Vladimir Propp’s fairy tale morphology and game studies

Working paper

Vladimir Propp’s model of the structure of fairy tales has since its introduction to western scholarship during the 1950s, been regarded as one of the milestones in semiotic analysis and narratology, both for its inspiring function and taken for face value. It comes as no surprise that it also is suggested as a work of significance for game studies. I can agree on that; however, its meaning within the field of folklore studies and its range of applicability must be discussed. What is the content of Propp’s model? How has its basic ideas been further developed by later generations of folklorists? How can it be used? What claims can be based on it? What are its limits?

My questions are trigged by the claims that sometimes are made for a universal applicability of Propp’s 31-function pattern. For instance, Arthur Asa Berger states in a recent introductory book, Video Games: A Popular Culture phenomenon, that “His thirty-one functions … are, it can be argued, at the heart of all narratives – not just the Russian folktales Propp analyzed in obtaining his list” (Berger 2002:34).

I can agree with Berger that Propp’s model is worthy of attention in narrative studies. However, the claims of its universality go to far. It goes beyond the russian folktales, but halts somewhere after.
The historical scientific context of Propp’s study is European folk tale studies, as they were in the 1920s with a history going back to the Grimm brothers showing the contemporary existence of an oral narrative genre with presumably ancient roots, within the popular classes. The 19th century scholars had proposed the folk tale was an all-european genre with a common (“indo-european”) genetic background in ancient times – theories on place of origin varying from Egypt, Assyria to India (the latter based on the discovery of the indian tale collection Pantchatantra and its similarities with european folk tales). The last decades of the 19th century saw the rise of the “finnish School” of folklore studies – based on systematic surveys of all published tales and archive manuscripts, using a comparative methodology as developed in the historical study of medieval manuscripts (Krohn 1971; see also Holbek 199x). The ultimate goal of the finnish school was, by deducing the historical spread of each tale within Europe, to deduce the place of origin of the genre proper. As a tool for this work, Antti Aarne made a type-index (Aarne 1910), which later was revised by Stith Thompson (1928, 1961).

Stith Thompson in the preface to the second revision of the Types of the Folktale says: “Strictly then, this work might be called ‘he Types of the Folk-Tale of Europe, West Asia, and the Lands Settled by These Peoples’ ” (p 7), and further on qualifies this with stating that “It would be a mistake to think that it could be extended to tales of such areas as central Africa, the North American indians, or Oceania. Each of those would need an index based strictly upon its own traditions” (p 8).

Propp’s model has been held forward as a grammar of all folk tales, and furthermore, the concept of ”folk tale” has been expanded to mean not only a form of narrative among European peasants at the eve of industrialism, but also to cover all forms of narratives in non-European societies and all ancient societies. That is, “folk tale” has in a way been constructed as “the Other” to modern European narrative, but also as an Other that represents an “archetypical”, “authentic” narration. In this way, Propp’s model can be – and has come – to serve as support for decontextualized analysis of narratives, regardless of social and historical context, grounded on claims of “narrative per se”.

There are some obvious flaws in this chain of argumentation. For example, ancient religious texts are excluded – perhaps a result of the modern European distinction between “literature” and “religion” as separate categories.
Propp’s model is based on an analysis of 100 texts in Afansiev’s collection of Russian Folk Tales, texts representing the subcategory of fairy tales (Propp 1968:23ff). Propp’s definition of “fairy tales” is: “...those tales classified by Aarne under numbers 300 to 749” (Propp 1968:19) (Note: in the 2nd revision, Thompson 1961, these types are called “tales of magic”). Propp has some critical points on Aarne’s work (p 10-11), as the reproduction of the ternary division of folktales into animal tales, tales proper and anecdotes, the division into types, and inconsistencies in basing the types on themes or motives.

Propp is outspoken on his model being a model for fairytales, a model that can be used in comparative studies, where other text categories include myths, ancient literature, and “tales throughout the world” (15-16). The notion of Propp’s model as an archetypical structure for all people’s narratives thus has no support in Propp’s own writing.

Propp’s model consists of 31 consecutive “functions”, that is, steps that function in relation to the narrative as a whole, and an inventory of dramatis personae. The seven dramatis personae he deals with are: villain, donor, helper, princess/sought-for-person, dispatcher, hero, and false hero. The functions are (quoted from Holbek 1986:335):

1. Absentation. One of the members of a family absents himself from home.
2. Interdiction. An interdiction is addressed to the hero.
3. Violation. The interdiction is violated.
4. Reconnaissance. The villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance.
5. Delivery. The villain receives information about his victim.
6. Trickery. The villain attempts to deceive his victim.
7. Complicity. The victim submits to deception.
8. Villainy. The villain causes harm to a member of a family, alt. 8a: Lack. One member of a family lacks something.
9. Mediation. Misfortune or lack is made known.
10. Beginning counteraction. The seeker agrees to counteraction.
11. Departure. The hero leaves home.
12. First function of donor. The hero is tested which prepares the way for his receiving a magical agent or a helper.
13. The hero’s reaction. The hero reacts to the actions of the future donor.
14. Provision or receipt of a magical agent. The hero acquires the use of a magical agent.
15. Spatial transference, guidance. The hero is transferred to the whereabouts of an object of search.
16. Struggle. The hero and the villain join in direct combat.
17. Branding, marking. The hero is branded.
18. Victory. The villain is defeated.
19. Restoration/ Lack liquidated. The initial misfortune or lack is liquidated.
21. Pursuit, chase. The hero is pursued.
22. Rescue. Rescue of the hero from pursuit.
23. Unrecognized arrival. The hero, unrecognized, arrives home or in another country.
24. Unfounded claims. A false hero presents unfounded claims.
25. Difficult task. A difficult task is proposed to the hero.
26. Solution. The task is resolved.
27. Recognition. The hero is recognized.
28. Exposure. The false hero or villain is exposed.
29. Transfiguration. The hero is given a new appearance.
30. Punishment. The villain is punished.
31. Wedding. The hero is married and ascends the throne.

Propp’s rise to fame came during the 1950’s, when his work was translated into several western european languages. It coincided with the rise of semiotic studies and narratology in general. Propp's list of 31 functions were reduced to 20 by Greimas, who also stressed the importance of the dramatis personae, or as Greimas named the actors on the level of structural positions, actants (1983). However, despite a positive review from Claude Levi-Strauss, the syntagmatic perspective of Propp’s model came into a problematic relation to Levi-Strauss paradigmatic perspective on myth (see Levi-Strauss’ review and Propp’s reply in Propp 1984).

The influence of Propp’s work on folklore studies is summed up by Bengt Holbek in his magnum opus Interpretation of Fairy Tales. Interestingly, the significance of Propp’s model for folk tale studies proper hasn’t been tested in any larger extent. Holbek cites a study by finnish scholars Juha Pentikänen and Satu Apo where Propp’s model is applied to 13 tales (all identified as fairy tales within the AT catalogue) recorded from one narrator. “Three tales …
follow the pattern very well, three more … follow it tolerably well although a certain degree of interpretation is demanded, four tales … cause real difficulties and three tales … are simply characterized as “non-Proppian”. They conclude that ‘stories about girls under a spell and about false brides are so far from the metaplot constructed by Propp that relating their structure to it often seems forced’ (Holbek 1986:380).

Holbek’s work includes a survey of folk tale studies in general, actually in order to come up with a theoretical framework for the study of symbols in fairy tales. Holbek in his method combines two perspectives. First, the reduction made by some of Propp’s students (Meletinskij et al 1974) of the 31 functions into five moves. The reduction is made to focus on those actions only that change the status of the hero and heroine. Second, the model proposed by Ella Köngäs Maranda defining the eight possible social positions that a hero or heroine can occupy, constructed by the combination of the oppositions high-low, male-female, young-adult. In Holbek’s combined framework, the syntagmatic and paradigmatic structures support each other to make a story flow; as long as there is a paradigmatic opposition not resolved, there will still be a drive to continue the story. Holbek has a valuable point of departure in his analysis: he stresses the importance of starting at the end of the narrative, where the outcomes of all events are pinned down, and tracing them backwards. In this way only those contradictions that actually are resolved will be highlighted (thereby reducing the bias of the analyst).

An example of the model would be: move 1: the princess acts unwise and is being prisoned by an evil force; move 2: the young boy leaves home, lacking social status, but earns a magic tool by acting wise; move 3: the boy frees the princess, they fall in love; move 4: the princess helps the boy to escape; move 5: they are recognized at the court as a wedding pair. Those who were “young” at the beginning of the tale has now become “adult”; man and woman has gotten each other; the social divide is overcome.

What Holbek’s model suggests is a generative grammar for tales of magic, that is, the similarities of many european folk tales and the variation within the genre is to be explained as a common, stereotyped pattern for remembering stories as well as producing new ones, a narrative/entertaining competence of the skilled narrator (it shall be remembered that the telling of tales of magic was a specialist craft, not a common everyday knowledge).

In other words, the european folk tale/tale of magic gets its narrative force from the oppositions of male and female, young and adult, king and peasant (rich and poor) being topics of interest.
Holbek notes that many of the texts he studies, particularly those recorded after male narrators, diminishes the role of the female heroine and therefore some of the functions are omitted, even though they appear in other renderings of the same tale type. It can thus be said that many tales focus the “different task and rise to fame” – plot and reduce the role of the mating to a mere reward.

Bengt Holbek also surveys the different models of “hero patterns” as proposed by J G von Hahn, Otto Rank, lord Raglan, Joseph Campbell, and Jan de Vries (Holbek 1986:328-331). These scholars made, independently of each other, proposals of structural patterns in mythical and heroic tales. Holbek cites Alan Dundes comparison of von Hahn, Rank and Raglan: “It turns out that there are far more differences in detail than there should be, considering that much of the basic material is common” (Holbek 1986:329).

Of special interest is de Vries’ views on comparing heroic tales and fairy tales: “The main differences are that marvellous elements play a major role in fairy tales and a minor one in heroic tales and that fairy tales invariably have happy endings whereas heroic tales end tragically” (Holbek 1986:330).

What should be held in mind is that the “heroic tale” as genre isn’t a stereotypical, customized set of narrative rules in the same way as the fairy tale. The Hero tale collapses myth, history and legend in order to make sense of the existence of a society by telling about its foundation or a crucial turnpoint in its history. Such a story can be told in many ways but is always felt as one; every society can have just a few heroes to tell hero tales about. Fairy tales are told for the sake of entertainment, and there is no limit to the number of different wonder tales that an audience would accept. The scholarly concept of heroic tales, however, brings together the odd heroic tale of many societies. They may have similarities due to international narrative motifs being stuck onto them, but also because what constitutes a hero in different states might be a function of the social structure. The prince/warrior who defeats the neighbouring enemies and founds the state might be a possible hero in many ancient middle east societies, but is less probably found among sibirian nomadic peoples without a distinct state organization.
Joseph Campbells study of hero myths is also worth considering. The overall structure is verbalized as a tripartite form: “a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return” (1993:35). The full pattern given by Campbell is:

I: Departure
1. The Call to Adventure
2. Refusal of the Call
3. Supernatural Aid
4. The Crossing of the first Threshold
5. The Belly of the Whale

II: Initiation
1. The Road of Trials
2. The Meeting with the Goddess
3. Woman as the Temptress
4. Atonement with the Father
5. Apotheosis
6. The Ultimate Boon

III: Return
1. Refusal of the Return
2. The Magic Flight
3. Rescue from Without
4. The Crossing of the Return Threshold
5. Master of the Two Worlds
6. Freedom to Live

This is in fact the headings of the first three chapters of Campbell’s book, being part one: *The Adventures of the Hero*.

Campbell also sums the different steps somewhat differently structured in his chapter four, in a circular diagram. The circular form stresses the “passing and re-passing the threshold to a different world” as an important paradigmatic polarity, by placing them opposite each other. Furthermore, the diagram also visualises the cyclic quality that is suggested in many myths
The diagram contains the following steps:


These steps are further explained by Campbell’s comprehensive paragraph summary of the “monomyth” which states that the last occurrence of “elixir” means that the world is restored by means of the elixir. One can also notice that some steps are alternatives to each others, for instance is dismemberment and crucifixion held as alternate to brother-battle and (or?) dragon-battle.

Still Furthermore, Campbell in part II of his book also analyses “the cosmogonic cycle” of which the adventure of the hero is a part. Here narrative steps as “the virgin Birth”, “Childhood of the human hero” and “Departure of the Hero” are named among others. These are not intrinsic to the adventure story proper but are a common part of hero myths. In sum, Campbell’s work gives us a basic tripartite overall structure with twentysomething episodes.

To comprehend Campbell’s work, it is important to remember that it is a work in the field of comparative mythology. The empirical basis of his study is never stated explicitly; rather, you get the impression that Campbell has from many years of studies in comparative religion, influenced by psychoanalytical studies on cultural symbols by Freud and Jung, intuitively felt and formulated a common structure within various cultures’ religious stories. Where Vladimir Propp refers to a coherent (sub)genre within a culture – wonder tales of Russian peasants – Campbell makes an intercultural comparison of The religious Myth of many cultures: his examples are the stories of the life of Buddha, Moses, Jesus, ancient greek, old Nordic, Egyptian, Sumerian mythology, as well as African, Sibirian, American Indian, and Eskimo myths, to name but a few. What Campbell is aiming at is an common answer to common problems, namely the existential social questions of where do knowledge come from, what are the sources of power, how do Man and Society relate to each other, how can individuals be leaders of a collective etc.
Another problem of narratological analysis is the level of abstraction. The Russian formalist school in linguistics and literary studies – which is held as the start of modern narratology – worked with “fabula” and “siuzhet” (Tomashevskii 1925), fabula representing the immanent pattern behind the actions within a narrative. Contemporary narratologies work with “fabula”, “story” and “text” (Bal 1985), thus discriminating the verbalized level where moods, interpretational cues etc are transmitted, the level where the narrator’s attitude towards the actions of the story are coded. But in folktale studies you come across four different levels. Starting in the most abstract, Propp’s model (whether we accept it as the single structure or not) represent a pattern common to many types of folktales. These types are defined from international comparative studies, where the Grimm brothers have supplied many of the titles: Snow White, Cinderella, The Sleeping Beauty. The concept of type is an abstraction from the level of variants, which can be found nationally or regionally inter/intranational. For instance, Anna Birgitta Rooth in her classical study of Cinderella (1951) postulates three basic variants on a global level, with further subdivisions. Finally, the verbalization of folk tales come in different versions: from different narrators, or from the same narrator but recorded at different times. Here, the international folkloristic studies have moved from studying differences on national and regional level, by study of variation between narrators, to the study of personal idiosyncracies and the adaption/variation in each new retelling situation as result of the interplay with different audiences (cf Holbek, Mills, Bauman).

My conclusion is that the idea of a rigid narrative structural model underlying all complex narratives is a mistake. It feels strange to notice that a 19th century evolutionary model of culture and society, suggesting the universality of a specific historical european narrative genre, would still be at work at the beginning of the 21th century. However, it is a model based on existing narratives, and there is much to gain from it without having to accept its basic premisses.

How can Propp’s model – as benefitted from Holbek’s development – thus contribute to game studies?

At first, there are the obvious cases where a game is a transformation of a folk tale. Quite a few tales of magic have by way of the Grimm brothers and Disney become common knowledge. Here the model might be useful as a tool in analyzing intertextuality and retextualization.
There is also the medieval connection. One important link between the empirical corpus of European folk tales as recorded in the early 19th century, and ancient/early medieval narratives, is the coexistence of identical stories and plots, which has served as proof of continuous tradition. A “master type” position was given to the story of the Dragon-slayer; in Aarnes and Thompsons type-index it was given the number 300, as the first of the Ordinary Folk Tales, subcategory Tales of Magic(nos. 1-299 reserved for the structurally simpler /undeveloped?/ animal tales). The frame narrative of the young knight sent on a mission whereby he has to gain certain tokens, avoid obstacles etc thus is productive both via folk tales and as inspired by medieval literature.

Now, here the differences between narrative and game are getting obvious. A narrative that focuses on endless new obstacles easily become tedious for the listener/reader, but a game that give the player continuously new challenges is interesting.

Another point of view; Propp’s list of functions may be of help as a list of actions – but not supposedly, as Propp states, in a specific order. The aim of Propp’s model is to pinpoint different actions that function in relation to the whole; but the designations can also be used as tools in analysing other wholes (other genres than tales of magic). In fact, this is being done by many scholars who nevertheless claims they have proved the presence of an universal structure. Here, Alan Dundes use of the designations lack – lack liquidated (function 8a and 19 in Propp’s model) in his analysis of North American Indian Tales (Dundes 1964), that is, the occurrence of 2 out of 31 possible functions, might have had a obfuscating effect; Dundes is taken as proof of the universality of Propp’s model whereas he actually has proven a much smaller minimal unit (in par with Labov’s complication/resolution, Todorov’s disequilibrium – equilibrium restored, and so on).

Games must be analysed from the point of view of what polarities generate action. The Proppian model thus might be useful in games of the quest type. However, since focus in games is on the road rather than on the goal, the structure is not to be supposed to match perfectly. Instead, what is merely obstacles in the fairy tale might be permanent forces in the game. The male/female, young/adult, and high/low divisions might be complemented by or substituted with other polarities and divisions: man/gods, humans/animals, humans/aliens form outer space, ethnic divisions etcetera, producing different contradictions to be resolved before the narrative is up (this might also be a constructive way of thinking in game construction).
WORKS CITED


