Conjuring *The Witch's Way*

Game Design as Magic and Spiritual Practice

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Introduction

> As first nights go, this wasn't the worst. You just woke up in Auntie's cottage and actually feel rested. You haven't gotten a good night's sleep in a while and usually new places make you nervous. But the moment your ear touched the pillow in the small but friendly upstairs bedroom, with the window overlooking the garden, you were out. It was like catching up on a year of sleepless nights. Everything around you exuded an air of calm order and protection. Your otherwise voracious thoughts, found no fodder to chew on the moment you slipped between the cool, clean, white cotton linens. You noticed a faint scent of lavender. (Rusch/Phelps 2021b: n.p.)

So begins the transformative adventure game *The Witch's Way*, in which you play a middle-aged woman named Lou, who decides to take a time out from her busy and outwardly successful but inwardly unfulfilled life and move to the cottage in the woods her aunt has left her. There, she establishes contact with nature, the Unknown Forest behind the cottage, and the mysterious beings that dwell within it. Guided by animal spirits, 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. Conceptualised in four seasons, the first part, "Spring", is ready for release and is the basis for this paper. It focuses on the re-awakening of creativity through three technologies of magic: wordlessness, oneness, and imagination (Beck 2012). It is founded on 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. Rusch has published about this more theoretical work elsewhere together with Phelps, (Rusch 2018; 2020; Rusch/Phelps

2020; 2021a), who is also a collaborator on *The Witch's Way*, responsible for its technical and aesthetic implementation and art illustration. As the primary reader, his feedback has been essential for shaping the story.

Numerous scholars and designers have approached game design from various perspectives, including those based on game mechanics (Adams/Domans, 2012), those focused on rulesets (Tekinbas/Zimmerman, 2004), those exploring emotion (Freeman 2004; Isbister 2016), and those exploring psychological approaches to character design (Isbister 2006). Some scholars have also approached design through a broader context and multi-disciplinary approach (Shell 2008; Fullerton 2013). The design of *The Witch's Way* takes the leap of faith from theory into creative practice, aiming to apply salient aspects and strategies presented in the existential, transformative game design framework to actual game design. The design process leveraged Jungian psycho-technologies (e.g. active imagination and dream work) to surface unconscious, psychologically resonant content (Goodwyn 2012; 2016). By investigating the leap – the subtle, invisible, liminal space of creative work where theory takes form in new and unanticipated ways – this paper aims to inspire fellow creatives. It also aims to share the journey of how diving deep into the soul to examine and engage personal themes through symbolism and imagery that aim to ignite transformation in others can also transform designers and developers of such work themselves. The dialogue between *The Witch's Way's* main author, Doris, and her collaborator Andy, was instrumental to the entire design process. Hence, the following text gives voice to both perspectives and experiences. As Andy and Doris discuss the personal aspects of the game's themes and imagery, they speak in first person, with clear demarcations of whose turn it is. This process corresponds to their collaboration in a bigger sense, which is an ongoing dialogue about games, design, academia, and life. This continuous exchange of ideas feeds into the existential themes of identity, meaning, purpose and connection and provides the encompassing framework within which a fictional (and academic) practice of spirituality can flourish.

What Magic Is This?

Before we begin, a warning: we will speak of witches, witchcraft, and magic: what you read might change you. It might change your perception of yourself, of others, and of the natural world. This is how we understand what it means to be a witch: the ability to transcend perceptual boundaries of culture and social environments and to really, fully pay attention to the natural world and to see ourselves as an inherent part of it. It is about shifting the emphasis of our consciousness at will towards attending to the world with our right brain hemisphere. Magic is inherent in our consciousness, because what we pay attention to (and **how** we pay attention) changes whatever it meets. It changes what we are in relation with and how we can access the energy web of the natural world with which we are entangled. As McGilchrist writes, the right brain relates to the Other:

> to whatever it is that exists apart from ourselves, with which it sees itself in profound relation. It is deeply attracted to, and given life by, the relationship, the betweenness, that exists with the Other. By contrast, the left hemisphere pays attention to the vir-

tual world that it has created, which is self-consistent but self-contained, ultimately disconnected from the Other, making it powerful – but also curiously impotent, because it is ultimately only able to operate on, and to know itself. (2019: 23)

There is not one definition we can draw on to pinpoint what we mean when we speak of 'witches'. Our understanding is informed by several sources from anthropology, ecology, neuroscience, and consciousness studies. Also Terry Pratchett. Always also Terry Pratchett. The closest to a working definition of our interpretations of 'witch' and 'magic' is from David Abram's (2017) wonderful book *The Spell of the Sensuous.* Taking an ecological perspective, he starts by explaining what characterizes a sorcerer:

> The ability to readily slip out of the perceptual boundaries that demarcate his or her particular culture – boundaries reinforced by social customs, taboos, and most importantly, the common speech or language – in order to make contact with, and learn from, the other powers in the land. His magic is precisely this heightened receptivity to the meaningful solicitations – songs, cries, gestures – of the larger, more-than-human field. (ibid: 9)

Abram goes on to unpack the idea of magic:

> Magic, then, in its perhaps most primordial sense, is the experience of existing in a world made up of multiple intelligences, the intuition that every form one perceives – from the swallow swooping overhead to the fly on a blade of grass, and indeed the blade of grass itself – is an *experiencing* form, an entity with its own predilections and sensations, albeit sensations that are very different from our own. (ibid: 11–10)

We will come back to our understanding of witches and magic later on, but this should have set the tone. No hocus-pocus. Just a good dose of right-brained attending to the natural world.

The Witch's Way is about the becoming of a witch: Lou. Lou doesn't necessarily want to become a witch. In fact, she is not quite sure she believes in magic and all that. Well, at least the part of her that doubts really doesn't. The part that knows, though, has a different view and, as usual, the two parts bicker and disagree about this. She moves into the cottage she inherited from her aunt to take a break from her life and figure out what she should do with it, unaware of its secrets. Since (at least initially) the part that doubts has the upper hand in Lou's active and restless mind, it is a bit of a surprise to Lou that the cottage is fueled by a Thaum Pump: a powerful device that taps into environmental magic to protect and care for the house and its inhabitants. It is also a surprise that her aunt was the powerful witch who kept that pump Up and running and – most importantly, in check – and ensured the balance and healthy exchange between all living things in the surroundings while she lived. Surprise is maybe a bit of an understatement: downright shock might be more accurate. The thing about Thaum Pumps is that, if there is no competent witch around that manages the powerful flow of energy it catalyses, they tend to go berserk. Lou has an opportunity here: to learn about magic, turn her life around and become the witch she was always meant to be. The only question is whether she can do it before the Thaum Pump goes kablooey and unleashes all sorts of nastiness?

Andy: The Thaum Pump was what instantly drew me into this world, because I've always been fascinated with magic not just as a thematic element, but as a system. *The Witch's Way* engages in a fairly common form of magical realism (Hart/Ouyang 2005: 3) wherein the main character, Lou, learns about magic being real while those around her, for the most part, have no such knowledge. I've always been fascinated in not just what magic did in narratives, but in how it worked, and who knows what about that process. When I first read (or had read to me as a child) *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Lewis 1980) I was fascinated with how Narnia existed in a way that intertwined and interconnected with the real world, how it served allegorical purposes and grounded and shaped its characters. And yet how one had to believe in it for it to exist: that it was powerful but fragile, even fickle. When I read *The Hobbit* (Tolkien 1999), I was far more interested in how Gandalf knew things, and when he knew them, and how spells worked, and what the runes meant, than anything else. This interest in magic as a system, as a coherent and logical thing that is at once both incoherent and illogical but, importantly, consistent, occurs again and again in my imagination that has been informed by countless stories, books, texts, movies, games and more. From early *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax/Arneson 1974) to Hogwarts's wizards and muggles (Rowling 1998), this focus on the relationship between the mystical and the mundane has captured my interest. And this interplay, the idea of a magical furnace that must be maintained, this force that must be wielded a la Thomas Covenant (Donaldson 1991), but that requires personal balance instantly resonated with me. It was the first illustration I planned because it is the first moment I connected with both halves of Lou: the part that knows, and the part that doubts, in equal measure. I could see it in my mind exactly, fully formed, throbbing (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: The Thaum Pump from The Witch's Way (Rusch/Phelps 2021b)
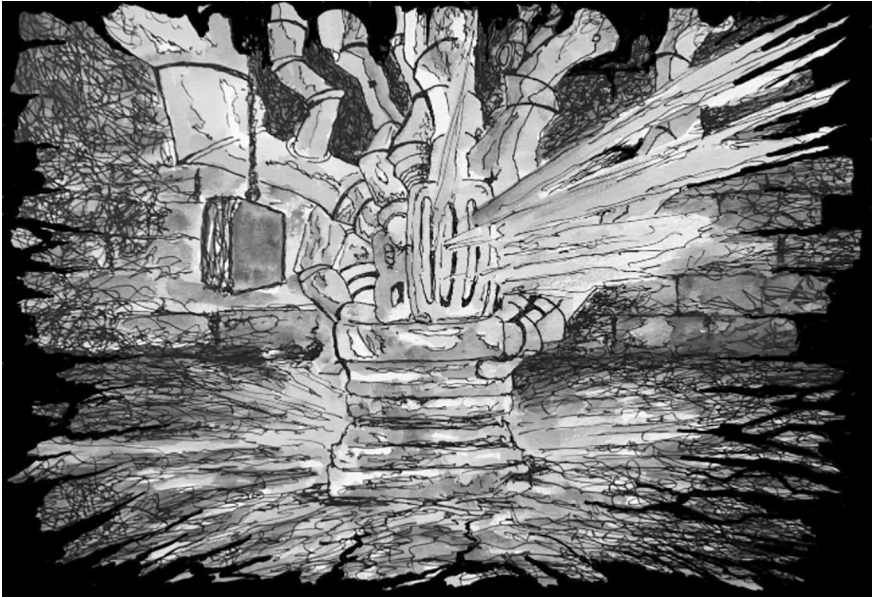
Doris: Lou's journey parallels my own. I didn't move to a cottage in the forest, at least not right away –I now live in a place very much like the one described in *The Witch's Way*, complete with two cats, Ghost and Spunk, and surrounded by nature and the Baltic Sea. Like Lou, I also found myself good and stuck a few years back: my career had gone pretty well so far, but despite academic success, I felt adrift, purposeless and alone. From 2007–2010, I was struggling through the tail end of a 12-year long relationship and had no clue who I was if not a researcher, who I would become once I left MIT (where I held a temporary postdoctoral position), how my work even mattered in the greater scheme of things, and what I was supposed to do with my life. It seemed like everything I had believed in and took strength from was challenged at the same time. When you find yourself in a hole, the best strategy is to stop digging. I therefore decided to stop chasing the next publication, grant, award, and to focus my considerable energy and resourcefulness to rediscover what actually brought me joy!

This was much harder than it might sound. If you've lived most of your life for external approval and pats on the back for some kind of achievement or other, letting go of that as a goal is hard. Yet, what was at stake was my feeling of aliveness, and I decided that was worth some discomfort. So began the most intense and scary research phase of my entire career thus far, because I dedicated my efforts not to yet another publication but to 'project Doris'. How frivolous! And I decided – much to the chagrin of the part that doubts – to put my scepticism about anything 'unscientific' on hold and just explore **everything** that held the promise of an answer about how to navigate out of this mess I found myself in, and into something that felt…well…better! Granted, being a game design researcher provided an excellent starting point. Much better than, let's say, if I had been a lawyer! One of the most life-changing books I could read at that moment was right in front of my nose: Stuart Brown's (2009) *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination and Invigorates the Soul.* The other book that opened the door towards a much happier, healthier life was Julia Cameron's (2002) *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity.* From there, I spent the next decade diving into the study (both through books and embodied experience) of improvisational theater (e.g. Johnstone 1992; Wiener 1994; Madson 2005), psychodrama (e.g. Moreno/Moreno 2011; Dayton 1994), the mind and mind-body connection (e.g. Siegel 2010; 2016; Lakoff/Johnson 1980; Johnson 1987; Lawley/Tompkins 2000; Halprin 2003; Varela et al. 1993), mythology (e.g. Cameron 2002; Campbell 2004; May 1991; Larson 1996), and ritual as psychomagic (Jodorowsky 2010; 2015). What fueled and informed all of these approaches to some degree or another were play, creativity, imagery, and experiential, embodied, symbolic action. They used different terms for similar concepts and were all directed in one way or another towards getting out of one's head, towards a deeper, more unself-conscious layer, from which one could explore new ways of acting and being, discover and act from a more authentic core self – one informed by playfulness and spontaneity – and, harnessing the mind-body connection, move towards a greater sense of joy and harmony. Since then, play and creativity have become very intentional key concepts that govern my life. I honor and trust them to get the job done. They replaced a puritan work ethic with a healthier and – alas! – more productive way of doing things. They are also, I argue, at the center of the kind of magic that informs *The Witch's Way.*

Andy: In similar fashion, I had just left the university I had been at for over twenty years, left behind the programs, school, and research centre that I had founded there over a multi-faceted history as an academic and administrator, and set out on a year of sabbatical to reclaim both a new career focused on design based research and a new life with different places, people, and experiences (Phelps 2019). It's easy to type that now, and it almost even seems logical, but of course none of it was either: I remember feeling completely unmoored, adrift, and largely alone. I moved to a new city (Washington, DC) and a new country (New Zealand) and created a strange, multi-faceted life that while it is inefficient and makes very little sense, has at times during the last year finally fed my soul again. Reclamation of self is a very difficult thing. And so, as I read early drafts of *The Witch's Way*, I would suggest specific turns of phrase, little bits of language or idioms that had personal resonance to me during this period, as I was Lou and she was me. I could see in her the insecurity, the self-doubt, the frustration and the hurt I felt when I left RIT, but also the drive, the will, and the stoic force to succeed. And thus, the game for me very quickly became a mirror, and I started putting little bits of myself into it around the edges, offering feedback to Doris with our long messenger discussions.

Magic is Being in Harmony with (One's True) Nature

And what magic is this, exactly? Magic, as understood in *The Witch's Way*, is not super-natural: it is extremely natural. Nature is magic. It strives towards the fulfilment of its inherent purpose – from seed to plant to flower to releasing seeds to becoming part of the earth again. For humans, the answer to the question of purpose tends to be a bit more complex. Sure, one way to look at it from a biologist perspective may also just be repro-duction. Many of us, however, do not find the idea of producing offspring to be the only answer to all our existential questions, our longing for meaning and purpose in life! In that regard, we may be slightly more complicated than the common dandelion. It as-sumes, however, that we all have a true nature, an authentic self, an inherent purpose or calling that is unique to us, and that living in alignment with this true nature is the key to the **feeling of aliveness** and fulfilling that which we feel we absolutely must do. To be sure, the true or authentic self is a tricky concept that has been subject of debate in the social sciences. Can there be an authentic self, when we occupy different roles depending on different social contexts? Is our 'true self' inborn or socially constructed? Postmodernist social science has thus made a point of seeing authenticity as relative. An in-depth dis-cussion of the different conceptualisations of the authentic self goes beyond the scope of this paper, but Vannini and Franzese (2008) offer a good overview and references for further reading. In this paper, authentic/true/core self/nature are used interchangeably and are understood as psychological as well as poetic ideas, grounded in the inner feeling of aliveness and full engagement without inhibitions through external oppression.

As existential psychotherapist James Bugental (1990) notes: "viewed from an existen-tial 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 life in distorted relationship with our true being." (246). This experience of deep, inner harmony is what Joseph Campbell (2004)

has called bliss, "that deep sense of being present, of doing what you absolutely must do to be yourself." (xxiii). He continues:

> Your bliss can guide you to the transcendent mystery, because bliss is the welling up of the transcendent wisdom within you. So when the bliss cuts off, you know you've cut off the welling up; try to find it again. And that will be your Hermes guide, the dog that can follow the invisible trail for you. And that's the way it is. One works out one's own myth that way. (xxiv)

In *The Witch's Way*, Lou encounters a dog (named Dog) in the forest. Dog becomes the guide towards her bliss; he puts her on the trail to her truth. The design of Dog was not making a conscious reference to Campbell. It just happened. The wounded and beaten dog in the forest was just the image that presented itself when trying to connect to the energy of joy. The dog became an emblem for the instinctual part that knows the way to the feeling of unencumbered bliss and inner freedom.

James Hillman (1996) also famously expands on the idea of true nature – only that he calls it 'soul' – in *The Soul's Code*, where he presents the acorn theory, "which holds that each person bears a uniqueness that asks to be lived and that is already present before it can be lived" (6). It is a mythological approach to understanding psychological development, personal meaning and our very biographies. Just like the acorn carries a fully formed image of the oak tree inside itself and will inevitably strive towards the realisation of this image, humans – according to this theory – are born with a destiny written into their souls that wants to be expressed, realised, and lived. It is important to note that destiny does not refer to anything external and it should not be confused with religious notions of fate. Destiny is an inner urge that springs from one's unique personality blueprint. Taking a stance against an overly scientific and thus constraining view on the mystery of existence, Hillman (1996) writes:

> There is more in human life than our theories of it allow. Sooner or later something seems to call us onto a particular path. You may remember this "something" as a signal moment in childhood when an urge out of nowhere, a fascination, a peculiar turn of events struck like an annunciation: This is what I must do, this is what I've got to have. This is who I am. (3)

Sounds great, so what's the problem? The problem is that there are many external forces that work against our true nature, that cannot accept it, might even feel threatened by it, and hence aim to – more or less consciously and deliberately – destroy it. As a sociologist by training, Beck has a systemic perspective on transformation. Social expectations and structures are what push us from our authentic path. She writes "At your deepest level, you know what makes you happy and how to create your best life possible. But your nature is forever colliding with a force that can tear it apart: culture" (Beck 2021: xiv). She goes on to explain that by culture she means "the set of social standards that shapes the way people think and act" (ibid: xvi). In our desire to belong, we conform to these cultures and thus sacrifice our own genuine feelings. "At that point, we are divided in ourselves.

We aren't in integrity (one thing) but in duplicity (two things). Or we may try to fit in with a number of different groups, living in multiplicity (many things)" (ibid: xv).

Holding with James Hillman (1996), Stuart Brown (2009), Julia Cameron (2002), Keith Johnstone (1992) and oh so many luminaries who have practiced, researched and written about calling, meaning, play, and creativity, Beck also observes that we know who we are and what genuinely speaks to us when we are children; we know how to **be** and **create** in a unique, genuine, and unself-conscious way. Later in life (by the time we reach the ripe old age of five or even earlier), this blissful feeling of true 'aliveness' often gets educated and raised out of us and – if we want to live an authentic life that is filled with unique meaning and purpose – we have to recover it, find our way back to it. This is all the more difficult and even at times dangerous, if what is authentic to us goes against socially accepted norms.

The witch as an archetype (and the way it is understood in *The Witch's Way*) represents this unapologetic authenticity that survives and thrives outside the norm. The witch is the sovereign over their true nature. The witch stands firm and unmoved in the eye of the hurricane of social and cultural pressures and expectations. Maya Deren (1947) writes in her notebook, which she kept while doing field studies in Bali:

> A witch is, actually, a successful (in the sense of surviving) deviant. You have a cultural, ideological, social, what-not pattern which is, for that society in question, normal (and, importantly, that is understood as a synonym for *natural*.) Most people survive because they conform to these patterns – because they behave normally. Then suddenly you have someone not behaving 'normally,' and usually they cannot survive, since having rejected the system and its support they go under, so to speak, and are referred to as 'subnormal,' 'maladjusted,' and other such terms which have a negative relation to the standard norm. But then suddenly you get a deviant which survives, and since it does not draw its support from the normal pattern – and since the normal people only consider themselves as natural – that deviant is understood as drawing its support from 'unknown,' 'supernatural' sources. This 'independence' of the accepted, natural pattern upon which the normals are dependent jibes, of course, with the universal attributes of witches as being 'solitary,' owning cats (since cats share this independence), etc. (33)

This is what Lou must learn in *The Witch' Way*: the struggle that characterises her becoming. Her creativity and true self are locked up in perceived expectations and norms and recovering them comes at a risk, as being different tends to be constructed as being dangerous. Deren continues:

> For the survival of the witch independent of the accepted pattern means that she is simultaneously a manifestation of a non 'normal' order which is apparently integrated and strong enough to sustain life. But it is characteristic of the 'normal' that he cannot conceive of the simultaneous existence of dualities – that his way is the only possible way – and consequently the sheer existence of another order capable of sustaining life is a threat and a source, potentially, of destruction. They are afraid, for they think: If we cannot survive without our order, how can she survive in solitude? Hers must be indeed a very powerful order to exist so independently, without all the intercooper-

ation and individual compromise which we have to go through to survive. And if it is so powerful, then it could destroy us. We must try to destroy it first. (ibid: 33–34)

Witches wield great power due to their authenticity and integrity. Their magic lies in being themselves. It is a magic that comes at a high risk, requires a great deal of courage, insight, and passion, as well as lifelong practice. It should be noted, though, that while a strong, personal sovereignty is key to the notion of the witch here, witches are not condemned to a solitary existence. We can be individually strong together! We created *The Witch's Way* and this paper as a team. Our work is embedded in a larger social context along with a few fellow creatives and researchers, whom we playfully refer to as our 'coven': Sarah Lynne Bowman, Kjell Hedgard Hugaas, Josefin Westborg and Josephine Baird. We are a research group at Uppsala University, dedicated to the exploration of 'transformative play' through role playing games and symbolic enactment. One of our big aims is to contribute to a 'Soulful and Sustainable Academia' aka 'Operation SASSY'. We cultivate and celebrate our individual so-called 'deviance' and support each other in staying in our integrity so we can keep our lamps lit and help others do the same despite the manifold pressures and expectations that are inherent in academia as a system.

Doris: The Witch's Way – born from my own, deep desire to recover my bliss and fascination and let it guide me again on the way to my calling – is about the magic inherent in living an authentic life, in accordance with my play personality and against perceived pressures and norms of society in general and academia in particular. This magic manifests not only in the exquisite feeling of aliveness but also in extraordinary synchronicities. Jung discusses the concept of synchronicity as an 'acausal connecting principle': encounters, events and opportunities that lack an obvious causal connection, yet to the mind appear meaningfully related (Jung 1973). Greenwood and Goodwyn (2015) speak of a 'magical consciousness' that is at work when ascribing meaning to these causally unrelated events. Julia Cameron (2002) gives examples for these kinds of occurrences in her book *The Artist's Way*: e.g. "A woman admits to a buried dream of acting. At dinner the next night, she sits beside a man who teaches beginning actors" (62). Cameron elaborates on the role of synchronicity in recovering one's creativity and leading an authentic life:

> In my experience, the universe falls in with worthy plans and most especially with festive and expansive ones. I have seldom conceived a delicious plan without being given the means to accomplish it. Understand that the *what* must come before the *how*. First choose *what* you would do. The *how* usually falls into place. (ibid: 65–66)

Synchronicity is the phenomenon that facilitates the realisation of what Hillman calls destiny. When we go through life fully tuned into our true nature, our authentic, aligned self, our abilities to perceive the things that will come to our aid increases tremendously. We meet the right people/mentors/friends/partners, happen to walk into the right stores, grab the perfect book that seems to have been written only for us, see exactly the advertisement for the art class we have been looking for, etc. Why? Because our inner GPS towards our True North is up and running full steam. What we are dealing with then are not supernatural forces that intervene with our destiny. The kind of magic that is at work here – and that is no less astonishing and powerful – is **perceptual**. It is based

on the interplay between inner alignment and outer opportunity, a syncing up of our energies humming on a harmonious frequency with the energies of our environment. It is about the discovery of being part of an 'energy web' of all living things as Martha Beck (2012) calls it, or, as David Abram (2017) writes,

> the experience of existing in a world made up of multiple intelligences, the intuition that every form one perceives – from the swallow swooping overhead to the fly on a blade of grass, and indeed the blade of grass itself – is an *experiencing* form, an entity with its own predilections and sensations, albeit sensations that are very different from our own. (10)

To become proficient at magic then, one has to learn how to access this energy web.

The Four Technologies of Magic to Transform Ourselves and Our Environment

Martha Beck (2012) calls accessing the energy web 'Wayfinder Magic'. She takes inspiration from Anthropologist Wade Davis' (2009) research on the ancient cultures, e.g. the Polynesian navigators, who discovered the Pacific Islands. With very small boats and without modern navigation tools, they found tiny patches of land in the vast, open water because these Wayfinders – some of them are still around today – have the ability to "'read' the ocean so sensitively that they recognise the refractive wave patterns of island chains hundreds of miles away by watching ocean swells break against the hull of their canoe. They use empirical observation and a dash of intuition that looks damn close to magic" (Beck 2012: xxi). Beck understands this kind of wayfinding as a metaphor, one suitable to describe the task we all face today: to chart our course in a world as fluid and ever-changing as open water, and to do so "in such a way that we not only stop the destruction of our own true nature, but reverse it. As we do that – and only as we do that – we will naturally begin healing the earth" (ibid: xxi-xxii). This interconnectedness of personal transformation and the wider, more encompassing impact on our environment this transformation can have, is key to the understanding of spirituality as it has infused my own life and the creation of *The Witch's Way.*

Interconnectedness is also key to current approaches towards sustainability. To save the earth and effectively lead the change towards a more sustainable, equitable, and just world, we need to see ourselves as part of a big system, an interconnected web of life. Monica Sharma (2017), the author of *Radical Transformational Leadership* who designed and implemented numerous wildly impactful sustainability programs worldwide during her two-decades-long career at the United Nations, speaks of bridging our "dual and non-dual worlds" (74). Based on systems thinking, Sharma also draws on explicitly spiritual frameworks to inform her ideas about what needs to be done for lasting, impactful social change and environmental sustainability:

> The non dual universe is where you and I are one – as Rumi says '*where there is no each or other*.' The dual world is the outer world we live in, where there are differences, where our experiences are named, defined and measurable. When the dual world is

informed by our oneness – the non dual self and universe – a different set of realities and entities emerges, creating a thriving interdependent world among humans and between humans and our planet. Phenomena in the dual world are interdependent and related through cause and effect. The world operates largely in a dualistic manner with many polarities. The complex problems we currently deal with, such as the inequities of the financial system or the unending conflicts, are based upon exclusionary cultural human behaviors. They cannot be resolved by the linear reductionist thinking that created them in the first place. (ibid: 74)

Creating social change and working towards sustainability are a form of manifesting (i.e. to visualise a desire and harness the power of inner capacities and imagination to make the desire real) that taps into the same kind of magic that is at the core of *The Witch's Way.* Magic, in that sense, is not some self-absorbed mumbo jumbo. It is not just about finding individual happiness or bending something to one's will. It is about seeing oneself as part of a whole that can provide awesome things to us, but to whom we have to give back to as well. Here are the (metaphorical) Cliff's Notes from Martha Beck on the four technologies of magic that facilitate access to one's own, true nature and the wider energy web:

> **Wordlessness** shifts consciousness out of the verbal part of the brain and into the more creative, intuitive, and sensory brain regions. Which is more powerful? Well, the verbal region processes about forty bits of information per second. The nonverbal processes about eleven million bits per second. You do the math.
>
> **Oneness** allows you to sense the interconnection between your consciousness and that of beings apparently unconnected to you. Science now confirms that we are highly interconnected. We are basically energy vibrating at different frequencies, unbounded and overlapping.
>
> Once the technologies of Wordlessness and Oneness are active, **Imagination** becomes their supportive servant. Used in a state of nonverbal connection with the world around you, it will help you achieve a level of problem-solving that feels like pure fun and looks like pure genius.
>
> Finally, **Forming** creates in physical reality the situations, objects, and events you've had imagined. (…) There are two ways to make things happen at the stage of Forming: by moving things around with physical processes alone, or by adding physical action to the other three skills. Forming in this second way is so much more effective than simply slogging through various physical processes that it makes a wayfinder appear to be doing magic. (the following list entries in Beck 2021: xxiv).

It is striking how Sharma (2017) uses the same vocabulary in relation to her sustainability work. In the context of describing the importance of knowing who one is and what one stands for in order to bring about transformation, she states:

> Each one of us has inner power. Because of our socialization process and perhaps traumatic childhood, we are often unable to tap into this robust space. Different people and scholars refer to this space with varying expressions, such as self-awareness, inner capacity, inner power, **oneness**, wisdom, full potential. Essentially, this space is *wordless*. It is a *way of being*. (Sharma 2017: 45–46)

These ideas of an energy web one taps into through wordlessness and oneness are also present in David Abram's (2017) work, who has studied the function (and particularly the healing powers) of traditional sorcerers of the Indonesian archipelago and the traditional shamans of Nepal. He states that the key ingredient to magical manifestation of desired outcomes (e.g. restoring health to the villagers and the surrounding environment) seems to be a certain kind of perception beyond intellectual understanding (i.e. 'wordlessness') and a focus on the interrelatedness of humans and nature ('oneness'), which emphasises harmony and balance of the whole ecosystems, rather than putting the well-being of one type of creature (e.g. humans) over others.

Cultivating wordlessness and oneness to tune into the energy web in this unself-conscious way allows for our own true nature to come to the fore, uninhibited and unencumbered by social norms or expectations and cultural constraints. The core of 'feeling alive' and personal authenticity is bigger than the self; it is inherently spiritual and it is directed towards healing, balance, and sustainability. By recognising, honoring, and healing all authentic parts within and around ourselves, we create a deeper existential connection to the planet and its critters and extend our healing efforts to the earth.

Wordlessness and oneness in particular have found their way into the first part of *The Witch's Way*. Seen this way, magic is a powerful antidote to two of these core existential concerns: death and isolation. They become illusions in the face of the eternal life-death-life cycle of nature and the idea of its interconnectedness. This idea is captured in *The Witch's Way* through the image of the aforementioned Thaum Pump – a magical device that taps into the natural power all around, its purple veins reaching deep into the earth and the Unknown Forest. It feeds the cottage, takes care of household chores, and protects the home from intruders. How well the Thaum Pump performs depends on the competence of the witch it serves. The power is always there, but how much of it can you use, and how well can you control it? It takes a lot of practice – practice of the technologies of magic, e.g. wordlessness and oneness, but also imagination and forming – to harness the Thaum Pump's potential. Throughout the game, there are barriers: the door to the Thaum Pump is initially closed, the Unknown Forest cannot be accessed etc. To cross the threshold and enter the realm of the magical, the player has to perform rituals. Rituals play a big role in the existential transformative game design framework. Their power to communicate with and influence the unconscious mind by way of symbolic action is referred to as 'psychomagic', to borrow a term from Alejandro Jodorowsky (2010; 2015). Jodorowsky has used these kinds of symbolic, 'poetic acts' in his theater counseling method to help his clients transform. The access rituals in the first part of *The Witch's Way* are all based on play and creativity. Play is how we learn, grow and transform: we cannot force any of these things. We can't will or think them into existence either – we must play. Hence, these rituals are intended to remind the player on an experiential level that they need to put their intellect, their critical self, their 'part that doubts' as it is called in the game, on pause for the sake of letting the magic work through them in play. It is what opens the door to the Thaum Pump as well as the mysteries of the Unknown Forest, a symbol for the unconscious mind in general, including the individual psyche as well as the collective unconscious.

Andy: To me, this focus on the interplay between magic and nature is a key component in the game, and again it mirrors so much of my own experience. When I was a

child, I was fascinated by the Arthurian legend (Malory 1485), not by Arthur but, of course, by Merlin, and the idea that the magic they wielded was not his own but that of Britain itself, and the connection to druidism, nature, land, death, and rebirth. The idea of a magic web fits perfectly with these very old ideas (that are, of course, based on much older ideas, simply reformulated and reworked in the tradition of the bard/storyteller for generations), but again it resonates. Also, as an only child, we moved around a lot (I mean a **lot**) and I remember much of the time being very lonely: I had several imaginary friends, and at one point an imaginary brother I would tell my secrets to and wish with all my heart was real. And the place where I would go to play, to be free, to be wild, was the forest. Learning paths so well I could run them blindfolded, swinging across creeks on grapevines, carving sticks, building forts, sitting in the grass in the shade just listening to everything around me. The forest was to be alive, away from school, away from home, away from everything, but to also feel as connected as possible.

And this led me, instantly, to Dog (see Fig. 2). I knew that dog like my best friend before I even played the whole game, indeed before the game was even half-finished. And it was a very careful, very constructed thing because that dog was tired, it was weary. It had taken on the slings and arrows I had felt over 46 years, and particularly over the last few as I slowly, inexorably came to a sort of divorce with my working world and prior appointments. That dog wanted to remind me of those forest paths, to remind me both of stillness and of listening, and, importantly, of play. It was part wolf, part wild, part magic, and yet tempered by age, and even by regret. I again saw myself in the game. Again, the game was a mirror. And I knew I had to draw Dog, because it was so very clear in my mind.

Fig. 2: An illustration of Dog from The Witch's Way

The Witch's Way as Structured Game Design

It is important to note that the design of *The Witch's Way*, while organic and fluid, is not actually unstructured. Instead, it is designed directly in reference to and as an example of the authors' transformational game design framework. The elements discussed thus far in this paper work together to create games that directly seek to create a form of psychological resonance and position players for transformation. While this framework has been extensively documented in other articles (Rusch/Phelps 2020, 2021a), it essentially maps a triangular space (See Figure 3) with three design axes: (1) employing existential themes to engage players in the consideration of life in a reflective, evaluative state, (2) using myth and ritual elements to engage the player in actions of consequence that have cultural relevance and operate through symbolic enactment (Rusch/Phelps 2020), and (3) creating game experiences that are deeply experiential in the sense described by Phelps, Wagner, and Moger (2020), meaning that they engage the player directly in the core action of the transformation. A game about teaching line and form and gestural abstraction will engage the player in creating a painting (Phelps et al. 2019), a game about learning to find peace in death and dying will engage the player in a narrative wherein they assist in this process and must make peace with it (Thunder Lotus Games 2020). This is all to say that the core of the game experience is the potential transformation in action, learning by feeling, doing, and reflecting rather than consciously analysing. It is a very different form of active learning (Kiili 2005) than is typically discussed in educational circles.

Fig. 3: Mapping a design space for existential, transformative games (Phelps/Rush 2020)
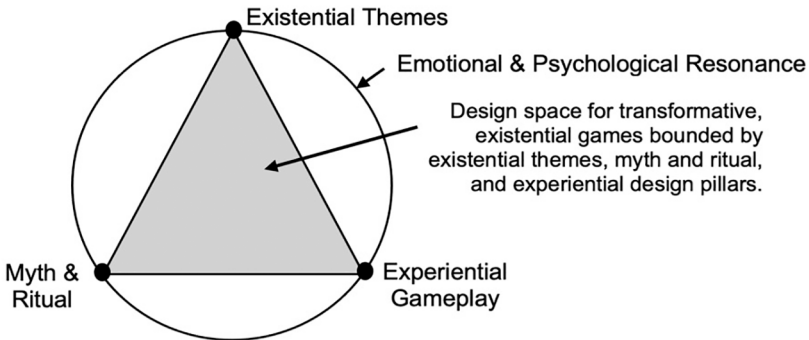
The authors have explored this structure in consideration and comparison to numerous other games including the works cited in the previous paragraph, such as *Journey* (Thatgamecompany 2012), *Fragile Equilibrium* (Phelps 2018), *Spiritfarer* (Thunder Lotus Games 2020), *Walden, a Game* (USC Game Innovation Lab 2017), and more. As a tool for analysing the transformational potential of games, it is useful in considering design characteristics and centering an approach. Each design element, character, narrative, scene, visual, etc., can be evaluated as to whether it brings the player in alignment with one or more of these pillars, with ideally the strongest potential in work that deeply en-

gages in all three. But analysing and critiquing is not making, and *The Witch's Way* is intended as our effort towards actionable design using this framework. As an application of the existential, transformative framework, we knew the game had to revolve around existential themes – e.g. the question of purpose or meaning in life, identity, connection and choice. We also knew we wanted to harness the power of myth and ritual with their imagery and symbolism to ignite transformation through personal resonance. And we explored countless methods to engage the player in the doing of the things – not just actions in the game world but in debating with oneself about choices, recognising the parts of one's own mind and their voices, listening to inner dialogues directly. As such, many of the design decisions, while they were arrived at through the process described throughout this manuscript, were carefully considered and informed by this framework in a logical and structural way, but with (hopefully) an artistic sensibility to both the process and the design.

Game Design as Spiritual Practice

Doris: The design of *The Witch's Way* was also a spiritual experience in itself. Rather than being deliberately created to address a particular problem that needs rectifying – as tends to be the dominant approach for games following other transformational game design frameworks – this game's design was allowed to emerge through a dialogic process with my unconscious, facilitated through dreaming, active imagination, long walks, and writing morning pages while staring out into nature from my favourite place on the rocking chair in the winter garden (often with a cat on my lap as well as a laptop). Andy followed a very similar process, while ruminating on the initial text and his own internal visual imagination. The themes and images of the unconscious are skittish – they shy away from harsh light and force. They have to be sought and met in the twilight, before they willingly part from the shadows and allow a good look. Mat Auryn (2020), author of *The Psychic Witch*, writes about a possible connection between the pineal gland, melatonin, dreaming, relaxation, and – consequently – psychic ways of perception that are different from wide-awake states. The pineal gland sits in the middle of the head, looks like a tiny eyeball and is often referred to as the Witch's eye or the Third Eye. It sends neural signals for melatonin output. Darkness coaxes the body into producing melatonin, which promotes sleep. People who report to have taken melatonin supplements report more vivid dreams.

> Since both relaxation and brainwave states associated with daydreaming and light dreaming are important for psychic perception, you may start to realize that this is one of the many reasons that witches and psychics tend to prefer to work in dimly lit spaces with candlelight in lieu of bright atmospheres. That's because there is more melatonin being produced, which may activate a more naturally relaxed state conducive to alpha, and the pineal gland is actively working (...) When we're in alpha, there's a direct conversation going on between the conscious mind and the pineal gland. (Auryn 2020: 17)

In other words: the Third Eye flutters open when we are in the meditative alpha brain-wave state. It perceives by way of dream images and symbolism and is closely connected to wordlessness and oneness. It is 'the part that knows' with wordless, deeply intuitive clarity.

The Witch's Way was written mainly in this state. It takes, however, a certain kind of discipline, commitment, and practice to trade the harsh light of the scientific operating room for the diffuse and soft candlelight conducive to spiritual work, creativity, and magic. As scholars engaged in creating a design framework, we set out to apply this theory in a stringent, rigorous way, following a rigorous, stringent process. As the lead narrative designer, I (Doris) knew I wanted to make a game about a personal, transformational journey and so I looked for clues and guidelines on how that worked in psychotherapy as well as in fiction. I longed for structure, because the freedom of choice that is in keeping with existential themes, can be terrifying in the creative process. Hence, I toyed with the Jungian concept of integration (which deals with unearthing unconscious material and integrating it into a conscious understanding of the self) and asked psychiatrist and scholar Erik Goodwyn, whose work I had devoured in the theory writing process, what themes came up in his work with clients and how they could inform the game. This was largely ineffectual as a design strategy: the most universal appeal is in the personal. I couldn't write this game without connecting to it on a deep, personal level, and if I couldn't connect, how should others? I had to find my own transformational journey and let that speak to me. I thus decided – as part of my creative method – to forget everything I knew about the theory and to get out of the way, which is now (after iteration) actually a part of the more formal design framework.

As a design method, I started exploring my own psyche for potent material through writing little symbolic vignettes for about two weeks. Every morning, right after waking, and before my inner critic showed up to work, I took my place on a rocking chair, still dreamy (perfect Third Eye conditions!), and let a question form in my mind to prompt an active imagination process. These questions – geared towards surfacing a relevant theme for the game overall – went something like this: 'What have I struggled with? What did this feel like? How have I overcome it?' These questions, however, were just held in the mind lightly, gently – a suggestion more than a problem to be pondered and solved. This call to the unconscious was answered with emotionally charged images that slowly evolved into little mythical narratives. They were not interactive at this point and often did not make a lot of obvious sense. Staring into the garden that was awakening outside, a cat purring in my lap (cats are veritable alpha brainwave machines, which is maybe why many witches are depicted with them!), the initial images tended to have nature themes: dark soil ready for planting but suddenly equipped with sharp vampire teeth… the earth feeding off the blood of the gardening witch, leading to deeper explorations of the source of these teeth in the Unknown Forest to discover a very hungry vampire baby in a cave. What to do with the vampire baby? As a designer, I focused my attention on the emotional quality of the images and to keep my critical, analytical, interpreting brain turned off as much as possible. What did the characters do? What did they want Lou – the witch in the story – to do? How did I feel compelled to act or respond to the symbols that floated to the surface and manifested in these little vignettes? Every one of these active imagination explorations followed a similar arc: it started with a feeling of tension or conflict, then the

images danced and rearranged themselves and suggested ritualistic, symbolic actions to be performed by the protagonist – e.g. the witch dragging the vampire baby outside the cave and into the open to writhe in the sunlight and feel all the pain she tried to numb through the blood she took from others. The witch witnesses the struggle, holding the baby close but letting her experience the terror until she is transformed into a regular baby, peaceful and ready to start fresh.

After engaging in this material collection process for about two weeks, without rereading or editing of the vignettes, I shared the outcome with two trusted colleagues. Without offering any interpretation or explanation for what any of it was supposed to mean, the colleagues were asked to comment on what came up for them when they read the texts. What (if anything) were they moved by? What images did the vignettes spark for them? This was meant to indicate potential for psychological resonance, to discern whether a vignette was a purely personal indulgence, too idiosyncratic for others to relate to, or whether it carried a more broadly relatable, mythical core. Obviously, a sample size of two is hardly comparable with the century-long process of cultural transmission that determines psychological resonance in an empirical sense with regards to myths and folk tales but it is at least a beginning (Goodwyn 2016). It was also surprisingly obvious which vignettes sparked responses and which ones fell flat. In the end, none of these initial narratives made it into the game. Their purpose, apparently, was to get me into a process of creation that emphasised symbolical/magical thinking and connecting with my unconscious, to practice exploring my innermost self and letting it speak to me in a revealing manner that carries the key to transformation within its ritualistic, symbolic structures and actions. It strengthened the connection to my feeling core, which is so often silenced and pushed back in academic work for the sake of objectivity, and encouraged it to come to the fore.

I realised that this tension between my critical, analytical side and my intuitive, feeling side had been a key theme of my own transformational journey for many years. Suddenly, the overall theme for the first part of *The Witch's Way* revealed itself: creative recovery! The image that bubbled up from the depths the following morning during active imagination exercises was a symbol for this theme: a garden stuck in Winter, frozen over and unable to give way to Spring. I immediately knew I could work with that; that this core metaphor was potent and rich enough to carry the story and guide me through the steps from conflict (stuck in the rigidity of other people's expectations and outlived belief systems) to resolution (breaking out of the inner dungeon, allowing the creative juices to flow freely and to fill the soul with life force once more). The writing process, now transferred directly to the Twine game engine and considering player's choice, was guided by successive questions along the lines of who/what froze the garden? Was there ever a spring/summer time? What was that like? What needs to happen to melt the ice/break the rigid structures that prohibit thriving in an authentic, joyful way? Again, these questions were held lightly in my mind during writing sessions, subtly setting a course towards a goal without dictating the path.

Finding the Mythical in the Personal

The Witch's Way is semi-autobiographical. I picked certain details from my own life to anchor the story in the personal and help me tap into the strong emotional experiences associated with the various stages of the transformational journey, but I certainly took a lot of fictional liberties as well. Emotion was the gateway for me to conjure up resonating imagery. Whether and how much it will resonate with others remains to be seen. It certainly carried a lot of psychological potency for me, and since that's the only thing I could control at the time or rely on in the creative process as a navigation tool towards impactful imagery and content, that is what I focused on. Most importantly, I trusted the somatic experiences I had when writing: how did the images that popped up feel in my body? This, too, is an aspect of the technologies of magic – increasing one's perceptual abilities from intellectual reflection to what Gendlin (1996) refers to as a 'felt sense.' He writes in *Focusing Oriented Psychotherapy* that a 'felt sense' occurs at the border between conscious and unconscious mind: "A direct, at first unclear bodily sense at the border zone is not quite the usual bodily sensation; it is not an emotion, not a thought, not a definable content" (Gendlin 1996: 19).

Felt sense is experienced inside the body (rather than as an external physical sensation, e.g. a tickling nose). Many people cannot sense their body from the inside, e.g. they can only feel their toes when they wiggle them. A felt sense can be practiced and requires tuning into the body, becoming aware of its inner sensations. According to Gendlin (1996), Freud and Jung both somewhat navigated around this 'felt sense' in their techniques of free association (Freud) or active imagination (Jung), only referring to it implicitly as a 'block' that might suddenly come up. When the block was correctly interpreted, it resolved. To me, paying attention to these blocks or the free flow of energy in the body was and is an important instrument to feel out psychologically resonant, meaningful content. It indicates to me whether a creative decision feels true to me. A felt sense is an experience that moves us towards wholeness. Our thoughts, emotions, memories are distinct and divisive. The felt sense unifies. Gendlin (1996) continues: "A characteristic of this felt sense is that it is experienced as an intricate whole. One can sense that it includes many intricacies and strands. (…) it is a whole complexity, a multiplicity implicit in a single sense" (20).

I have long learnt to trust my body to have a clarity that my mind often lacks. There is no way to cheat the body. It knows whether you are telling the truth (your truth) or bullshitting. Gendlin notes that while emotions are less reliable than reason,

> a felt sense is more reliable than reason. When we act in anger, we often feel sorry later because we reacted only to a part of the situation. When we are calmer, we recall the whole of the situation. (…) In contrast, a felt sense is more reliable than reason because more factors can be sensed in it than reason can manage. This does not mean one can discard reason and responsible choice in regard to the felt sense. (ibid: 58)

The holistic characteristic of the felt sense deserves particular attention here because it directly relates to the aforementioned technologies of magic: it is wordless (as sensations tend to be) and it fosters oneness – first within the body, then between the body and its

entire context. Thus, tuning into the felt sense is part of wayfinder technology! So, if an image presented itself from the depths of my unconscious and brought a deep sense of peace and flowing energy, even if it represented emotionally difficult content, I knew it carried truth. When something feels really, really right (authentic) the alignment of mind and body becomes physically tangible and some of the constant tension we carry with us eases. In *Steering by Starlight*, Martha Beck (2008) speaks of the experience of 'shackles on' vs. 'shackles off' when tuning into the body to tap its wisdom. When confronted with a choice, rather than listening to lizard-brain fears (remember, emotions are less reliable than reason!), ask your body (whose felt sense, because holistic, is more reliable than reason) whether it has an experience of 'shackles on' – feeling constrained, bound, trapped – or 'shackles off', liberated, expansive, free. Beck (2008): "the way you can tell you're following fear away from your North Star is that while this course may feel safe, it will also feel imprisoning. The way you can tell that something lies true north, even though inner-lizard fear says to run from it, is that it feels liberating" (42).

When there is alignment – the shackles are off – it's like the body lets out a sigh of relief: "Ahhhh, now you get it, thank **goodness!**" I was following the signs of inner sighs of relief as my navigation tool towards impactful and psychologically resonant content and symbolism when writing *The Witch's Way*.

The story interweaves personal experiences derived from the stations of my own transformational journey with Beck's technologies of magic, which are of much wider relevance. Also, I aimed to render the personal in such a way that it was not overly idiosyncratic – that individual events became symbolic. I only used the emotional charge of my personal experiences to access potent imagery, but not to tell my story. While I have my own concrete memories of the wrapping up and constraint of my own authentic, instinctual, joyful self in the perceived expectations of other people, it is a much more general, human concern that others probably recognise. In the game, this stage of the journey the realisation of one's inhibitions to creativity, play, joy – are represented through childhood art bundled up in a man's shirt bound by a belt. Sure, this image guides the interpretation towards a specific kind of social constraint, suggesting a reading along the lines of 'daddy issues,' to ideas around patriarchy in general. That's because my own dad has played a very big role in my life, particularly when it comes to the question of my identity, calling, and purpose. He has always been incredibly loving and supportive of me, but also had his own ideas of who I was supposed to be or become and what I was supposed to do with my life. Like probably many daughters with strong father figures, I struggled with this, because while I wanted to please him, I also wanted very much to be seen and accepted for who I was or wanted to be. Writing the game provided an opportunity to explore my personal feelings and transformational journey – to use the technologies of magic myself to transcend surface concerns and superficial conflicts to probe into what rang true and what would feel reconciliatory and liberating. There might be many players whose particular flavor of social/external constraint looks very different from mine. Maybe they are more conflicted around their mothers or other influential figures, or have experienced traumatic marginalisation due to their race or gender expression or otherness. The man's shirt and belt may not bring up memories of their dad for them – in fact, it may not resonate at all! It can, or so is the hope anyways, act as a jumping-off point for them to identify their own conflict bundle. What is tied up

inside them? By what? To support a broader reading of the freezing force that is behind the inner winter, the whispers the player can choose to listen to when examining the shirt bundle are fragments rather than fully articulated, oppressive statements. They just carry the general gist of 'something about you isn't up to snuff'. This allows players to fill in the blanks and lend language to their own internal whispers of self-doubt. More clues towards a broader reading are given through the magical bookshelf consultations. For instance, looking for an answer to the question 'what is freezing the garden?', the player is presented with the myth of Persephone who had been abducted by Hades. This caused her grieving mother, Demeter, responsible for bringing Spring and promoting the crops to grow, to neglect her duties. Persephone represents creativity. She is not dead, just in the underworld. Go search for her to bring her back. This tie-in of a well-known, existing myth is another strategy to transcend the more personal aspects of the story and connect it to the much broader realm of a more universal, human experience, and to reinforce the psychological resonance of the game's theme.

Regardless of the starting point – the specific source of an inner winter that keeps people from thriving – the next step on the transformative journey in *The Witch's Way*, part I, is to make contact again with the part of the self that represents the instinctual, playful, unself-conscious self. For me, the picture that bubbled up to represent this was Dog. Dog is a symbol for unbounded energy, curiosity, enthusiasm and joy. Dog sniffs out what feels right and goes for it full force. He is a True North Navigation Expert! When we first meet Dog in the clearing in the Unknown Forest, however, he is sad, tired, mistrustful, wounded, and very, very pissed at you. (Andy: See the prior section and illustration – I tried very hard to capture all of these things together!) Healing him happens through a liberation ritual the player gets to enact themselves: first, empathise with Dog, by becoming him. Remember what it was like to just be. Then: burn the shirt, reject the imposed expectations and create new affirmations to counter the whispers of self-doubt! Then: let your newly recovered, instinctual self lead the way to the next step on your transformative journey. Tapping into wordlessness and oneness, you mind-meld with Dog, following him deep into the Unknown Forest (i.e. your unconscious) towards the place where you keep your very own Persephone – a shapeshifting trickster character who just goes by the letter D – trapped in the Dungeon you created for her a long time ago by following an inauthentic path. How do you get her out? Or better, yet: how do you get yourself out? Because D was never truly trapped; it was only your belief of them being trapped that froze your inner landscape. By sinking deep into wordlessness, you dissolve the dungeon walls that kept you stuck and constrained. The artificial prison does not stand a chance when not upheld through the constant chatter of shoulds and musts and doubts and concerns.

Having reconnected with your instincts and taken a first, big step towards trusting your intuitive, feeling self – the part that knows – you have regained access to your source of joy and creativity. The garden thaws, Spring can come. This ends part I of *The Witch's Way*.

Guided by Animals

In many stories that feature witches and magic, animals act as familiars and guides; *The Witch's Way* is no exception. Animals are tapped into the magic much more than we are, due to their fully embodied perceptual abilities. Navigating by magnetic fields? Magic. Hearing sounds at frequencies way beyond what the human ear is capable of? Magic. Sensing predators from afar? Magic. We can expand our own magical abilities when we aim to connect with animals, because communicating deeply with other living beings forces us to drop into wordlessness, to get out of our heads where we create the problems that keep us from authenticity. In a wordless state, we are at play and we can play along with others, including animals. For adults, it is often quite difficult to remember what being at play even feels like. For many of us, it's been so long since we have been truly, utterly engaged in an unself-conscious activity, lost ourselves in the pure joy of doing something without any consideration for how we looked while doing it or how much time might have passed. Slipping into the mind of Ghost, the cat, in *The Witch's Way* is meant to remind the player of what that feels like. Lou gets a glimpse of the perceptual alternative that becomes possible when she gets out of her own head and experiences wordlessness and oneness with a wordless creature. There is another instance of oneness with an animal when Lou realises that she is Dog, that Dog is a part of her and how that part used to be fully alive.

The Witch's Way aims to communicate that practising these perceptual shifts through dropping into wordlessness and cultivating oneness are essential for the transformational journey to become a witch and recover one's inherent creativity, playfulness, and magical potential. They are the antidote to how most of us have been socialised and enculturated through various school or academic systems, which have led us further and further away from what is authentic to us and confused our inner compass. As Beck (2012) writes:

> It's a pretty safe bet that your education, dear reader, consisted of sitting in airless rooms listening to lectures, reading books, and taking tests in which you interpreted verbal or numeric questions and tried to give exactly the answers your teachers already knew. If you couldn't do this, you were shamed and punished, or perhaps diagnosed with a learning disability and medicated to the point where you could focus exclusively on words and numbers. If you did this well, you were praised and rewarded. If you spent too much time outside playing, you experienced punishment and failure. Screening out everything but words, you were taught, is the way to create a good life, to find your way in the world." (5)

It is no coincidence that Keith Johnstone (1992), a key figure of improvisational theatre, writes that the first important step on his journey to recover his spontaneity and ability to play was to forget everything he had learned in school. He started by trying to conjure up and investigate hypnagogic images – the images that surface from the unconscious at the threshold of sleep. He notes that "[i]t's not easy to observe hypnagogic images, because once you see one and think 'There!' you wake up a little and the image disappears. You have to **attend** to the images without verbalising about them, so I learned to 'hold the

mind still' like a hunter waiting in a forest" (Johnstone 1992: 13). Again, the connection between wordlessness, oneness, magic, creativity, and play is made.

Borrowing Ghost – being invited by the cat to slip into his mind for a little bit – gives Lou a first taste of the long-forgotten art of 'just being', or being fully present with all senses, fully awake yet utterly relaxed.

The Importance of Humor

The terseness of the language is a survival strategy for me. There is humour in it, but also rebelliousness, and of course the conflict of various inner voices – primarily the part that knows and the part that doubts – which I believe should be quite familiar to a lot of people. We are often meaner to ourselves than to others, more critical, more demanding. I (Doris) wanted to capture that in the writing. It's quite pathetic to be human, but also wonderful. We are strange creatures. So resourceful and resilient on the one hand, but also so doubting and fragile, self-sabotaging, and silly on the other. We constantly have second and third thoughts, hold on to beliefs we know do not serve us, have inexplicable loyalties to people or jobs that are not good for us, and are master creators of our own dungeons. It is absolutely absurd, the lengths we go to get into our own way! Making this explicit by being a bit rude helped me get an ironic distance to it and I think it helps others, too. What is the alternative? I certainly hate to preach. There is nothing worse, I think, when trying to get a message across, than preachiness. I abhor it. And I can't deal with a more soothing, wholesome, and vulnerable way of describing our humanity – it gives me hives. My love for humanity comes out through making fun of it. I also think that a bit of rudeness and irreverence is better suited to help us get over ourselves. You can't pamper yourself into change. A bit of a kick in the butt is needed to get the momentum necessary to break out of cognitive dissonance. There is also positive power in humour and a certain provocative cockiness. When I was very little, I watched a fairy tale on TV. I don't remember what it was, but it went something along the well-known lines of 'poor farmer's boy finds himself in an awful situation, having to face the devil with nothing but his wits and a butter knife'. The poor farmer's boy thinks to himself (and this has stuck with me ever since as some of the greatest wisdom TV has ever bestowed upon me), "with courage and cockiness, you can slay the devil!" I am translating from German. Courage and cockiness! **Mut und Übermut**! Don't give in to the fear. Don't let your flaws get you down, either! As an adult, I have been very much inspired by a wonderful little book called *The Comedy of Survival* by Joseph Meeker (1997). Meeker speaks about the comic way and the tragic way: the hero has very high standards, and what characterises a tragedy is that the hero fails at their own ideals. Since the hero only accepts meeting their standards as success, they have nothing left to go to but utter despair when they fail. But the comic character is an opportunist – they just want to survive. When shit happens to them, they just want to get back to normal. And they do, because they don't have these super high ideals. They are not bad; they are just not obsessed with living by a certain moral code or a fixed idea of how the world is supposed to be. They take it as it comes and they get by. This is part of the human condition: we are not perfect, we mess up constantly. We have to live with this or despair. The irreverence of the language is a nod to the comedy of

survival. First, you've got to survive the messiness of being human, then you can get on with the business of thriving. You can't thrive when you're constantly down on yourself for only having a butter knife to defend yourself from the devil. The devil here, of course, being understood as a metaphor for our own weaknesses. If we can all change our inner monologue into something a bit more cocky and irreverent, we are all better off, I believe.

Enacting the Transformative Spiral

The Witch's Way is fairly linear. While it starts more open-ended and explorative, allowing the player to look around the cottage and investigate the garden, it becomes more and more linear as the story kicks into gear. It does play around with the order of things, though, to play on the notion that time or linear progression are artificial constructs and transformation does not happen as a neat journey from A to B. Instead, time functions in the form of a spiral: who hasn't stopped and wondered, finding themselves in an all-too-familiar feeling pickle, 'haven't I been here before? I thought I was done with this? And yet, here we go. **again**.' And we continue to do so, over and over again, until we finally get the hint! Fortunately, this is not only true for lessons we need to learn, but also for opportunities: the things that speak to our true self have a way of stubbornly coming back to us. 'Oh, you're ignoring me again this time? All right, I'll give you a year, or five, but I'll try again. Still, not listening, are we? Well, I'll be back, you just wait.' And they do come back, in different guises, unfailingly so, until we either die unfulfilled and frustrated, or we finally wake up. You can do this first, or that, it doesn't matter. It just informs what you already know when you get to the point where you need to be, but it also doesn't really matter so much what you already know. This structure is another play on perception. Replaying the game allows players to explore this – how their interpretation of certain sections changes depending on which route they took to get there. Yet, it is never too late: no road is ever closed off completely, it can just be more or less fully investigated.

In terms of the transformational arc of the game overall, it is also more like a roundtrip. You do not end up exactly where you started, but a bit further along on the spiral pathway. Yet you definitely will not have leveled up to an endpoint of ultimate 'witchiness'. You just got a taste of some of the important bits and pieces throughout the year and its life-death-life cycle. Will the game help you to from now on navigate unfailingly towards your True North, always embodying authenticity and integrity? Unlikely. Hopefully, though, players will remember the tools and principles introduced in the game through the imagery and symbolism that stirred something inside them on a deep, unconscious level. Then, when they feel the twinges of their inner alignment going out of whack, they will remember what to do to get things more centered again.

Andy: The spiral approach to linearity was something we talked about a lot and that I pressed on in early iterations of the game. Very early drafts had few choices, and they were linear to the point where it was difficult to feel like you could go back or switch between the paths. Yet we also knew where we wanted it to end, and that wasn't in a series of wildly different, disparate potentials. So the general erosion of pathways as you progress towards the end is very much by design – you can see it actually in the Twine map of the game in the development environment, and it was readily apparently to me since I

was staring at that map a lot as I was designing early tech for the custom navigation and autosave functionality. Hopefully the game strikes the right balance between affording the player a sense of agency and individuality while also guiding them through the story we wanted to tell inside the world we wanted to tell it in.

The Witch's Way is structured in four seasons, with spring dealing with creative recovery through introducing the technologies of magic, wordlessness, and oneness. The other seasons have different core themes revolving around the balance between rest and productivity, dealing with anger, and letting go. They reveal more aspects of Lou's self in the forms of archetypal sisters – fellow witches that appear on her path and take on different psychological functions that guide Lou further in her quest to personal transformation, authenticity, and wholeness. The principles introduced in part one, though, are not over and done with. They come back in different guises, applied to new scenarios and challenges, supported by the other two technologies: imagination and forming. By the end of it, Lou/the player will have hopefully gained many new (or be reminded of already known) perspectives on themselves, life, and nature, an appreciation for the resourcefulness of their own psychological aspects, the bandwidth of different ways of acting and being, the importance of cultivating equanimity and playfulness, and a sense of connection to something bigger than themselves.

Conclusion

This paper discusses the interweaving of auto- biography and fiction in part 1 of the transformative adventure game *The Witch's Way*. As an illustration of how the existential, transformative game design framework developed by Rusch and Phelps can be applied to creative practice, it deals with existential themes such as identity, meaning, purpose, and connection through sourcing mythical imagery and symbolism as well as ritual enactment. It approaches spirituality through magic as metaphor, represented by the protagonist's journey of becoming a witch. Conceptualised in four parts, this first part of *The Witch's Way* deals with creative recovery, represented through the imagery of igniting spring in an unnaturally frozen garden. Magic is seen as supremely natural (rather than supernatural), being in balance and harmony with all living things, connected to an encompassing energy web. Developing one's magical abilities is synonymous with living in accordance with one's True Nature and authenticity. It requires – so the game proposes – to get out of one's head, drop into wordlessness, and access oneness. To demonstrate how this is done, *The Witch's Way* introduces animal guides such as the cat, Ghost, and the dog, Dog. It further incorporates rituals that revolve around play and creativity to cross the barriers imposed by an intellectually dominated way of perception that leads to experiencing oneself as separate from others for the sake of a more holistic, intuitive, connecting approach. *The Witch's Way* is not just about personal development, though: as a spiritual work of fiction, it ties up to much bigger ideas related to sustainability and a way of manifesting a reality that does not spring from ego desires, but from balance and harmony with the energy web.

Acknowledgements

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