



The Witch's Way

Andrew M. Phelps and Doris C. Rusch

"[...] a playful and inviting story of the main character Lou's magical journey [...] takes you down a rabbit hole of intrigue and alternate reality."

The Witch's Way. A Transformational Story Adventure

Abstract

This work explores the design and creation of games intended to promote existential, transformative change—games that directly engage the player in the contemplation of life, with the ostensible goals of reflection, awareness, empathy, and growth. Through this work we intend to recontextualize games as a form of art that can move us profoundly, drawing on existential themes and awareness of the human condition in direct fashion, spurring our consideration of our place in the universe, and our own agency with respect to the meaning of our lives and relationships. The authors have spent several years theorizing a research-based design model for such games, and this work marks the first game that has been born directly from that framework as an exemplar of the form and format of more theoretical work. Thus, the game seeks both to illustrate the components of an existential, transformative game design framework as previously theorized, and also acts as a tool for analysis in considering how elements from the framework map to concrete elements of implementation. This work reviews the theoretical model that informed the design, discusses and dissects the game itself as an exemplar form, and presents the game itself for consideration of players and designers.

Keywords

Existential game design, game design theory, game narrative, interactive narrative, twine, story-based games

Game Overview

The Witch's Way is a text adventure game in which you play a middle-aged woman named Lou, who decides to take time out from her outwardly successful but inwardly unfulfilled life, and move to a cottage in the wood left to her by her aunt. There, she establishes contact with nature, the Unknown Forest behind the cottage, and the mysterious beings that dwell within the woods. Guided by animals, a wise and quirky bookshelf and her aunt's magical clues, Lou learns about the Witch's Way and how to live in greater alignment with herself and the world around her. The disconnection from her everyday business, the noise of "culture" and habitual yet unchallenged social rules and environments, facilitates a profound reconnection to Lou's true nature, her deeper self and a reclaiming of her integrity. Through the symbolism,

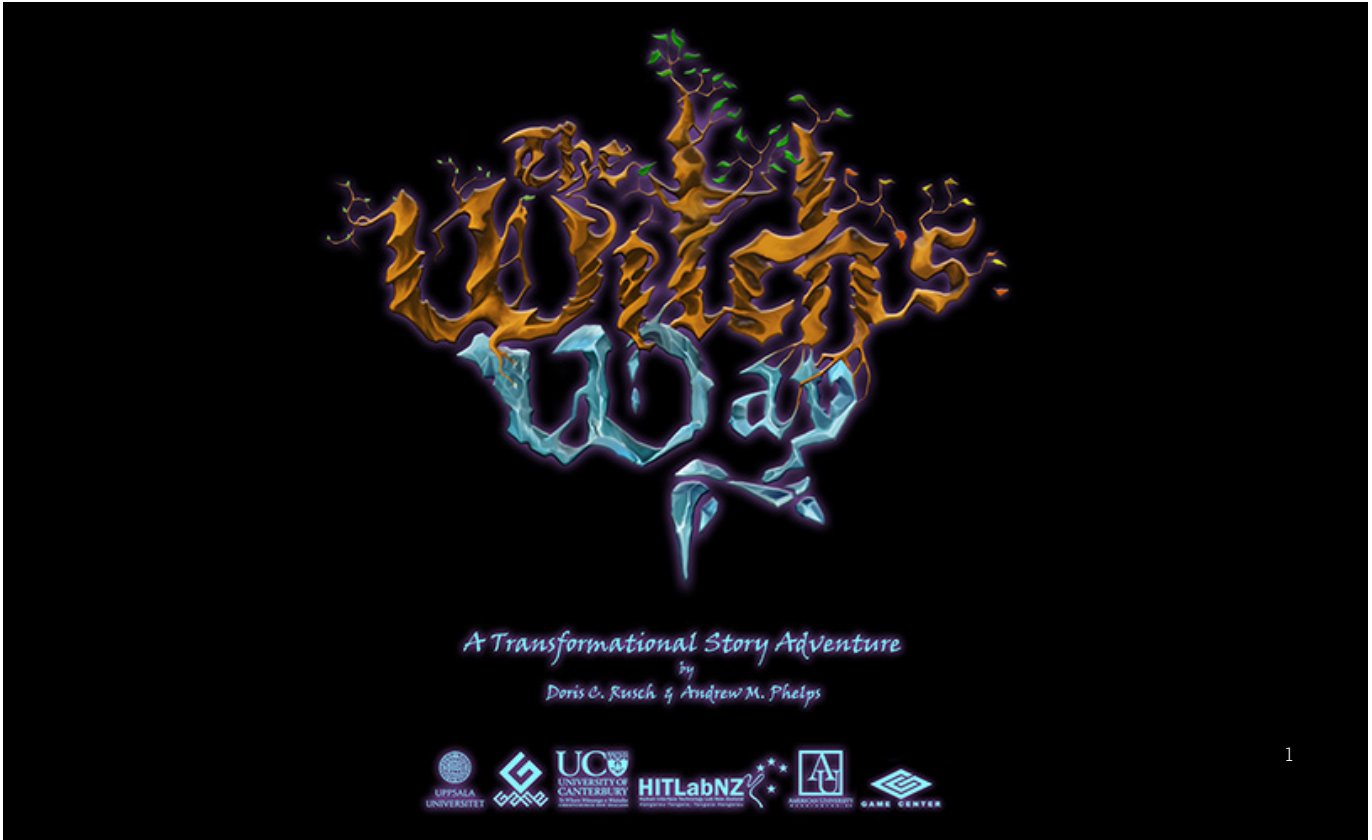
mythical imagery and rituals of the interactive narrative, players get to explore the possibility space of Lou's inner world. By making choices about which of her parts to listen to—the one that knows or the one that doubts—players can own the journey and discover what might be most true for themselves. Conceptualized in four seasons that tackle various personal development themes, the first part—Spring—has been released and is featured here. It focuses on the re-awakening of creativity through three technologies of magic: Wordlessness, Oneness and Imagination. (Martha Beck, 2012). It further ties up to several years of research on existential transformational game design, which addresses the bigger question of how we can design games that contribute to a meaningful life. The existential, transformational game design framework draws on existential psychotherapy as well as myth and ritual studies, particularly from a psychotherapeutic perspective, and in conjunction

with experiential notions of play and design.

Introduction

This work builds upon several years of design-oriented theoretical work, and the creation of a design model for the creation of existential, transformative games. We have published extensively on their model as it has developed, (Phelps & Rusch, 2020; Rusch 2020; Rusch & Phelps 2020; Rusch 2018) and have examined at length not only the design of games for meaningful transformation, but the underpinnings of these approaches and how these themes and ideas borrow approaches from existential psychotherapy as well as depth and archetypal psychology, myth and ritual studies. In this work, both of them have been active for a while in the so-called 'games for change' or 'games for impact' communities and have become frustrated with certain tenets and norms of this space;

namely that the kinds of transformations most sought after are those that are easily measurable across multiple participants at scale, and those that are predetermined at the outset prior to the actual playing of the game itself. In this way, these spaces seek to define 'change' or 'impact' in ways that are in a very real way detached; they idealize 'change' as small, discrete, and measurable changes in attitudes or perceptions or actions given particular stimuli, and imagine that these are successful if they are repeatedly and reliably transferred to the 'real' world. And yet, as Paulo Pedercini noted in his critique at Games 4 Change in 2014, "the kinds of change we can clearly measure are not all that interesting". While there is of course value in these kinds of games and their design towards these notions of change, we are focused instead on the creation of games that spur us to reflection of the human condition, ourselves, our lives, and the betterment of our own inner sense of be-



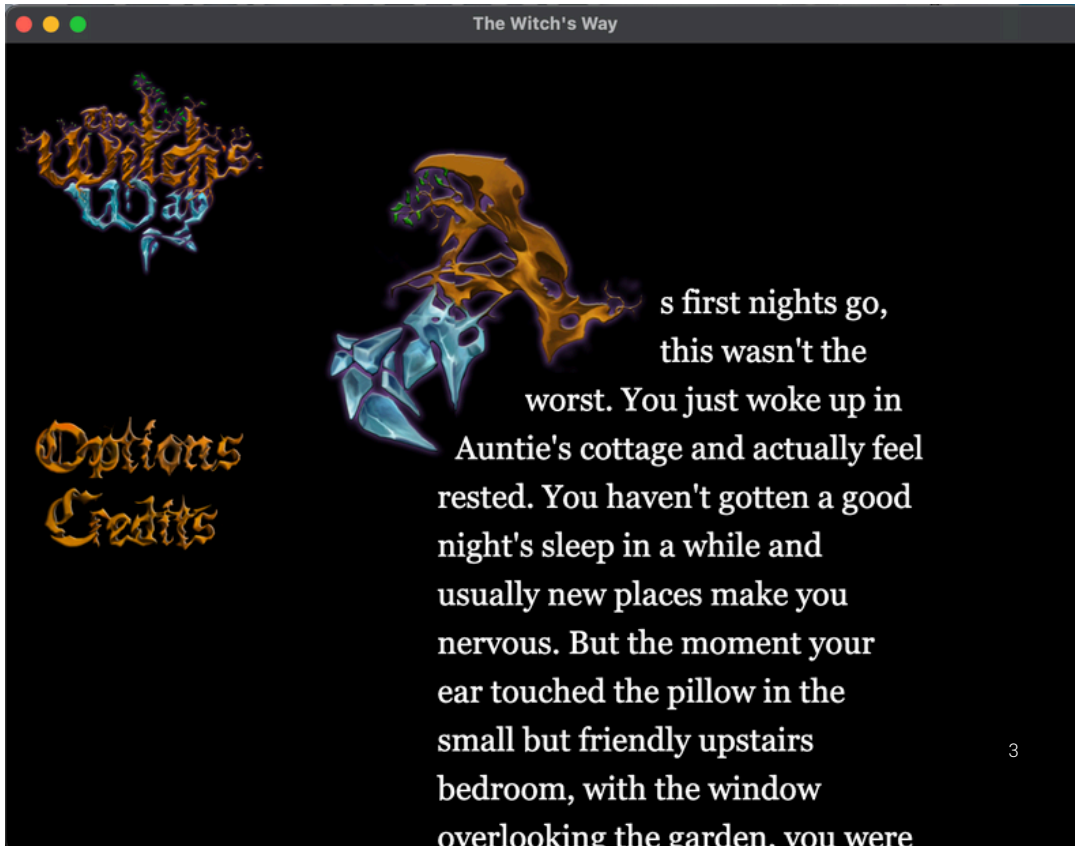


longing, being and meaning. Humans are, in this sense, both extremely complex and extremely individual: to design for such 'inner shifts' a more individualized, contextualized approach is needed, and the evaluation of such games must also be contextualized very differently than has been previously understood.

Instead of focusing on repeatable, if minute, measurable changes in perception or attitude, we instead borrow heavily from the tenets of existential therapy and the notion of individualized therapeutic intervention. To complement this approach, we also draw on archetypal and depth psychology as well as myth and ritual studies. The importance of myth as narrative patterns that give meaning to our existence and can help orient us towards our purpose or calling has been recognized by existential psychotherapists (May, 1991). Existential psychotherapy rejects the notion of 'mental illness' and focuses instead on creating a deep connection with the

true self, understanding our purpose, and our place within the world. It replaces the notion of a 'patient' with that of a 'client'—the goal of such therapy is not to 'fix' or 'cure' a given individual but rather to help them achieve goals and objectives that they themselves are engaged in identifying, and that are personal and individual. In this way, clients are met where they are currently self-identified and positioned with regard to their identify, rather than via predetermined assumptions or inferences on background. Notably, Phelps and Rusch do not propose that these methods are all-encompassing, but rather that there exists within this space a conceptual area to re-evaluate the concept of games for transformational change in ways that existing frameworks (Culyba, 2018) do not recognize and therefore lack sufficient guidance as to their design.

It is the focus on individuality that is key to this work. Existential psychotherapy holds as its root the consideration of the so-called 'exis-



tential givens,' that 1) life is finite, 2) there is no universal truth, but that we must find meaning for ourselves, 3) we must make choices of consequence, and 4) we are ultimately alone (Yalom, 1980). In this way, existential psychotherapy takes the individuality and personal journey of its clients into account directly, while doing so through a lens of universal concerns. Furthermore, psychotherapy also posits the idea that when viewed from an existential perspective the good life is an authentic life, a life in which we are as fully in harmony as we can be. Inauthenticity is illness, is our living in a distorted relationship with our true being (Bugental, 1990).

As noted in an earlier work:

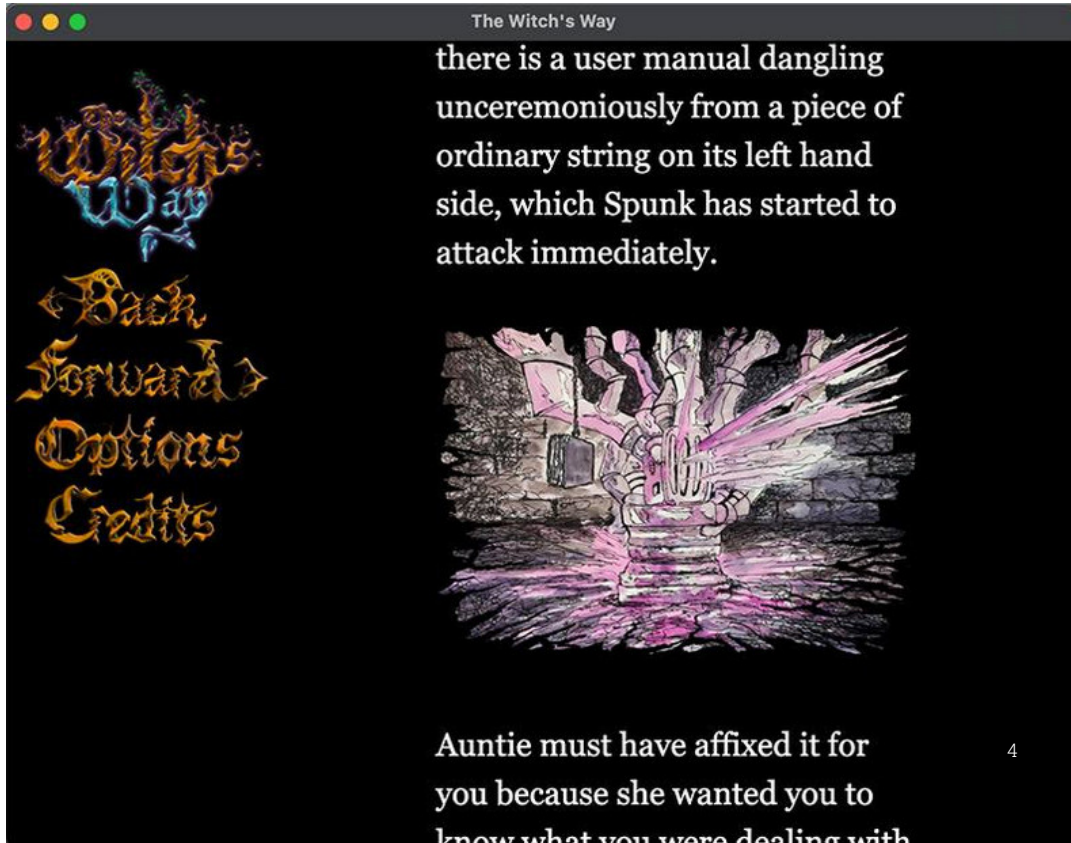
Games can contribute directly to authenticity and inner balance by recognizing the connectedness between authenticity and the unconscious. Put another way, it is in recognizing the alignment between the goals that we think we have, and the goals that we really have. This

leads us in turn to seek out tools to connect with the unconscious, to invite the player to ponder and reflect, and to get in touch with the emotional and underlying mechanisms of what really drives and moves us towards change" (Phelps & Rusch, 2021).

The tools identified to tap into the unconscious, to create a sense of resonance and engagement with players around these themes are, unsurprisingly, myth, symbolism, and imagery, as famously evidenced by Rollo May's work *The Cry for Myth* (May, 1991), who noted that modern people need myth to help make sense of their complex existence.

Design Elements and Components: Mythology and Symbolism

Utilizing myth and ritual to tap into the unconscious and shared cultural context is nothing new in video games. Indeed, numerous games



have utilized the psychologically resonant power of myth (Goodwyn, 2016), mostly by utilizing and incorporating existing mythological narratives within their structure(s). Examples include, but are by no means limited to, *God of War* (Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2005), *Darksiders* (THQ, 2010), *Apotheon* (Alientrap, 2015), *Dante's Inferno* (Electronic Arts, 2010), and many others. While this is certainly an effective approach, it also implies working with a limited set of myths that have already achieved a sort of cultural prominence and background. We focus instead on how to expand beyond this set of pre-defined or pre-resonant material and explore how new material can be created that carries the potential of myth to connect players with unconscious, resonant themes that can ignite individual processes for change. And, again, it is this individuality that is key:

"The power of myth is that it works without having to analyze it intellectually. If the recip-

ient is in the right mindset –open to the themes the myth deals with—the symbolism and imagery within the story “resonate” and activate the recipient’s imagination” (Rusch & Phelps, 2020).

Or, in the words of Jung:

“the auditor experiences some of the sensations but is not transformed. Their imaginations are stimulated, they go home and through personal fantasies begin the process of transformation for themselves” (Bonnet, 2006).

As an example of this kind of individual, lasting shift, one need look no further than the account of Sophia Ouellette, who played the game *Journey* (thatgamecompany, 2012) with her terminally ill father shortly before his death. She notes that:

“I think that that gave my dad some kind of peace because near the end of his life, he was playing a game that told him that in the end it would be all right” (Comulada, 2016; Takahashi, 2013). This change is profound, meaningful, and

decidedly individual: yet its singular nature does not diminish its impact.

In order to put these elements into practice, we turn to the concepts of active imagination and dreamwork as two psycho-technologies that have been developed by Jung (1997; 2001) and further explored by more recent scholars (Feinstein & Krippner, 1988; Feinstein & Krippner, 1997; Goodwyn, 2018; Johnson, 1986; Moss, 1998) to surface unconscious material. As Joseph Campbell stated: *“Myths derive from the visions of people who have searched their own most inward world”* (Campbell, 2004). By exploring their own minds and listening to their “inner storyteller” (Goodwyn, 2018) as it speaks to them, game designers can create psychologically potent imagery and symbolism through techniques involving intentional practice and active imagination (Jung, 1997; Johnson, 1986; Rusch, 2020). Myths and associated imagery authored in such fashion and with these elements

in consideration have a much better chance of resonating with players and being universally recognizable.

Design Elements and Components: Ritual is Myth Enacted

These concepts are further enmeshed with games in noting that ritual as performed by players is in essence myth enacted. Through action, players or performers get a handle on inner processes through their own actions. An example of this form of interaction are the famous “poetic acts” of Jodorowsky (2010; 2015), which are a form of theatre counselling. In one such ritual, designed for clients who feel they have failed in life and are contemplating suicide, he offers the conclusion that such a state is incurable and that the client has no choice but to simply “die and be reborn as a new person” (Jodorowsky, 2015). This involves an intricate series of

rituals and actions as the client is buried, dug up, washed clean, and given a new identity. As Thompson et al. (2009) note, the emphasis here is in the doing – this is what makes the symbolic acts real to the mind.

This is not merely pretend play without consequence, but rather a space in which the rules and consequence of embodied, symbolic action are altered to fit with goals and objectives of the player themselves. As Rusch and Phelps note: “various symbolic actions are indexical rather than iconic; the feigned death is not about pretending to be physically dead, but it refers to the more elusive concept of letting go of an old self” (2020).

Games thus lend themselves to this idea of ritual not only at a content level but also through their form as interactive media where player action is inherent to the engagement. Players must take direct action in the myth itself, determining how and along what path it

unfolds, as this is inherent in the concept of interactive fiction interventions, or as Murray describes them, “symbolic dramas” (1997).

Design Elements and Components: Experiential Game Design

The third element of the theoretical design model is the concept of “experiential gameplay” as put forward by Phelps et al. (2020), which notes that the experience of gameplay provides both a sense of agency and of direct effect. This expands on notions of “flow” (Kiili, 2005) and numerous other education theories. It is perhaps best described as a combination of procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2010) ideas around mechanics coupled with complimentary aesthetics in a sort of “what you play is what you do” design space, seeking to re-orient a game-for-learning approach such that the act of playing the game itself is sufficient for the desired learning out-

come without any other act needed other than playing and reflecting on the play experience. Thus, the concept of experiential play centers on the idea of open-ended, metaphorical, resonant types of learning where the player is made to ‘feel what it is like’ to have a certain experience or reaction or moment, rather than a focus on rote knowledge retention or application.

These kinds of experiential approaches have proven to be effective with players in describing and translating complex topics (Phelps et al., 2020), but are, again, highly individualized. Phelps notes this highly individualistic potential for change at the intersection of personal history and game design via his own history with *Missile Command* (Atari, 1980; Phelps & Rusch, 2021) but this kind of personal approach is applicable across a broad spectrum of games and players. The idea that players bring their past histories and experiences to bear in interpreting new media is anything but new, and yet

it is critical to note in this context as it speaks to the individuality of experience, even when designing for shared resonance.

Mapping a Design Space

Together these three elements: existential themes and subject matter, the incorporation of myth and ritual in both aesthetics and mechanics, and a more open-ended, experiential, and exploratory element of play work together to define a space where games have significant potential for transformation. While individual designs may gravitate to one of these pillars, games that incorporate two or even all three elements to a greater degree are often significant in their potential for nudging players to reflection, contemplation, analysis, and lasting insight. This is visualized by Phelps and Rusch (2020) in the diagram in image 5.

It is important to note that this repre-

sents a bounded but continuous space: individual games will map to different points or areas within it. Indeed, Rusch and Phelps map various games against this triangle, with discussions of *Walden, A Game* (Walden, A Game, n.d.), *Elude* (GAMBIT MIT, 2010), *Fragile Equilibrium* (Phelps, 2019), *Spiritfarer* (Thunder Lotus Games, 2020; Bugental, 1990), and many more in their various writings that further their theories on this design model. As they note:

[...] together these elements form a general notion of design that aspire to emotional and psychological resonance. They work together to create games that are primed to move us, that speak to us unconsciously, primally, even when they engage us intellectually and emotionally. We can then use this mapping in considering additional designs: does the design engage the player strongly on at least one, and ideally more than one, axis? Does the design use both mechanics and aesthetics to reinforce the relation-

ship between these pillars? Does anything in the design threaten the interpretation and reflection of these pillars from the player perspective? (2021)

This framework, then, provides a mechanism to continuously and reflexively evaluate design choices and game elements from an existential, transformative lens. It provides a way of mapping individual mechanics, story elements, themes, and symbols against a background to ensure cohesion, congruity, and connection. It provides a roadmap for designers in this space, seeking to create games of their own design that aspire to existential, transformational goals.

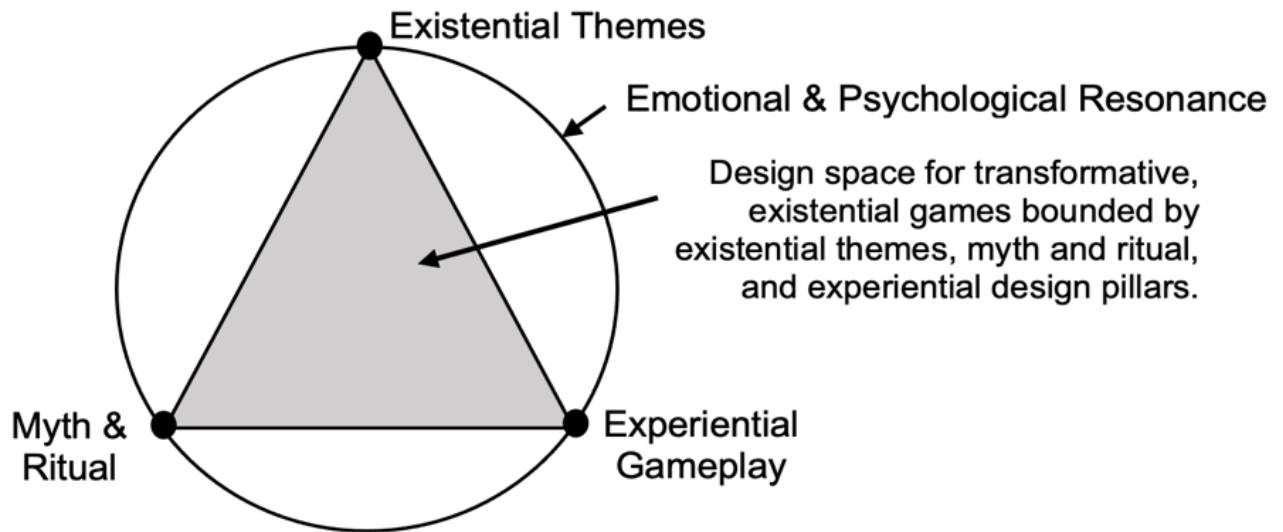


Figure 5 depicts a triangular space between 1) existential themes, 2) myth and ritual, and 3) experiential gameplay. Between these three elements, there is a space ripe for the design of transformational games. This image is reprinted from prior work at DiGRA 2020 by the authors. (Phelps & Rusch, 2020)

Design Space in Practice: *The Witch's Way*

The Witch's Way maps onto our existential, transformational triangle in multiple ways: creative recovery is connected to the existential theme of identity and choice. How to reconnect with and live authentically and in tune with one's true nature?

The story that emerged with its images and symbols might be considered mythical in so far as its "true meaning [can be] understood as inner processes" (Kirmayer, 1999). The writing was guided not so much by deliberate construction of a plot – although there was a transformative arc inscribed in the metaphor of Winter giving way to Spring by virtue of a ritualistic, liberating act – but by the intent of tapping into the psychic energies of the different stations of a personal development process. As an interactive experience, *The Witch's Way* aims to

allow players to explore its images and symbols firsthand and to enact rituals such as stopping destructive inner voices, replacing their eroding background commentary through affirmations, dissolving the dungeon walls of an inner prison, tapping into the unbridled joy of creative, playful moments etc. While text-based, our hope is that the choices offered give players the kind of agency required for an embodied experience that facilitates the psychic impact of performing rituals. Preliminary playtesting has indicated that the game's imagery and symbolism as well as its deeper existential themes are evocative and understandable to players on a deep level. Testers have reported feeling touched and emotionally moved in ways they found surprising and profound and that the game made them reflect on their own choices and areas of misalignment.

Magic and (Re)Connection in *The Witch's Way*

Also critical to the discussion of the game is the role of magic within it, both literally as the system of magic as engaged by the player (i.e. the thaum-pump, associated forest, and balancing system) as well as magic as viewed as a metaphor for connectedness and oneness. In the game, the eventual goal of the player is to connect with this system, to understand it, balance it, and effectively recognize it as pervasive to all other elements: the forest, the NPC's, the house, the animals, etc. The tension of the initial chapter hinges on the tension of being disconnected from this system, and from the system itself being broken and in need of repair, which is a reflection of Lou as the game opens: a quest for connection, for peace, for oneness and fulfillment. The game thus specifically explores the idea of magic as metaphor – what it is, how we

can access and develop it—to live with personal meaning and purpose. With this exploration of magic, our design process opened the door to further theorizing, adding to the framework as well as design practice by drawing on research in neuroscience. We are currently exploring key ideas that inform the magic in *The Witch's Way*, e.g. Whole Brain Living, how we attend to reality, open focus, embodiment and how the “technologies of magic” as social scientist Martha Beck (2021, xxiv) calls them that arise from this, shape what we can imagine and thus manifest in our lives, all of which speaks to the theme of [Re|Dis] Connection.

References

- Alientrap. (2015). Apotheon [Video Game]. Alientrap.
- Atari. (1980). Missile Command [Video Game]. Atari, Inc.
- Beck, Martha (2021): The Way of Integrity, London, UK: Piatkus.
- Bogost, Ian. 2010. Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames. 1. MIT Press paperback ed., [Nachdr.]. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Bonnet, J. (2006). Stealing Fire from the Gods: The Complete Guide to Story for Writers and Filmmakers (2nd Edition). M. Wiese Productions.
- Bugental, J. F. T. (1990). Intimate Journeys: Stories from Life-Changing Therapy (Rev. ed). Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Campbell, J. (2004). Pathways to bliss: mythology and personal transformation (D. Kudler, Ed.). New World Library.
- Comulada, J. (2016, March 24). A girl and her dad played one last video game before he died. She'll never forget it. Upworthy. <https://www.upworthy.com/a-girl-and-her-dad-played-one-last-video-game-before-he-died-shell-never-forget-it>
- Culyba, S. H. (2018). The Transformational Framework. Carnegie Mellon University: ETC Press. <https://press.etc.cmu.edu/index.php/product/the-transformational-framework/>
- Electronic Arts. (2010). Dante's Inferno [Video Game]. Electronic Arts.
- Feinstein, D., & Krippner, S. (1988). Personal Mythology: The Psychology of Your Evolving Self - Using Ritual, Dreams, and Imagination to Discover Your Inner Story (1st Edition). Energy Psychology Press/Elite Books.
- Feinstein, D., & Krippner, S. (1997). The Mythic Path: Discovering the Guiding Stories of Your Past-Creating a Vision of Your Future (1st Edition). G.P. Putnam's Sons.
- Goodwyn, E. D. (2016). Healing Symbols in Psychotherapy: A Ritual Approach (1st Edition). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315651811>
- Goodwyn, E. D. (2018). Understanding dreams and other spontaneous images: The invisible storyteller. Routledge.
- GAMBIT MIT. (2010). Elude [Video Game]. GAMBIT MIT. <http://gambit.mit.edu/loadgame/elude.php>
- Jodorowsky, A. (2010). Psychomagic: The transformative power of Shamanic psychotherapy. Inner Traditions.
- Jodorowsky, A. (2015). Manual of psychomagic: The practice of shamanic psychotherapy. Inner Traditions.
- Johnson, R. A. (1986). Inner work: using dreams and active imagination for personal growth. Harper & Row.
- Jung, C. G. (1997). Jung on Active Imagination (J. Chodorow, Ed.). Princeton University Press.
- Jung, C. G. (2001). Dreams (2nd Edition). Routledge. <https://www.abebooks.com/9780415267410/Dreams-Routledge-Classics-Jung-C.G-0415267412/plp>
- Kiili, K. (2005). Digital game-based learning: Towards an experiential gaming model. The Internet and Higher Education, 8(1), 13–24. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2004.12.001>
- May, R. (1991). The Cry for Myth. W. W. Norton & Company.

references

- Moss, R. (1998). *Dreamgates: An explorer's guide to the worlds of soul, imagination, and life beyond death*. Three Rivers Press.
- Murray, J. H. (1997). *Hamlet on the holodeck: the future of narrative in cyberspace*. MIT Press.
- Paolo Pedercini. (2014, May 1). Making Games in an F****d Up World. Games for Change 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MflkwKt7tl4>
- Phelps, A. (2019). *Fragile Equilibrium* [Video Game]. MAGIC Spell Studios.
- Phelps, A. M., & Rusch, D. C. (2020). Navigating Existential, Transformative Game Design. DiGRA '20 – Proceedings of the 2020 DiGRA International Conference: Play Everywhere, 4. http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/DiGRA_2020_paper_21.pdf
- Phelps, A., Wagner, J., & Moger, A. (2020). Experiential Depression and Anxiety Through Proceduralized Play: A Case Study of *Fragile Equilibrium*. *Journal of Games, Self, and Society*, 2(1), 101–149. <https://doi.org/10.1184/R1/12215417>
- Rusch, D. C. (2018). 21st Century Soul Guides: Leveraging Myth and Ritual for Game Design. DiGRA Nordic '18: Proceedings of 2018 International DiGRA Nordic Conference, 13. http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/DiGRA_Nordic_2018_paper_47.pdf
- Rusch, D. (2020). Existential, Transformative Game Design. *Journal of Games, Self, and Society*, 2(1), 1–39. <https://doi.org/10.1184/R1/12215417.v1>
- Rusch, D. C., & Phelps, A. M. (2020). Existential Transformational Game Design: Harnessing the "Psychomagic" of Symbolic Enactment. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.571522>
- Rusch, D.C. & Phelps, A. (2021) "Games of the Soul." In *A Ludic Society* by Denk, et al. (pp. 102–126). Donau-Universität Krems, Universitätsbibliothek. ISBN-13: 978-3903150720.
- Sony Interactive Entertainment. (2005). *God of War* [Video Game]. Sony Interactive Entertainment.
- Takahashi, D. (2013, February 8). An interview with Jenova Chen: How *Journey's* creator went bankrupt and won game of the year. *VentureBeat*. <https://venturebeat.com/2013/02/08/an-interview-with-jenova-chen-how-journeys-creator-went-bankrupt-and-won-game-of-the-year/>
- thatgamecompany. (2012). *Journey* [Video Game]. thatgamecompany.
- Thompson, J. J., Ritenbaugh, C., & Nichter, M. (2009). Reconsidering the Placebo Response from a Broad Anthropological Perspective. *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, 33, 112–152. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-008-9122-2>
- THQ. (2010). *Darksiders* [Video Game]. THQ.
- Thunder Lotus Games. (2020). *Spiritfarer* [Video Game]. Thunder Lotus Games.
- Walden, A Game. (n.d.). [Video Game]. Walden, A Game. <https://www.waldengame.com>
- Yalom, I. D. (1980). *Existential Psychotherapy*. Basic Books. <https://www.basicbooks.com/titles/irvin-d-yalom/existen->

tial-psychotherapy/9780465021475/

Images

1. The launch poster for The Witch's Way, a collaboration between Doris Rusch and Andrew Phelps.
2. This is an illustration of Dog, as described in the story at first as threatening, but actually very lonely and neglected, in a clearing in the forest. Original watercolor by A. Phelps.
3. The opening screen of The Witch's Way, as played on MacOS.
4. An illustration of the Thaum-Pump, as seen inside the game.
5. Mapping a design space for transformative, existential games, as published at DiGRA 2020.

Dr. Doris C. Rusch is a professor of game design with a special focus on Transformative Play at Uppsala University, Department of Game Design. She is the author of “Making Deep Games” and numerous journal papers and book chapters, has given conference presentations and keynotes at GDC, FDG, Meaningful Play, FROG, DiGRA and a variety of other well-known games conferences. She is the vision holder and lead designer of many award-winning games that deal with mental health issues and other salient aspects of the human condition, from depression to domestic violence. She is collaborating with Prof. Andy Phelps on the Existential Transformative Game Design Framework, a design framework to create games that contribute to a meaningful life and which draws on existential psychotherapy, depth psychology as well as myth, ritual to create experiences with deep, psychological resonance, which can ignite change in a self-directed and uncoerced manner.

Andrew “Andy” Phelps is a designer and professor at the Human Interface Technology Laboratory NZ (HITLabNZ) within the College of Engineering at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand exploring virtual and augmented reality, games and education, and art and interactive media experiences. He is also a professor in the Film & Media Arts division of the School of Communication, holds a joint appointment in the Department of Computer Science, and is the director of the AU Game Center at American University in Washington DC, USA. Phelps is also currently president of the Higher Education Video Game Alliance (HEVGA), and his work in games is recognized internationally. His latest game is *Fragile Equilibrium* (XBOX, Steam, Itch.io 2019), and he maintains a website of his publications, popular writing, artwork, curriculum development, and more at andyworld.io.