

The plague transformed: *City of Hunger* as mutation of narrative and form

Jennifer J Dellner, Ph.D.

Ocean County College, Toms River, NJ 08754, USA

This short paper proposes and argues the hypothesis that Minna Sundberg's interactive game in development, *City of Hunger*, an offshoot or spin-off of her well respected digital comic, *Stand Still Stay Silent*, can be understood in terms of the ecology of the comic as a mutation of it; as such, her appropriation of a classic game genre and her storyline's emphasis on the mechanical over the natural suggest promising avenues for understanding the uses of interactivity in the interpretation of narrative.

At once a diasporic and plague narrative, Minna Sundberg's web comic *Stand Still. Stay Silent* presents a particularly Nordic post-apocalyptic tale of exploration and discovery, one that elaborates a future world of Scandinavian folkloric creatures and monsters encountered by a group of young explorers who have left the safety of plague-free safe zones in order to discover what is to be found in the rest of the world. The supernatural elements (monsters, grotesquely mutated animals, and souls unable to escape the world) associated with the world of Nordic folklore are also aligned with the plague. A controlling idea throughout is that "the illness" is ecological deformation: writing of "Beasts, Trolls, and Giants," the narrator explains, "They are a shadow of our past, a distorted echo of what once there was." Avoiding the shadow of the past and the monstrosities it has produced is a powerful theme, carrying an implied social critique that deserves examination. In an environment divided into safe areas and the Silent World, the first rule beyond safe zones is avoidance: "do not run or call for help but stand still and stay silent. It might go away" (Sundberg, 2013: 68).

In similar fashion, however, to what Dadey argues is a strategy found in other comics about illness, *Stand Still Stay Silent* manifests the plague-riven world in visual terms that challenge the verbal narratives the characters have heard about it, presenting seeing and vision as experiential knowledge that upends and exceeds received wisdom. While Christensen insists that *Stand Still Stay Silent's* themes of isolation and fear of contagion fit formulaic plague narrative perfectly, e.g. when the people flee toward isolated places, "huts in the mountains or . . . Iceland" (22), completely free of the plague, this is only in the exposition of the story world. The governing principle of the comic, both structural and thematic, is transgression.

While the characters often go where they are not supposed to go, a central feature of the social interaction of those on the mission is debate about what to do and how to interpret their experiences. As some only speak Finnish and others only Norwegian or Swedish (this is indicated by a drawing of each country's flag), a few are multi-lingual; in order to communicate, they must cooperate as a group. These moments in the plot invite readers to also engage in debate in the comments feature, offer solutions and plot suggestions in between postings of the new panel(s), a feature Sundberg herself wrote about in her undergraduate thesis. A key means of building a readership, she writes, is to create, via a comments section, a means for readers to build personal connections with the world of the narrative and the author; social media is another (2013:17). A key component for the act of reading here is interactivity, and is enabled by the digital environment of the comic. The capacity for, and the necessity of, interaction is emphasized by both the plot and the digital affordances of the comic, and challenges expectations that the characters and readers might bring concerning the safety of isolation and fear of others.

In *Stand Still Stay Silent*, biological mutation is the root of the ecology; it is the trope of both transformation and death alike. *City of Hunger*, Sundberg's interactive game in development, can, in fact, be read as a mutation of this original world. *City of Hunger* extracts and foregrounds a subtext found in the comic's plague narrative as the basis of its structure and theme: "the illness" as a battle against malevolent forces. In the game, the illness may or may not be gone, but conflict (vs. cooperation) becomes the primary

mode of interaction for characters and reader-players alike. In order to produce the narrative, the reader-player will have to do battle as the characters do.¹ Sundberg herself signals that her new genre is indivisible from the different ecology of the game world's narrative. "*City of Hunger* will be a 2d narrative rpg with a turn-based battle system, mechanically inspired by your older final fantasy games, the Tales of-series and similar classical rpg's." There will be a world of "rogue humans, mechanoids and mysterious alien beings to fight" (2017). While it remains to be seen how the game develops, its emphasis on machine-beings and aliens in a classic game environment (a "shadow of the past") suggests strongly that the use of interactivity within each narrative has an interpretive and not merely performative dimension.

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¹ Montfort notes that adventure games are not themselves narratives, but "produce narratives when a