6 Building stories

The interplay of comics and games in Chris Ware's works

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As Laurie N. Taylor has pointed out, “video games [...] have extremely close ties to comics” (2004, n.p.), a statement that is supported by the research of Hans-Joachim Backe (2012, 115) and Bryant Paul Johnson (2013, 145). What these three scholars have stated about the interrelation between digital games and comics can also be asserted for the analogous context of parlor games.¹ Characters like Batman, Hellboy, and many others appear in at least one parlor game as part of a bigger merchandizing strategy,² but as I will show in this chapter, parlor games are involved in the medium of comics in notable, if not always obvious, ways.

Recent examples of this involvement are works of the Franco-Belgian artists group called OuBaPo (short for *Ouvroir de bande dessinée potentielle*, “workshop of potential comic book art”) that experiment with characteristics of games as they probe and expand the boundaries of the medium by applying a set of formal constraints (see also Kuhlman 2010, 79–80). For instance, Anne Baraou and Corinne Chalmeau’s *Après tout, tant pis* (1991) addresses dice games quite directly. The comics object consists of three dice with a single panel on each face in a box. Every time the dice are rolled, a new narrative emerges (Groensteen 1997, 32). Another case is Patrice Killoffer’s (1997, 66–67) *Bande dessinée en Tripoutre*, which contains a clear allusion to racing board games. Similarly, the English artists Alan Moore and Kevin O’Neill include a classical racing game within the *Black Dossier* of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2008).

Whereas all of these examples have in common that they are solitary works of the mentioned artists, the interweaving of comics and game structures is an elementary part of Chris Ware’s artistic approach. This chapter highlights the different intersections of comics and games in Ware’s works, especially regarding conventions as well as socially constructed regulations and attributions within the comics and games cultures. It does so by comparing and contrasting two works that come from the opposite sites of this intersection: the game “‘Fairy Tale’ Road Rage” (2000), which interweaves game structures with comics elements; and the comic *Building Stories* (2012), which intermingles comics-specific narrations with game allusions.

In 2000, Chris Ware conceived the racing and grammar-learning board game “‘Fairy Tale’ Road Rage.” It was published in the comics anthology *Little Lit: Folklore and Fairy Tale Funnies*, which is addressed at children and edited by Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly. It consists of a printed game board, cut-and-assemble game pieces, and a dice as well as a game manual and an accompanying comic strip with the origin story of the game characters. The comic *Building Stories* from 2012 consists of a box with 14 printed products, some of which vary greatly in form, including newspaper formats, magazines, a book whose design and format recalls a children’s book, and a folded game board similar to that of a board game. In these different formats, the story of five inhabitants of a Chicago apartment building is told: a young woman, a middle-aged couple, the elderly woman who owns the house, and Branford the bee. The stories around these five protagonists are characterized by loneliness, depression, and a lack of interpersonal warmth. In contrast, the multicolored pages, the intricate page layouts, and the publication formats, some of which seem to be directed at children, carry a positive and playful undertone. This playful character is underlined by the triple-folded game board and the slip lid box as they resemble the classic arrangement of a board game.

In the preoccupation with the game board and the box, the recipients/players have to build stories. But whereas the board game “‘Fairy Tale’ Road Rage” with its complementary elements adapts comics structures and refers to aspects of comics culture on a social level (e.g., the valuing and collecting of comics), *Building Stories* adapts structures and mechanisms of games. By contrasting the board game with the comic, I argue that certain expectations connected with aesthetic, ludic, and narrative aspects of both works are invoked at first sight and disappointed on closer examination. Thereby, the reading viewers³ and the players, respectively, have the possibility to ponder how communicative and social conventions regarding comics and games can be uncovered and even challenged.

“‘Fairy Tale’ Road Rage,” or: How comics correlate with games

After assembling the game pieces, which represent vehicles driven by the characters Frog, Princess, Wolf, and Grandma, the game is ready.⁴ The players of “‘Fairy Tale’ Road Rage” start at the corners of the game board with one out of four vehicles. By rolling the dice the players have to collect chits with different colors and words on them in order to fill up one’s own so-called “storyboard” with a story in the format of a fairy tale. The different colors correspond to different word classes, and the first player to complete his or her story wins the game. Thereby, “‘Fairy Tale’ Road Rage” combines a classical racing game with a didactic approach to convey grammar-learning skills. The topic of tales emphasizes this concept by offering a typical and well-known sentence structure starting with “Once upon a time” and ending with “and so the moral of this story is... .” But whichever chits are

combined to construe the story, the players will never get to know the moral conclusion, as it always ends with an ellipsis. The moral assumptions are left open. The heading of the playing rules advertises this matter of fact as an opportunity to shape moral assumptions out of one's own storyboard: "Hey Kids! Play... *'Fairy Tale' Road Rage* and trace a literary path to your own moral conclusion!" (Ware 2000, n.p.). Although the importance of the formation of ethics is stressed repeatedly within the manual and the other game components, the moral outcome has no consequences on winning or losing the game. While the social dimension of the parlor game is given by playing together with or against each other, the players are on their own in the final outcome of the game, the moral conclusion.

While we cannot make explicit statements about the moral dimensions of the constructed stories, at least the content of the colored chits reveals information on the stories' ending. The variety of verbs shows that in most cases the stories end unhappily, life-threateningly, or indeed with death (in six out of eight cases). These endings are diametrically opposed to the fairy tale format, which ideally provides a happy ending for the main characters and is epitomized in the phrase "and they lived happily ever after."⁵ The negation of such an ending is reiterated in the comic that accompanies the game, which provides the interwoven background story of Frog, Wolf, Princess, and Grandma. The stories have four different starting points and are allocated in successive squares. Both idiosyncrasies resemble the game board context and refer directly to the structure of "*'Fairy Tale' Road Rage*," whereas the describing text evokes the association with children's books and, of course, fairy tales. Within this panel arrangement, the conventions and markers of comics, fairy tales, and board games are indissolubly intertwined. However, the reading viewers who are expecting a traditional ending may be left with frustration. Not only do all the protagonists live a sad and tragically miserable life (except for the fortunate Wolf), but Wolf is also not the stereotypical villain known from the fairy tale context. Although Wolf can partly be blamed for the unhappy lives of the others by his actions, he operates with a clear conscience and good intentions, as the text points out. A similar relation between the expectations of fairy tale content and their negation penetrates into the depictions on the game board: Instead of the enchanted forest, elves, and other places or characters of a magical world, the players confront buildings mostly taken from the American cityscape. But at least the names of the buildings remind us of fairy tales like the laundry "Snow White Cleaners" or "Jack's Beanstalk Gentlemen's Nightclub."⁶

"*'Fairy Tale' Road Rage*" thus frustrates conventional expectations of fairy tale content. This is noteworthy, especially since the expectations are not just not met, but actually disillusioned or, more fitting to the context of tales, disenchanted. Speaking of "disillusion," I do not want to highlight the negative connotations of being deprived of one's own ideas and wishes. Instead, I want to argue that in a neutral sense of the word, less charged

with emotions, disillusionment is a precondition for the possibility to reveal and literally discover self-reflexive mechanisms and the prerequisites of our own perception and cultural imprint. This means, quite similar to genre conventions, but also in a broader understanding of cultural practices and techniques, that we are shaped by social and cultural regulations to expect certain things when we are confronted with specific markers, and in finding these expectations disappointed, we have to think about what seduced us to draw the disappointed conclusions in the first place.

While the motif of fairy tales within the game encourages the players to think about preconditions and socio-cultural expectations of fairy tale storytelling and the attribution to human and animal characters, the title already refers to this kind of questioning. Ware puts the fairy tale in quotation marks and highlights it as sarcastic, or at least as charged with another meaning. Not only do the expectations regarding fairy tales play a decisive role in “‘Fairy Tale’ Road Rage,” but the anticipation of the entertainment value as well as the social dimension of the parlor game are crucial elements of the play experience as well.

Besides the fairy tale content, the title of the board game as well as the advertising statements accompanying the game make the social conventions of playing games a subject of self-reflection among the players. The title suggests a wild car chase and refers to the category of a racing game. In fact, this racing game has a very slow course of play due to the single dice used, with four being the highest number one can roll. In addition, the heading of the manual evokes some kind of excitement in the activity of “tracing a literary path” (Ware 2000, n.p.) while the description on the game board pledges recreation or at least an “agreeable tone of recreation for youth of both sexes” (Ware 2000, n.p.). In contrast, the personal liability statement at the bottom of the game manual indicates: “No insurance is made against potential alteration in moral constitution, world outlook, or temperament, nor is any child guaranteed a ‘good time,’ or even mild amusement” (Ware 2000, n.p.).

Besides these partially contradictory promises regarding fun and entertainment, this grammar-learning game directly refers to the discussion of educational games, which are often purported to fail to support learning processes to the same extent to which they entertain the players (Gros 2017; Stasiński 2013). As Mizuko Itō (2008) maintains, the desire to learn something in passing while amusing oneself with gaming is relatively difficult to fulfill. Notwithstanding, there is a rich history of educational games, of which one of the earliest is the so-called *Kriegsspiel of Brunswick*, which was designed by the German mathematician Johann Christian Ludwig Hellwig, the master of pages at the court of the Duke of Brunswick. He developed the game on the basis of the rules and form of chess and published a rulebook in 1780. As part of a comprehensive compilation of European war games, H. D. S. Heistand translated Hellwig’s rulebook into English and accompanied it by the translated excerpt of a letter from Hellwig, in which he

stresses the goals he wants to achieve by his game. In particular, Hellwig formulates:

That idea [for this tactical game] came to me first through a need which I experienced of rendering sensible, not to say palpable, a few principles and rules of the military art which my position as professor to the pages of the Duke of Brunswick required me to teach those young noblemen, destined some day for military service. Independently of this chief object my secondary one was to offer those who had no need of such resources an agreeable recreation by laying before them a game which, at first sight, presented different objects and operations, and which depended upon nothing but the rules and combinations made by the players.

(Hellwig, quoted in Heistand 1898, 238)

Besides a strikingly similar wording in describing and even advertising the recovery effects of the games, Ware and Hellwig have in common that they combine an attractive gaming context for pleasure in the spare time (chess vs. racing game) with an educational purpose. But while Hellwig accomplishes this goal to some extent, as Rolf F. Nohr and Stefan Böhme (2009, 8–9) argue,⁷ Ware uses the ruptures that evolve by confronting expectations with their disillusionment to point to the social regulations of playing games. For instance, as part of the game instructions, the single player option is not only not characterized as an opportunity for children who love to play games even if they are not in the company of others, but explicitly as the one for lonely desperate children who do not have any friends at all to play with. But in his usual ironic intonation, Chris Ware sees hope for the future of this stereotypical lonely youngster: “Do not, however, despair; someday you will grow up to be a famous cartoonist and all of the other kids who made fun of you will have miserable jobs and be desperately unhappy, but you will get to draw stories for lots of money about how you still hate them all” (2000, n.p.).⁸

As it echoes in the message to the lonely nerd and future cartoonist already, Ware also reflects on the relationship between children and adults. The manual is separated into two divisions, one for grown-ups and one for children only. The grown-ups are confronted with short sentences in a commanding accentuation and in bigger font size. The text for children has a smaller font size, fills the complete remaining page spread, and includes detailed information on the game as well as additional rules. The underlying assumptions of adults who can only understand the simplest sentence structures and children who do not have any problem with complex grammar, very formal language, and a variety of additional background information, reverses the conventional allocation of rules and regulations to different age groups (Meerhoff 2011, 31). Furthermore, it perverts the rules of comprehensibility of manuals according to a linguistic-semiotic viewpoint (Langer et al. 1999, 15–23; Nickl 2001, 65–66). As all of these examples show, the promises made in connection with the pleasure of playing, the

social interaction, and the attribution of comprehensibility and adequacy to children and adults are disillusioned and partly reversed. Therefore, the preconditions of the process of socio-cultural attribution are exposed and even challenged.

However, not only is the gaming culture at issue here, but the sphere of comics culture is negotiated as well. In addition to the aesthetic matters in the context of the comic with the background stories of the fairy tale characters, the manual offers a short comics story with Rusty Brown and Chalky White, two of Chris Ware's recurring comics characters, as protagonists (Tinker 2009, 257–261). They are both collectors of comic books and action figures, and they fulfill all the stereotypes of lonely grown-up comics nerds. When Rusty notices in the comic strip that Chalky has cut out and assembled the “‘Fairy Tale’ Road Rage” characters and chits, he is on the verge of a nervous breakdown because the book is no longer near mint condition and has lost considerable value in his comics collection. Chalky can only calm him with the offer of one of his expensive action figures. In the end, Rusty, embracing his new action figure, plays the game with Chalky and realizes how much fun it is to play the game instead of storing it in a polyethylene storage bag in a cool, dark place.

Apart from the topic of collecting, the comic strip entitled “Collecteurs Extraordinaire” also satirizes adults: Rusty and Chalky have forgotten how to have fun and play games without worrying about the value of their collectables and toys. This is strongly emphasized by the additional explanatory note: “‘Collectors’ are ‘adults’ who like to have ‘one of everything,’ or, specifically, items which they were denied as children. ‘Pristine’ manufacturing condition and ‘original packaging’ are of a premium to them, as are ‘rare’ or ‘hard-to-find’ items. You should, under all conditions, avoid growing up to be a ‘collector’ ” (Ware 2000, n.p.).

Thus, a close look at the title in combination with game elements, design, and the game manual in “‘Fairy Tale’ Road Rage” can foreground the game-related contexts of social conventions. In addition, as my analysis has shown, the social and communicative correlation of comics culture is intertwined with the disillusionment of expectations and the discovery of socio-cultural imprints regarding regulations for children and adults, conventions of specific parlor games, and fairy tales.

***Building Stories*, or: How game structures invade comics**

Reading and viewing the individual parts of Chris Ware's *Building Stories* conveys quite a similar way of a discovering disillusionment. In contrast to “‘Fairy Tale’ Road Rage,” however, *Building Stories* is clearly not a board game but offers some explicit board game references, for instance, by including a box with lid and base that is typical of board game packaging. This box represents an important part of *Building Stories* although its interpretative significance is often underestimated, as Andrew Kunka and Derek

Royal (2013) underscore. The back of the box features a text with an accompanying diagram entitled “Everything you need to read the new graphic novel *Building Stories*.” What initially reads like a manual does not provide the promised help with the complex structure of *Building Stories*. Taking the manual character seriously would mean that one would only need to know how to use the individual publication formats. The diagram shows how the publications can be unfolded and opened. What’s more, the proper positions for reception are addressed by depictions of the sitting, lying, standing, or traveling female protagonist. And, as a last structure of reference, arrows designate the filing locations of the publication formats within an apartment. The text, however, particularly pairs critical remarks of contemporary culture in the digital age with ironically fractured advertisements for the comic, and it contains a very rough summary with information on the production contexts. But fundamental questions such as in which order the elements of *Building Stories* should be read and viewed or what kind of stories can be expected are addressed neither by the diagram nor by the text. Thus, Ware takes up only the most obvious connections for his explanations, which can be summarized with Jasmin Meerhoff (2011, 32) as the presentation of knowledge of pre-inscriptive correlations that trivializes the function of manuals.

The foldable game board, the second game-related item of *Building Stories*, establishes the board game relation by its materiality, size, and visual appearance and has diagrammatical depictions of the apartment building and its inhabitants as its subject. The reverse side of the cardboard is covered with a structured blue paper and shows axonometric depictions of every single floor of the apartment building. The print on the inside of the folded cardboard shows the whole building during the four seasons. Every area focuses on one protagonist and the story this character inhabits, which corresponds to the blue cardboard back and the axonometric depiction of the floor in question. Through the diagrammatical structures and panel sequences, the reading viewers can gain insight into the relationships and activities of the five protagonists. The apartment building is introduced through the façade-less architectural depiction on the backside. The perception of this piece of *Building Stories* as a game element is invoked visually and materially, but there are neither pieces or tokens nor dice that would make this particular part of *Building Stories* usable as a game board. Furthermore, instead of playing within a community, as the allusion to a parlor game suggests, the recipients usually deal with *Building Stories* on their own, as is common for reading and viewing comics. This item rather complies with a manual that explains the connections and problems of the protagonists and supports the desire to structure all the information about the different plots.

Understanding the game board format as a manual points to a more abstract concept pertaining to the structural level of gameplay as well as to a notion of *Building Stories* that is informed by the approach to (video) games

as “simulations of basic modes of real-life experiences” (Grodal 2003, 129), as Torben Grodal puts it. By taking this approach as a basis, reading viewers can comprehend *Building Stories* as experimental narrative (Gilmore 2012), as memory store (Sattler 2012), or archive of serialization (Crucifix 2018). Following Laurie N. Taylor’s (2004) structural comparison between comics and videogames via the analysis of thresholds, I define gameplay as the framework consisting of game rules and the partly free interaction of players with the game.

By transferring the game-specific criteria of rules and regulations on a structural level, we can recognize the fourteen different items of *Building Stories* as simulations of the adopted publication format. In this context, I understand the basic concept of simulation as an “environment for experimentation,” which Gonzalo Frasca defines as follows: “[T]o simulate is to model a (source) system through a different system which maintains (for somebody) some of the behaviors of the original system” (2003, 223). The sheets of the large, folded newspaper format, for instance, are loosely laid one inside the other and have to be unfolded. The reading and viewing process requires a broader space for handling as well as something to lay the newspaper piece down on in order to perceive the panel arrangements within. By contrast, the children’s book format has the characteristic thick cardboard as book covers as well as a field located at the endpapers where the book owner’s name can be inserted. Even though both items adapt structures of the underlying publication form of a newspaper as well as a children’s book, the content appears in comics-specific panel arrangements.⁹ Every piece of *Building Stories* is still part of the whole comics conglomeration. Yet the activity and the involvement of the reading viewers resembles the experiences we can gain with the forms of publications in real-life. In this sense, my argument is quite similar to the one of Torben Grodal (2003, 142) regarding the relationship between videogames and a possible real world by simulation.

Besides the regulations related to the mediality of the comic’s items, the recipients also gain freedom in their interaction with *Building Stories*. It is up to the reading viewers to decide in which order they wish to place the individual elements of the work and how the narrative about the five protagonists and the apartment building evolves. Due to the nonlinearity of the perception process, the individual comics parts can consistently be rearranged and sequenced in new constellations, forming new references and revealing new systems of connection among the parts of *Building Stories*. Therefore, the reading viewers are permanently and actively influencing how the plot of each protagonist as well as the overall story of the whole ensemble is established and developed. The intriguing process of choosing items, ordering them and handling them under different conditions of perceiving, contrasts with the stories about sad and unfulfilled lives, for example, when the main protagonist, the nameless woman from the top floor, has an abortion, or when the couple’s woman from the

middle floor longs in her desperateness for the former mutual affection in her partnership.

Similar to the adaptation of structures of comics and tales in “‘Fairy Tale’ Road Rage,” the referencing of game elements and mechanisms in *Building Stories* reveals socio-cultural imprints regarding elementary cultural techniques and learned knowledge about the usage of printed products. This process of generating meaning emerges from a process of disillusioning expectations and is deeply intertwined with game-specific mechanisms.

The interplay of games and comics in Ware’s works, or: Some concluding thoughts

Ware’s “‘Fairy Tale’ Road Rage” and *Building Stories* intermingle aspects of the framework of comics and games culture, in particular regarding conventions as well as socially constructed regulations and attributions. Both works seem to take up the promise of fun and entertainment through their design and game associations. In “‘Fairy Tale’ Road Rage,” Ware raises expectations regarding the enjoyment and narrative of the game and counters these expectations by the slow manner in which the game develops, the staging of the magical world and its protagonists, and the way he comments on stereotypes about comics culture and its social settings. In *Building Stories*, the comics artist invokes playful characteristics and game structures that enrich the process of perception and stand clearly in contrast to the emotional and depressing content. By combining games with comics structures and, vice versa, comics with gaming strategies, the preoccupation with “‘Fairy Tale’ Road Rage” and *Building Stories* brings into focus the tension between game association, the expectations of fun and entertainment, and their disillusionment. Furthermore, it foregrounds the social and communicative dimension as well as the culturally imprinted implications of games and comics.

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Notes

- 1 For the particular context of board games within parlor games, see Johnson 2013, 147.
- 2 See, for example, the parlor games *Marvel Heroes* (2006), *Batman: Gotham City Strategy Game* (2013), and *Hellboy: The Board Game* (2019).

- 3 The expression “reading viewers” is used in order to describe more precisely the recipient and mechanisms of reception: When opening a comic book, the recipients are first viewers as they perceive the entire double page or the single page spread in its visual structure. Then they turn successively to the single panels, an action that is interrupted and expanded by the simultaneous observation of a single or double page.
- 4 The handicraft manual and the process of preparation would be quite interesting for an examination of Ware’s work in the broader context of playfulness. For different approaches to Ware’s cutouts, see Bachmann 2016, 176–184; Bredehoft 2006; Claudio 2011.
- 5 Although not all fairy tales possess a happy ending, Kathrin Pöge-Alder (2007, 27) points out that the happy ending is a typical feature of fairy tales. By using a quite characteristic preamble and complementary close in the story board, Ware refers to this kind of fairy tale.
- 6 This strategy of referencing is also known from other productions, for example Bill Willingham’s comics series *Fables* (2002–2015) or the TV series *Once Upon a Time* (2011–2018).
- 7 There are also objections of Hellwig’s contemporaries, as Sebastian Schwägle (2015, 19) describes.
- 8 It is noteworthy that this passage suggests a kind of self-reflection of the artist. Ware often ironically emphasizes his somewhat misfit youth, and it is no coincidence that Ware refers to the career of a comics artist (Ware 2017, 6–15). For a more detailed examination of Ware’s self-portrayal in text and depiction, see Heindl 2018.
- 9 Of course, as several comics scholars have already mentioned, these publication formats are indissolubly entangled with the history of comics (Crucifix 2018; Ghosal 2015). It is also noteworthy that Ware adapts a specific children’s book, namely the series *Little Golden Book*, which, as Julie Sinn Cassidy states, has been a “consistent [...] popular part of American children’s literature and culture since [its] inception in 1942” (2008, 145). Its adaptation evokes the discussion of the entanglement of comics, childhood, and nostalgia as well as of trivialization and ennoblement (Cassidy 2008; Lanes 1976, 112–127).

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