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Reading as Playing
The Cognitive Challenge of the Wimmelbook

Wimmelbooks are a type of wordless picturebooks which display a series of panoramas teeming with an immense number of characters and details. They constitute a narrative threshold genre with the potential to accompany children a long way on their path to literacy and introduce them to different strategies of coping with the world and telling stories. In contrast to puzzle or search books, wimmelbooks rely on their readers to find their own way through the rich material they contain and do not direct their attention by phrasing explicit search tasks. They allow for manifold reading options and encourage a highly active response from children and adults alike, which rightfully might be described as a form of playing.

Reading ought to be fun and books ought to be loved. Although literature and the act of reading may take many different forms, a frequently recurring term to describe them has been that of playing (Anz 2003: 470f.). But the alleged analogies between play and literature have been criticised as blurry, inconsequent, and confusing, despite their stimulating potential (Matuschek 1998: 1–23; Wilson 1981: 79–84; Wilson 1990: 8–12). The longevity of such discussions suggests that they touch essentials of literary communication, but also fail to grasp them with absolute clarity.

This essay contributes to an analysis of the relation between literature and play by focusing on an area where the use of the term "playing" is indisputable: like many other activities, even literacy begins in and as play creating intrinsic motivation. Infants and toddlers – children at the beginnings of literacy – are frequently described as the most universal and intense players (Mogel 2008: 9, 16). Although children and adults play differently (Morgenstern 2009: 69), children's playful discovery of literacy might anticipate patterns of adult reading behaviour and therefore contribute to a better understanding of the distinct qualities of fictional texts.

The notion of 'reading as playing' will be explored by analysing a specific genre of wordless picturebooks that has not been covered by literacy research yet: *Wimmelbücher*, 'wimmelbooks', as they are called in the German-speaking countries. Since these books accompany children from their first year of life to elementary school and beyond, they offer valuable insights into the long-term development of literacy competence.

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Whereas early concept books focus on single everyday objects isolated from their context, advanced wordless picturebooks of greater visual complexity serve as primers for the development of narrative skills (Arizpe & Styles 2003: 39–52; Jalongo et al. 2002; Hughes 1998:

121–125; Richey and Puckett 1992). Since they encourage intense observation and invite the beholder to create verbal stories about their pictures, such books can be experienced as both extremely challenging and rewarding (Graham 1998: 26–31). Wimmelbooks are a very complex example for such advanced wordless picturebooks.

While books for young children usually are grouped in a progression of different types with increasing difficulty (Nikolajeva & Scott 2001: 6–11), wimmelbooks are hard to place on this scale, since their reception is highly variable and not limited to a specific target age. This hypothesis is based on a six-week online survey conducted in early 2009 among German-speaking parents and other caregivers who had used wimmelbooks to introduce small children to literacy.[1] The 115 participants were asked to define what they considered as a wimmelbook, to assess it and describe their reading experiences. Although this sample is too small to claim a statistically relevant outcome, the results were surprisingly consistent, particularly since most sections of the questionnaire required the participants to phrase their answers in their own words. It is hard to tell, however, inhowfar their social or educational background might have influenced the results, since these data were not collected in the survey.

Asked to determine the appropriate target age for wimmelbooks, a third of the participants considered them suitable for children from one year onward, while another third named 18 months as the lower age threshold, although the publishers usually recommend the books for far older readers. This corresponds to observations the participants sent in about their own children: almost two thirds of them began occupying themselves with wimmelbooks when they were between one year and 18 months of age; 96% of all children described in the survey had their first wimmelbook contact before they turned two. This contact tends to be long-ranging and rarely ends before the children enter school, sometimes even far later. For picturebooks, these numbers are remarkable. They indicate that wimmelbooks are a threshold or bridge genre, varied enough to accompany children through many stages of their path to literacy.

These books will be examined in three sections here: the first section introduces key characteristics of the genre, the second derives central challenges and reading options from these features, and the third discusses what readers actually *do* with wimmelbooks.

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Not another puzzle book: General genre characteristics

The German term 'wimmeln' could be translated as 'to teem', or 'to swarm with something' (DWb, 219–221).[2] Hence, a *Wimmelbuch* is a book of a plenitude. Due to its popularity, this term has become a sort of quality brand in recent years, so that even books which would not be considered wimmelbooks by most consumers are merchandised with *Wimmel*-titles.[3] Such titles suggest an abundance of characters and an inexhaustibly rich source of material, but also a certain degree of disorder and chaos. Ali Mitgutsch is usually credited with having started the genre in the late 1960s (Palluch 1998: 6–8; Schröder & Weber 2005), although there are earlier examples

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[1] I am indebted to Karin Gstöttmayr and a number of other blogging parents for spreading the link to the survey via their weblogs.

[2] Mitgutsch disapproves of the term because it reminds him of the similarly sounding 'abwimmeln', 'to get rid of ' (Mitgutsch and Heller 2008).

[3] Such as search books with accompanying texts (Scholbeck 2004), panoramas of German cities (Rieken 2008), graphic sightseeing guides (Ganther 2008), or mnemonic condensations of biblical stories (Rausch 2005).

of very similiar books (Müller-Firgau 1955). In Dowhower's typology of wordless picturebooks, the genre most closely related to wimmelbooks are visual game books "that invite the reader to interact with the pictures, find hidden objects, compare changes from one picture to another, match, predict ahead, create stories, or visually play with illusions and transformations on the page" (Dowhower 1997: 61). But wimmelbooks defy a classification as typical 'game books' because they are lacking clear rules or instructions.

CONSTITUTIVE GENRE CHARACTERISTICS: THE CAREGIVERS' DEFINITION

Since wimmelbooks have not been the subject of closer scholarly analysis yet, any reasonable attempt at defining the genre must start from its public perception. Their essential characteristics, as named by the participants in the online survey, can be grouped in six categories: (1) the size and material; (2) the amount of text; (3) the graphic style; (4) the subject of the pictures; (5) the book's overall structure; (6) the reading behaviour stimulated by the book.

(1) A wimmelbook is robust, preferably made of cardboard, and large enough to allow for richly detailed illustrations. Most wimmelbooks are printed in quarto or even folio format, so their massive physical appearance adds a material dimension to the reading experience.
(2) The book does not contain any verbal texts, apart from its cover, the preliminary matter and short texts integrated in the pictures.

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(3) Each double-page spread presents a panorama, usually in a top-down perspective without major spatial distortions, drawn in a naively realistic style characterised by clear lines and colours. The pictures are extraordinarily rich in characters and detail, "pluriscenic" landscapes composed of various scenes (Thiele 2000: 59f.).
(4) Many of the situations depicted are familiar to young readers from their own daily life. Several participants in the survey criticised "alleged wimmelbooks" with overly kitschy or fanciful settings, populated by fairy tale characters or teddy bears instead of human beings, and dismissed them as violating what they considered an unwritten rule of the genre.
(5) The different panoramas usually form separate, independent units. Some books, however, connect them to form a continuous narrative.
(6) Wimmelbooks activate readers of all ages, invite many different modes of reception and offer new insights with each reading.

Two comparisons may help to sharpen the genre profile sketched in this general definition: a synchronic look at the related, yet distinct genre of puzzle books and a diachronic look at the tradition of wimmelpictures in western art.

WIMMELBOOK VS. PUZZLE BOOK

Readers in the English-speaking world are familiar with search or puzzle books, like Martin Handford's *Wally* or *Waldo* series (Handford 2007); they resemble wimmelbooks in their outward appearance, although their essential concept is a rather different one. While Handford squeezes an overwhelmingly huge mass of tiny characters into each of his pictures, a classical wimmelbook double spread looks far less cramped (see Figure 1). Ali Mitgutsch's pictures are densely crowded as well, but his characters are far larger in relation to the whole. Not only does this make the scene more realistic, it also allows the characters to develop more individual features.

Besides, Mitgutsch's panorama is clearly segmented, which reduces the beholder's confusion: lake, brook and trees serve as visual markers partitioning the picture into smaller units. But most importantly, his picture is not accompanied by any texts – no one is telling you what to do with it. While Handford provides his readers with long lists of search tasks, Mitgutsch offers no such guidance. Therefore his pictures require another reading strategy than Handford's.

For puzzle pictures privilege a hierarchic mode of reception. Their search tasks name a small selection of elements as the beholders' chief cognitive priority, while all the remaining elements are designed as distractors, intended to deviate them from their search mission. Only in a second step, these distractors can be

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appreciated as elements of their own right. While puzzle pictures are organized hierarchically, with the search object as their hidden centre, wimmelpictures are remarkably open; search options can be added to them, but they are never central to the pictures themselves. Puzzle pictures may be regarded as wimmelpictures if they can be separated from the instructions surrounding them, but their wimmel qualities might rather contradict their puzzle aptitude than support it.[4]

THE WIMMEL TRADITION IN THE HISTORY OF WESTERN ART

Reviewers frequently point out that wimmelbooks stand in the tradition of an art form represented most prominently by 16th-century painters Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel the Elder, who in their turn refer back to even older examples of composing sceneries teeming with characters: such works of art provide plenty

Figure 1. Image from *Mein Wimmel-Bilderbuch: Frühling, Sommer, Herbst und Winter* by Ali Mitgutsch
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of material for pious contemplation or sophisticated reasoning (Silver 2006: 122, 81f.; Vandenbroeck 2002: 213). Their richness often has theological implications and points to the chaotic state of the world (Silver 2006: 78).

While Bosch impresses the beholder with the fantastic ingenuity of his inventions, Brueghel's 'encyclopaedic' paintings, such as *Children's Games*, appear more realistic, since they comprise recognizable extracts of the contemporary world. Its plenitude, visual structure and realistic style mark *Children's Games* as a prototype for later wimmelpictures and suggest a mode of reception that might be applied to wimmelbooks as well: since there is "no real focal point of the action", we are "thrown into a game of trying to figure out which of the games we want to focus on; in other words, the very act of looking at the painting becomes a game" (Bonn 2006: 35). The disordered complexity of wimmelbooks invites a similarly playful and therefore pleasurable response.

[4] A growing sense for the distinct character of these book types is suggested by the new edition of a puzzle book which – originally characterised as a "wimmel picture book" – is now marketed as a "search and wimmel picture book" (Wandrey 2001 and 2008).

What wimmelbooks have to offer: Possible reading options

When Ali Mitgutsch's first wimmelbook was awarded the prestigious Deutscher Jugendbuchpreis (Mitgutsch 1968) and its two successors were shortlisted for the same prize, the jury emphasized the many possibilities of dealing with their rich material. The following section discusses the elements contributing to this impression and outlines the spectrum of possible reader response to a basic and a more advanced type of wimmelbooks.

ABUNDANCE OF MATERIAL

Any attempt at grasping a wimmelpicture exhaustively is doomed to fail, for this would require not only an extensive account of its overall structure and details, but also an explanation how its numerous elements might act together. To phrase a coherent analysis, one is inevitably forced to mix analytic descriptions with mere assumptions about the characters' motivations, thoughts and feelings and the events preceding or following the moment captured in the picture. Moreover, each picture simultaneously presents so many single elements that the number of their possible combinations is immense.

This plenitude reflects the complicated composition of the world in general, which demands certain strategies for coping with its wealth. Learning how to handle the demanding abundance of a wimmelpicture therefore implies learning how to cope with a complex world, and mirrors "the child's fundamental need to make sense of the large, the looming, and the loud in her world by

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forming manageable units and exploring these strange objects over and over again" (Singer 1994: 9). This means that Wimmelbooks can be described as models of the world and vice versa: "For children who cannot read yet, the world resembles a picture book without text" (Ludwig 2008: 7). They encourage curiosity and support their readers in making the world readable and meaningful (Gelberg 2005: 14).

PERSPECTIVE

Picturebook readers are not clueless when confronted with textless images. If there is nothing else to guide them, a picture at least exhibits "directed tensions", patterns which draw the beholder's attention to certain details (Nodelman1988: 125–257). In wimmelpictures, however, such visual instructions are usually rather limited, for their perspective does not privilege a particular part of the picture. It is rather unsophisticated and usually remains constant throughout a book.[5]

Ali Mitgutsch's wimmelbooks show each scene from a point of view high above it, which grants the beholder a seemingly omniscient overview (Hann 1977: 486; Palluch 1998: 4). But despite the elevated standpoint, this overview is more confusing than helpful in gaining access to the picture, because it indicates next to no visual hierarchy.[6] Seeing more therefore does not imply understanding everything, although the bird's eye view seemingly grants the beholder a

[5] With only few exceptions, like Suess (2007).

[6] This remains true even for those authors who vary Mitgutsch's model, e. g. by adding layers of elements to the foreground, which remind the observer of the picture's depth (Regener 2008).

god-like position: it is impossible to determine what happens inside the characters, what they are thinking or feeling (Nikolajeva & Scott 2001: 118).

But wimmelbooks use other means to suggest that there is something worth exploring behind each face. Some authors, for example, confront their readers with cross-sections through the rooms of a building (Mitgusch 1968; Müller- Firgau 1955). Not only does the resulting grid of small cells help to segment the page into meaningful units, it also refers to the potential of such looks behind the facade. For even if the heads of the characters remain closed to our perception, these open house fronts suggest that there is more to be discovered beyond the surface. Combined with such clues, the strangely unsophisticated staging of wimmelbooks turns out to be a deliberate artistic feature supporting their overall visual effect: since the pictures have no clear centre, figuring out what to look at becomes an essential step in the process of exploring them.

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CHALLENGES

These visual qualities open many reading options. Children and adults might focus on single elements, try to agree upon objects to observe together and establish some way of communicating about them, by pointing and labelling, by asking for particular objects, by explaining their characteristics or by adding acoustic elements: a cow mooing, a running woman breathing heavily. To determine an object of common interest, the beholders need to structure and segment the page into significant scenes and decide which components deserve further exploration. After the separate elements have been examined in detail, one might also try to establish relations and connections between them.

In an even more advanced step, child and adult may speculate about the stories behind the picture and discuss causes and consequences which are not presented explicitly, but might help to understand the portrayed situation: why do the characters behave like this, and what might be the results of their actions? Such speculations may finally evolve into independent stories about any of the characters, objects or places in each picture. The child is challenged to engage in symbolic play, to juggle with visual and verbal symbols (Singer 1994: 13–15; Largo and Benz 2003: 69f.).

Discovering new details in every encounter with the pictures might also trigger reflexions about one's own perceptual capacity. Why haven't I noticed that squirrel, that car, that gesture before? The readers are constantly encouraged to question their own impressions and former hypotheses about a wimmelpicture because there is simply too much to consider about it. Just like the primary observations and speculations, even such critical reflections may serve as narrative seeds for new stories.

While providing a treasure of elements that may be combined into stories, classical wimmelpictures do not tell stories themselves and cannot be more than starting points for actual narrative constructions. But a group of more complex wimmelbooks anticipates this narrative activity and adds a temporal dimension, which makes it all the more demanding to analyse the relations within them (Berner2006a: 27; Berner & Weinkauff 2004: 52f.). Instead of constituting separate entities, the double spreads in these books form a successive narrative.

In some cases, the storyline may appear quite unobtrusive and connect the pictures only loosely, often giving the impression that a simultaneous wimmelscene has been expanded to fill an entire book. The backdrop landscape can be designed as a continuous whole (Baumann 2000), with recurring elements suggesting discreet continuity, like the heart-shaped balloons floating

through an entire book after a wedding party has released them in the first double spread (Regener 2008). The temporal dimension turns dominant and formative as soon as some

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characters remain present throughout the book, engaged in a sequence of causally connected events constituting one or several plotlines. Such books introduce their readers to the particular challenges of interpreting a sequence of pictures as a story (Bornens 1990: 194f.; Nodelman 1988: 187).

MULTIPLE NARRATIVES I: THÉ TJONG-KHING

Thé Tjong-Khing's two *Cake* books centre on the adventures of a diverse group of animals moving through a landscape, tracking down a stolen cake and going out for a picnic. While their movements are rather straight and linear in the first book (Thé 2006), the spatial structure of the second is more astute (Thé 2008): here, the backdrop reflects the entire dramatic arc, the build-up of tension, the peripety and denouement, and also mirrors the forward and backward movements of a reader working his way through the pages.

The pictures are to be decoded as a sequence of snapshots representing a coherent series of events, always involving the same characters. To understand their connections, the beholders must make sense of the signals encouraging them to combine the separate scenes and fill the gaps and undefined spaces in and between them (Iser 1994: 283–315). The books stimulate narrative creativity by challenging their readers to contemplate change, predict the outcome of events and form hypotheses about their causes (Jones 1996: 141–188; Whitehead 2004: 111–128). Since they do not offer a "clean" story with distinct main characters and clear plot priorities, the reader first of all must determine what is to be considered as a relevant story element.

Therefore, basic decisions about how to organize one's perceptions become even more important here than in books with separate pictures. To establish a plot thread, one must keep a consistent focus on one particular element and try to follow it throughout the book. While the titles of Thé's books suggest focusing on the eponymous cake, any other element catching one's attention may serve as a starting point as well;[7] but even following just one detail proves difficult and almost inevitably triggers an entire series of follow-up questions, because the movement in the foreground is far from orderly, despite the continuous backdrop. Most characters do not follow linear trajectories, but rather seem to dance across the pages, so that their crossing paths become intricately interwoven. All these

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additional factors must be taken into account if one is to reconstruct the logic of a character's progression.

Once you reach the end of the book, you will notice that even seemingly marginal details turn out to be at least as important as your original focus elements; a re-reading is required to appreciate their meaning. You are therefore challenged to expand your focus more and more to explore the intertwining of the numerous narrative branches. Following one plotline, one is

[7] It is symptomatic that both the original Dutch and the English title of the first *Cake* book are phrased as explicit search tasks, assigning the book to the puzzle book genre ("Where is the cake?"), while the German publisher chose to replace this question with an exclamation ("The cake is gone!"), which leaves more room for open speculation.

permanently tempted to investigate a completely different chain of events intersecting the story arc one is focusing on, and might end up leafing back and forth over and over again. Such investigations can develop into a rhizomatic, poly-directional reading all across the book.

When, for example, the animals in Thé's second *Cake* book return home from their adventurous outing, all their houses have been decorated with colourful happy faces. Skimming back, one will notice that various trees and stones in the neighbourhood have been garnished with similar drawings. After stumbling across the culprit – a little fox –, one might follow the trail of his crayons to Mr. Dog's knapsack, which has been slashed open by another malefactor. This delinquent, a rabbit boy, can be spotted on the cover of book, where he threatens the menacing face printed on the knapsack with his toy sword. He even fights many other opponents throughout the book, but a diligent observer will perceive that all these enemies suddenly vanish in the second half of the story, exposing the monsters of the first half as mere products of the rabbit's imagination. In other words: Thé confronts his audience with a modal narrative, where the visible elements represent an individual perception rather than the book-world's actual reality (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 154–174). The turning point of this story arc is reached when the rabbit boy faces a real opponent – a teenage rabbit bully – and suffers a defeat against him. But even this actual monster is finally outplayed, when all the harassed animal children unite and manage to overcome their previous quarrels. On this and countless other reading paths, the dense texture of Thé's book can be explored in many variations.

MULTIPLE NARRATIVES II: ROTRAUT SUSANNE BERNER

In Rotraut Susanne Berner's books, the potential complexity of the reading process is even higher. Between 2003 and 2008 she has published a series of five wimmelbooks, forming one gigantic picturebook project that has lead the interplay of constancy and variance between wimmelpictures to a new level. Like Thé, she presents a panoramic sequence of pictures linked by different plot threads (Berner & Weinkauff 2004: 53). Each of her wimmelbooks, set during the four seasons and during a summer night, follows the same route through the town

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of Wimmlingen, chronicling the activities of its numerous inhabitants. Since the sequence of locations remains the same throughout the series, Berner's wimmelpictures can be linked not only horizontally within each book, but also vertically between the books, so that even buildings and places are equipped with stories of their own. While the space remains constant, time is passing both between the books and within each of them: the clockfaces in different parts of the town indicate that the each book's plot covers about one hour, while the overall chronology of the series is signalled by evidence like the slowly progressing construction of the kindergarten building. Each book ends with a game and party scene at the lake, which provides a distinctive closure similar to the notorious party scenes ending the *Astérix* albums or the picnics in Thé's *Cake* books.

But before this finale is reached, there is ample room for the characters to interact and become involved in different events. Some of them follow rather steady paths across the pages and are easy to spot, thus granting continuity, while others move from the background to the foreground or vice versa, appear or vanish. In the autumn book, two such connecting elements are the children's lantern procession and a flock of bird crossing the sky (see Figure 2 and 3).

Other characters are relocated to more unexpected positions. Just take some of the persons in the foreground, i.e. near the bottom of the first scene. The girl next to the sign post in the centre can be spotted inside the bookshop in the next picture, while the two ladies in the lower right corner have been separated in the marketplace: one is queuing at a sales cart in the background, while the other one is dancing next to the fountain. And the woman and man talking on their mobile phones far away from each other in the first scene can be identified as a couple in the next.

Decisive for this density of Berner's fictional world is not just her attention to detail, but the countless cross-references strengthening Wimmlingen's coherence. One prominent example are the advertising posters spread throughout the town, many of them referring to certain scenes by means of iconic representation. Posters announcing events at the cultural centre, for example, show a poet reading from his works (Berner 2004) or a violinist giving a concert (Berner 2003a) in exactly the same poses in which those two characters actually appear on stage. These posters are among the many elements illustrating the joys of literacy in Berner's books and encourage the beholders to occupy themselves with books and reading: there are shops signs, kiosks selling magazines and newspapers, a bookshop, a public library, and a little girl who is never seen without a book. Reading children may find their own situation reflected in such scenes.

It is the inherent quality of Berner's pictures that invites the beholder to explore them, not any explicit search tasks immediately attached to them. Although Berner supplies her readers with stimuli that might serve as such tasks, these are never presented as imperative challenges, but simply as invitations to explore

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Figure 2. Wimmlingen's kindergarten and cultural centre.
Image from *Herbst-Wimmelbuch* by Rotraut Susanne Berner
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Figure 3. Wimmlingen's marketplace.
Image from *Herbst-Wimmelbuch* by Rotraut Susanne Berner
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certain details a little further. Some of these stimuli are integrated into the pictures themselves, like the already mentioned posters referring to events in the town. When Wimmlingen for example is covered with placards asking for the whereabouts of an escaped parrot (Berner 2005b), the reader is confronted with a search task that is presented to the inhabitants of Wimmlingen as well and thus forms an integral part of the fictional world.

Some other search stimuli are clearly separated from the pictures, but even these elements are far from phrasing explicit search tasks like those of typical puzzle books. Berner gathers a small selection of noteworthy characters and objects on the back covers of her wimmelbooks, each of these elements accompanied by a brief description, often specifying a character's thoughts or feelings: "Daniela is looking forward to her piano lesson." Only very few of these comments are phrased as direct questions, and even those refer to narrative connections rather than simply prompting the reader to find a specific element, e.g. "Who has lost this wallet?", "What is the fox doing in the town?"

It is characteristic for the different genre conventions of German and Anglo-American picturebook cultures that the marginal position of these elements was changed considerably in the US edition. *In the Town All Year 'Round* unites the first four Wimmlingen books in one single volume, thus eliminating the chance of a vertical reading (Berner 2008a). More than that, the US version separates the four season wimmelbooks by inserting their original cover illustrations between them. Since the original back covers are placed at the very beginning of each seasonal section, their non-committal search suggestions turn into a preset cognitive requirement, which changes the entire character of the books and their reception process.

Even another element which emphasizes the fundamentally open nature of the books has lost its significance in the US edition: each of the original front covers shows a recurring character in its lower left corner, a mysterious woman in green clothes, whose body transgresses the border between the cover illustration and its frame, namely the vertical colour stripe marking the book's spine. Since she protrudes from the inner world of the book, she might be interpreted as the reader's representative on the border between fiction and reality. In some cases, she even appears inside the books and can be spotted in the department store (Berner 2005b) or at the kiosk near the marketplace (Berner 2003a and 2005a). But since she always turns her back towards the observer, her face remains hidden and it is impossible to decide what she is looking at. Thus she guides the readers' attention towards the world of Wimmlingen, but does not instruct them to focus on a specific part of this world. She represents the free and open view at the copiousness of Berner's wimmelpictures. *In the Town All Year 'Round,* however, erases this thought-provoking character from all but one of the inserted seasonal title illustrations, and even in this single case integrates her into the picture instead of having her cross its frame.

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While the US edition adapts Berner's series to the puzzle book type and tones down its open nature, her German publisher leaves the readers at liberty to decide for themselves what to focus on and therefore makes a point of separating the wimmelworld from external reading instructions. A series of spin off stories printed in a smaller book format, the Wimmlingen chronicles (*Wimmlinger Geschichten*), presents some examples of how to develop individual stories out of the large wimmelbooks, but simultaneously provides more building bricks for the reader's imagination and thus enhances the overall complexity of the Wimmlingen world. Each of these books highlights one or two particular characters familiar from the main series, picks up motives from the larger-sized books and turns them into independent stories by isolating them from their original crowded surroundings and adding simple rhyming couplets.[8] This furnishes the focused characters with background stories, which in their turn influence the perception of events in the wimmelbooks and invite the readers to invent similar stories even for other characters.

Certainly such additional information is not imperative to enjoy Berner's wimmelbooks. But the crucial point is that they provide their readers with many options without imposing a fixed approach on them. The decision which of the many layers to explore remains entirely that of the individual reader, which makes it easy to adapt the books to each child's developmental status. One may focus on single characters and their immediate proximity or on the increasingly

[8] Most of the Wimmlingen chronicles are linked to one or two specific books in the main series, e. g. *Petra* to the autumn and *Niko* to the winter book (Berner 2009a, b, 2005b, 2003a).

complex texture of their further surroundings, even experiment with various narrative techniques. By exploring different ways of transforming the pictures' simultaneous presence into linear narrative discourse, children can develop a sense of central parameters of storytelling.

Core skills for wimmelbook readers

Despite this broad range of possible reading options, most participants in the wimmelbook survey agreed upon a set of essential skills which are challenged and practised through such books. However, the transition between prerequisites and newly acquired skills is a fluent one: as long as the adult caregiver provides sufficient help and support, already children around one year of age may savour the encounter with wimmelbooks.

The children should be able to sustain a high degree of attentiveness and concentration for some time. They should be patient and persistent enough not to be satisfied with a quick glance, but willing to focus on the pictures for a longer

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period of time and explore their details. It is helpful if their conversational skills are advanced enough to allow for some basic exchange about the book. When confronted with the overabundance of a wimmelpicture, they need to filter and structure its mass of information, to memorize selected observations and to combine them, which requires a basic understanding of causal relations. Finally, the children need imagination and creativity to develop possible explanations around the depicted situations.

Most survey participants presumed that the skills a child might enhance through wimmelbooks do not differ fundamentally from these requirements: perceptivity and patience, attention and concentration; hermeneutic competence, language and communications skills. Language promotion was considered particularly important; wordless picturebooks in general stimulate a high degree of verbal input and are therefore assumed to support or diagnose linguistic development (Whitehead 2004: 80–84; Tuten-Puckett & Richey 1993; Kalender & Klimaszyk2007: 68; Dowhower 1997: 71f.; Demirkaya & Gültekin 2008: 70).

Playing the book: What readers actually do with wimmelbooks

Listing the challenges of wimmelbooks may seem to ignore their aesthetic qualities and reduce them to mere didactic catalysts. But didactic benefits and aesthetic achievement are closely related in this case, because the creative commitment wimmelbooks seek to inspire is a form of entertainment, as long as it is fuelled by a genuine passion for the process of learning itself (Arizpe & Styles 2003: 224). Reading a wimmelbook thus becomes an intrinsically rewarded act of experiencing oneself and the world.

Immersion and cooperation: The roles of child and adult readers

The portrayals of reading situations submitted for the survey confirm this union of pleasure and usefulness and prove that wimmelbook readers indeed carry out the manifold reading options inherent in the pictures. Some participants even sketched how their children had progressed through different stages of dealing with such books, gradually mastering their challenges. Again, the question asking for this actual reading behaviour was phrased deliberately open, yet aimed

at distinctive qualities of wimmelbook readings: "What does your child do with wimmelbooks? Are they treated differently to other books?"

About three quarters of the participants reported such notable differences. They described their children's occupation with wimmelbooks as longer, more frequent, more active or interactive and more intense than that with other books.

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While children below three years of age have been observed to become deeply immersed even in other reading situations (Whitehead 2002), this behaviour seems particularly frequent with wimmelbooks: 90% of all participants noticed that their children not only read wimmelbooks together with adults, but all by themselves as well.

This confirms the programmatic idea that wimmelbooks support children in dealing with books all on their own, independent of expert readers (Wildeisen 2009: 9), and thus help them to develop self-confidence (Sutton-Smith 1994: 146). As Mitgutsch has pointed out, he wants his books to represent a world that children can influence and improve, a world enhancing their imagination and problem-solving skills (Mitgutsch & Heller 2008; Palluch 1998: 6). This might even result in a complete levelling or reversal of the usual hierarchy in reading situations: the otherwise seemingly omnipotent adults turn into mere listeners, while the children become authors and storytellers in their own right (Berner 2006a: 26; Berner & Weinkauff 2004: 53; Fein, Ardila-Rey & Groth 2000: 28; Mol et al. 2008: 8f.). Since neither party can make sense of wimmelpictures spontaneously, an adult reader's cognitive advance is radically reduced, which fuels an intense collaboration between adult and child (Rau 2007: 176; Jones 1996: 117–140; Arizpe & Styles 2003: 223).

But this strong position of the child reader does not disqualify the adult companion, who contributes to enhancing the child's status. Asked to specify their own role while reading wimmelbooks with a child, the survey participants described a wide range of activities: they demonstrate their own love for books (Sonnenschein et al. 2000: 123f.), act as motivators and partners, as helpers or just silent observers. Their role therefore extends far beyond the simple task of pointing at different elements and labelling them. With their descriptions and explanations, they help their young companions to structure the confusing multitude of details. By voicing different characters, they create dramatic exchanges that increase the children's emotional commitment. Moreover, they encourage them to become active analysts and interpreters themselves, to search for certain objects, explore the implications of the scenes and connect the pictures with their own experiences. By listening and reacting to the children's utterances, they affirm the importance of their contributions. All these activities are aimed at diminishing the adult's own role in the wimmelbook reading until the child is in full control of the conversation: "I am allowed to hold the book, but nothing more," as one participant remarked.

Provided that the adult partner possesses some communicative talent (Bus 2003), wimmelbooks form an ideal foundation for the technique of dialogic reading, which involves parents encouraging active responses from their children (Whitehurst et al. 1988: 553; Valdez-Menchaca & Whitehurst 1992). Like other

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positive interactions between child and caregiver, this may aid cognitive development in general and language development in particular (Mol et al. 2008; O'Reilly & Bornstein 1993: 61) and even affect the child's social competence (Galda & Liang 2007: 133f.).

DOUBLE ADDRESS: MOTIVATING ADULT READERS

Dialogic reading is particularly demanding for the parents in their various roles. Many wimmelbooks offer additional rewards to them for immersing themselves in their world. Since their dual address supports both adult's and children's strengths of perception and organisation, it advances their keen collaboration (Nodelman 2008: 206–214).

Berner addresses her adult readers with small elements of verbal humour and many allusions, which tie the world of Wimmlingen to a fictional cosmos outside her books (Berner & Weinkauff 2004: 52). Puns and witty remarks on shop signs, door plates or posters challenge the literate reader to approach the world of words just as playful and open-minded as that of pictures: the dentist, for example, is named "S. Eirak" – which nicely illustrates his professional activity, since this name is a reverse anagram of "Karies", tooth decay.

The bookshop at the marketplace is a centre of intertextual references in all five Wimmlingen volumes. Its owner, Armin, is obviously an affectionate portrayal of Berner's husband Armin Abmeier, a learned bookseller himself. Already in her very first wimmelbook (Berner 2003a), the shop window provides surprising intertextual insights, since all the books displayed there are actually existing titles (Jacoby 1999; Bauer 2001, 2003b).[9] Motives from one of these, Berner's own *Apfel, Nuss und Schneeballschlacht*, are even quoted twice on the first double spread, in the shape of a poster and a toy polar bear in a nursery: the book eradiates a fascination that extends into Wimmlingen's reality. Even the border between this reality and the reader's own extratextual world is blurred, for the woman leaving the bookshop is holding none other than the winter book itself, the book containing this scene.

Several other examples of such mise-en-abyme interrupt the aesthetic illusion and remind us of Wimmlingen's fictional status. In the spring book, the book itself is on display at the bookshop, while the nursery on the first double spread now features a poster of the winter book's cover (Berner 2004). Even the summer book is depicted inside the book itself and combined with other familiar covers

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in the bookshop's window (Berner 2005a; Könnecke 2004; Donaldson 2004), similar to the night book (Berner 2008b). Only in the autumn book is the book's own cover missing from the shop display (which shows Andersen 2004 and a detail from Berner 2006b), but instead this book continues another elaborate thread of mise-en-abyme. For the final double spread of the summer book had shown a painter, capturing the whole party scene at the lake on his canvas. In the autumn book, his painting resurfaces on the wall of Dr. Eirak's dental practice (Berner 2005a, b). These intricate connections invite the beholder to examine Wimmlingen's fictional status more closely and wonder about how books may mirror and shape our worldview.

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9 Many of the featured illustrators are personal acquaintances of Berner's, like Bauer, Heidelbach, Erlbruch, Buchholz, Scheffler, or Könnecke (cf. their contributions in Abmeier 2008).

Intertextual allusions are not limited to reproductions of book covers; some of them disrupt that frame and merge into the Wimmlingen world, which might spawn reflections about how fictional experiences shape our reality. In the autumn book, a poster illustrating the fable "The Fox and the Raven" (Phaedrus 2006: I.13) turns real when a raven steals a bit of cheese in the marketplace and is then confronted by a fox (Berner 2005b). Earlier on, both animals are shown following a flock of wild geese, lead by one single white bird – a clear reference to several animal characters from Selma Lagerlöf 's *Nils Holgersson*, Smirre the fox, Bataki the raven and Mårten Goosey-Gander. The latter makes another appearance on a poster in the subsequent night book, including the minute Nils on his back (Berner 2008b). The characters are flexibly changing their affiliation to different fictional worlds, sliding from Phaedrus to Lagerlöf to Berner, and thus illustrate how all parts of Wimmlingen can serve as poetic building blocks at the reader's own command.

The intertextual fabric is densest in the night book, the final volume of the series, which is littered with references to night-themed children's classics (Berner 2008b), ranging from the single book in the nursery on the first double spread (Bassewitz 1915) to the bookshop's broad selection (Rathmann 1994; Michels 1985; Berner 2008b; Kopisch 2007). An exhibition of "night pictures" at the cultural centre even offers looks *into* some books (Donaldson 2004; Nöstlinger 1993; Sendak 1963 and 1970; Buchholz 1993), while the library one floor below is holding a reading night for the children of Wimmlingen and has arranged an additional assortment of relevant books on its shelves (Storm 2002; Berner 2001; Bauer & Kantelhardt 2007; Erlbruch 1999). This implies an instruction how to handle the vast amount of references: the night book offers nothing less than an expanded version of the exhibition at the cultural centre and the reading night at the library, a visual encyclopaedia of night books for children. One may delight in the collection of familiar covers and feel encouraged to get back to them, or follow the book's recommendations when stumbling across still unknown books in a library or a

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bookshop. The massive presence of other books within just the night book is a gesture of approval, but also points to the close relation of artistic invention and fiction with night, the time of dreams, which opens a space for philosophical reflections extending far beyond the scope of a single wimmelbook. Adult readers may therefore feel entertained on many additional levels, apart from enjoying how children reacts to Berner's wimmelbooks; this ensures their commitment to the reading situation.

Conclusion: Playfulness and the joy of reading

Despite their vastly different perspectives, children and adults can act as equally motivated partners when reading wimmelbooks together, because these books offer many "opportunities for playing", as Berner has phrased it (Berner & Weinkauff 2004: 53). Her evaluation echoes that of scholars who have described children's early book encounters in general as essentially playful experiences (Whitehead 2004: 133–136). This close relationship between play and literacy development is frequently emphasized in literacy research (Roskos and Christie 2007; Whitehead 2002: 286), though seldom examined critically (Sutton-Smith 1997: 38–51, 123–125).

When literature is to be related to playing, it is usually described as a 'game' (Wilson 1990; Suits 1985), a term that represents a narrower concept than 'play' and refers to game theories

modelling strategic social interaction in the behavioural sciences (Gintis 2009: 48). But applying their strict game concepts to literature is problematic (Wilson 1990: 83–88, 98f.). Even the broad definition that "playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" (Suits 2005: 55) fails to grasp the essence of wimmelbook readings, as it is hard to define a goal behind them that could be blocked by such obstacles. My survey suggests that wimmelbook readings are experienced less as an orderly structured activity than as a manifestation of spontaneous, unstructured playfulness (Caillois1958: 52–62), which might confirm a fundamental difference in the playing behaviour of adults and children: "whereas children play, adults play games" (Morgenstern 2009: 67).

Playing is an intrinsically rewarding activity (Suits 2005: 149), which absorbs its player completely without any apparent material payoff. As a deeply satisfying mental state, play transforms reality into a play world, where the inner imagination outrules outer circumstances (Olofsson 1992: 31–33). Children's play in particular creates such a reality of its own, which remains in a state of permanent change, since the focus and aim of children's play behaviour may fluctuate continuously (Mogel 2008: 11, 235).

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Due to the dynamic nature of such play worlds, playing can be interpreted as a cognitive training mode supporting the emergence of adaptive variability (Sutton-Smith 1997: 217–231; VanderVen 2006: 405–407): players develop a vast repertoire of behaviours, which help them to handle the contingencies of life. In play, behavioural sequences are decoupled from their immediately vital functions and recombined in other contexts, to help the human brain to organise itself in the best way possible (Tooby & Cosmides 2001: 13–17). Our fascination with works of fiction can be interpreted as a motivational system rewarding such adaptive training (Tooby & Cosmides 2001: 19f.); by constructing play worlds, we reassure ourselves that our inborn patterns of cognitive processing can master the chaos of the actual world (Eibl 2009: 20f.). Since wimmelbooks comprehend a far larger world sample than most other picturebooks, they provide children with lots of material for playful experiments with such fictional world constructions.Their plenitude supports the incessant dynamics and ever shifting focus of playing children and encourages divergent thinking (Singer 1994: 22–26; Pepler 1982: 75). Through their experiments, the young readers gain competence in facing both the actual world and its fictional counterparts.

It is not only the diversity of wimmelbooks that invites their readers to play, but also their portrayals of playing characters; entire wimmelbooks have been dedicated to the theme of playing (Scherbarth 1974; Mitgutsch 1983). This may inspire the beholder to drop the book and recreate the playful situations in immediate physical action (Nodelman 2008: 190–198), but also to translate the depicted physical activites into mental commitment and understand them as a reflection of his own reading behaviour. Just as the characters immerse themselves into their play, wimmelbook readers immerse themselves into the book world for sheer pleasure – they practice "ludic reading" (Nell 1988: 7–10, 256–266). The numerous representations of play situations in wimmelbooks strengthen this play experience and support the formation of motivational loops, which perpetuate the activation circle of playing (Heckhausen 1964).

Reading a wimmelbook can therefore turn into a play fuelled by the idea of discovering new ways of playing (Kafai 2006: 38). The readers' intense and durable relation to these books even

suggests that reading wimmelbooks is an "open game", lacking a final goal that might end the game when achieved (Suits 2005: 122–124): the challenge is to prolongate the book experience and create a potentially endless, joyful reading activity from the limited resources of one book. Readers who master this challenge are ready to conquer other literary playgrounds as well – and prepared to motivate themselves for all the new book challenges expecting them.

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