Labyrinthine Challenges and Degenerate Strategies in *The Hunger Games*

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According to Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga, the concept of play is a cultural phenomenon that permeates social activity and can be found as an element of almost everything humans do, from the way we construct language to the way we enact our beliefs: "law and order, commerce and profit, craft and art, poetry, wisdom, and science. All are rooted in the primaeval soil of play" (5). What engrains play into cultural activities is its simulation of specific *sets of rules* that define a social system in which we operate, "a rule-based formal system," that can produce differently evaluated outcomes—winning and losing (Juul 6; Sniderman). Key to all play is its dependence upon rules and their regulation of behavior within a given system. But just from looking at Huizinga's list, it becomes clear that a concept as encompassing as play runs the risk of losing its scientific value for any kind of specific inquiry. To counteract this diversity of forms, games scholar Brian Sutton-Smith proposes to differentiate the concept into seven distinct rhetorics, meaning specific ways of thinking and talking about play. At the heart of this argument is what he calls the "rhetoric of play as progress," which holds that we learn and develop by playing, that play can function as "socialization and moral, social, and cognitive growth" (Sutton-Smith 9f).

Sutton-Smith shows that it is possible to understand play as contributing to a variety of developmental steps such as the "real-life adaptive skills for survival" or "skills for cognition and education," that play may function as "an imitation of adult activities" or "a form of learning or socialization" (50). In this very general pedagogical function then, play is related to other cultural forms, such as mythology or literature. In regards to myth, Joseph Campbell argues that one of its functions is "to validate and maintain a certain sociological system: a shared set of rights and wrongs, proprieties

or improprieties" (10), and another is "the pedagogical" (14). Myth thus functions as a moral guideline for right and wrong behavior, teaching younger members of society "to become self-reliant" (Campbell 14). Moreover, young adult literature fulfills a similar function, encouraging development and learning, foregrounding stories that deal with adolescents' quests for "self-identity and self-discovery … [and] define their journey toward self-understanding" (Kaplan qtd. in Canavan, and Petrovic 46).

To sum up: many aspects of culture (myth, literature, play) provide young adults with a guideline (with the *rules*) as to what is considered an acceptable or a desirable action within a given social system. Suzanne Collins' The Hunger Games series might be read as such a cultural rulebook—one that appropriates Greek mythology to reveal a behavioral strategy that allows survival in a dystopian social reality. Key to this reading is the understanding of the world presented in the novels as deeply and unjustly prejudiced against the inhabitants of the districts. The only chance to escape the systemic exploitation, while adhering to the rules of the system, is participation in the Hunger Games, which itself is a game system that is unjust towards its players. A strategy to deal with such unjust systems (both the social reality of the novels and the Games) thus has to be making use of any means available to ensure not only survival but a change in the system. The Hunger Games present us with examples of systems that warrant the use of what game theory refers to as *degenerate strategies* as a legitimate and necessary path to victory.

The Labyrinth Metaphor

When talking about inspiration for the books, Suzanne Collins points towards the Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur. Especially the aspect of a "punishment for past deeds" seems to have captured her imagination because of its ruthless violence and the inherited guilt of the crime: "Crete was sending a very clear message: 'Mess with us and we'll do something worse than kill you. We'll kill your children'" (Everett 1). It is this unjust system, punishing children for crimes of generations past, which inspires a heroic rebellion—both in the myth and in *The Hunger Games*, as Collins points out: "I

guess in her own way, Katniss is a futuristic Theseus" (Everett 1). In order to understand these parallels, a recapitulation of the myth seems helpful.[1]

In a conflict between the King of Crete, Minos, and Aegeus, the King of Athens, Minos had the upper hand, due to his vast fleet, and threatened the city of Athens with destruction unless Aegeus paid tribute every nine years by sending seven boys and seven girls to be sacrificed to a fearsome creature, the Minotaur. The Minotaur, a monster that was half-man and half-bull, was kept in a labyrinth and devoured the youths as they tried to escape the confusing maze. When the third sacrifice was ready, Theseus, the son of King Aegeus, volunteered to go, so that he could to slay the Minotaur. When he arrived at Crete, King Minos' daughter Ariadne fell deeply in love with Theseus and did not want him to die, so she secretly helped him defeat the Minotaur. She gave him a ball of thread, with which he could retrace his steps and safely maneuver the maze without getting lost. In some more recent versions of the myth, she even gave him a sword to fight with. Theseus attached one end of the thread to the entrance door and unwound the ball as he went into the maze, found the Minotaur, killed him, and then returned by following the thread back to the entrance.

Central to the myth's connection with The Hunger Games series is the challenge set before Theseus in the form of the labyrinth and the unjust system it represents. In contemporary (Western) culture, the labyrinth has become a trope that metaphorically represents a loss of orientation in society, an inability to find safety and meaning, a search for an individual path to self-determination, as well as a form of initiation and development. The labyrinth is thus suited to represent not only the loss of orientation in twenty-first century society in general and more specifically after the events of 9/11, but also the anxieties felt by adolescents when confronted with the task of identity-formation. The latter is especially important, as the labyrinth functions as a site for a rite of passage, an initiation into adult society. Craig Wright argues that the labyrinth of Crete "signified a gloomy, tortuous Underworld," and that as such, it served as "an arena for trial and ordeal, for confrontation and conquest,

for initiatory rites in which the hero undergoes a process of self-discovery" (15). Manfred Schmeling specifies the function of such an initiation for society by claiming that the fight against the Minotaur as a ritual is focused on "rectifying a social injustice" (33, translation mine). Theseus volunteers to be sacrificed to the Minotaur, because he sees the slaughter of children as a social injustice. By crossing the threshold into the labyrinth, Theseus leaves behind the status as child/son, and the social security associated with this, to enter the mythological realm, which bears no orientation or security. All categories of stability are suspended here. Theseus has to navigate the mythical space and time of the labyrinth, entry into and reemergence from which represents death and rebirth, the maze itself becoming a sort of Underworld (cf. Wright 15). By slaying the Minotaur and returning safely from the labyrinth, Theseus thus claims his rightful place as an adult, as a hero, and as a leader, restoring order and eliminating the previous social injustice.

In a mythopoetic retelling, such as Collins' novels, the elements of the myth become more complex and adapted to the contemporary situation. The conflict between two city-states becomes a civil war in which the districts rebel against and are subdued by the Capitol and, as punishment, have to offer up one boy and one girl each as surrogate sacrifices. However, Collins escalates the ruthlessness of the sacrificial system: not fourteen but twenty-four tributes are demanded, not every nine years, but each year, and, of course, Katniss as "future Theseus" emerges not in the third but the seventy-fourth round of sacrifices. Also, it is interesting to note that though Katniss volunteers to become a tribute, she does so to stave off the unjust reaping of her younger sister, not to balance out the more dominant injustice of the system in general. In the end, she succeeds in both, but the socio-political injustice is addressed only later in the series, when her conflict with the Capitol escalates, and Katniss' actions become symbolic for a political movement.

In a metaphorical sense, Katniss has to overcome more than one opponent (e.g., the tributes, the mutts, Snow, Coin) and has to navigate more than one labyrinth (e.g., the Capitol's entertainment structure, the Games' arena—twice, the warzone) during the

course of the novel series, but the first book and the Hunger Games competition ring truest to the original myth. Here Katniss volunteers as a tribute, is brought to the arena, and has to survive both disorientation and obstacles before finally defeating Cato. She enters the arena as a tribute, a teenager to be sacrificed for the sins of past generations, and reemerges from it a grown-up victor, a revered leader for the districts. A detailed comparison of any novel and classical mythology will, of course, yield differences, but it is easy to see that the overall structure of Katniss' challenge in the Hunger Games resembles that of the labyrinth.

Beating the Labyrinth

In talking about the pedagogical function of the labyrinth myth and especially Collins' appropriation of it in *The Hunger Games*, I will concentrate on an aspect that has been generally overlooked: that of Ariadne's thread and its function in the myth. Following from the original discussion of play as elementary to rituals and cultural behavior, readers can understand the labyrinth as a system governed by game-like rules. Analyzing it according to game theory should thus offer up new insights, especially in regards to the rules in such a system and how to "beat the game," so to speak, and survive.

In their book *Rules of Play*, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman argue that there are three kinds of rules: operational, constitutive, and implicit rules (130). Operational rules are explicitly spelled-out, and in the case of the labyrinth they are thus probably found in the (oral) contract between Crete and Athens: every nine years seven youths and seven maidens are to be sacrificed to the Minotaur. In return, Crete will not attack Athens. The constitutive rules are rather abstract, determined by "the underlying formal structures" (Salen, and Zimmerman 130), such as the logical movements in navigating the maze: when coming to a crossroads, one can either go left, go right, or go straight to progress; moving backwards will not help.

Most interesting, though, are the implicit rules, which are so variable and so numerous that it is hard to determine them for each game. These deal with the fundamental social dynamics when playing, but as Sniderman argues, we cannot possibly know all

the rules of a game, as "some deeper rules are always operating … without the player's being aware of them" (par. 1). In the case of the labyrinth, the implicit rules are complex, opaque, capricious, and unjust towards the players. King Minos wants the Minotaur to devour the Athenians because he wants to appease the beast (something he will not advertise in the rules), while at the same time keeping his enemy in line. So, implicit in the rules—which Ariadne, daughter of Minos, should know—is that the Minotaur needs to eat the sacrifices in order for Minos to keep his power. In this game, the odds are never in the Athenians' favor (because Minos, as game designer, systematically favors the other side), and there can only be one victor: the Minotaur.

The game rules implicitly work so that the sacrifices are defenseless, disoriented, and scared to death to go into the maze, but Ariadne's gifts negate this. Since Theseus receives a ball of thread and a sword, he is the first person to enter the labyrinth equipped with tools not intended to be in play and thus not covered by the rules. Though they are not expressly forbidden, thread and sword were not foreseen as part of the game. Theseus can backtrack his path, should he get lost, and he can fight the monster. Thus, for him, the ultimate fear of entering a disorienting, chaotic space in which a superior opponent lurks is mitigated by the fact that he has tools to his favor. In terms of the rules of play, Theseus is thus cheating—or better, he uses degenerate strategies to outwit the design of the game.

Also called "exploits," degenerate strategies are described by Salen and Zimmerman as a "way of playing a game that takes advantage of a weakness in the game design, so that the play strategy guarantees success" (271). In game theory, this behavior is not referred to as cheating, as it does not involve breaking explicit rules, but reflects the most efficient strategy to beat the game:

> Taking advantage of the game's weakness in this way would not exactly constitute cheating, but it does exploit the game's structure as a means of winning. Although games are not designed to be exploited by players, what makes a degenerate strategy degenerate is not just that it goes against the intentions of the designers. Using an exploit

> is a way of playing that violates the spirit of the game. (Salen, and Zimmerman 272)

It is important to point out that the spirit of the labyrinth as a game is ruthlessly evil and highly prejudiced against the Athenian players. In fact, the intention of the game design is to kill the players. Consequently, the labyrinth does not really qualify as a *game* (which according to most definitions needs to be voluntary), but only exhibits *game-like* qualities. Nonetheless, in terms of rule-based systems, the skewed nature of the rules of play offers an interesting point of analysis: In a system that is unjust and threatening, divergent or degenerate strategies can become necessary to survive. In such an environment, using an exploit feels justified, and that is probably why Theseus has been seen as a hero and not an unsportsman-like player or even a cheat.

Strategies for Survival

The mythical use of degenerate strategies becomes a model for *The Hunger Games*, but Collins takes great care to make her variant of the myth more complex by rearranging aspects of Ariadne and Theseus into Katniss and the rest of her team. Ariadne and Theseus have clear roles in their strategy: Ariadne knows the exploits and provides the tools, whereas Theseus executes the strategy and beats the system; Katniss, on the other hand, sometimes devises the strategy and at other times executes it. Haymitch, Peeta, Cinna, and even Effie provide additional aid and guidance. What the novel emphasizes is that in order to make use of degenerate strategies (i.e., become Theseus), one needs to decipher the implicit rules and devise a plan (i.e., become Ariadne). The novel reimagines the myth and foregrounds the ability to spot the exploits, to observe a system and find its flaws, to "game the game" so to speak.

Already in the beginning of the novel, Katniss shows an acute awareness of how the society of District 12 works and how to manipulate the rules in order to survive. Food is scarce in the district, and hunting in the woods is forbidden and severely punished. But since the Peacekeepers, who would enforce these rules, are just "as

hungry for fresh meat as anybody is" (Collins, *Hunger Games* 5), Katniss is able to exploit this as a flaw in the system. She is also very aware of the outright injustice of the reaping and of the Hunger Games, with its systemic prejudice against the poor, who are forced to add their names "more times in exchange for tesserae" (13) to provide their families with additional food. This system Katniss knows and handles rather well until her sister Prim is chosen as a tribute. With her name in the bowl only once, she should have been "as safe as you can get" (15)—that she is chosen against the odds proves that Katniss is "powerless against the reaping" (15) though. It also forces her to volunteer in Prim's stead and enter a world with new rules, which she has to learn to exploit for survival.

On the train towards the Capitol, Haymitch hits Peeta and reminds him that appearances matter. When Peeta protests, that the bruise suggests a breach of rules—no fighting between tributes outside the arena—Haymitch reveals his knowledge of the implicit rules and of degenerate strategies: "Only if they catch you. That bruise will say you fought, you weren't caught, even better" (Collins, *Hunger Games* 57). Later, when the train arrives at the Capitol, and Peeta is waving at the crowds, Katniss realizes that the Games have begun, that every moment counts, and that Peeta is "already fighting hard to stay alive" (60) and winning sponsors for himself. The rules of the Hunger Games are much more complex and opaque, and Katniss has to learn them fast.

At the presentation ceremony, Katniss for the first time grasps the reality of the Games: the need to play the crowd, as the Games are mostly about entertainment, and the tributes are judged for sympathy and admiration. When Cinna tells them to hold hands and stand confident, Katniss feels the force of the image: "Cinna has given me a great advantage. No one will forget me.… Surely, there must be one sponsor willing to take me on!" (Collins, *Hunger Games* 70). But it takes Haymitch to point out the gesture's power as degenerate strategy: "Just the perfect touch of rebellion" (79). In terms of the operational rules, the hand-holding is simply a way to earn sympathy, but in terms of the implicit rules—that only one

tribute remain—it becomes symbolic, rebellious in that it defies the spirit of deadly competition.

During the final evaluations in training, the operational rules state that each tribute is granted a private session in front of the Gamemakers to rank his or her skills, giving "the audience a starting place for the betting" (Collins, *Hunger Games* 184). The implicit rules suggest that tributes show off their skills to their best ability to impress the Gamemakers. Further, in the spirit of the situation, tributes should display a respectful behavior towards the Gamemakers—the judges who decide their fates. When it is Katniss' turn, she realizes that the Gamemakers are bored: "Instantly, I know I'm in trouble. They've been here too long.… Sat through twenty-three other demonstrations. Had too much wine…. The majority of them are fixated on a roast pig that has just arrived" (100). Katniss is enraged: "[W]ith my life on the line, they don't even have the decency to pay attention to me…. I'm being upstaged by a dead pig" (101). She fires an arrow at the pig's mouth and then storms off. Behind this brash act is the knowledge of the implicit rules that the Gamemakers will need to remember her in order to rank her high. Shooting at them is no breach of the operational rules, but it is a degenerate strategy, as it certainly "violates the spirit" of the session and the "intentions of the designers" (272), as Salen and Zimmerman put it. It is indeed such a violation that a year later (in *Catching Fire*), the Gamemakers' booth is secured by a force field—thus preventing another similar exploit. Metaphorically, as Shannon Mortimore-Smith argues, Katniss' arrow "declares her presence, her dignity, and her threat" (165) to the Gamemakers, thus foreshadowing the disruption to the rules of play of the Hunger Games and the dissolution of the fascist district system that will follow over the course of the trilogy.

In the arena it becomes clear, that the Gamemakers control all aspects of the Games, but may change the rules to get better audience ratings. Keeping with the idea of a spectacle, Katniss realizes the underlying rules of this entertainment and the options to exploit them. The audience consequently becomes a key component in the rules of play, as Vivienne Muller argues:

> The supervisors … are responsible for setting up and controlling the killing fields. The topography, the flora and fauna and the weather are artificially manipulated and dangerous and deadly obstacles are deliberately put in the way of the participants to direct the action … [But t]he audience can become sponsors, providing food, medicine or weaponry to help their favourite tribute win. In this they are recruited as associate directors of the simulation, players of and in the game, contributing to its theatricality and its sub-plots, aiding and abetting murder and violence. (55)

Katniss manipulates the audience's desire for the star-crossed lovers theme in order to receive food from her sponsors (Collins, *Hunger Games* 261), but she is also keenly aware of the repercussions her actions could have in District 12: "Because my words go out all over Panem" (268). She and Haymitch take on the roles of Theseus and Ariadne, Haymitch communicating the implicit design via the sponsored goods (or lack thereof), guiding Katniss to natural water (169) or sending medicine to steady her after the fire attack (188). She muses on the Gamemakers' need to keep entertainment levels up, arguing that water and food can be found, as "barren landscapes are dull and the Games resolve too quickly without them" (140). The "real sport of the Hunger Games is watching the tributes kill one another" (177) not watching tributes die from exhaustion or killing them off too swiftly. The fire attack is a device to manipulate the in-game situation to make it more entertaining: "This fire is designed to flush us out, to drive us together" (173), creating a more dynamic interaction.

So the audience and its reaction play a role in determining Katniss' behavior, leading to specific options for degenerate strategies. The strongest example of this is Katniss' decision to give Rue a burial ceremony after her death. She not only refuses to leave and let the game-rules take over, but also provides a defiant reading of the situation by decorating Rue's body with flowers and paying respect: "I press the three middle fingers of my left hand against my lips and hold them out in her direction" (Collins, *Hunger Games* 237). This clearly violates the competitive spirit of the Games and negates the intentions of the designers: "I want to do something …

to shame them, to make them accountable, to show the Capitol that whatever they do or force us to do there is a part of every tribute they can't own. That Rue was more than a piece in their Games. And so am I" (236).

Katniss realizes the violation of the rules, which state that she should remove herself from the body so that it can be collected. Her gesture is defiant of those rules—deliberately using an exploit to send a message. She knows that the cameras will have to show the body being collected, and by decorating Rue, she signals love and respect for Rue as a person, effectively undermining the dehumanization that the Games represent. Muller suggests that the tributes function as "avatars" (55) for the districts in a punishment simulation. But punishment functions best, according to Andrew Shaffer, when the avatars are dehumanized, so that the audience can feel "a sense of justice" when they witness "perpetrators of a crime actually punished" (79). By re-humanizing Rue, Katniss robs the audience of its distance, forcing them to acknowledge their complicity (cf. Mortimore-Smith 165).

That this degenerate strategy completely violates the spirit of the Hunger Games becomes obvious when District 11, Rue's home, sends Katniss a loaf of bread. The gesture in itself is a degenerate strategy, as the intention of the Games is to pit the districts against each other: "For whatever reason, this is a first. A district gift to a tribute who's not your own. I lift my face and step into the last falling rays of sunlight. 'My thanks to the people of District Eleven,' I say. I want them to know I know where it came from. That the full value of their gift has been recognized." (Collins, *Hunger Games* 238). As Tom Henthorne has argued, the viewers "ultimately determine the Games['] meanings" as:

> ideological content cannot be fixed by producers, however much they try…. In effect, viewers are able to use the Games' interactivity to subvert the producer's ideological intent: sponsoring Katniss while she is in the arena becomes a means of defying the Capitol's power since to them Katniss has come to represent resistance. (104)

At this point, the novel for the first time acknowledges that Katniss' actions are not merely part of the Hunger Games but also part of a larger social system with similarly strict and complex rules governing the relation between the Capitol and districts.

Degenerate strategies also reverberate outside of the context of the Games arena and apply to the social system at large; just how deeply they apply becomes apparent in Katniss' last act of resistance in the book. For the Capitol, the "stunt with the berries" (Collins, *Hunger Games* 372) is an outright act of cheating and is viewed as subverting not only the spirit of the Games but its power as a tool for suppression. After the back-and-forth changes of the Hunger Games' operational rules—allowing for two victors, then again denying that opportunity, Katniss realizes "they have to have a victor" (344) and that both remaining tributes dying would mean the audience would be denied their greatest entertainment—the after-show and the Victory Tour. It is at this point that Katniss reveals the deepest understanding of the implicit rules of the game. By threatening to eat the poisonous berries, Katniss and Peeta can turn the game rules completely against their intentions. In effect, as Helen Day has argued, this strategy "exposes the war between ratings (which require the editors to show this climactic gesture) and deterrent (which requires the censorship of such an incendiary act)" (174); thus, the gesture completely undermines the Gamemakers' intentions.

Furthermore, her act of exploiting the unwritten rules of the televised spectacle is read as the ultimate defiance against an unjust system. "By refusing to play by the established rules, Katniss forces all of the players into a new game, the ramifications of which reverberate through the second and third books," as Andrew Jones has stated (246). But it is important to note here that Katniss uses this as a degenerate strategy for the Hunger Games—in order to survive. The political message of rebellion is a product of the mediated process: "In the arena—I was only thinking of outsmarting the Gamemakers, not how my actions would reflect on the Capitol. But the Hunger Games are their weapon and you are not supposed to be able to defeat it" (Collins, *Hunger Games* 358). The degenerate

strategy is doubly effective; not only does it secure Katniss' survival in the arena, but it also sparks the change in the unjust system, turning her into a hero and a role model.

Unjust Systems

Just as Ariadne's thread helped Theseus dismantle the social injustice of the Athenian sacrifices by killing the Minotaur, so Katniss uses degenerate strategies to topple an unjust system of sacrifice and state control. The moral message that both transport is thus clear: When the system is prejudiced and stacked against those acting within it, it is necessary to explore the rules that govern that system and use any exploit possible. We are all subject to rules and regulations, taking part in a complex web of intricate and often implicit, unwritten rules. Understanding those rules is paramount. As Salen and Zimmerman point out: "In a social context, the exploit unbalances the level playing field of conflict and shrinks the space of possibility to a very narrow range, threatening the meaningful play of the game" (273). But what about a game, in which the playing field is skewed from the beginning? What about a social context in which the odds are *never* in your favor? Here, degenerate strategies are an act of defiance, an act of rebellion against the rules and the system itself. In an unjust system, one that stacks the odds against the players and threatens their lives, knowing the rules that bind the system and exploiting them to one's advantage becomes a heroic deed. Degenerate strategies, because of their willingness to undermine the spirit of the game and the intentions of the system designers, are ideal guidelines for dystopian and unjust systems, be they game systems or social systems.

Note

1. As with all classical mythology, there are many versions of the myth. None of the variants is the *correct* version; instead myth can be seen as a "system of communication that depends on a body of pre-worked material, a system that brings with it a host of associations, connotations, and interpretive baggage" (Dougherty 13). Every telling of a myth thus adds to the baggage and emphasizes a different aspect, adapting the myth to its specific time. I am here referring to

versions given by Apollodorus (E1: 7–9), Plutarch (*Life of Theseus*, XIX: 1–3), Diodorus Siculus (IV: 61.4–7), and Ovid (*Metamorphoses*, VIII: 152–82), as well as modern scholarly interpretations by Robert Graves (Chapter 98: 336–48) and W. H. Matthews (17–22).

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