

Continuity and Discontinuity: An Experiment in Comparing Narratives Across Media

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Introduction

In his 1984 anti-TV diatribe *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman (1985) amends McLuhan's famous aphorism "the medium is the message." A communication medium does not have any one particular thing to tell us. Rather, he argues, we should think of media as metaphors, "working by unobtrusive but powerful implication to enforce their special definition of reality... our media-metaphors classify the world for us, sequence it, frame it, enlarge it, reduce it, color it, argue a case for what the world is like" (p. 10). While Postman's own observations on television have all the weaknesses inherent in a polemical argument, his premise is a good one. Major social institutions and tools provide cultures with models for understanding the confusing jumble of senses and relationships everyone experiences. It is not an accident that European political theory of the Middle Ages relied heavily on the Christian notion of the Church as a corporate body (Kantorowicz, 1997). Nor is it an accident that phrases like "the bottom line" slip into everyday conversation in an era where the corporation is arguably *the* dominant social institution. Thinking of the world as a stage for the drama of life is different than seeing it through a lens: both metaphors take their pattern from different media.

So what is the metaphor of the digital game? How might we see the world differently in the age of the Playstation than we did when RCA was a cutting edge company? There is, of course, not one answer to that question, and more than one way to investigate it. This paper is one attempt to think about the social and cultural change introduced by this new medium. Using Edmund Carpenter's (1960) brief analysis of multiple renditions of the *Caine Mutiny* as a model, I want to share some impressions of the transformation that mythically-styled narrative undergoes when it moves from one medium to another—with a specific focus on the digital game medium. While not written in McLuhan's nearly-stream-of-consciousness style, this analysis of stories set in the fantasy worlds of Middle-Earth and the Star Wars galaxy draws on the spirit of his unscientific and curious "probes." I will argue that while mythopoetic narrative loses some of its mystery and abstraction in digital games because of the need for precise definition and systematic functionality, computer and video games excel at creating vivid Secondary Realities.

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Literature Review

Media Ecology

Because this paper takes its cue from the body of theory sometimes called Media Ecology,¹ I need to briefly establish the roots and ideas of this school of thought. Many people are familiar with the work of McLuhan (1964)—especially his famous and popular book *Understanding Media*—but they may not realize that a series of key publications with very similar ideas appeared around the same time. These include Eric Havelock's (1963/1967) *Preface to Plato* and Jack Goody's (1968) *Literacy in Traditional Societies*. Media Ecology also draws on earlier work, such as that of Harold Innis (1951; 1952), Edward Hall (1956/1990), and Lewis Mumford (1934).

What is common to all these works—and all subsequent Media Ecology theory—is the idea that our tools of communication have some kind of important role in shaping our culture. In other words, the way we think and the way we interact have a great deal to do with how we communicate. There are many different ways of saying this, and many different observations about how this has been true in various places and times. Walter Ong (1982) collected and produced research on the distinctions between oral and literate cultures. He notes, among many other things, that oral cultures typically encourage the development of exceptional memorization skills. Elizabeth Eisenstein (1979) talks about how the printing press led European culture to introduce the idea of standardization. Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) argues that the introduction of television has led to blurring of the conception between public and private lives and information. This is just a brief sampling of an increasingly diverse body of scholarship.

This kind of theory is often labeled as technologically determinist and overly simplistic. Sometimes these *are* valid criticisms, but the best of Media Ecology writing avoids both charges. It is possible to argue that the tools of communication have an important role in the development of culture without saying that media are the only social forces that matter, or that they determine the course of history in a mechanical manner. A good Media Ecology analysis recognizes that the tools of communication are socially constructed and that human beings have some degree of ability to resist, reinterpret and re-purpose messages they receive.

The key metaphor implied in the name of this theoretical perspective is that media form the parameters of our symbolic environment; they are the ground or the stage upon which we perform our daily communication, our narrative-building, and any symbolic interaction. Like our physical environment, media can be re-shaped into something substantially different. The radio, for example, was originally intended and used as a point-to-point medium, while today it is synonymous with broadcast (point-to-many) communication. Nevertheless, like our physical environment, the shape of our media affects the way we live. The lifestyle in tropical San Juan is not the same as it is in the arctic town of Inuvik, and many (although not *all*) of the differences are directly related to the differences in physical environment. Likewise, imagine a world without the possibility of recording communication (either via writing or audio-visual recording equipment) and you will swiftly gain an appreciation for how fundamentally culture changes when communication technology changes.

But how can we trace these differences? This is where Edmund Carpenter's analysis in *Explorations in Communication* is so promising. In only one extended paragraph, Caine examines four different representations of the story *The Caine Mutiny*—book, stage, TV and film—and uses the differences between them to suggest some of the fundamental differences between these media. I want to extend this non-systematic, but evocative analysis by looking at a few narrative worlds that have a similar style and voice and have appeared in multiple media forms. The works of Tolkien's imagination and the Star Wars universe both invoke a kind of mythic or mythopoetic style and voice, and they have both moved into the digital game medium, making them ideal samples for examination.

Of myth and media

The modern use of the term “myth” has varied greatly: it was a god-term for romantics, for example, and a devil-term for the Marxists (Von Hendy, 2002). This paper will lean away from the understanding that equates myth with false ideology or superstitions, and more toward the romantic and anthropological notions that myth is a special type of narrative that has some kind of unique connection to fundamental, pan-human experiences. Northrop Frye (1957) identifies mythic narrative as narrative in which the primal forces of human experience play a direct role. In *Anatomy of Criticism*, he constructs a narrative continuum that ranged from supernatural to realistic. In myth, the least realistic form or “an abstract or purely literary world of fictional and thematic design” (p. 136), fantastic supernatural characters played the role of the Sun or Death or similar things. Frye argues that in realistic stories, on the other hand, characters and forces that are much closer to everyday human experience displace the primal forces of mythic stories. Myth, then, is identified less by a specific story topic, and more by its style, its characters, and its connection to pan-human experience.

The writings and literary theory of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien echo this understanding of myth, although they come at it from a slightly different angle. In multiple essays, Lewis (2000a; 2000b; 2000c; 2000d) develops the notion that some stories can connect the reader to something deeper than plot; that some stories excel at invoking imaginary worlds, and in so doing, impress upon the reader qualities of existence in a unique and powerful manner. In creating alternate realities, in other words, myths give us a fresh experience of the fundamental characteristics of our own. In one passage, Lewis (2000a) describes myth as a way to bridge the gap between the confusing welter of concrete sensorial experience and the detached and over-generalized nature of abstraction that thinking requires. Tolkien (1947/1997) echoes this idea in his well known lecture “On Fairy Stories.”² He uses the term “Secondary Realities” to discuss the other worlds built by narratives. Like Lewis, Tolkien also argues that such stories give us insights into our primary reality that we would not get in everyday life. Both scholars emphasize this other-worldliness of myth, but they essentially tie it back to Frye's notion that this is a kind of narrative that taps into something fundamental about human existence. As Tolkien puts it: “The magic of Faerie is not an end in itself, its virtue is in its operations: among these are the satisfaction of certain primordial human desires” (Tolkien, 1947/1997, p. 116).

Interestingly, Tolkien and Lewis, as well as subsequent theorists have questioned whether mythic narrative can prosper or even survive in a post-literate media context. In a telling discussion of the motion picture adaptation of *King Solomon's Mines*, Lewis (2000c) argues that film will typically—because of its focus on the surface, rather than the quality of things—focus

on narrative *action* rather than creating another world. Tolkien (1947/1997) similarly argues that drama is inherently bad at fantasy. This is partly because audio-visual effects were so shoddy in his day. More importantly, however, he thinks dramatic representation (I imagine this argument includes film, television, radio and any other mediated re-enactment) is inferior to read or recited mythic narrative because drama makes visible and audible what should be imagined. In the end, he says, drama is “likely to prefer characters, even the basest and dullest, to *things*” (p. 142; emphasis added).

In a paper presented at the 2002 National Communication Association convention, Alex Wainer (2002) presented a more developed argument along similar lines. Drawing on Frye’s notion of myth as primal and literarily abstract, and cartoon theorist Scott McCloud’s (1993) notion that abstraction invites greater emotional and imaginative involvement, Wainer sees the film version of *The Lord of the Rings* as crippling the mythic potential of the story. He essentially argues that because film must present visual representations of its subjects, it cannot avoid making the story-world too realistic, thus crippling the possibility of true mythical atmosphere. He affirms that film offers many tools to do a good job of telling epic stories, but the mythopoetic atmosphere of those stories will necessarily diminish.

Game Studies on digital games and stories

None of these arguments, however, consider what happens to mythopoetic narrative when it jumps into the digital game medium. To study this topic is to step into something of a theoretical minefield, as Game Studies scholars know all too well. We have witnessed a surge in scholarly writing on digital games since 2000. But perhaps the most widely-read academic theory on games—certainly the most widely cited outside of social scientific research—has been the work of textual formalists and other literary intellectuals hammering out the relationship between games and stories. So-called narratologists like to consider the ways in which computer and video games can function as interactive fiction, or interactive cinema, or interactive theatre (Laurel, 1993; Murray, 2004). So-called ludologists argue that games are a different form of text (Aarseth, 1997) that does not have at its core a telling of sequential events, but instead is a playable rule-machine (Juul, 2003).

I do not propose to settle this issue here (or ever). It seems to me that both groups have some very valid points to make. Clearly some games have not a shred of story to them, and forcing it upon them, as Janet Murray’s (1997) now-infamous analysis of *Tetris* does, is a little ridiculous. In addition, the experience of a game and the way it is structured is clearly very different from both novels and films—even those of the interactive variety. Nevertheless, it is also clear that the vast majority of popular digital games have narrative elements to them, and that many, if not most of these popular games have something like a plot to them. If the problem on the narratological side stems from putting the new wine of games into the old wineskins of narratology and hypertext theory, then the ludologists seem guilty of a few other inflexibilities. Either they refuse to recognize that the meaning of terms (such as “narrative” and “story”) are defined more by popular use than reason, or they do not recognize that such popular definitions will eventually shape academic use. Whether a ludologist wants to keep the “story” separate from the “game,” players know that their games have stories. They are simply a different *kind* of story. Rather than try to pretend that stories are not there or that they do not belong (Eskelinen, 2001), we would be better served to figure out *how* these game-stories are different.

This is why Henry Jenkins' (2004) article "Game Design as Narrative Architecture" is encouraging: it provides alternative theoretical language for describing what is happening with stories in games. In particular, he develops one concept that fits very nicely with Lewis and Tolkien's notion of myth: the idea of spatial storytelling, where an author or creator creates narrative that focuses less on plot or character and more on making worlds. Jenkins argues that this is not new—he cites a list of literature that belongs to this tradition, including L. Frank Baum, Tolstoy, and, naturally, Tolkien. But Jenkins believes that while this style of storytelling has a long lineage, it was not the dominant mode in older media; computer games, on the other hand, are naturally suited to this form of narrative. In other words, this spatial storytelling—which sounds almost exactly like Lewis' and Tolkien's ideas about the creation of Secondary Realities—is precisely what the digital game is well-suited to doing. Is spatial storytelling, however, the only thing that the digital game medium brings to storytelling?

Analysis

The texts

I have chosen to look at Middle-Earth narratives and Star Wars Universe narratives for several reasons. First, both worlds exist in multiple media formats. While *The Lord of the Rings* started as a novel, it has appeared in radio, film (both animated and live action), theatre and game forms. The Star Wars universe first appeared in films, but it has since appeared in comic books, novels, radio plays and games. Second, in spite of this multitude of forms, the details of their imaginary worlds—which include the plot lines occurring within their histories—have been held remarkably consistent due to concerted efforts. Tolkien Enterprises (not the Tolkien estate) control all the film and game rights to Middle Earth-related material, while George Lucas' enterprises (which control the rights to all Star Wars-related material) actually have an internal database with thousands of entries called the Holocron that they use to keep the burgeoning number of story and game spin-offs consistent with each other.³ Finally, both worlds (or their authors) draw heavily on pre-modern mythology. Tolkien was a professor of philology who specialized in medieval Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon literature, and it is quite clear that both the style and content of stories like *Beowulf* and the *Volsunga* saga heavily influenced his own fiction. The connection between the mythological progression described by Joseph Campbell (1949) in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and Lucas' movies is also well-known (e.g. Campbell, 1988). While the actual *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings* texts are actually less like pure myth and more like romances or even high mimetic narratives on Frye's (1957) continuum, they clearly attempt to evoke a kind of mythic feel. Besides, Frye himself notes that many pieces of literature can simultaneously fall into more than one category of his typology. Even if they are judged to be failures as myth, they were created by authors conscious of mythopoetic patterns and tropes.

The following analysis, then, is based on a cross-media comparison. The primary texts are four different incarnations of *The Lord of the Rings*: Tolkien's novels (1991), Peter Jackson's (2001; 2002; 2003) film trilogy, the action video game *The Two Towers* by EA (Stormfront Studios, 2002), and the real-time strategy game *The Battle for Middle-Earth*, also by EA (EA Los Angeles, 2004). The analysis is supplemented somewhat by the Star Wars films (both trilogies) (Kershner, 1980; Lucas, 1977; Lucas, 1999; Lucas, 2002; Lucas, 2005; Marquand, 1983) and the role-playing game *Knights of the Old Republic II* (hereafter referred to as

KOTOR2) (Obsidian Entertainment, 2005).⁴ Clearly, any engagement with these media will be a highly subjective experience. However, as much as possible, I have tried to allow for multiple possibilities of use and interpretation—different people encounter the same text in very different ways.

These differently mediated versions could be compared along many different axes. One thing I found fascinating was the very different presentation of characters: Aragorn of the book is not Aragorn of the movie is not Aragorn of *Battle for Middle-Earth*. While much of this is due to creative choices by writer, movie production team, and game production team, clearly the medium made some things easier (and harder) than others. We can hear internal thoughts of characters more easily in print form, for example, and the game characters were remarkably underdeveloped—more like shells or tools than imaginable people. Such impressions could fill another paper or two, but I have discovered three themes that seem to speak deeply to the contrasting tendencies of the three different media I engaged: how the different media defined imaginary worlds, how systematic these worlds were, and how tangible the different media made those worlds.

Low-definition vs. High-definition

Essayist Andrew Rilstone (“How to misread *The Lord of the Rings*”) notes an odd thing about Tolkien’s writing: while *The Lord of the Rings* is crammed with encyclopedic descriptions of Middle-Earth, the author often presents the fantastic creatures in an ambiguous manner. Tolkien, in other words, frequently writes about magic and its manifestations in such a manner that his descriptions could be visualized in hugely different ways. The classic example is the demonic balrog, which Tolkien never really directly describes, but talks around. It is a thing of shadow and fire, but the book does not make it clear how the two could coexist. Of course, we get to see it in Peter Jackson’s movie—the digital effects artists render a horrific shadowy giant with fiery highlights. And in *The Battle for Middle-Earth*, we actually get to fight it—Gandalf has to run in circles to avoid being hit while his magic power recharges. This example gets to the heart of one of the key media differences in the presentation of mythopoetic narrative: that different media have different capabilities and tendencies for defining their fictional worlds.

The book is a primarily linguistic medium,⁵ and as such has some continuity with the oral myths of ancient cultures. This is not to say that myth as told by Tolkien—or even in transcriptions of old epics like *Beowulf*—are the same. For all of Tolkien’s evocation of medieval European myth, his books cannot really approximate the atmosphere and flexibility of the oral recitation of mythological poetry; a printed myth is fixed and unresponsive. But they *are* similar in the sense that both primarily use words to create their imaginary worlds. Yes, a poet can mime or gesture or change vocal inflection, and yes, even non-picture books will feature occasional illustrations. Nevertheless, words are the indispensable tool of the oral and print storyteller, the primary paint for the canvas of the listener and reader’s mind.

As tools of description, words are remarkably powerful, yet have some important limitations. Language can get at least a partial handle on practically all aspects of human experience—that is, we can linguistically express even highly subjective and ambiguous aspects of experience, such as the process of thought and emotion. We have probably all experienced emotions that words will never fully capture, but we can at least give a rough approximation.

However, because most words must be generalizations (exceptions might include things like proper nouns) practically all description will have a certain degree of ambiguity. If I describe a tree as “tall,” anyone reading the description will have a different image in their mind. To make linguistic definitions of non-present spaces meaningful, the reader or listener must imagine—and that imagination is necessarily subjective.

When Tolkien refuses to clinically dissect Ents, Orcs, and Ringwraiths, and leaves them purposely vague, he is simply using a linguistic medium in a manner already used to great effect by the mythological texts he loved (again, see Rilstone, [“How to misread”] for a fun, readable discussion of this). Metaphor, metonymy and other devices of language provoke a reader or listener’s imagination, inviting vivid, emotional involvement and often a sense of mystery. In fact, the variability of language can allow for paradoxes and impossibilities that can be quite powerful, as in the case of the Balrog. Shadow and fire in the same being, while difficult to visualize, can produce a strong emotional effect because of the literary and cultural connotations of both concepts. Even when Tolkien is being far more encyclopedic in style—such as when he describes the layout of strongholds such as Isengard or Helm’s Deep—the reader (absent any artwork or diagrams) must create their own unique visualization. It is, however, the fantastic and the mysterious, or “evocation of the mythic” as Wainer (2002) puts it, that most prosper when myth remains in purely linguistic form. Tolkien understood this—thus his critique of the dramatic performance of mythical and fantastic literature.

Film, obviously, is not a primarily linguistic medium. While characters can speak in films, restoring the orality of language from the dead fixedness of print, cinema is primarily a *representational* medium. That is, it shows, rather than tells. In theory, any words that end up in a book *could* end up in a film. In fact, we can (and sometimes do) see the pages of books in movies. More commonly, diegetic dialogue and non-diegetic narration can carry a film story. But typically, films are much more than conveyors of words. Cinema is typically a dramatic medium, in the broadest sense of the word: it shows us enacted narratives. This has several ramifications. For example, unlike language, images and sound have a very difficult time conveying interior thought with any kind of precision. Acting can often convey an impression of thought and emotion, but this is often even more subjective and culturally coded than language. More importantly for this particular issue, however, cinema typically renders sound and visuals with much greater precision and fixity than language by itself ever does. Once an image of something appears, there can be little or no ambiguity about what that thing looks like or how it behaves. It is precisely defined.

This is what Wainer (2002) notes in his critique of Jackson’s films. Whereas in the book Tolkien can describe elves as luminous, greater-than-human beings with an ethereal, graceful, mysterious presence, Jackson has to show them. And as soon as we see them up close—which is inevitable, given the plot—we see them too clearly. The nature of film makes it difficult for the narrative to maintain any kind of mystery—let alone a high mythic sense of mystery—because film visually and aurally defines its subjects. It is possible for a film to avoid showing even major characters for extended periods of time, or to show those characters in such low resolution that their characteristics are suggested, not defined; horror films are particularly good at this. This can certainly heighten suspense and other kinds of dramatic tension, and it is arguable that this technique might maintain an air of mythic mystery. Wainer notes, for example, that one of the early scenes from the extended version DVD shows a party of luminous elves walking

through the wood at a distance, which gives us a suggestion of their majesty without letting us see details of costumes and make-up. But this is the exception, not the rule. If Jackson had decided to show *The Lord of the Rings* without any of its fantastic characters, it would have been a long and tiresome exercise in evasion. This is not to say that the movie has absolutely *no* sense of mythical mystery; rather, it has much less than the book.

But if the mythic film is over-defined, the digital game medium takes another step. Today's digital games are almost exclusively cinematic—certainly all the major commercial releases are. As such, digital game forms of mythopoetic narrative maintain most of the high definition of film (although not all, as the quality of graphics has still not quite reached the level of photorealism we expect from film). But they add another dimension: functionality. The cinematic digital game is not only representational, but all its playable items are functionally defined. In other words, anything you can do something with in a game has a set of attributes that determine its behavior.

In *The Two Towers* video game, for example, Aragorn does more than just look like a wilderness-hardened ranger—he acts the part based on the player's input according to the game rules. If I press the right combination of buttons with the correct manipulation of the joystick, Aragorn performs the attack I want. In other words, he is now defined by more than his looks and sounds (as he would be in the movie): he is also defined by what he does and *can* do. In *The Battle for Middle-Earth*, I know how much damage my hero characters can take before they perish, I know how much damage they can do, and I know precisely what mystical powers they can and cannot wield. It is the same way in *KOTOR 2*: the mysticism of the Jedi has been presented as a defined set of powers and quantified Force points. There is little, if any, mythic evocation here—only strategy.

The point is not that one medium is better than the other—as if such a judgment could be made. The point is that in this one sense, because they heavily define their imaginary worlds, the newer media of cinema and digital gaming are less easily able to develop the strong sense of mystery or mysticism which ambiguity *can* bring to mythopoetic narrative.

Open possibility vs. Systematic necessity

One of the joys and terrors of magic in mythopoetic stories is its fundamentally unpredictable or uncontrollable nature. In most mythic narrative, magic is, by definition, mysterious, inscrutable, and most importantly, dangerous. In fact, in many such stories, the mark of a good and wise magic-user is that he or she, while well-trained, refrains from using magical powers or uses them in an unobtrusive manner. Gandalf does not have many moments where he puts his wizardry into action in a noticeable way, and when he does, it is only at key moments, such as driving off the Nazgul in the battle of the Pelennor. Yoda and Obi Wan Kenobi are much the same way, especially in the first three films that Lucas made. Even when used frequently, magic or mystical powers remain unpredictable, and their workings are mostly opaque to the reader or viewer of a story. I would attribute this at least partly to media tendencies.

Books and films both are only restricted by the imagination. Realistically, of course, the use of these media is limited by all kinds of practical realities: the writer has only so much time available, and the film production team has only so much money. But within these limitations,

the story knows no bounds. Any apparent predictability of magic powers is strictly the result of the author's wishes, not a requirement of the medium. If the Force had operated one way for three movies (say, as an invisible energy) and Lucas decided that it would operate differently in the next three (perhaps as a visible energy), he could change it, granted that his special effects wizards could make it look convincing. This may seem obvious, but it is an important point because I believe it stands in contrast with the digital game medium.

A game is, if nothing else, a system of rules governing the behaviour of defined game items (again, for example, see Juul, 2003, or Suits, 1978, or Caillois, 1961). *Monopoly*, to cite a trite example, defines pieces, properties and money (and much more) and provides a series of rules governing player input and what happens to the defined pieces based on that input. I agree with ludological theory to the extent that it argues all games must have some kind of rule system or they are no longer games. Again, this may seem obvious, but it has significant implications for any mythopoetic narrative transplanted into the digital game medium. It means, among other things that any element in a computer or video game that a player can interact with, (or *game* with) belongs to a part of a system. What this means practically and immediately is that if you have magic as part of a game, it must behave in a systematic manner. This is quite obvious in the games I have played. Spells are defined according to duration, difficulty, resources required, and effect. As already mentioned, I know what buttons I have to push to make Aragorn execute the right attack. I know how many hit points Gandalf has. And I know that the magic of Middle-Earth will not behave in a manner that does not fit the game system.

Games have a series of tricks for countering their systematic bias. Often, the game systems are quite hidden. I do not, for example, see the calculations that the game makes when I strike at an enemy with my lightsaber in *KOTOR 2* (although I *do* see a numerical representation of the damage dealt, and I have a defined queue of actions for my character to perform during this combat). Games also often use cinematic cut-scenes to suspend the operations of the game system so that the game can advance plot points that are crucial to the game moving forward. At one point in *KOTOR 2*, for example, an evil Sith Lord attacks my character's mentor, but since the action occurs in a cut-scene, I cannot make use of the game's system to alter the interaction. Nevertheless, such strategies mask, rather than remove the game mechanics.

The point is that the systematic nature of the digital game medium significantly handicaps the mythopoetic narrative's sense of mystery in much the same way as the game's high-resolution definition of imagined worlds. I do not mean to argue that there is absolutely no way around these tendencies. I simply want to point out that this is the bias of the medium. Games require a systematic world. Mythopoetic worlds in earlier media, however, are frequently impoverished when they are modeled in a simulation.

Intangible vs. Tangible Secondary Realities

I still remember the shock of surprise I received when playing LucasArts' (1993) *X-Wing* over a decade ago. I had played the game for a quite some time when suddenly, in the middle of a fight, manipulating my ship's shields and weapons, I realized, "this is how these things *work* in the *Star Wars* movies!" Perhaps this is mind-bogglingly obvious to others, but the *Star Wars* universe suddenly became more *real* for me. Peeling beneath the surface of the film made it a more substantial and more exciting place for me. In other words, my experience with the game

helped me to realize (or imagine) that the spaceships and planets and jungles and lightsabers were more than just convenient props and sets called solely to support a particular plot. Rather, it was as if Star Destroyers, TIE fighters and X-wings existed and functioned the way they did regardless of whether a movie or comic book or radio play talked about them or not. The movies just visited the place—they did not create it.

This, of course, is famously what Tolkien was attempting to do when he wrote his spatial stories. Large chunks of the story do not forward the plot and often have little to do with building a character drama; they read, instead, like sections from an almanac or encyclopedia. This is further evidenced by his large appendices to *The Lord of the Rings* and by his even larger volumes of notes describing a world that (until his death, at least) only reached the public in four relatively small narratives. In spite of Tolkien's relative success at using print to create his beloved Secondary Realities, however, I want to argue along with Jenkins that the digital game is the medium of choice for creating imaginary places.

Book and film are clearly powerful tools for evoking magical worlds. The description of places via the use of words, as already noted, invites a significant investment by the reader or listener, naturally leading to a feeling of intense connection with the imaginary world of the story. Film interaction is different: less involving in terms of imagination, but very powerful at the same time. Although the viewer only sees two-dimensional images and sound from speakers, our culture associates these signs with real things. In other words, film makes things look and sound real. Fan followings and enormously popularity and profitability are all reasonable indicators that the imaginary worlds of book and film can suck people in.

But however convincing the spell of the novel or movie, readers and viewers will always be spectators. Game players, on the other hand, are able to bump up against the stuff of their world. That games are interactive is a truism, but it is nonetheless important. The fantastic worlds created for gamers are not untouchable, as if sealed off in a glass display case. Rather, digital games allow players to get into the world and manipulate it, travel through it according to their own choices (to some degree, anyway), and figure out how it works. While I have argued that this knowledge of functionality decreases mystery, the flipside is that, as my decade-old experiences with a low-resolution game attest, it makes an imaginary world seem more real. Knowing how to construct a lightsaber helps the Star Wars universe make more sense. When I see something in a movie or read something a book about a place I would be interested in investigating in some detail, the game allows me to do so—as in the run through the broken lands outside the mines of Moria in *The Two Towers*.

All of this gets back to Lewis and Tolkien's notion that myth succeeds to the degree that it creates another world. Clearly, books and movies can do this. But because games allow players to move beyond simply reading, listening or watching, they have a unique capability to create extremely vivid and convincing Secondary Realities. While this is not the sole measure of a myth, it *is* an important one.

Conclusion

In short, then, while a digital game will tend to impoverish the mystery of myth due to its detailed definition and its systematization of imaginary worlds, the very tangibility of the game

world is likely to make it a more convincing Secondary Reality. Again, these are not rules, and individual readers, viewers and players can work against the medium bias—as can content creators. In fact, in light of their anti-film and anti-drama positions, I am, ironically, fairly certain that the conservative Tolkien and Lewis would not at all have agreed with me about the world-building potential of a computer game. They were wedded to the written and spoken word, as are some still today. The bias they took to their texts was enormously important, and it is no different for the contemporary media user. But I do not take that to mean that the construction of the medium is irrelevant. The tendencies displayed in the Middle-Earth and Star Wars games are ones that appear in many other computer and video games, and they have very real effects. If we want to understand and anticipate our culture's shape, past, present and future, we would be doing ourselves a disservice if we did not consider the media metaphors that help frame our experience.

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¹ The same body of theory is sometime described without capital letters, and in other contexts as “medium theory” (Meyrowitz, 1985).

² In this particular essay, Tolkien speaks about Fantasy, not myth. Nevertheless, his ideas are so similar to those of Lewis and Frye that I have chosen to treat them as the same thing.

³ See official blog at <http://blogs.starwars.com/holocron/4>.

⁴ This is the beginning of my research, not the end, and this paper represents where I am partway through the analysis. I want to enrich the number and diversity of games researched, especially on the Star Wars side. Importantly, *KOTOR2* belongs to the Star Wars Expanded Universe, but it is not the same plot as Lucas' films, which means comparisons cannot function in the same way as *The Lord of the Rings* analysis can. However, because *KOTOR2* still has continuity with the imaginary universe portrayed in the major films, I think examining similarities and contrasts can be of some use.

⁵ For the purposes of this paper, comics count as a separate medium from most print—see Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993) and *Reinventing Comics* (2001) for a convincing explanation of why this is so. Picture books more broadly considered would also not count.