

Wonder Cards Storytelling: Imagination, Storytelling, and Role-playing in the Creation of Objects, Spaces, and Experiences

Abstract: This article explores storytelling and role-playing as resources to create objects, spaces, and experiences in the field of design. To this end, we present *Wonder Cards*. The game is an “imagination instrument” that, through distant analogies (de Cruz and de Smedt 2010), assist in the development of narratives. A tale needs to arouse feelings – empathy, love, fear, nostalgia, and many others. The materiality of this abstraction helps the individual generate notions of belonging and temporality for himself and for others (Pallasma 2012). Human beings express themselves through objects and spaces: what we call our material culture. They are an indispensable part of the materialization of sensations and affect. Accordingly, magnificent tales create memories that express the objects and spaces invented. Objects and spaces within an intrinsic narrative create memory. Memory helps construct and preserve cultural and personal identity, since living itself is a constant movement toward recollection (Cardoso 2011). Therefore, the merging of objects with subjectivity is exceedingly important to culture construction. Nonetheless, how does one create these tales? Structures can facilitate this creative process. This article presents the constitutive elements of our creative tool, the implemented experiments, discussions, and debriefings (Atwater 2016) derived from the use of the card game on workshops and design classes at Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro. These activities with participants, objects, spaces, and experiences are explored by the creation of narrative scenes and storytelling resources through fantasy (Barthes 2013) and role-playing (Bienia 2016) and by using the *Wonder Cards*. This union enables the participants to live situations removed from the creative environment where they usually work, thus stimulating creation in new situations and imaginary narrative environments. The *Wonder Cards* assist in the construction of tales, which inspire the development of objects, spaces, and experiences by the participants.

Rian Rezende

Pontifical Catholic University
of Rio de Janeiro
rian.rezende@gmail.com

Sabrina Araujo

Pontifical Catholic University
of Rio de Janeiro
sabrina.design22@gmail.com

Denise Portinari

Pontifical Catholic University
of Rio de Janeiro
denisep@puc-rio.br

1. INTRODUCTION

The following article arose from the initial reflection about how our knowledge defines and limits us creatively. It is assumed that when we are confronted with a problem or are demanded upon creatively, we work these questions with our repertoire, and thus, we limit innovation capacity. This restriction occurs because we apply existing solutions, adding only small advances. The questions that guide this study, inspired by the work of Hélen de Cruz and Jóhan de Smedt (2010) are: How can we go beyond creative limitations caused by our conceptual limits based on existing knowledge? How do we bring together reason and fantasy to pursue ways initially unimagined? How do we use narrative and role-playing to expand these visions?

The present study investigates education and the development of creativity by exploring non-linear thinking, distant analogies, role-playing, and connections between reason and imagination. This exploration is inspired by the theories of the romantic poets writing about imagination, in particular Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis, the reflections of Roland Barthes about method, the theories about

creativity by de Cruz and de Smedt (2010), and the definitions of role-playing by Rafael Bienia (2016). Several of these concepts are considered alongside the conceptual structure that we define as Wonder Design. To explore these ideas, we performed a series of experiments with a card game aimed at expanding creativity called *Wonder Cards* and its “Storytelling” expansion. These experiments took place mainly at Pontifical Catholic University in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

2. THEORY: REASON, POETRY, SCIENCE, AND IMAGINATION

By the end of the nineteenth century in Jena, Germany, a group of poets, philosophers, and scientists exchanged ideas and experiences. Schlegel’s words sum up the main concept shared at the meetings: “All art should become science and all science art; poetry and philosophy should be made one” (Schlegel 1997, 38). They aimed to end the existing separation between reason and imagination, thus releasing creative potential. This romantic tenet of uniting reason and imagination inspires us, for it enables creativity to expand beyond the rational field; however, this does not happen spontaneously.

Schlegel himself wrote about the necessity of a method that combined poetry and philosophy, and was based on experimenting, stating, "The sphere of the combinatorial spirit is quite undetermined. But there must be a method according to which one can proceed. This method will be experimentation" (as cited in Chaouli 2002, 109). For this connection between diverse already existent concepts and the emergence of new ones to occur, it is essential to blend practice and structure. From this union, we developed a creative card game, *Wonder Cards*. Before describing the game, we will discuss the theories that supported its conception.

2.1 Creativity and Distant Analogies

Before proceeding with our reflection about the enhancement of creativity, we need a working definition of the term. In this paper, we will therefore understand creativity in the sense proposed by Margaret A. Boden, who states, "Creativity is the ability to come up with ideas or artifacts that are new, surprising, and valuable" (Boden 2004, 1). Boden's definition of creativity works well with the theories of de Cruz and de Smedt about creativity and thought, upon which we have built our conceptual framework. These authors analyze the influence of conceptual presuppositions -- distant analogies and ontological expectations -- on thought processes, in order to understand their role in creativity. According to the authors, the knowledge and expectations that we hold about how things are -- that is, our world views and interpretations -- influence our ways of thinking and creating: existing conceptual spaces constrain creativity to an important extent. If our thoughts and knowledge can limit our creativity, how may we overcome such limitations? Stories point to a way out, as "distant analogies may have been of crucial importance to move away from well-trodden paths" (de Cruz, 2011, 187). The authors also state that "a near analogy is one in which target and source come from the same or closely related conceptual domain[s]. In a distant analogy, target and source come from widely diverging domains" (de Cruz and de Smedt, 2010, 5). Thus, distant analogies escape from the imaginative common sense, because they bring together widely separate or disparate elements. These are the kind of analogies that we propose to explore through the *Wonder Cards*.

2.2 Fantasy, the Culture of Project, Wonder, and Role-playing

Roland Barthes expatiates on method and fantasy. To him, method "implies good will by the thinker" and "a premeditated decision" (Barthes 2013, 5). When a person wants to develop something with established objectives, this person will possibly follow the already plotted route, since there are no open spaces to get lost or to follow in unknown directions. Instead of a method, Barthes chooses to focus on culture, which he describes as "thinking under the action of selective forces, a training that puts the player's unconscious at stake" (6-7). Among these forces, Barthes highlights desire and fantasy as working on the individual while they act according to this culture when researching. This opens up possibilities of diverse paths inside the project, in contrast to method, which guides the researcher inside routes deployed in the same semantic field ruled by similarities and close correspondences (12). We aim to stimulate desire and fantasy forces with the *Wonder Cards* imaginative tool. With the cards, we seek to avert pre-existent concepts and definitions and open the space to fantasy.

How do we foster imagination and desire? How does the "wonder" encourage creativity and bring reason and imagination closer? Bearing these questions in mind, we wrote the article "Wonder Design and the Exploration of Senses and Imagination," where we presented the initial concepts and the inspirations for what we call Wonder Design, "associating romanticism, enchantment, imagination, and senses" (Rezende, Araujo, and Portinari 2016, 32). By doing so, we tried to stimulate the creation of concepts and projects that spur imagination, creativity, and the sense of "wonder." By "wonder," we mean enchantment, amazement, and a sense of the uncanny, that is, elements which awaken senses, emotions and curiosities in the individual. Our idea was to dissolve certain rational knots in the process of design and to allow a greater freedom of creation. Afterwards, we embraced this concept for role-playing through the expansion "Storytelling." Here, we invoke Bienia's definition of role-playing: "Role-playing is pretending [to be] a character living in a shared story world, and as agency, it requires all actors at a game session to collaborate" (Bienia 2016, 43). We tried to expand the imagination process and to allow the creation of objects, spaces, and experiences through the players, using narrative as support.

3. *Wonder Cards*: Instruments of Distant Analogies

The *Wonder Cards* are instruments of imagination aimed at inspiring concepts and projects. They are a group of cards structured into categories around a basic rule: blind picking. This way, when picking cards, a map of words is generated that, at first, seems illogical. However, this incoherence sets a challenge for the one who picked those cards. Its inventive powers lie in simplicity because it stimulates distant analogies. The traditional deck is made up of 54 cards split into 5 categories: Imagination, Sense, Emotion, Object, and Space. Here's an example: in the traditional way of playing, called Sequence, the player picks five cards, one of each category. For instance: Imagination (Emotional), Sense (Smell), Emotion (Fear), Object (Sticker), and Place (Earth). Using these elements, one must think of an idea which brings these concepts together. How, then, can one think of a sticker that creates fear through smell? How to do so by stimulating the emotional experiences of who is watching? And how to connect the sticker to the selected place, Earth? How to interconnect these different elements? The cards are a creative provocation, for they bring together distant analogies (de Cruz and de Smedt, 2010). This conundrum, brought upon by the comment above, is special because it focuses on the user, object, and space through a personal perspective: the desires and emotions of the person. We stimulate, then, a vision of a project based on the sense experience one has with the world around oneself, and then materialize it in space using artifacts.

4. *Wonder Cards* Storytelling, Experiences, and Further Research

From the basic structures and categories of *Wonder Cards*, we developed other modules aimed at exploring narrative elements and including role-playing, thus aiding in the process of creating stories, objects, spaces and experiences. We created the modules for the Storytelling expansion: Genre, Characters, and Events. The category "Genre"

explores narrative genres. There are 7 double cards (a total of 14 genres) in addition to a free choice card. "Characters" is composed of 14 double cards, totaling to 28 characters, in addition to a free choice card. This series aims to stimulate empathy among the players by adopting different personalities and to use this feeling to create stories. The third category, "Events," asks players to connect the events to the characters, all according to the narrative environment suggested by the genre cards. Combining these three narrative categories, and using cards from other *Wonder Cards* categories, the players must incorporate such concepts and create a playful narrative structure. To assist them, we developed support materials named "Sheets of Imagination." Each sheet of paper presents a different playing mode. There are modes focused on the creation of backgrounds, objects, spaces, and stories. The players, according to their own necessities, may choose to focus on developing only one of these elements. In the main mode, named "role-playing," the players create the backdrop, the physical spaces, the objects belonging to this place, and a narrative situation that encompasses the characters and these elements. Afterward, they play the characters and live the story they have created.

The experimental applications occurred between 2016 and 2018, involving open public workshops and classroom activities with design students at Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. They happened in the following way: the cards and imagination sheets were presented to the players, groups of 4 to 5 people. Participants had 15 to 20 minutes to draw the cards and create stories. We observed and registered the proceedings in audiovisual form during the process. Once the card session was over, we had a debriefing session, talked about the experiment, and the participants made suggestions. Over these experiments, which generated dozens of stories and had more than a hundred students participating in them, more complex imagination sheets were developed, which incorporated more categories of cards. The dynamics of the experiments also changed; besides creating stories, we also asked narrative games to be created

Figure 1: Example of a Mode Sequence game, using all five categories.



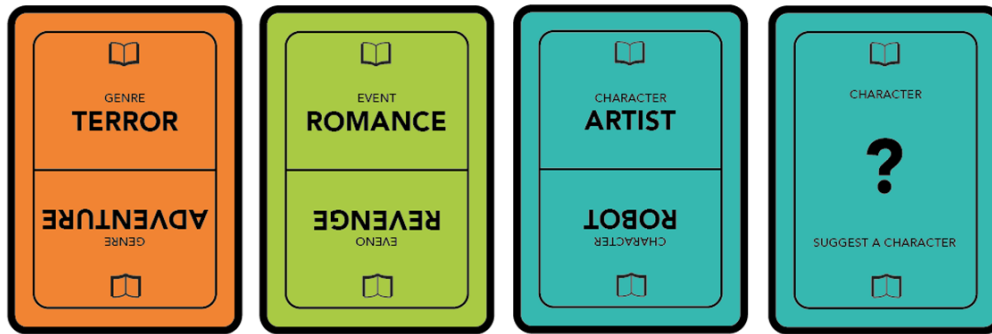


Figure 2: Example of cards from each module (Genre, Event, Character) and Free Choice.

in which the players, after developing the structure of the game, switched games, with each group playing the game developed by the other group.

We highlight some comments of the players that happened during and after the activities. One participant said it was “challenging but very good, because it takes away that feeling of looking at a blank sheet and not knowing where to begin” and also that using the cards randomly made him create a rather different story than the ones he was used to. Another person said, “I think that without the cards, the students would feel stuck and the cards made it possible for the imagination to flow” because they were “a wonderful facilitator; to create with unexpected elements makes you connect them easily to create a narrative.” They also suggested that it would be great to use the cards to create characters, their backgrounds, and even role-playing game adventures. Below, we will describe in further detail some of these experiences.

For a certain activity, a group picked the cards: Fantasy (Genre), Garden (Space), Fear (Emotion), Object (Sweet), Murder (Event) and the cards of the characters: Mermaid, Pirate, Queen, and Fairy. They created a narrative situation: “In a universe where the world is a huge garden of sweets, a murder took place, which prompted fear throughout the kingdoms. The king was dead. To investigate the crime, the queen summoned the representatives of the kingdoms: The Mermaid from the Chocolate Milk Lake, the Licorice Pirate, and the Jelly Beans Fairy.” In this narrative game, in a space full of sweets, each player takes a role. While they savor the treats, the role-playing happens until they collectively find out who the killer is and how everything occurred.

In another experiment, a group of players picked the cards: Surreal (Genre), Room (Space), Emotion (Nostalgia), Relic (Object) and the characters: Child, Man, Object, Living, and Psychologist (which they chose because they picked a free choice card). Through these cards, the group created a live action

role-playing game (larp): “A man is confined to a room where he talks to a mirror, which reflects him when he was a child. Meanwhile, a psychologist finds out what has been haunting him for all these years.” The group created the space of the room and decided it would be necessary that someone played the role of the mirror (and they created the story and details of this object). The other players would play: the man, the child, and the psychologist. In the interpretations and conversations between the characters, they find out what haunts the man. During the experience of debriefing, the players came up with suggestions and modifications. For instance, in one of the activities, we began to include an “Event” card on the “Sheet of Imagination,” for the players felt a narrative continuation was needed as an inventive support. During debriefing, they also reported that they had never created narratives of that kind, but the method of connecting cards made the creative process a lot easier and they invented stories that they never thought they could.

These experiments carried out with the cards, including the participants’ suggestions, open up possibilities for future explorations in the RPG and larp fields, as well as research on innovation and other areas that explore creativity based on arbitrary elements and the stimulation of new connections through distant analogies. These experiments may also be used, for example, in situations of creative blocks in the creation of characters and backgrounds or for improvisational warm-ups previous to larp sessions. We intend, in future experiences, to test the cards with other user profiles than those of people essentially from the academic environment. We also intend to further our investigation by creating more open and collaborative forms of experimental design, opening room for new proposals and new ways of playing developed by the participants during the sessions.

5. CONCLUSION

The *Wonder Cards* and its Storytelling expansion explore the connection between reason and imagination; the cards are connected to inspirations from Jena's romantic poets, and they open up possibilities that go beyond those limited by ordinary reason. The concept that the cards are picked blindly, with the players not allowed to choose, takes the players out of their comfort zone. As de Cruz and de Smedt (2010) point out, the comfort zone is a tightened space, just like a prison, which reduces innovation skill, since the creative connections normally used are very much alike. The cards propose the incidental and the connection between different elements; they allow players to escape the boundaries that knowing and solving old problems impose on the creation process. By introducing the principles of role-playing and narrative, we allow players to explore the creation of stories as a narrative force. Therefore, they create settings, objects, backgrounds, games, and narrative experiences that emerge from the connection between their senses, emotions, memories, and references. These components are mixed with random elements deriving from the *Wonder Cards*, being challenged by the fantastic and wonderful. On such occasions, where the mastered repertoire is not enough and a new perspective is essential, creative leaps are stimulated and wonder happens.

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Rian Rezende (M.A.) is a professor at the Arts and Design Department at Pontifical Catholic University in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (PUC-Rio). He is a social scientist and designer. He completed his B.S. degree in social sciences at Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, his M.A. in Design at PUC-Rio, and currently, he is working on his Ph.D. at the Arts and Design Department PUC-Rio. He is a founder of 5D Magic Design Studio. His studies explore innovative methodology and thinking through the construction of experiences, artifacts, and spaces that combine methods, games, narrative, imagination, magic, and design.

Sabrina Araujo has a B.S. degree in product design at Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, with final research on sensory artifacts. She is a founder of 5D Magic Design Studio. Sabrina teaches extension courses in the areas of photography, branding, cities, and museums.

Denise Portinari has a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology. She works currently as psychoanalyst in private practice and as a professor and research director at the Arts and Design Department of Pontifical Catholic University in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Portinari's main research interests explore the poetics and aesthetics of resistance; the politics of arts and design practices; and the material aspects of subjectivity.