuten till forskningsprojektet Ludification of Culture and Society och ett flertal forskningsprojekt om spel som han tidigare har lett.

Anna Nordenstam är professor i svenska med didaktisk inriktning vid Luleå tekniska universitet och docent och universitetslektor i litteraturvetenskap vid Göteborgs universitet. I rapporten bidrar hon med en artikel som tar avstamp i projektet "Lättläst?" om nyskriven lättläst ungdomslitteratur i samarbete med Christina Olin-Scheller och med en artikel tillsammans med Per Holmberg där de undersöker det svensksdidaktiska forskningsfältet.

Christina Olin-Scheller är fil. dr i litteraturvetenskap och professor i pedagogiskt arbete vid Karlstads universitet. Hennes forskningsintressen är multimodala perspektiv på barns och ungas läsande och skrivande i skolan och på fritiden och frågor som belyser läsundervisning. Artikeln är knuten till projektet "Läsa Lätt?" som bedrivs i samarbete med professor Anna Nordenstam, Luleå Tekniska högskola.

Annbritt Palo är universitetslektor i svenska med didaktisk inriktning vid Luleå tekniska universitet. Hon arbetar inom lärarutbildningen och är forskningsmässigt främst intresserad av frågor som rör litteratur och litteraturdidaktik, genus, intersektionalitet, medier och mediedidaktik men också av literacy samt läroplansteoretiska och allmänsdidaktiska frågor.

Katarina Rejman, FD, är lektor i svenska med didaktisk inriktning vid Institutionen för språkdidaktik vid Stockholms universitet. Hennes forskningsintresse rör frågor om läsning, främst läsning av skönlitteratur, och estetiska lärprocesser. Artikeln är knuten till projektet Skrivkompetens i samarbete med Åbo Akademi och Vasa universitet.

Stina-Karin Skillermark är doktorand i Pedagogiskt arbete med ämnesdidaktisk inriktning vid Linköpings universitet. Hon undervisar på lärarprogrammet och inom ämnet tyska. Hennes forskning handlar om hur litterära epoker och författarskap har förmedlats i utbildningsradions program under perioden 1960 till 2012.

Simon Wessbo är doktorand i Pedagogiskt arbete med ämnesdidaktisk inriktning vid Linköpings universitet. Hans forskning handlar om skönlitteratur och film i svenskämnet. Föreliggande artikel bygger på resultaten från en inledande pilotstudie.

Helen Winzell är doktorand i Pedagogiskt arbete med ämnesdidaktisk inriktning vid Linköpings universitet. Hon har arbetat som gymnasielärare i svenska och undervisar i svenska språket och svenska som andraspråk i ämneslärarprogrammet och fristående kurser. Artikeln tar sin utgångspunkt i hennes licentiatavhandling *Svensklärares skrivdidaktiska kunskapsbildning*.

Framtida berättelser

Perspektiv på nordisk

modersmålsdidaktisk forskning och praktik

Hur tar sig berättande uttryck i olika format, i olika medier, i olika kulturer och med olika syften? Vilka betydelser kan detta ha för lärande, undervisning, identitet och meningsskapande? Samtida och framtida textkulturer utmanar föreställningar om berättande liksom föreställningar om språk, litteratur och kommunikation. Vilka berättelser, i vid mening, skapas och vilka berättelser får plats i modersmålsdidaktisk forskning och praktik? Möjligheterna att i och genom de digitala medierna utveckla expressiva och avancerade berättelser där "läsaren" i hög grad erbjuds, och förutsätts, medverka öppnar upp för didaktiskt relevanta frågeställningar och möjligheter. Nya textvärldar och ändrade förutsättningar för textskapande och textläsande erbjuder och frammanar till en rad olika frågeställningar med relevans för modersmålsdidaktisk forskning och praktik.

I rapporten *Framtida berättelser* samlas nordiska forskare för att från olika perspektiv tillsammans begrunda hur modersmålsdidaktisk forskning och praktik kan förstås, studeras, utövas och utvecklas. Den referegranskade rapporten är ett resultat av den femte nordiska modersmålsdidaktiska konferensen, NNMF5, som ägde rum vid Åbo Akademi i Vasa i december 2015. Bidragen i rapporten består av ett urval artiklar baserade på presentationer framförda på konferensen.

Redaktörer för rapporten är universitetslärare Heidi Höglund och professor Ria Heilä-Ylikallio, båda verksamma vid Åbo Akademis fakultet för pedagogik och välfärdsstudier och dess lärarutbildning.

Rapport

ISSN 2343-2373

ISBN 978-952-12-3482-8

ISSN 2343-256X (digital)

ISBN 978-952-12-3483-5 (digital)

Vetenskapligt granskad rapport, double blind review

Fakulteten för pedagogik och välfärdsstudier, Åbo Akademi, Vasa

Adress: PB 311, 65101 VASA, Finland

<http://www.abo.fi/fpv>