

12 Destruction, Abjection, and Desire: Aesthetics of Transgression in Two Adaptations of “Little Red Riding Hood”

Ragnhild Tronstad

Time and again, theorists and designers of videogames address the questions of how and why games could be considered works of art (see, e.g., Flanagan 2009; Tronstad 2012; Sharp 2015). In this chapter, I do not continue this discussion but instead start with the simple observation that a common characteristic of art and videogames is that our engagement with them often leaves impressions that continue to resonate in our minds long after the interactive engagement is over. The main hypothesis to be explored in this chapter is that transgression in various forms affects such resonance in the minds of game players and art audiences.

The Path (Tale of Tales 2009) is a horror videogame presenting six variations of the well-known fairy tale “Little Red Riding Hood.” When playing *The Path*, the player must cautiously balance the urge to explore with careful awareness of the potential dangers lurking in the woods and must avoid the wolf, but not at all costs—the wolf is, after all, her destiny. No other goals are defined in the game. There is, in other words, no escape for those who want to play.

In this study, I compare my experience of playing *The Path* to my experience of watching *Footnote til Rødhette og Ulven* (Footnote to Little Red Riding Hood, hereafter referred to as *Footnote*) (Jonasson and Vislie 2014), a theater performance thematically related to *The Path* in the sense that both are adaptations of the same fairy tale, but in different media and genres. Reading the two works in parallel, I am particularly interested in the implicit threat of violence that lurks in the background of both works and how this lurking violence introduces a kind of potentiality that set the works in play.

The term *potentiality* has the same etymological roots as the term *power*. In games, power in the form of agency is usually negotiated and distributed among the players according to rules that may be more or less explicit and formalized. However, neither work discussed in this study seems willing to grant the audience sufficient agency to autonomously engage in the play. Presenting a surprising and unpredictable narrative,

Footnote renders in its audience a sense of vulnerability rooted in the anxiety of not being able to predict what the work will confront them with next.

The typical fear for members of a theater audience is that they will be confronted in person, *as a person*—to be expected to *participate*. This is the opposite case from playing a videogame, where participation is anticipated as part of the deal. In *The Path*, however, very little agency is granted the player. The playful negotiation between game and player thus happens in a manner quite similar to the playful negotiation between the theater performance and audience in *Footnote*—in the player's or audience's imaginative expectations of what is to happen next.

In this chapter, I investigate how the violence of the two works functions as an igniter of the player's and audience's playful imagination. In this investigation, I apply a concept of play derived from Hans-Georg Gadamer ([1960] 1993), who sees play as inherent to aesthetic experience in general, regardless of artistic medium. Psychoanalytical theory forms another part of this chapter's analytical framework, providing a perspective from which the type of conflicts addressed in these two works, *The Path* and *Footnote*, can be articulated and productively related, despite their apparent incommensurability.

Footnote repels us by confronting us with the *abject*. In psychoanalytical theory, the abject is that part of us from which we want to liberate ourselves: it represents the mother, the edges of our body, that which is cast off (Kristeva 1982). *The Path*, in contrast, serves us stories of desire, staging the all-too-familiar conflicts of adolescence, where “the sense of expansion, of new power, and the desire for discovery, can lead to provocative behavior and the deliberate violation of moral and social rules” (“Transgression” 2006). The two adaptations thus realize two rather different interpretations of the familiar fairy tale: one in which transgression is seen as a progressive movement on the path toward adulthood and enlightenment; the other in which the transgressive moves in the opposite direction, backward into regression, confronting us with the pitiful, dirty, and abject—that which did not evolve into a higher stage.

The latter version of the story, as presented in *Footnote*, is indeed a rather unusual one. How the performance was to be read and interpreted as a *Footnote to Little Red Riding Hood* was something of an enigma to me for quite a while. The three available reviews of the performance (in two Norwegian theater journals and one newspaper) matched my initial confusion, agreeing that the only obvious reference to the fairy tale seemed to be the one found in its title and that other connections were difficult to spot (Erichsen 2014; Pettersen 2014; Amundsen 2015).

It was not until I embarked on this project of analyzing *The Path* in terms of its potentially transgressive aesthetics that other possible relations between *Footnote* and

the fictional-mythical world of “Little Red Riding Hood” started to dawn on me. It is not entirely uncommon that when doing textual analysis, we find that the text under scrutiny turns out to mean more or something else than we initially assumed. In this case, however, my initial attempts to analyze a videogame came to influence my understanding of an entirely different text, a theater performance. My subsequent analysis of the theater performance in turn broadened my perspective on what transgression may imply in the context of “Little Red Riding Hood” and thus ended up informing my reading of the transgressive aesthetics at work in *The Path*.

Transgression

Transgression is defined as “the action of transgressing or passing beyond the bounds of legality or right; a violation of law, duty, or command; disobedience, trespass, sin” (“Transgression” 2017); to transgress is “to go beyond the bounds or limits set by commandments or law or convention, it is to violate and infringe” (Jenks 2003, 2).

In chapter 3 of this volume, Holger Pötzsch addresses the historical, cultural, political, economic, and epistemological contingency of what in a specific situation may be experienced as transgressive and thus constitute a transgression. In order for transgression to happen, there must be a limit or boundary for what are considered acceptable acts. Especially within art contexts, boundaries available for transgression are fluid and in constant change. The act of transgressing one such boundary may very well cause the transgression to lose its edge and the act to become normalized. Thus, *transgressivity* must be analyzed in each specific case according to its relevant parameters—what makes this act transgressive in a certain respect to a particular person or group of persons.

In my analysis, I address how both works transgress genre and medium-specific conventions of the genres to which they belong. *The Path* transgresses by denying its player agency to interactively engage in the game and by imposing upon her an unconventional set of rules that force her to act in a way that is contradictory to her own interests in the game. *Footnote* intriguingly transgresses our expectations of how the well-known tale “Little Red Riding Hood” may be represented on stage, in one sense because what we are presented with contains so few of the familiar elements by which we usually know and recognize the fairy tale and in a different sense because its disrupted and distorted sequence of events is difficult to interpret and order into a meaningfully coherent whole. As a result, we are doubly confused: the elements we look for to create meaning are not there to be found, and the elements that are there do not connect in a way we are able to make immediate sense of.

Jennifer Reid argues that “throughout the history of ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ ... there is a constant emphasis on transgression, either emphasised through the beastly male, the wolf, or alternatively through the eponymous heroine herself” (2014, 6). Several versions of the story exist, each mirroring the morality of its time. Whereas early versions end with the little girl and her grandmother being devoured by the wolf as punishment for the girl’s naïveté, later versions allow them to escape their brutal destiny when they are saved by a passing hunter. Some versions are even rather empowering on the women’s part, ending with the girl and grandmother playing tricks on the wolf, causing his death (Bettelheim 1976, 174). The entry on transgression in *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales* explains that transgression in fairy tales “generally has a normative function in affirming societal rules and practices, but this is not always so: social change is primarily produced by transgression and the subsequent acceptance of a new mode of behavior” (Stephens 2008, 986). In modern critical discourse, transgression most often denotes a rejection of repressive forces and is therefore a positive concept: a prerequisite for change, transgressive behavior is judged as constructive, whereas behavior that upholds traditional ideas is deemed destructive (Stephens 2008, 987).

In psychoanalytical theory, transgression is part of the “inescapable complementarity of desire and law, of law and transgression” (No Subject 2015). It is characteristic of the death drive as well as of the pleasure principle. In *The Path*, as in the traditional versions of “Little Red Riding Hood,” the pleasure principle represents a transgressive force that in the context of this volume appears curiously reminiscent of other practices of “escaping reality”—playing games, for example. In *Footnote*, however, the death drive rather than the pleasure principle seems to be the driving force. Representing the human being as a “suffering, passive victim of, or witness to, violence and death” (Black 2010, 59), “a type ... connected to poverty, ignorance and peasantry—a dehumanizing construct” (Black 2010, 44), the performance stages the abject in a manner that feels peculiarly invasive and threatening.

To distinguish between the various “frames, forms, and practices [of] transgressivity in videogames and play,” Pötzsch suggests a flexible, dynamic model containing the categories ludic, diegetic, critical, hegemonic, juridical, situational, and idiosyncratic. The latter category is of particular interest in the context of this study as it hinges on “subjective attitudes, beliefs, experiences, and convictions” where features of the game and play are subjectively experienced as transgressive by specific individuals.

Methodologically, in performing aesthetic analysis we approach the aesthetic object or event from a number of angles, informed by relevant theoretical perspectives, as we

try to come to terms with the dimensions of sensory effects and meaning production that emerge between the work and its audience. This process is necessarily based on and relying on personal experience. To the extent that it succeeds in producing insights into these dimensions, these insights may be more or less reflective of and productive to other people's understanding and experience of the work, depending on factors such as their sociocultural background, aesthetic preferences, and previous experience of similar works. With specific regard to the works analyzed here, it is not unlikely that gender may also play an important role.

The Path

The Path was created by Tale of Tales, a game-development studio founded and run by two visual artists who have received much praise for the remarkably beautiful visual design of their works. They have also been known to problematize the concept of gameplay, challenging game designers and artists to design games that are "not games." They explain that the purpose of the challenge is to figure out how to make "good art with the medium of videogames" by abandoning "the idea that what we make should be a game" (Samyn 2010). As a consequence of this viewpoint, there is not much traditional gameplay in *The Path*, and the experience of engaging with it is largely interpretative rather than interactive. Except for being allowed to move rather freely in the landscape, the player has few opportunities to interact with the environment. Forms of interaction are limited to picking up objects and effectuating occasional cutscenes by entering certain places. Cutscenes often signify progress in the game, transferring the player-character from one stage in the game to another. During cutscenes, the player has no control over the character. Thus, apart from moving about in the game and picking up objects, the player has a rather restricted role and agency in the game. Engaging in interpretation and imagination to make sense of what is happening to her character, especially in terms of the possible dangers ahead, defines much of the gameplay experience.

To start the game, we choose one of six adolescent sisters as our player-character and protagonist. To complete the game, all six must be played in turn, and their different "paths" explored. The girls differ in age, the youngest one is 9 years old, and the oldest is approaching 20. Before the game starts, we find all of them gathered in the living-room of their apartment, ready to be picked up as our character to lead and control. Choosing one of them, we are taken outside and placed in front of a forest path, presumably leading to Grandmother's house. We are explicitly told not to leave the path, and then the game begins. If we choose to follow the path straight to our announced

destination, nothing much happens. A raven lands in front of us on the path, then leaves again. Perhaps we catch a glimpse of a white-clad girl in between the trees before we reach the garden gate in front of Grandmother's house. Entering the house in search of Grandmother turns out just as uneventful. It is rather obvious that our mission in the game is something else, something more, than just bringing Grandmother refreshments. If we instead leave the path and enter the woods, we can start exploring the environment, finding objects to pick up, discovering clearings, encountering people. Changes in the soundscape—such as the clanking of chains—warn us that there are dangers lurking nearby.

The versions of the fairy tale that confront us in the game are far from unambiguous. Like most games of exploration, the narrative progression of *The Path* depends on how we interpret and choose to physically move about in the game, steadily discovering new areas and items that may inform us and give us a gradually more complete understanding of our quest, its purpose and meaning—although they never become particularly explicit in *The Path*. One rule that soon becomes clear, though, is that we cannot complete the game without confronting our wolf. It turns out that each girl has her own destiny to realize, each destiny implying a “wolf”—that is, a symbolic encounter with a male figure in the woods representative of aspects we may connect to the wolf of the fairytale. At least once in the game, the encounter between the girl and her wolf is portrayed as a transcendental experience of being united with one's missing half—the romantic idea of true love as a possible destiny. In this particular encounter, the wolf comes in the shape of a handsome young man. In other encounters, he appears to be something more dubious, even literally wolflike. However, each encounter results in his revealing his true wolf nature in a blacked-out scene, leaving the lifeless body of a ravished girl behind. We are then brought back to the initial living room in which the game first began, where we may choose one of the remaining sisters to start another adventure.

In order to complete the game, instead of avoiding the wolf at all cost, we need to find the correct balance between being daring (to make progress in the game) and being careful (not to end the game and the girl's life too soon). It is a constant negotiation between the urge to explore and the wish to survive (so we can continue exploring, in case there are still unexplored areas and secrets to uncover). The ultimate choice of the game thus boils down to when we are ready to meet our wolf: When are we ready to sacrifice our present protagonist and move on in the game to realize another young sister's quest?

The Fairy Tale in a Psychoanalytical Perspective

In *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, the psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim argues that it is of vital importance to the function and value of fairy tales in a child's development that the fairy tale is ambiguous as to what it literally "means." To get a proper sense of ownership to the story, the child needs to be able to gradually discover new aspects of it and decode more of its "meaning" as she grows older and more experienced. Stories that are too openly didactic, spelling out their moral to the child once and for all, as do some of the early versions of "Little Red Riding Hood," ruin the fairy tale experience (1976, 173).

Bettelheim points to the struggle between two opposite sides of the masculine as central in "Little Red Riding Hood": on the one hand, the out-of-control, aggressively sexual, brutish force represented by the wolf (in psychoanalytic terms, the id), threatening to destroy everything in its vicinity; on the other hand, the rescuing father figure, strong, reliable, and comforting, represented by the huntsman (in psychoanalytic terms, the ego) (1976, 172). In Bettelheim's perspective, both figures refer to the *father* in the child's subconscious interpretation of the tale. In *The Path*, however, the double addressee of the quest—the player and the player-character—is presumably past the Oedipal phase representative of the child in Bettelheim's theory. I interpret the masculine force in *The Path* to represent, instead of the father from whom the child must disconnect, the typically unstable, often delusive object of desire that can potentially fulfill the adolescent's yearning for adulthood. Another difference between *The Path* and our conception of the story based on the version popularized by the brothers Grimm is that there is no hunter figure available to rescue the girls in *The Path*. There may be various reasons for this figure's absence; transgression of the tendency within popular culture to always provide a happy ending is one reason. Another, as I have come to read the story, is that the savior is already implied in the wolf: not least in the example referred to earlier in which encountering the wolf is represented as finding one's soul mate. This interpretation makes the girls' "fall" and "death" ambiguous and a matter of making the right choice—just as they might sometimes be in real life.

Footnote to Little Red Riding Hood

The female protagonist in *Footnote* evidently does not make the right choice—if she indeed has a choice at all. If "Little Red Riding Hood" is a tale about growing up, the grown-up life depicted in this performance certainly leaves something to be desired. The performance opens with the audience engulfed in darkness. No sound can be heard except for an occasional scratching of unknown origin. Slowly our eyes adapt to the

darkness, and we are able to discern the branch of a tree swaying slowly in front of us, scratching the wall. More branches become visible. We are in the woods, hardly able to see anything at all, feeling vulnerable and not knowing what to expect. Next, a person on stage is ambushed by another person. We hear them struggle, panting.

After this incident, the stage is slowly lit, signaling that the story is about to begin. Covering the back of the stage is a wall clad in foliage, in which two twittering little birds make occasional fluttering moves. The scenery creates an absurd gothic atmosphere, with the birds visibly stuffed and so poorly animated that the sight of them fluttering would be comical were it not rather unsettling. We are then introduced to what must be the everyday life in the home of a couple of indeterminable age. The relation between them is not clear, but somehow they appear more like brother and sister than husband and wife—perhaps because they share the same appearance, mixing the pitiful with the sinister. Their behavior and actions seem unmotivated and random, making it difficult to predict what is going to happen next. In my experience of the performance, this difficulty had an unsettling effect, influencing how I came to interpret and anticipate the future course of action. Thus, although very little in fact happens later in the performance, every small incident—laying out cutlery, setting the table—is read as a potential disaster.

I believe that the unsettling effect of these scenes can be ascribed to the onstage human figures' evocations of the abject—a perception of the repulsive with which we resist identification. Our resistance to identifying with them makes the objects, persons, and situations on stage appear uncomfortably close, as if they threaten to invade, infect, and assimilate us. Such an experience is not very common in theater but rather typical of experimental performance art. Furthermore, anticipation of rape and violence triggered by the performance's title as well as its opening scene may influence our perception of what is to come. It certainly does not help that the narrative structure of the performance is unclear, its sequencing of events appearing unpredictable, to say the least. Thus, the anticipation of violence and disaster continue to dominate our perception, preventing us from adjusting our worst expectations even though later experiences would suggest that not much *is* going to happen. The same mechanism is operative in my reading of *The Path*, up to a certain point.

Negotiation as Play

Several philosophers have related the play concept to aesthetic experience—for example, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schiller, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. As Gadamer applies the concept of play, it is understood as a mental movement between the aesthetic

object or situation being experienced and the experiencing person. In this interpretative movement to and fro between a work of art and its beholder, play may reach its highest possible state, emerging as a “structure.” This implies a transformation of reality in which its “truth” becomes apparent to the spectator. Often collecting his examples from theater and drama, Gadamer describes how the spectator may rediscover himself in the tragedy by recognizing “a metaphysical order that is true for all” ([1960] 1993, 133). Gadamer’s idea of play implies being played as a necessary part of the play experience. To avoid confusion, it should be noted that Jaakko Stenros’s discussion of norm-defying behavior in play and playfulness, in chapter 1 of this volume, applies a different conception of play than Gadamer’s. The latter concept is beyond good and evil in the sense that it designates a movement, an interaction between parts, and thus cannot be isolated to a single mindset.

As a work of art, *The Path* indeed requires of its player an interpretative to-and-fro negotiation, in which the player seeks to be realized as a player of this particular game by her decoding of its rules and figuring out its secrets. This negotiation is necessary for the player to take part in the interactive relationship. Whether the gameplay reaches the state of a “structure,” in Gadamer’s terms, that reveals a deeper kind of truth to the player must surely depend on each particular interactive-interpretive relationship. In a passage that corresponds astonishingly well with Gadamer’s perspective on the function of play in art and aesthetic experience, game designer and scholar Emma Westcott reports on meeting her teenage self in the game:

Moments spent playing *The Path* triggered my identification with almost forgotten memories of personal experience. This seemingly direct address resonates still. ... *The Path* re-tells a tale of feminine becoming in a form that has, from time immemorial, passed on wisdom from generation to generation. *The Path* reminds us of the potential of gaming to let us see through another’s eyes. (2010, 80)

As I have argued elsewhere (e.g., Tronstad 2004), in games of exploration the player’s interpretative acts become externalized, manifest in the choices she makes in the game. A negotiation process takes place between the player and the game, wherein the player tries out actions and adjusts them according to the responses she receives from the game, until some kind of progression is made. The interpretative negotiation decides the course of the path through the game, and to a certain extent it determines the resulting narratives that the player constructs in order to structure her experiences in the game. The process may often involve more action happening inside the player’s head than what is made manifest in the game, however. A great deal of the play going on in these games is thus compatible with Gadamer’s concept of play as it occurs in the act of aesthetic interpretation.

Transgression as a Catalyst of Play

I propose that transgression in various forms stimulates our imagination and thereby functions as a catalyst for play to happen. This is certainly the case in the theater performance *Footnote*, in which the initial audience experience of being personally exposed to the possible dangers lurking in the woods is never properly released in the course of the performance but merely replaced by a continuous, restless anticipation of disaster. In the performance, this experience is in part produced by transgressing the theatrical convention of a separation between audience and stage, which physically and psychologically implies that whatever happens on stage does not personally affect the audience. The transgression of this convention is surprisingly and effectively accomplished by depriving the audience of their ability to visually control the situation, by removing all light in the black-box theater space where the audience and performers are situated together. This way, the physical addressee of the threat lurking in the dark becomes unclear, and every person on stage as well as in the audience is potentially exposed. The transgression is also accomplished when the audience's playful imagination is stimulated by depriving the audience of narrative control—in other words, by producing a sense of not being able to predict the course of action.

When I first started to play *The Path*, a similar kind of experience occurred. My initial explorations of the game were strongly influenced and characterized by a lurking threat of violence and sudden death, represented by the absent wolf. Instead of being reassuring, his absence—to me—only signified that he could potentially be present anywhere in the landscape. However, as Westecott notes, more than the promise of violence marks the transgressive in this game. The rule that forces the player to sacrifice each of her player-characters, one after the other, in order to proceed in and win the game, which acts against the usual player instincts to pursue survival, may be experienced as transgressive as well. The player-characters represent vulnerable young girls with whom we may easily identify. Intuitively, we relate to their situation and see their need for protection and guidance by someone older and wiser, yet this is not our mission in the game.

When we realize that we are not in the game to protect and save the girls—that their deaths are required to solve the game—something odd happens: it is as if the horror of the lurking violence that awaits them is canceled out. On the one hand, we now regain agency and a sense of power as players; on the other hand, the perhaps most important aspect of the initial playful experience is taken away from us. Allowing the girls to meet their destiny no longer feels like a transgressive act but is

accepted as part of the gameplay. From this point on, the gameplay is less impressive, in my experience.

My hypothesis is that the sense of horror works as a driving force behind the interpretative play to and fro between us and the work and is our main motivation for coming to terms with the work and appropriate its meaning. Our interpretative drive is stimulated by the narrative ambiguity, expressing a “powerful/powerless binary” (Reid 2014, 13) characteristic of the fairy tale, which is symbolically effectuated in the game as well as in the theater performance, directed at the player and audience.

Play and the Pleasure Principle

Sigmund Freud ([1911] 1984) identified the *pleasure principle* as the guiding force for the id and thus decisive for our behavior in early childhood and infancy, leading us to constantly seek pleasure and avoid pain. He contrasted the pleasure principle to the *reality principle*, by which we gradually learn to abide as we grow up into responsible human beings. When Little Red Riding Hood disobeys her mother’s warnings, leaving the path and her duties behind to gratify an impulse to pick flowers instead, this choice is often read as an immature response from a child who is still ruled by the pleasure principle. The moral of the story, read from this perspective, is obvious: abiding by the pleasure principle leads you into trouble. The reality principle teaches us to postpone instant gratification in order to obtain a more precious future goal. If we follow the pleasure principle only, such goals, potentially granting us even greater kinds of pleasure, are out of our reach. Thus, the reality principle also fills an important function in realizing pleasure.

In popular discourse, playing games is often dismissed as an irresponsible, immature activity in which the player surrenders to the pleasure principle instead of devoting herself to more productive activities rooted in reality. This certainly holds true for some casual games, but not so much for games that provide a more complex game mechanic and rules that require strategic thinking and positioning in order to secure an objective. Far from providing any instant gratification, such games do not merely stimulate the player’s drive for pleasure but are sophisticated training grounds for learning to master the reality principle. Rather than pools of regression, they may be tools for personal growth and transgression—tools with which to refine and develop the player’s humanity. Engaging and provocative, the transgressive aesthetics operative in *The Path* may guide the player in hermeneutic interpretations to come to terms with, for example, emotionally disturbing experiences from her own adolescence.

“Pool of regression” is a more apt description of the world that confronts us in *Footnote*. In psychoanalytical terms, this world connects to destruction and the death drive. According to Freud, the death drive is an instinct in the organism that works against the life instinct and “whose function it is to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death” ([1920] 1984, 311). It is the opposite of transgression—it is a conservative, self-preservative keeping-to-oneself and a *not*-becoming of anything other than what one already is.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have applied and explored different understandings of transgression and the transgressive in my comparative reading of two adaptations of the fairy tale “Little Red Riding Hood.” For the videogame version, I have looked at how the game developers have transgressed conventions of the videogame as a genre and medium of play in order to investigate the potential for videogames to effectuate an audience or player experience that we are more accustomed to find in fine art. Gadamer’s equation of play with the aesthetic experience of artworks, as an interactive, interpretive movement to and fro between the work of art and its audience, has served as a frame of reference as I have argued that transgression in various forms may trigger and stimulate such processes. As Pötzsch points out in his chapter in this volume, however, transgressions of genre or medium-specific artistic conventions seldom function transgressively for very long. They often end up defining a new norm or are already considered the norm in an adjacent medium or genre. It is thus entirely possible that the staging of the abject in the theater version of “Little Red Riding Hood” would not have been experienced as half as transgressive if its context were not theater but experimental performance art. In performance art, staging the abject is, if not the norm, at least well within the received limits of what is considered the norm.

The final transgressive move discussed in this chapter is that of the character Little Red Riding Hood violating the rules set for how she is to behave. In several versions of the fairy tale, this transgression of rules functions as a stepping-stone and prerequisite for her progress and development into adulthood. In other versions, however, it signifies disaster and demise. Correspondingly, whereas violence represents a progressive force in *The Path*, its results are regressive in *Footnote*. Together, the two works represent the span of and ambiguity at play between progressive and regressive transgression in the classic fairy tale.