Fairy tale trans-migrations: the case of *Little Red Riding Hood*

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Summary

This paper looks at Little Red Riding Hood as a case to find out how fairy tales can be translated/transmediated into the digital world. I examine an array of contemporary electronic genres that all have adapted this tale in order to find out which elements of the classical fairy tale have made it into the electronic versions, and if there is a medium-affordance logic in the strategies that each digital platform chooses. Finally, I argue that fairy tales are the perfect feedstock for transmedial storytelling, due to their malleability, their archetypical nature and the fact that they already exist in the mind of their audience.

Introduction

The best known fairy tales are malleable objects that have been translated across languages, cultures and media in innumerable occassions. They are interpreted and re-interpreted to suit new audiences and exploit the strengths of new platforms. They can even be cut up into pieces in order to uncover the basic building blocks of narrative, as Propp did and Murray suggested we do with digital literature (Murray, 1997: 197).

Little Red Riding Hood (*LRRH*) is one of the most often remediated stories in digital media. I have chosen a few distinct instantiations in several emblematic digital genres and platforms in order to cover as much ground as possible with respect to the affordances of the different media. It must be noted that the point of this article is not to analyze *all* the electronic versions of *LRRH*, but only to use a few of them as a practical example to make an argument about the power of transmedial narration in a more general discussion of storytelling in digital media.

My interest for transmedial narratives can be traced to a wider ongoing project on transmediality which I am engaged in together with my colleague Lisbeth Klastrup (Klastrup/Tosca, 2004, 2009, 2011, 2013), as well as a general interest in the development of the field of digital literature. Looking at "transportation" of stories and meaning is a powerful lens to reveal the strengths of the different media strategies. In this respect, I argue in my conclusion that transmedial storytelling can help overcoming some of the traditional limitations of interactive narratives. For a well argued summary of this debate, please check Stern & Mateas, 2005.

Transmediality

There has in recent years been a growing interest in transmedial storytelling, or stories that are told accross different media. According to one of the pioneers of the field, Henry Jenkins: "a transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole." (Jenkins, 2006: 95). This definition is mainly aimed at works that are launched accross several media at the same time, such as when a new feature film is accompanied by a video game and a board game depicting the same world/story. In this paper I am mostly interested in old stories (folk tales) that get reinterpreted and remediated without a unified strategy, but still, Jenkins stress on each new text making a distinctive contribution is very useful.

"Trans" means "across", and literary scholars might be sceptic of yet another new critical term, couldn´t we just speak of translation, or even adaptation? I think that, although both translation and adaptation are at work in some of the pieces examined here, transmediality covers the picture better. Translation is about language, adaptation about content (the meaning or the story), but transmediality focuses on the affordances, strengths and weaknesses of the various platforms.

The theoretical framework supporting the literary/media analysis is mine and Lisbeths Klastrups previous work on transmedial worlds. In our definition, transmedial worlds are "abstract content systems from which a repertoire of fictional stories can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms" (Klastrup & Tosca, 2004: 409).

That is, transmedial world are mental constructs shared by both the designers/creators of the world and the audience/participants. The transmedial world is not defined by the material entity of any particular instantiation(the media platform), but by the shared idea of the world.

I argue that such a well known fairy tale as *Little Red Riding Hood (LRRH)* can be considered to have the status of a transmedial world, and that the trans-mediations have to take into account the many expectations and previous encounters with the world which readers/viewers will have had. Interactors with the new electronic versions of *LRRH* have probably heard the story before, read it, or seen it in a film version. How is these readers knowledge of the world/story integrated into the new translations? What can be taken for granted and what needs to be explained? What drives the innovations in the cultural versions: technology or meaning? If we can uncover the grey areas of the digital reading experience, we will gain a better understanding of the general processes of rhetoric composition and reception of digital literature.

Four strategies to re-trans-tell the tale

In a way, a folk tale is always already transmedial, since it doesnt originate as the single *oeuvre* of a well identified individual whom we attribute authorship to (with all that that means). When the originator of a transmedial world is identifiable, we can treat the first instantiantion of the transmedial world as the autentic one, while all others will be derivations from the canon. In this case though, we cannot date the first original telling (oral) of the tale; we only know that the first written version was that of Charles Perrault in the XVII century.

But the tale is much older than that, and after Perrault, there have been innumerable re-tellings in all sorts of media. The basic story is always a little girl traversing a dangerous forest to visit a grandmother. On the way, a wolf appears, distracts her and tricks her. He gets to grandmother´s house first, eats her, substitutes her in her bed and later when the girl arrives, tries to eat her as well. In some version he succeeds, in others he doesnt, but the danger of the wolf and the tricked girl are always there.

There is also a very famous dialogue exchange between the disguised wolf and the girl, one involving some big ears and nose and eyes and mouth. And it is so well known that with only this hint you, reader, are reproducing it in your head right now with no need for me to say more. This will be one of my major points in this rapid romp through some electronic versions of the tale: that readers/interactors know this story so well that a lot can be taken for granted and built upon.
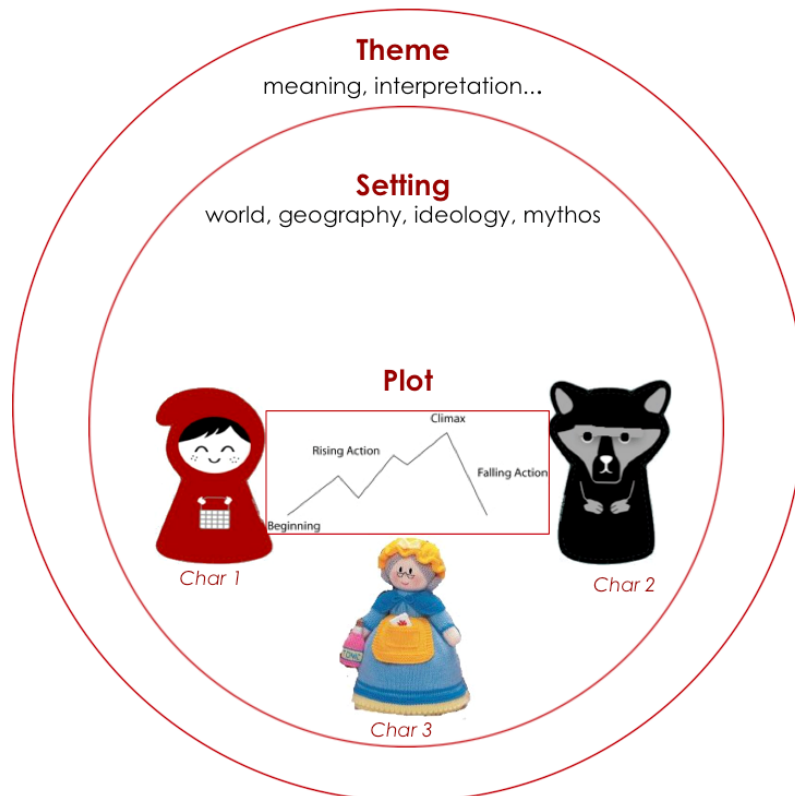

Fig. 1 The transmedial word of *LLRH* (components)

An interesting question in this respect is: how much deviation do we tolerate? We want innovation, and yet, we want to recognize the story. How little is enough for us to identify it as the same story? When do readers perceive the transmeadion as breaking the world of *LRRH*? In this paper I have identified four strategies of transmediation.

Strategy 1: Multimedial Remediation (Illusion of Paths)

The first strategy is that of simply transporting the old text into a new platform and add some images, sound, and sometimes minimal interactivity. Just a search in the App Store will reveal hundreds of versions of *LRRH* for iPad, and most of them

will fit this description. There is not a qualitative difference with the adaptations that we know from children books, because the interactivity is often very simple and disconnected with the story. For example, the reader needs to turn a page to go on reading, answer Yes/No to some question, find something in the screen illustration and click on it, solve a puzzle, or move some pieces (like moving the girl forward in the path). These small movements are not even touch-screen specific (no sweeping, shaking or sliding) so that the experience of interacting with these versions is not attached to the medium itself.

Even in the ones where options are given (should the girl stop to pick berries or run to her grandmothers house?), multilinearlity is only simulated, as there is always one only way to move forward, so that our choosing is either meaningless or, if wrong, we are given the chance to go back and choose the correct one.
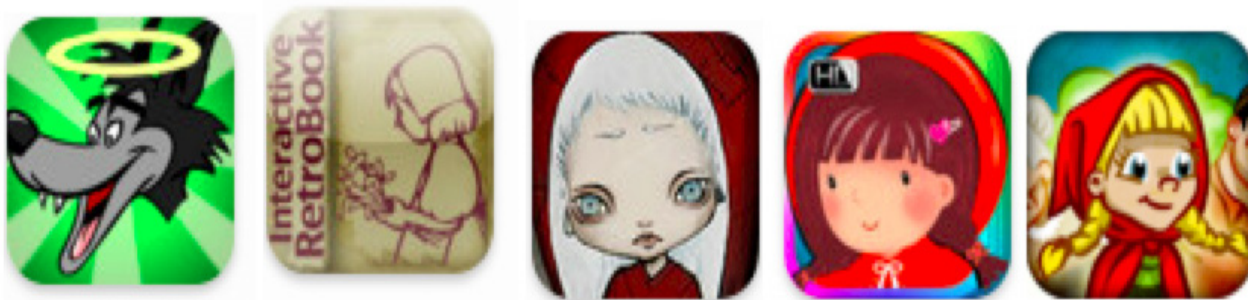

Fig 2. Some *LRRH* apps for IPad (see list in bibliography)

Mostly, these adaptations are faithful to the Grimm version of the story, but some of them turn the wolf into a benign creature or try to avoid violence and struggle at all costs. This would be violating the ethos of the story in a misunderstood attempt at children-friendliness; the transmedial world stops being credible.

Strategy 2: New Symbolic Layer

Another, more literary fruitful, strategy is that of adding a new symbolic layer to the tale. In my fig. 1 this would transform the outer circle which I have called "Theme: meaning, interpretation". It has been often attempted by quite a few "analog" writers. My favourite is Angela Carters "The Company of Wolves", a short story from her book

The Bloody Chamber. Here, most of the traditional plot elements are preserved: the girl, the grandmother, the forest, the wolf... but there is an additional layer of sexuality, violence and the theme of growing up, presented with powerful symbolism and a language heavy with metaphores and dark beauty.

The same can be said of Donna Leishmans *RedRidinghood,* a mostly graphical hypertext with very limited interaction. The readers function is mostly to set things in motion, and literally to open windows where a dream world runs in parallel and lets us discover new aspects of the tale. It is surprising, fresh and powerful. Again, many of the classic elements are preserved, but because of the new layer´s power, the reader actually doesnt know what is going to happen.

Both these works are open texts, playing with the ambiguity that results of superimposing the children´s tale with very adult themes and imagery, as well as picking up on rich contemporary cultural subtexts. They open avenues for exploration that are not about twisting plots, but about creating new worlds of meaning that spring both naturally and unnaturally from the original tale. This structure responds nicely to Mark Bernsteins "Mirror World" hypertext pattern (1998). Interactivity is mostly in the head of the reader.

Strategy 3: Dispersion/Fragmentation

The third structure is that of multiplicity. I have used *LRRH* often in creative hypertext workshops, because the students know the tale and have no problem in making changes to its plot of character to find alternate ways. They usually attempt multiple branching, only to realize that if every node has to offer two or three new ways forward, the story grows exponentially and becomes unmanageable. We use *LRRH* to show how the hypertextual maze needs to be reduced to only a few, well structured paths. The students also usually make a big effort to orchestrate different endings for the tale. This is one kind of multiplicity, and it corresponds to a popular idea of interactive storytelling as choosing multiple paths.

But there is another kind of multiplicity that has a different mission. It is the

multiplicity of Robert Coover´s *Pricksongs and Descants*, where *LRRH* is mixed with several other fairytales in a pandemonium of themes; sex, violence and generational struggles are only the top of the iceberg. The book also has his probably best known story, "The Babysitter", in which a young girl is assaulted by different males (wolves) in alternate worlds that are presented together in chunks, so it is up to the reader to decide what actually happened. In these stories, the *LRRH* tale is exploded into several versions which coexist, in a hungry illusion of wholeness.

This is the same strategy that digital author Nick Monfort humorously exploits both in his "variable tale" *The Girl and the Wolf*, and his combinatorial poem *Through the Park*. In the former, the reader can regulate the degree of sex and violence (low, medium, high), and get nine versions of the same tale. In the latter, a randomness algorythm generates different versions of the story of a girl going through the park and getting assaulted by a man. The program picks only a few sentences from a database of many, and constructs a tale that can be enjoyed several times as the reader fills in the gaps both with her knowledge of the *LRRH* tale and the growing context of Monforts vision as we discover more of the sentences kept by the database.

> **The girl grins and grabs a granola bar. ... The girl sets off through the park. ... The man's breathing quickens. ... A lamp above fails to come on. ... Pigeons scatter. ... The man's there first. ... Things are forgotten in carelessness. ... Pairs of people relax after journeys and work. ...**

Fig 3. A Screenshot from *Through the Park*

Both in Coovers and Monforts work, the point is not to choose any of the different paths, as in my students experiments, but rather that all paths have to appear together at the same time in the mind of the reader. Paradoxically, I argue that the reader here is more free than the hypertext reader going down a branch narrative that excludes some paths and shows only one. Here we get all the contexts, embrace the expanding possibilities of the story and decide for ourselves what the final meaning is. And all this is only possible because in *LRRH* we have been freed from an interest in the plot by the fact that we know the story.

Strategy 4: Transmedial World

The final strategy I have called a full blown transmedial world, meaning a world that is fully navigable, three-dimensional and has a certain ambition as to imitation of reality. *The Path*, by Tale of Tales is a short horror game where the player controls six sisters that are sent to the forest one by one in order to help their grandmother. Each of them will meet different challenges along the way, and each of them has their own wolf, with different appearance and symbolic power. The game′s atmosphere is eerie and oniric, the images are beautiful and the pace is slow and mysterious.

Here, the story is not told, it is embedded in the objects of the game and their behaviours. The role of the player is to move the sisters through the forest and make them arrive at their grandmothers house. She decides if the girls will linger in the forest or not, and her curiosity, determination and willpower will determine which way the story goes. Exploration of the three-dimensional world is only the beginning, the "physical" actions of the avatars will trigger behaviours in the world which the player has to interpret to piece the story together. As opposed to all the other examples and strategies, there is here an extra layer to the interpretive-evocative, as the interaction of the player is in fact decisive.

The strength of transmedial worlds is that of the lived, rather than the told, story. This strategy makes *LRRH* into an immersive game, even though reception of *The Path* wasnt all positive by traditional gaming audiences since it was perceived to be too slow, contemplative and too much focused on meaning.

Conclusion: where is the story?

Of all the examined works, it seems to me that the most succesful transmediations are those that exploit the real strentgh of their medium to initiate a rich search for meaning by the reader.

Strategy one was about empty clicking with no real purpose, so that the digital medium was only used at the surface. Strategies two and three (multiplicity and dispersion) were both sucessful in exploring the subtext of *LRRH* in a novel way,

and the interesting is that both of them had print-era counterparts. The digital way of multiplying and dispersing is just a tad more radical than the print version, but they are both productive. Here, the mythos and ethos of the story are preserved, even though some accessory elements might change. The interesting thing is that, in order for the story to make sense, strategies 2 and 3 require a reader that *knows* the transmedial world. This is a nearly banal observation, but nonetheless extremely important. Unless the reader has a mental image of *LRRH* in her head, the multiplied/dispersed stories wont make any sense, no matter the competence of our postmodern ideal reader. Strategy 4 also requires previous knowledge of the world, for even though the superficial elements (forest, girl, grandmother, wolf) are all there, there wouldnt be any possibility for meaningful interaction if the reader couldn´t relate her actions to the original tale. Of course there will still be speculation about the meaning (for example, what do each of the wolves represent exactly?), but the whole point of these fictions would be lost if the original *LRRH* wasn´t known.

In other worlds, all the successful re-tellings of *LRRH* are meaningful deviations from the original story which you, the reader, put together in your head. The succesful transmediation refuses to reproduce the story as in the old oral tradition, but rather builds on it in different ways and use the reader as initiator of the action. In Carter and Coover it is about interpretation; in Leishman and Monfort it is about interpretation + mechanic interaction; in *The Path* it is about interpretation + configurative non-trivial interaction (Aarseth, 1997). In all of them, the interpretive layer requires an explicit and constant going back and forth to the mental construction of *LRRH* that the reader has in her head.

This is æstethically much stronger than for example turning the original *LRRH* into a three-dimensional world where the reader played the protagonist girl and had to go through the well known plot points of the old story. What would be the point of playing such a game? There would be no suspense, no room for uncertainty, no pleasure. No matter how beautiful the world, how exciting the mini quests, how clever the AI and how seamless the experience, players would still not enjoy it as a fiction, as it has been empirically demonstrated in relation to games set in several contemporary

transmedial worlds. Players dont want an exact reproduction (translation/adaptation) of the same story (Klastrup & Tosca, 2004, 2011).

Transmedial storytelling can free digital fiction designers from having to faithfully reproduce every nook and cranny of a particular narrative (sequence of events). Instead, they can trust that their interactors possess the original stories in their heads, so that they can explore the subtexts, create new layers, and generally allow for interaction with material that is very much related to the original tale but not exactly the same. This would free digital fictions from the paradox of interactivity destroying the essence of stories. If interactivity is allowed within a frame that is *close* to the original story, but *different*; the actions of the interactor take place in the transmedial world of the story but, so to speak, alongside the sequence of events we know, which doesnt even need to be represented in the new digital fiction.

The familiarity of the transmedial world and the strangeness of the new instantiation collaborate to create powerful rewarding experiences as the ones briefly explored here. Folk tales are probably the best known stories of all, so transmediations and re-tellings that exploit the refreshing affordances of new media will continue to move us.

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