Fairytales therapy in the modern world

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Once upon a time, the good old narrator traveled the world and looked for the best fairy tales for his beautiful princess. He visited various places, warm and cold, mountains, and deserts. He was a guest in the royal palaces and huts of the poor, and he met some people. And he learned a lot of stories, but not all of them were equally interesting. Some of them were too sad, some were scary, which cannot be listened to overnight. But he was very patient and curious and found the tales he needed. In the end, after long wanderings, he came to a country of smiling people, where there was beauty everywhere. The houses were made of multi-colored glass. The most unique and beautiful flowers grew everywhere, birds which the children fed with tasty cookies sang in the gardens. And the narrator heard the first fairy tale from people, which he immediately remembered and decided to tell the princess later. It was a tale of three secrets of happiness. Smiling people wanted the narrator to be happy, too, so they shared their secrets with him...
Dear Reader, now, when you have already gone far-far away in your mind, let me greet you and say that I am incredibly pleased that you are reading these lines. I think you have already guessed that the place you are in today is magical. In this place, like you, Dear Reader, I spent a lot of time when I was a kid. And now, with the birth of my children and participation in the WCI course, interest in this place has returned.

You must be already have figured out what the place is, aren’t you? It is native to all of us and to the eternal children that are within us. This place is a Fairy tale. And I invite you, Dear Reader, to join me for this beautiful journey.

Our first magical stop is Personal Inquiry (1) ...
One evening, when I read to my daughter Nastya a tale about the good old narrator, I thought about how important it is for an adult sometimes to return to the world of children's fairy tales. Child live in a huge magical world, where a miracle occurs every step of the way. We see just a flower on a flower bed, and the child sees a magic flower from a fairy tale. He speaks to this flower and is sure that the flower understood it. The simplest and most ordinary things seem magical to him, and he wonders about everything - the smell of a rose, the singing of birds, sunny bunnies that penetrated the room at dawn. A fairy tale heard from dad or mother, he correlates with reality, sees its heroes around him, and models his unique world, in which he is well and interested.

Growing, we lose this unique sense of sharpness of perception of the world. An adult is deprived of the opportunity to rejoice in simple things. Maybe this is the reason for our eternal search? We change cities, houses, surroundings, jobs, but still, we can no longer experience the burning, incredible bright joy like a child who sees a butterfly, or a kite flight feels.

Nastya looks at me with expectation. And I'm continuing my story that the narrator learned another secret from smiling people - how important it is to find the right words when you tell your story. I have a good friend, an English teacher. A few years ago, he took part in a professional competition. Among the competitive tasks was a twenty-minute conversation with children on a given topic. My friend got the theme "What good can I do for my city here and now." Apparently, he found the right words because he completed this task best of all. But he was proud not only of it. Later, he told me that children from the orphanage were invited to talk, and in twenty minutes, he was able to find a common language with them. He considers this case as his primary professional achievement, although he worked at the school for more than 20 years and met with various situations.

I have never worked with children and have not previously thought about how important it is to talk with them, especially with my own child. And now, I understand how great it is when there is a real understanding between you and the child. That is a particular level of trust, a special
emotional mood. And I think - *what would our world become if everyone learned to talk to their children?* It would definitely have changed for the better.

Nastya is ready to hear my story to the end. And I go to the part of my fairy tale where the narrator finds out the third secret of happiness. The fact that love is always more expensive than gold and silver, all the money of the world. And when there is love, no trials are scary. And the narrator will definitely return to her princess because he loves her and wants to give her a new, the best fairy tale he knows.

*So began my story of immersion in the world of a fairytale therapy...*

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I came into the research from my interest in exploring the importance of telling stories to children, which then moved my attention to methods of creating them, that led me to the concept of a therapeutic fairy tale and, finally, to the discovery of a huge world of fairytale therapy as a psychotherapeutic method for children and adults.

Fairytale therapy is the oldest psychological and pedagogical method. Since ancient times knowledge about the world and philosophy of life has been transmitted from one generation to another in the form of fairy tales. Today, the term «fairytale therapy» refers to psychology techniques and means the psychological effect on personality through stories, contributing to education, personality development, and behavior correction. Fairytale therapy is based on the process of communication between actions in a fairy tale and reality. Many believe that fairy tale therapy is addressed only to children and preschool age. However, the age range covered by fairytale therapy has no boundaries. The therapeutic story's use allows the client's psychological resistance to be passed on and to cope with the issue that the client is not prepared to say aloud for this or that reason.

Officially, fairytale therapy is a young science. It was registered in 1997, although many tales from traditional folklore written much earlier also contain a corrective effect. Such a famous psychologist carried out the analysis of fairy tales and their influence on personality formation as Karl Gustav Jung, Sigmund Freud, Eric Bern, Vladimir Propp, and many others. Both Freud and Jung described folk tales as «symbolic representations of life’s conflicts, struggles, and solutions»
Jung's analytical psychology implied reflecting archetypes in fairy tales, his concept and experiments proved that a person is often guided not by consciously made decisions based on rational thinking, but by attitudes that are mythologized in nature and do not obey the laws of formal logic, which leads to an unconscious desire for myths and fairy tales. Eric Bern also viewed stories as an excellent help in his work. It is fairy tales that are the first scenarios that we have been assimilating since childhood, and then we can repeatedly lose during our lives, not even suspecting where we have such a behavior model. Among the articles we analyze, the most often mentioned expert, on whose work the authors of the articles precisely rely is Karl Gustav Jung and his concept.

The articles selected for analysis could be divided into three key areas: methodology, benefits, and application of fairytale therapy. The majority of them was published in the last ten years.

In the publication Fairytale Therapy Today: Determining its Boundaries and Content Igor Vachkov explores different approaches to the understanding of the place of fairytale therapy in the psychological practice field. He describes four common academical views on fairytale therapy scientific affiliation, such as considering it to be an educational discipline, part of art-therapy, one of the methods of narrative psychotherapy, or a separate academic area (Vachkov, 2016). After doing that author analyzes these views and provides arguments confirming that the vision described above is too narrow and does not reflect the whole essence of the concept. For instance, he argues that «the presence of huge psycho-correctional and psychotherapeutic potentials of this area and its effects go far beyond the purely educational and developmental ones»; that fairytale therapy is much wider than just “creative self-expression”; and that unlike the narrative therapy with its “ready-made tales”, fairytale therapy encourages changing the fairy tale in order to “find new opportunities and models of behavior” (Vachkov, 2016, p. 384).

In the opinion of author, fairytale metaphor is the key tool of a fairytale therapy. He believes that “this fact forms a specific feature of fairytale therapy as an independent scientific and practical area» (p. 385), and during its further development fairytale therapy will become a “psychotechnical system” (Vachkov, 2016, p. 386).

The article titled Fairytale Therapy in work with the adults and children written by Olga Loginova in 2015 examines the typology of fairy tales and various therapeutic and pedagogical methods of working with them (Loginova, 2015).
In a study conducted and described by Mary Collier and Eugene Gaier in their 1958 article *Adult Reactions to Preferred Childhood Stories* it turned out that the fairy tales that people of different gender choose as preferable have a significant heroes and plot differences. In tales chosen by women the heroine is usually naive and helpless and is saved by a beautiful prince and evil is presented in the form an elderly woman, stepmother or a witch, while in male tales this role is usually not associated with female heroes, but with some physical forces (Collier & Gaier, 1958). The results of this study, in our opinion, can contribute to a more precise personification of fairy tales for achievement of therapeutic purposes.

Many researchers are devoted to studying the positive effects of the application of fairy tales. As described in Meredith Mitchell 2010 article *Learning about Ourselves through Fairy Tales: Their Psychological Value* fairy tale symbols are a reflection of intrapsychic phenomena occurring in a person and looking at them through a fairy tale allows a person to better understand himself, and in many cases could lead to a personal growth (Mitchell, 2010).

Research made by Ludmila Strelkova and described in her 2020 article *Development of Empathy through Stories* established a positive effect of fairytale therapy on the emergence of empathic feelings in children. Of particular interest, in our opinion, are the conclusions of the Strelkova, formed based on her experiment, that role-playing is building much stronger empathic experience in kids compared to classical reading (Strelkova, 2020).

Continuing specifically with the focus on fairytale therapy benefits the paper *Dynamic Aspects of Fairy Tales: Social and emotional competence through fairy tales* written by Hansjorg Hohr in 2000 by analyzing the semantical structure of fairy tales shows how they in an easy, metaphorical form help children better understand and manage their emotional states (Hohr, 2000).

Connie Wexler Cohen in 2013 article *Fairy Tales, Archetypes, and Self-Awareness* provides evidence of the similarity of the essence of fairytale therapy with art therapy and narrative practice, which is expressed by the effective use of a symbol by all of them allowing to externalize the traumatic experience of the client, reduce its resistance and facilitate its healing, and describes the benefits of the synergistic effect of combining these methods in therapeutic work (Connie, 2013).

The studies given above confirm the high value of using fairytale therapy in a psychological and educational context.

Many studies have centered on the application of fairytale therapy in different areas of social and health issues. Leilani VisikoKnox-Johnson 2016 article *The Positive Impacts of Fairy Tales*
for Children describes the ability of fairy tales to successfully work with the complex frightening situations, such as oncological diagnoses, in a fairy tale game form that greatly facilitates coping with them (VisikoKnox-Johnson, 2016). As an example, the author mentions studies of the positive impact of fairy tale therapy in the treatment of eating disorders by developing self-control by identifying with specific fairy tale heroes (Hill, 1992, as cited in VisikoKnox-Johnson 2016).

Thus, the academic literature provides much evidence of the huge usefulness of fairy tales in psychotherapy and educational purposes.

With the development of digital technologies in recent decades, people's lives have accelerated significantly, adults and children are spending more and more time in gadgets. In contrast, the culture of reading books to adult children in the classic form seems to be being sidelined. In the digital economy, academic researchers are exploring ways to integrate fairy tales into modern children's lives to develop their moral qualities. One of such methods is to include fairy tales in computer games. Ekaterina Muravevskaia & others in their 2016 publication Developing children's cultural awareness and empathy through games and fairy tales discusses how educational computer games can be built to involve young kids in essential discussions of cultural understanding in order to increase their empathy and tolerance level (Muravevskaia et al., 2016).

When I began to reflect on the topic of Conversation Inquiry and exactly where the gap in the academic discussion might be, an article about introducing fairy tale stories into computer games caught my particular attention. I asked myself: "What can be the limitations of this method? What important things might be missing?".

I continued to reflect on the missing link repeatedly, and finally, I found the answers to these questions. The authors of the article talk only about the benefits of the method of integrating fairy tales into computer games. Simultaneously, as far as I understand, the process of "Child-Computer" interaction is missing the most important, I would even say, a key component of therapeutic healing, namely the second person (as a therapist/parent/teacher or adult in the classic-form interaction). Adult, which reflects the content of a fairy tale and emotions of a kid. “Here it is!” - I thought and formulated my hypothesis is that adding dialogues or other interpersonal
interaction elements between a computer hero and a player can lead to more like human communication and enhance the therapeutic effect of a fairytale therapy.

I began to seek in academic community confirmation of the importance of the presence of an interaction, a partner (second person) for the therapeutic process. Few sources used in my Analysis Inquiry emphasized the importance of an adult's presence, and his emotional involvement in the process of reading to a child.

Olga Loginova in article titled *Fairytale Therapy in work with the adults and children* (2015) claims that in the healing process “important point is the dialogue between the adult and the child. In this connection the emotional relation of the adult to the content of the story becomes one of the main conditions for the effective work the typology of fairy tales and various therapeutic and pedagogical methods of working with them” (Loginova, 2015, p. 9). Besides that, she stresses out the key role of emotional involvement of an adult: “during reading or telling you should settle down in front of the child so that he could see the face of the psychologist and watch the gestures, facial expression, expression of his eyes, to exchange with him the looks” (Loginova, 2015, p. 10).

In the research made by Ludmila Strelkova and described in her 2020 article *Development of Empathy through Stories*, the author points out the important role of live discussion: “additional specially organized work is needed to gradually prepare children for a deeper understanding of and feel for the tale’s moral meaning and its characters’ deeds and to promote the formation of a new emotional (or rather, empathetic) attitude toward others” (Strelkova, 2020, p. 160).

Important to say, that the second participant in a live dialogue does not have to be in the image of a human. It can be, for example, a talking doll, controlled by an adult, having a conversation with a child. Joyce Mills and Richard Crowley in their book *Therapeutic metaphors for children and the child within* (1986) explain that then a child identifies himself with the hero of a fairy tale, unconsciously he stops to feel lonely in his complication, a sense of divided experience comes to him, which leads to the healing (Mills & Crowley, 1986).

In psychological circles, the widely known idea that a person is not healed by psychotherapeutic methods itself, but mostly by therapeutic relationships that are sincere and caring. This thought reminds me of quantum theory, of Schrödinger's cat, of the Observer's importance, under whose "eye" the object of observation is changing.
If we go deeper to the brain functioning, in context of importance of live interaction it is also important to mention the theory of mirror neurons, which are brain cells that activate when observing other living things when they perform certain actions. Thanks to them, people and animals can feel and represent the sensations of others. In the article *What Makes Eye Contact Special? Neural Substrates of On-Line Mutual Eye-Gaze: A Hyperscanning fMRI Study* Takahiko Koike points out that automatic mimicry as an example of mirror neuron system is “a critical part of human social interaction because it is closely tied to the formation of relationships and feeling of empathy” (Chartrand and van Baaren, 2009, as cited in Takahiko, 2019, p. 2). “Eye contact, or mutual gaze, conveys the message, “I am attending to you,” thereby promoting effective communication and enhancing social interaction (Farroni et al., 2002, as cited in Takahiko, 2019, p. 2).

As we see, eye contact is crucial for successful therapeutic process. But at the same time, when I think about important criteria for success in fairy tale-based computer games it also reminds me about the concepts of “holding” (by Donald Winnikott) and “containment” (by Wilfred Bion). It is a basis of therapeutic interactions that is the ability of an adult (parent/therapist/teacher) to accept, contain and reflect the emotions of the other person. In the early childhood these actions made for a baby by mother, while later this type of healing attitude could be presented toward client by psychologist.

Can a computer game approach “live” communication, and if so, under what conditions? Answers to these questions can lead to the more effective achievement of the goals set by parents, teachers, and psychologists.

When I started to fantasize about how an educational or computer game could approach real, living, interpersonal communication, comfort, or so-called transitional, objects came to my mind. These are objects that relieve tension and create a feeling of psychological comfort in an unusual or stressful situation. For children, such items can be favorite soft toys, clothes, blankets, objects
associated with parents, or even having their smell (as in the case of a mother putting some item of her clothes in a cradle to the child, smelling it, which gives the baby a feeling of maternal presence, a sense of comfort and calm). The concept of a transitional object was introduced and investigated by children's psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott. From his point of view, the transitional object is located on the border between these worlds, facilitating the transition to reality.

From my experience and the experience of my relatives, I know that children really perceive toys as alive. I remember the story told to me by my uncle Alexei. His son Leonid was very fond of hares. And his uncle had the following ritual with him for a long time. Every evening he came to his son with a glove hare doll, and the hare began to talk to him (to ask how the day went, what was new and interesting he found out, etc.). And once it happened that the hare and Leonid began to argue about something. Then Leonid said to the hare "Let's ask Dad." Alexey began to answer, in the habit of continuing to move the doll's mouth. Seeing this, Leonid turned to the doll, covered her mouth with his hands, and said "wait, now dad is talking." This story seems nice and funny to me, and at the same time, it shows me how real and living dolls are perceived by children. In my opinion, this type of communication as an example of interpersonal interaction can be used in computer games.

In the process of writing this inquiry, on the Internet I discovered a site of psychologists who communicate with children through animated heroes (cats, dogs, penguins, and even cookies:). The project is called Animago (https://animago.world/).

Methodologically, it relies on cognitive behavioral therapy. The creators of the project claim that working through an animated hero allows you to eliminate the fear of adults, relax the child, reduce his resistance, and achieve a therapeutic or educational goal much faster. Given how rapidly computer science and the doctrine of artificial intelligence are developing, in my opinion, it is not far from the day when a computer will
automatically read a person's emotions, interpret the meaning of his speech, and, depending on these factors, issue a personalized answer, as well as generally conduct a dialogue on a given topic.

In fact, based on the information, provided in the article *Character Computing: Computer Science meets Psychology* (2018) written by Alia El Bolock & others, it is obvious that finding opportunities to simulate interpersonal relations in the Human-Computer interaction, one of the main and most rapid research areas of scientists, which is expressed in the founding of research sectors such as Character Computing, Affective Computing and Personality computing. All these areas considered interdisciplinary and are based on the close interaction with psychological sciences (El Bolock, 2018).

It is important to remember the limitations that can prove themselves in this kind of work. What could it be? In my opinion, the most important limitations, and therefore dangers, can be related to the ethical component and the risk of various kinds of manipulation, including unconscious for the child and adult based on cognitive reasoning through modern knowledge from neurosciences. Another problem, however, of leading importance now, may be the confidentiality and protection of personal data. In the case of such a private process as psychological interaction, which implies greater sincerity and openness of a person, this acquires special significance. Obviously, over time, given advances in neuroscience, monitoring, and certification of the ethics of computer games must become stricter to protect people from such negative impacts.

Hopefully, development of new technologies will bring fairytale to the new, more innovative, and effective level to benefit people of all ages.

"The fairy tale is the great spiritual culture of the people, which we collect along the crumbs, and through the fairy tale the millennial history of the people is revealed to us."

*Alexey Nikolaevich Tolstoy*
And they lived happily ever after...

THE END
References


