



Bruno Faidutti about unicorn research

From hearsay to symbolism to the rainbow

An interview for reich-der-spiele.de by Michael Weber

Full German version:

<https://www.reich-der-spiele.de/specials/bruno-faidutti-einhorn-forschung>

Bruno Faidutti invented a series of board games. One of his most famous is Citadel. One of his hobbies is less known. He does research on unicorns. What at first seems like a bit of a whack job has a scientific basis. He has even done a doctorate on the subject of the mythology of the unicorn. What moves a person to deal with the subject? And why is there actually no unicorn game by him? We simply asked Bruno Faidutti.

Bruno, you have a curious hobby. You research about unicorns and have even done a doctorate on this topic. What fascinates you about this topic?

I started studying history quite late, when I was already teaching sociology and economics, and my interest is mostly in the history of thought. My fascination at the time was with men, and especially scientists and other specialists, always had a critical view on the knowledge they had inherited, and tried to sort the true and the false. Actually, my first master research was about games, and specifically about when and how the legends about the origins of chess inherited from the middle-ages – how the game was invented during the Trojan war, or at Camelot, or in Iceland, were abandoned in the late Middle Ages and the idea that it came from India or China through the Arab world rapidly accepted. It was a bit light for a big PhD thesis, so I looked for another similar topic, and I found the unicorn interesting. It was interesting mostly because it was not abandoned as fast as the dragon or griffin – after all, if you get rid of a few funny virgin stories, a quadruped with a single horn is not something that fantastic.

Tob e clear: You don't look for hints if there ever has lived a unicorn. Your research deals with the meaning of symbolism, right?

I'm not really interested in symbolism per se, I'm actually even very wary of it, but I sometimes had to deal with it. What I studied and wrote has more to do with zoology, with

medicine, with how, from the XIVth to the XIXth century, the science dealt with the idea of a unicorn and the way its horn could be used in medicine.

So, let's start at the beginning: Where do Unicorns come from? Is there something like a „first source“ of tales about this mythical creatures? There are animals like the java rhinos and the narwhal ...?

An interesting point about the unicorn is that, unlike the dragon, Pegasus or the siren, one cannot find its origin in old fairy tales or in mythology. Since this interview will be published in a German magazine, some readers might have read what C.G. Jung has written about the unicorn in Psychology and Alchemy, so let it be clear – this is confabulated erudite bullshit.

The first sources about unicorns are in greek texts, especially Ctesias of Cnidus in the Vth century BC who wrote that « in India, there are one horned asses ». All these early sources, which were not really discussed until the late Middle-Ages, lead either to an antelope in the mist or the guy who talked to a guy who talked to a guy who saw a rhino.

Are these origins a reason to show the unicorn mainly as a horselike animal? Are there other presentations?

Some early textes were describing it as goat or donkey like, and the medieval illuminations show unicorns of various colors, sizes and shapes. There's no clear reason for why it became horse shaped, but it usually keeps two characteristics of the goat, a small beard and cloven hooves.

You mentioned the purpose in medicine. Even though there was no proof of a unicorn, did scientists or doctors really think about the benefits? What effect was attributed to the horn?

Narwhal tusks were sold as unicorn horns until the seventeenth century. Powdered unicorn horn was considered to be a very good counterpoison, and the tip of the horn itself was sometimes dipped into wine to neutralize any possible poison. It didn't really work to neutralize poisons, but it might have worked to discourage potential assassins to poison wine.

The unicorn is a symbol. What is the meaning of this symbol in history? Are there typical attributions and has it changed over time?

For the Middle-Ages and Renaissance people who wrote about it, the unicorn is an animal. It is as real as other creatures from the bestiary like the lion, elephant, dragon, siren or girafe. There are crazy stories about how it can only be captured by a pure virgin, or how it purifies water with its horn, and therefore symbolizes the Christ, but there are similar stories about all animals. The lion erases its traces with its tail like Jesus did hide his divinity, the bearcubs are dead at birth and are licked by their mother three days long before getting alive, the elephant makes love once a year near the walls of the earthly paradise, etc.

We now see the unicorn mostly as a symbol because it happened not to exist, so that most of what was left of it. In the Renaissance, it was still often painted together with beautiful ladies and became a symbol of virginity.

Are there any reasons to connect virginity with the unicorn? Is the Unicorn an expression of sexuality or of a phallus, too?

The medieval bestiary said the unicorn was attracted by virgin maidens, and some interpretations of the unicorn hunt identified the maid seducing it with Mary, but this didn't mean the unicorn itself was pure - it could even mean the reverse. There are a few marginalia, the illuminations drawn in the margins of manuscripts and not or very loosely linked to the text, in which the unicorn horn is clearly representing a phallus. A few Renaissance humorists, such as Rabelais, also used this idea.

Are there misconceptions or stereotypes about unicorns that you would like to correct based on your research?

There are two interesting modern misconceptions. First, we imagine it mostly as female, when in medieval texts it is usually male – which is more fitting for a symbol of Christ and a beast attracted by cute young girls. Anyway, it's first and foremost an animal, there should be both males and females.

Second, we see it as an animal from the north, and from the forest. Old texts say that it lives in India or in Ethiopia, and it is more an animal of the desert.

I'm sure you've also found some particularly curious or funny stories. What's the craziest thing you've found about unicorns?

Two funny stories. The first takes place in the Renaissance Italy. The beautiful Giulia Farnese was nicknamed « Sponsa Christi », not because of its dubious virginity but because she was the mistress of the Pope. Anyway, she loved unicorns and there are at least three paintings of her with a unicorn, and unicorns everywhere on the walls in her many palazzios.

The second is much more recent. In the late XIXth century, there was a rumor that unicorns had been spotted in Tibet and in South Africa. As a result, English hunters travelled to South Africa to hunt the animal, unsuccessfully. They found the okapi, though.

In light of your research, are you surprised that unicorns today are often pink or show up with a rainbow? What do you think of this modern style and where did this style come from, that is very different from the historical symbols?

It's true that today's unicorn is very different from that of the Middle Ages, but most of the changes took place in the late XVth and XVIth century. That's when the unicorn becomes a symbol of purity and virginity, starts to be represented alone with a beautiful maiden, without any hunter, becomes white and gets the long spiraled horn which is in fact a narwhal left tooth.

Although you are interested in this topic and unicorns are very popular, you have not developed a game in which unicorns playing a leading role. Do you separate the two areas – research/game design? Will there ever be a game with unicorns by the game designer Bruno Faudutti?

I have one game in which a unicorn plays an important role, Grail Cup, recently published by Matagot, but it's a very light game and the unicorn there, drawn by John Kovalic, cannot be taken very seriously.

This being said, I generally try not to mix my activities. I'm a teacher, but I don't use game in school – I even think it's usually a very bad idea. I researched unicorns but I never really tried to design a game about unicorns. Games are not books, they are relatively abstract engines whose setting can only be very superficial, so there's absolutely no point in making a game about a topic one really knows. Similarly, I've noticed that I'm much better at teaching topics about which I know only a little more than my students than at teaching those of which I have a serious knowledge. When I try the latter, I want to become complete, to avoid simplification, and I become confusing and uninteresting.

On the other hand, many illustrator friends have put unicorns as easter eggs in my games, and I'm not even sure I've spotted all of them.

Are there any games with unicorns you really like?

I can't think of any one at the moment.

So as you haven't find a good game with unicorns: How to design a very nice game about unicorns? How to persuade game designer Bruno Faidutti of a game with unicorns?

If I have a good idea some day.