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**Abstract**

The purpose of this study has been to explore how the story in *The Lord of the Rings* is experienced in the game, *The Lord of the Rings Online*, compared to the book. The focus has been on the concepts of narrative, interaction, immersion, and themes. I have used my own experience from the game in addition to other academic sources when I have examined how the game differs from the book, and when exploring the themes in the book, I have relied on influential Tolkien scholars. What I have found is that the outcome of the narrative is different in the game due to the players' interaction. The players are a part of the narrative, and they also create their own narrative while playing. The story is also experienced differently due to the different points of view. Immersion gets a new meaning when the players are 'bodily' immersed in the storyworld through avatars, instead of just mentally immersed. Spatial immersion in the game leads to a better understanding of the scope of the storyworld when reading the book. The maps are no longer used only for strategic purposes, but also have affective value due to emotional spatial immersion since the places they depict have become familiar and filled with memories. Since the themes from the book are mainly integrated into the gameplay of combat and the aesthetics of the landscape, they are approached in a more playful way as opposed to the serious approach that the book has. The book's message is lost because the point of view is from the players, and therefore they do not get insight into the main characters' thoughts. However, on some occasions, players are directly involved in the story. Instead of reading about the heroic deeds of the main characters, the players themselves are the heroes, which changes the narrative and makes the players the protagonists in their own adventures.

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# Introduction

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born in 1892 and nearly fifty years after his death in 1973, the works of the professor live on and his Subcreation has never been more popular than today. *The Lord of the Rings* adaptations include films, musicals, radio plays, board games, video games, and the latest addition being the TV show, *Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*, set to premiere on Amazon Prime in September 2022. The focus in this thesis is on the MMORPG adaptation, *The Lord of the Rings Online*, and how it relates to the works of Tolkien. The gameworld's setting and scenery are from *The Lord of the Rings,* and in this landscape that features famous locations from the novel, the players can play as a human, an elf, a hobbit, a dwarf, or beorning. The main plot of the game's narrative is about saving Middle-earth from the Dark Lord Sauron and his minions.

The aim of this study has been to explore whether narrative is experienced differently in video games compared to books. Specifically, whether the story in *The Lord of the Rings* is experienced differently in the game *The Lord of the Rings Online*, and if so, how it is experienced differently in terms of narrative, interaction, immersion, and themes. *The Lord of the Rings Online* (*LOTRO*) is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) originally launched by Turbine in 2007 but is now being developed by Standing Stone Games. Initially, I wanted to explore to what extent the game is faithful to Tolkien's literary work. But the game is so much more than an adaptation of the novel. It is a realisation of Middle-earth into an interactive world, and due to the MMORPG format, narrative, interaction, immersion, and themes change.

To examine the narratological aspects of an online game, it is necessary to understand the format and how people engage with it. Therefore, I also look at the players' engagement with the narrative, and how they are part of it. MMORPGs are narrative heavy computer games, and the narrative can appear in many different forms. In addition to the scripted narrative created by the game developers, there is also narrative that emerges due to player interaction, and narrative that only exists in the player's mind. In the first chapter, I look at what elements must be present in a game for it to be considered to have narrativity and how video games, despite their interactive form, can still maintain narrativity. Then I look at how *LOTRO* as a transmedial world has dealt with the mythos, topos, and ethos in Tolkien's invented univers, and how these aspects enable the players to roleplay in an environment that resembles the setting of *The Lord of the Rings*. Players' roleplay is a part of the emergent narrative. The development of the narrative is dependent on the players' choices, and the

actions players choose to take again depend on the type of player. I have used Richard Bartle's four player types to explain the aspect of players' choices that influence the narrative.

The main difference between reading a book and playing a game lies in the interaction with the medium. In *A Theory of Adaptation,* Linda Hutcheon uses the term mode of engagement to explain the different types of engagement with different mediums. When we read a book, "our engagement begins in the realm of imagination", and our imagination can unfold freely without the limitations of image and sound. We can stop reading at any point, re-read, or skip pages, and we can see how much of the story remains to be read. Hutcheon calls this the "telling mode". Playing a game has some similarities with watching a movie where one has "moved from the imagination to the realm of direct perception" and is "caught in an unrelenting, forward-driving story" (23). The "showing mode" of movies and also video games offers visual representations that can be rich in complex associations and sounds that can enhance the experience. However, the "interacting mode" of video games is not only imagined or observed but also controlled by the player. In other words, all three mediums have their own specificities and can be equally good at what they are doing.

The challenge with interactive narrative where the story is dependent on the players' choices is that for some players the main plot may never be revealed due to the players' choice of direction, they may get lost and follow a different path, as Espen Aarseth puts it in *Cybertext. Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. The user of a cybertext, such as a video game, can easily lose control of the embedded narrative, in contrast to a reader of a book, who is on a safe journey (4). The emergent narrative, on the other hand, is created by the players through their interaction, and this narrative the game authors have no control over. It is this balance between players' choices and the authors' need to control the narrative, which is interesting to study in *LOTRO*.

Through *LOTRO*, the novel *The Lord of the Rings* has been turned into ergodic literature, and due to the ergodicity, the experience of Tolkien's text through the game is very different from the experience of the text in the book. It is not only different in terms of the narrative, but also concerning immersion, and the book's themes. Interaction and immersion are two important concepts in video game discussions. However, scholars have different approaches when analysing video games. Aarseth labels video games as ergodic cybertexts that are distinctly different from ordinary literature because they require a different type of action from the reader, or player. In video games, the reader/player decides how the text should unfold by clicking buttons and thinking strategy. Therefore, Aarseth argues that it is

the interaction and the player's agency that are the most important aspects of video games. Marie-Laure Ryan is another researcher who, unlike Aarseth, approaches video games from a narratological point of view. Ryan focuses on the concept of immersion and explains how immersion connects to narrative elements, such as setting, plot, and characters: "For a text to be immersive, it must create a space to which the reader can relate, and it must populate this space with individual objects" (9). In other words, there must be a setting, either a model of the real world or an imaginary world, such as Middle-earth, where characters can exist, and events can take place. This type of immersion applies to novels, movies, drama, paintings, and those video games where the player acts through an avatar.

In the second chapter I explore the many different types of immersion that Ryan presents, using examples from both the game and the book. The type of immersion Ryan connects to setting is spatial immersion which in turn can be in the form of emotional immersion with the places where events take place, or strategic spatial immersion which is the sense of understanding the scope of the virtual universe. To help readers with this, authors use maps to show the extent of the world. Tolkien is very fond of maps, and I have included some examples from *The Lord of the Rings* that show how the characters relate to maps. Maps are an important feature of the game because they help players navigate. Another phenomenon associated with spatial immersion is the kinesthetic feeling experienced through the movements of the player's avatar.

Concerning temporal immersion, which has to do with the desire to know what happens next in the story, I have looked at how literary devices such as curiosity, suspense, and surprise are present in one of the stories created by the game developers. Finally, I look at emotional immersion, whether players care about the characters and events, whether they are emotionally invested or have empathy with the NPCs. Although immersion in the game's narrative can be achieved through several modes simultaneously, the sense of presence is not quite the same as the sense of presence experienced in the book due to different perspectives. In the book, the reader experiences the story from the main characters' point of view, whereas in the game the point of view is from the player character.

Communicating the themes is also a challenge, and the game has an interesting way of doing this, mainly through the gameplay. Corruption is perhaps the most relevant theme from *The Lord of the Rings* these days. In the book, corruption is linked to the Ring, and in the game, corruption is a type of damage that affects the players if they are in dangerous areas or are discovered by Sauron or his servants. The overall theme of good versus evil is presented in the game through visual effects, especially through the use of colours. Also in

the book, there are examples of how colours can have a special meaning. The conflict between hope and fear is another main theme in the book, and the game uses these opposites in its combat system. When a player is losing health points due to fear, only hope can restore the player's health. But in this game, health is replaced with morale, which is another important aspect in the book. Many of the book's peculiarities are presented in the gameplay. I also look at the theme of friendship and compare the friendship between Legolas and Gimli with the friendships players can form in *LOTRO*.

Often in video game adaptations, it is the *storyworld* that is adapted more than the story. A storyworld has the ingredients of a story: setting, characters, and events. The storyworld, Middle-earth, is the core of *The Lord of the Rings Online*. It could be argued that it is the brand that is actually adapted in *LOTRO* and that the narrative and themes from the book come second. Players can enjoy the game without being involved in the story about Frodo and the Ring. However, there is the possibility to experience the famous story from a unique point of view, namely the point of view of the player's avatar. But the essence of *LOTRO* is the world, and what players can do in this world in terms of both gameplay and narrative. Thus, the game is not primarily about telling the story but is rather a visualisation and 'realisation' of Middle Earth. Players can see the world with their eyes, not just imagine it, they can participate in the affairs of Middle-earth and interact with the characters from the novel. During the process of turning Middle-earth and *The Lord of the Rings* into an interactive game (ergodic cybertext), new stories and characters have been added to the world. This allows the players to explore events in the world that go beyond the original story presented in the book. Thus, the game acts as an extension of the book with new material added. *LOTRO*'s developers expand the world, provide players with new information about Middle-earth and its inhabitants, and give detailed insight into events in the book.

In the last chapter, I explore the concept of heroes and heroism. In both the book and the game, heroes are an essential element. In the book, the readers observe the actions of the heroes, but in the game, the players are the heroes and perform the heroic deeds themselves. In order to make a comparison between the book characters' abilities and the player characters' abilities, I explain the combat system in the game, which is based on teamwork. Teamwork, or fellowship, is a theme in the book, which is represented in the design of the combat system. I use Gandalf, Aragorn, Boromir, and Sam as examples of heroes with abilities similar to the player class abilities in the game. These characters have qualities that everyone would be envious of, so when the game gives players the opportunity to create a player character who possesses these qualities, it gives the gaming experience an extra

dimension of immersiveness, the joy of pretending to be like one of the heroes in the world's greatest epic.

  It has been a satisfying task to compare elements from the book with elements in the game. The novel seems well suited for an MMORPG adaptation. To put it in Verlyn Flieger's words: "The *Lord of the Rings* is a complex and multilayered narrative, encompassing many themes and a full chessboard of action" (*Splintered Light* 149). In other words, there are many paths to follow, each leading to a different adventure with endless possibilities and things to discover.

# Chapter 1

# Narrativity in Video Games and How Narrative Affects Gameplay

## 1.1 Introduction

In this chapter I look at what narrative in video games is, how narrative affects the gameplay, and how players affect the narrative through their interactions. I start with explaining the format of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), and how the narrative in these types of games differs from other types of video games. In addition, the narrative in MMORPGs appears in several different forms. There is the narrative made by the game writers, then there is the narrative created by the players during roleplay, and finally the narrative that only exists in the players' mind. I include all these forms of narrative because they overlap each other. Regarding the format it is also relevant to look at how it differs from books when it comes to how users interact with the medium. To shed light on the mode of interaction I look at the concept of ergodic cybertext. Then, since some scholars have argued that video games are not narratives, I present examples of narrativity in video games. Furthermore, I look at how different types of players affect each others' experience of the narrative elements of the game. In this regard, I draw on Richard Bartle's article "Hearts, clubs, diamonds, spades: Players who suit MUDs", in which he describes four player types and their ways of interacting with the game. Interaction affects the narrative, and interaction between players affect immersion, or, the experience of the narrative.

When games have narrative, they are called interactive narratives. I explore *how* games convey narrative and exemplify with two quest texts from *LOTRO* that show how they can vary in form and content, and how they connect to gameplay. Because *LOTRO* is a transmediation of a well known story I study to what extent the game has been true to the mythos, topos, and ethos of the original text. Research shows that some players are upset about the fact that it is possible to play as an evil monster because of the moral implications and ethos break. I look briefly at the reasons why some players find it immersive to play as a monster character.

I examine how *LOTRO* incorporate the player characters into the main story of the game, which is the story about Frodo and the Ring. The game also has a vast number of other

stories in which the player characters play a part. The side stories are the game writers' own creations, but some of them is about characters from the *Lord of the Rings*, or explanations of events that occur in the book, which are not explained in the book. Thus, the game provides more background information about certain events that take place in *The Lord of the Rings*.

## 1.2 MMORPG

MMORPG is short for Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game, and these types of games are so different from all other digital games that it could be argued they are not really games at all, but rather digital worlds filled with cities, forests, oceans, mountains, and as the word 'massively' indicates, thousands of players who spend their evenings in this world. Although most MMORPGs have environments that are unlike the real world, there are some aspects that mimic the real world, for example, the economic system. In *LOTRO* players can take on a profession such as being a cook, a farmer, an armourer, or a scholar among others, which involves making things that can be sold to other players. The stories in MMORPGs are often tales of adventure inspired by legends from different cultures. The narrative elements are the same as those of the ancient sagas: "courage in the face of fear, creative solutions to problems, perseverance under adversity, the explorations of distant places, and triumph over evil" (Kelly 19). In many of these tales, there are dragons, demons, giants, trolls, goblins, and sorcerers, all ideal monsters to put in an MMORPG for the players to conquer.

In addition to being inspired by story elements from ancient sources, MMORPGs derive from both the role-playing board game called *Dungeons and Dragons* (D&D) and the MUD (Multi-User Dungeon) which was a game played on computers in the late 1970s. D&D draws on both collaborative storytelling circles and ancient folklore. Through the games, many hundreds of years old tales of valour and magic were recreated. MUD games were the first virtual experience with adventures, though unlike today's MMORPGs they were based on text sent from a program via email to multiple participants. Even though players now see through animation all the actions their avatar is involved in there is still a remnant of the text command used in MUDs that give information of the players' action, for example, "You hit the creature, doing 45 points of damage". This information is unnecessary but interesting for those who want to keep track of their critical hits. The anonymity of the players in a MUD game is also something that MMORPGs have adopted. In sum, the narrative elements of

ancient myths and legends, the participatory techniques of storytelling circles, the immediate action from board games, and the connection to a digital world, are all features found in an MMORPG. When adding the sound, movement, and fast pace of first-person shooters to all these other features, it comes as no surprise that MMORPGs are among the most popular games (Kelly 23). Moreover, these worlds are constantly evolving with new content being added regularly, giving players a steady flow of undiscovered areas.

MMORPGs can be addictive for those who play them. Some players find it hard to stop playing when necessary. Generally, players spend around twenty hours a week in digital worlds (Kelly 13). Unfortunately, there are some that get addicted and may spend every night and every weekend in the game world, forsaking sleep, food, family, and friends to such an extent that it could be compared to drug addiction. In the extreme, the urge for a new life inside the computer could lead to a marriage breakup or losing one's job. This addiction could also be compared to the effect the Ring has on the characters in *The Lord of the Rings.* In chapter three, I look at how the book characters have different approaches to the Ring, and how they are more or less affected by its influence. It is the same with MMORPG-players, some become addicted, while other, luckier players discover that the game functions as therapy. Some find freedom from physical disabilities or develop a sense of control, purpose, achievement, confidence, and happiness in their lives through participation in the games (Kelly 14).

A more interesting reason given for spending years inside a game, though, is the story behind the game. The narrative in MMORPGs is not just the stories written by the game designers, but also the players' own creative contributions in the form of roleplay and written short stories about their player character. Many players are attracted to the feeling of playing a part in the plot and to be able to shape the fate of the world. Their own stories become a part of the game and thus they get a sense of contributing to the game's plot (Kelly 70). In contrast to many ordinary video games where the plot often can be summarised in a single sentence, the MMORPGs' worlds are heavy with context. Players make up background stories for their characters that fit into the context of the game world. R. V. Kelly argues that this kind of direct involvement in the narrative makes an MMORPG an independent, engaging, living experience "that is even more engaging than reading a fantasy novel because your direct experience of the world reinforces what you read about it" (71). In addition, everything the players do with their characters expands the narrative content of the world, and the other way around the lore of the world enriches the players' actions and embeds them into the context of the game world.

## 1.3 Interaction in Ergodic Literature

Although all kinds of texts can be interacted with, there is a significant difference in the type of interaction between a reader and a book, and a player and a video game. The main difference between *The Lord of the Rings* and *LOTRO* is the nature of the two mediums and how they communicate text, the first being a book and the other a game. The book lets the audience read about Middle-earth and what goes on in this fantastic world, but the readers are merely observers of events, whereas the game gives the audience the opportunity to enter the world and act within it.

In *Cybertext. Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Aarseth proposes the concept of ergodic literature and says video games are ergodic cybertexts. He introduces cybertext as a concept that "focuses on the mechanical organization of the text, by positing the intricacies of the medium as an integral part of the literary exchange" (1). In other words, the mechanics of the medium, for example, the game mechanics of a video game, play a critical role in the interaction between the reader and the text. Another example of a cybertext is Raymond Queneau's *Hundred Thousand Billion Poems*, where each reader will read different poems depending on their choices in which parts of the page to turn. The activity is mechanical and different from reading a traditional book. The cybertexts are non-linear, but Aarseth finds this description inadequate because it implies the act of reading (2). Cybertexts do not have readers, he claims, (4) but users, or players, if the text is a video game. Aarseth's focus is not on what is being «read» but on the medium that produces the text. When a user interacts with a cybertext, more actions are required than just reading. One of these actions is making choices. A reader of a traditional novel is not able to alter the narrative in any way, there is only one ending to the story and there are no options for the reader to make fatal choices, it is a safe journey. The cybertext user, however, is not safe. She is in a game world where she can explore, get lost, find secret paths, or make the wrong choices (4). In other words, the outcome of the text is dependent on the interaction and motivation of the user. The user's choices may or may not set events in motion. Aarseth calls these types of texts *ergodic,* and he argues that in ergodic literature "nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (1), meaning that the reader/user has to put more work into the process of acquiring the content than merely reading word for word, which is the only effort needed in *non-ergodic* literature, where the story will unfold linearly. For example, the content of a video game will be inaccessible to someone who does not know how to play the game or is

unfamiliar with the rules. To advance in a video game or achieve the desired result, the user may also need to work out a good move or strategy.

Ergodic literature is not medium-specific, it can be a book that uses an untraditional method of presenting text, one that is not linear and where the content may not be completely revealed to the reader, or it can be a video game. Video games are cybertexts, and since cybertexts "are not narrative texts but other forms of literature governed by a different set of rules" (5), Aarseth finds it problematic to use traditional narratological tools for analysing video games and would rather use a ludological approach that focuses on the actions players can choose to take. The agency of the player as in "the thrill of exerting power over enticing and plastic materials" (Murray 188), is not any less important than the narrative, and it certainly affects immersion. However, other scholars argue that because video games have narrative elements, they can be discussed in the light of narratology.

## 1.4 Narrative Elements in Video Games

There are differences between games and books, but there are also similarities. MMORPGs are not just games, and they are not just narratives, they are both. And since these two disciplines are fused together, they cannot be analysed separately. In this section, I look at narrative elements that can be found in video games, and I also include how different types of players have different approaches to the narrative.

There has been some debate concerning the role of narrative in video games between "the ludologists" and "the narratologists", where scholars claim that the ludologists have rejected games as narrative, while the narratologists have argued that games could be considered to be just another medium for telling stories. Ludologists are game developers or scholars who study video games, and their focus is on the mechanics of the games, whereas narratologists are more concerned with the games' narrative. The ludologists have suggested that a video game should mainly be studied in terms of its mechanics (rules) and that there are no proper stories in video games. To support their view, they have leaned on traditional definitions of narrative which present narrative as "the representation by a narrator of a sequence of events", or "telling somebody that something happened", two definitions Marie-Laure Ryan claims are the most broadly approved among literary scholars (*Avatars of Story*, 184).

Ryan has played a role in this debate, favouring a narrative approach to video games. She does not say games are stories, but that they have narrative elements, and if these classical definitions are interpreted literally, they exclude the possibility of mimic forms of narrative, such as films, theatre, and role-playing games. Ryan argues in *Avatars of Story* that because a player of a video game is represented by a graphical representation of a character, called an avatar, who acts in the game world, and because this avatar usually has human-like features and is placed in a world inspired by real geography and architecture, play is integrated within a narrative and fictional framework (182). A video game that includes the traditional concepts of narrative elements such as characters, action, and setting arranged in a story-like order with a beginning and an end then, has narrativity. Ryan's definition of narrative is something that is produced "with the intent to evoke a story to the mind of the audience", though there will always be uncertainty as to whether "the sender and receiver have the same story in mind" (11). She then explains "having narrativity" as the ability to evoke a script or a story from a piece that is made by one person and interpreted by another, whether there is a text or not, and if there is a text, whether or not this is an explicit story that the author wants to convey to the reader. An example of something that has narrativity, but is not a text, is music where listeners can imagine a story regardless of what the composer had in mind. Video games are also examples where a potential story may or may not be perceived in the same way by the sender and receiver.

Ryan questions the arguments raised by ludologists against the narrativity of games. One of the arguments from ludologists is that narratives must have "the presence of narrators and narratees", in other words, that narrative is a form of retelling, a statement originally made by Gerald Prince in 1987, which Ryan interprets as "only language-based texts qualify as narratives" (*Avatars of Story* 185) because, according to Prince, since visual and dramatic events occur directly and are not recounted they are not narratives. Ryan does not agree with this statement, and for the record, Prince also abandons this later. Nevertheless, she argues that games can precisely have this feature when the events that the player acts out in a video game are replayed on the screen, sometimes in the form of verbal retellings. During a quest called "Sink or Swim" in *LOTRO,* the text "Your muscles ache, but you have put on a fine demonstration" appears on the screen when the player character swims over the Brandywine River to show the hobbits how it is done. One could argue this description of the event represents the voice of a narrator and thus is a narrative feature.

Another interesting argument that Ryan challenges is that games are like life, and life is not a narrative. This is, from the ludologist's view, based on the notion that just as in life, a

game is about winning or losing, that the experience is real and personal, and so it differs from stories because stories are not real, but games are, therefore games are not narratives. Whether life is a narrative or not could be questioned, but what is meant here is that games are real, like life. Ryan contradicts this by saying that "winning and losing are experiences specific to games" and determined by rules, in contrast to real life. Despite the famous metaphor that life is a game, people can not win or lose life. "You succeed or fail at concrete attempts to satisfy your desires", Ryan clarifies (*Avatars of Story* 189). In addition, she argues that in games with narrative "the experiencer is the avatar and not the real-life persona of the player" (190). It is the player's avatar that reaches or fails her goals, and events experienced in the game, such as killing or getting killed, are far from real-life experiences. On the contrary, these events could be regarded as acting, which would then rather make these games more like stories than real life. Another aspect of video games is that since most of the action is performed by the player, the player operates as an actor and at the same time she is also a spectator: she sees herself acting through the avatar. A spectator at the cinema does not take part in the film, but in computer games, the player is fundamental to the production of the story. This form of simultaneous narration where the act of playing is the same as the act of narrating deviates from the traditional definition of narrative. Finally, Ryan brings up the concept of retelling, when players recount their experience from the game by telling a story, and questions if this could be considered evidence of the game's narrativity. She argues that this depends on the type of game, if it "involves action whose purpose is not just winning or losing but fulfilling a concrete goal" (193). For example, if there is a task in the game that includes killing deer to provide food and it takes place in a fictional world, the game could be said to have narrativity.

## 1.5 Interactive Narrative and Player Types

When games have narrative, they can be called interactive narratives. Whether the narrative have a major or a minor role in the game, it will usually be connected to the gameplay. In other words, it is the narrative that gives the tasks in the game meaning. The narrative can also matter more to some types of players than others. Every interaction in a virtual world generates elements of narrative, but it is up to each player how involved they want to be in the narrative.

Players have different preferences and approaches to the various aspects of the game. Richard Bartle, one of the creators of the first MUD which is a multiplayer real-time virtual world that can be considered the MMORPG's predecessor, distinguishes between four player types: achievers, explorers, socialisers, and killers ("Hearts, clubs, diamonds, spades: Players who suit MUDs"). It is the motivation of the players and their aims that separates them. The achievers seek to gain maximum points and rise in levels, the explorers want to discover everything about the game world and gather as much information as possible, the socialisers are interested in people, the game functions mainly as a setting where they can chat with others about life and make new friends, and the killers' main goal is to impose themselves on other players and kill them. These four types of players have different approaches to the narrative of the game. Killers and achievers may treat the story of the game as less important, only as something to provide clues for progression. For the socialisers and explorers, on the other hand, the story of the game is perhaps more important than the gameplay. Socialisers are the ones who enjoy roleplaying and make their own stories about the game world. Explorers view the game world as a place full of stories to be discovered. In a game such as *LOTRO*, explorers will want to travel to all the places of Middle-earth, meet the familiar figures from Tolkien's books, listen to what the NPCs have to say, and gather the information that will lead them into new areas. Killers and achievers are less immersed in the stories the game offers, so despite their playing skills, they may be among those players that miss important aspects of the story.

In *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, Marie-Laure Ryan looks at ways to make narrative interactive without losing its narrativity. "While narrativity is a type of meaning, interactivity - when it is put in the service of entertainment - is a type of play" (234). Ryan introduces two interesting concepts: *narrative game* and *playable story*, which are two forms of interactive narrative based on Roger Caillois' two types of games, *ludus* and *paidia*. Ludus games are games that are rule-based and goal-oriented such as football or chess, and the pleasure lies in the excitement of competition or the satisfaction of solving problems. Narrative meaning is subordinated to the player's action in *narrative games*. In narrative games (ludus games) the narrative gives some sort of meaning to the play, it can serve to make the playing more interesting and fun, but the main reason for playing is the entertainment that lies in winning or losing. Paidia games are without predetermined rules or a specific goal and are imaginary games such as make-believe and role-playing games. The enjoyment of paidia games is the ability to create imaginary worlds and to pretend to be someone else. In a *playable story* or a paidia game, there is no winning or losing. The purpose of the player is "not to beat the game,

but to observe the evolution of the storyworld" (235) and try to effectuate or create a story, or in other words, a playable story is about having fun while indulging in the storyworld. *LOTRO* can be enjoyed as a narrative game (ludus) as well as a playable story (paidia) depending on the approach of the player. The goal for some players is to reach and conquer the end game content and to accomplish this they must play by certain rules. Bartle classifies such players as achievers and killers. Other players, the explorers and socialisers play *LOTRO* mainly to revel in the storyworld.

The complexity of the story in video games can range from merely simple information to intricate narrative situations with various characters and plots. MMORPGs generally have quests for the players to take on that communicate the scripted narrative. This can be a description of events, information about the surrounding environment and its history, or a tale about the NPC's background. To bring the story forward and have a feeling of playing a game at the same time, the narrative must necessarily be connected to the gameplay. Whether it is the game that pulls the narrative, or the narrative that pulls the game, it is in most cases the completion of a quest that pushes the scripted narrative forward, so, gameplay and narrative are closely connected. In the case of MMORPGs where the quests are optional, it can be argued that it is the player that moves the story forward, as opposed to a game where the story only proceeds when the control is taken away from the player and cut scenes are used to advance the plot.

There are several variations of scripted narratives in games, ranging from one primary narrative to follow or a primary narrative that branches at predefined points in the player's progression to no primary narrative at all. Games that have no main story can have a series of side-quests, each of which tells a short story instead. *LOTRO* has a primary narrative that is conveyed through quests and that branches at predefined points in the player's progression. Finishing one quest often leads to another one. The quest text can sometimes be quite basic such as a mere trivial justification of the ludic goal set by the quest. As in this quest given by a dwarf in Othrikar, a small dwarf settlement in The North Downs:

> There's a cold winter coming. I feel it in my bones. We dwarves are a hardy folk, but if we're going to survive the winter, we will need more supplies. Hunt the troublesome lynx that seem to cover the lands hereabouts and bring me their fur. I'll craft their hides into warm gloves for our miners. (*LOTRO*, Standing Stone Games, 2021)

Even if this seems an insignificant task the scripted narrative still manages to justify sending the player off to hunt the lynx, although it might seem pointless in relation to the main story in the game, these kinds of quests serve to gain experience and advance in levels.

Quest texts can also be interesting, funny, or emotional parts of a longer story. These types of texts are usually in a chain of many quests that are connected to make up a full story. One example is the beginning of a story about a courtship between two hobbits called Eldo and Asphodel. Here is what Eldo says to the players when they click on the floating ring above his head:

> This is a fine farm, wouldn't you say? Yes, life has been kind to me. My only regret is that I haven't anyone to share it with! I think you might be able to help me, if you're of a mind. The Widow Froghorn lives up the hill to the west, and she's a fine lady, but she won't hear of me courting her. I've been sending letters to her for a while now, asking her to tea, to the dance, to watch over my dog… but she refuses every time! Now, Widow Froghorn - Asphodel is her right name - is always needing help around her farm. Maybe if you lend her a hand, saying a kind word about me now and then, she'll change her mind! Go west up the hill, then turn south by the fence at the top. Her farm is at the crossroads. (*LOTRO*, Standing Stone Games, 2021)

What makes this quest different from the other example is that firstly it is a part of a chain of quests that involves a lot of running between these two hobbits mainly to bring letters and messages, and secondly, it might not be the ideal questline for achievers and killers (see Bartle's definitions of player types), players who are for the most part looking for tasks that challenge their fighting skills. This questline is about the hobbit culture conveyed through a comical story.

The narrative in playable stories should ideally be of better quality than the narrative in narrative games, because it is most likely that socialisers and explorers will choose a playable story type of game. Killers and achievers might prefer a narrative game where the players do not have to be involved in the narrative for it to be enjoyable. If the narrative in playable stories is of a poor quality, players may not find it engaging or immersive.

## 1.6 Interactive World and Transmediation

Imaginary worlds in books have always required the readers to interact in a way. Readers must imagine the world mentally to bring it to life. However, this type of interaction cannot change the chain of events in the storyworld. The outcome of the narrative will always be the same. In an interactive world, on the other hand, the players are not observers but participants who can control the events. MMORPGs are the first imaginary worlds that run in real-time, and due to their "vast size and unrepeatable nature" they cannot be "seen or experienced exhaustively" (Wolf 143) making them more like the real world.

What is even more interesting is when writers add content to a world that was originally created by another author. This is the case with Middle-earth as it appears in *LOTRO*. The fact that the original version of Middle-earth was literary and also made cinematic before it was adapted to an MMORPG, makes it a *transmedial* world which means it is a world that exists across multiple media, and this in turn enables *LOTRO*'s designers to draw on both former versions. When the game writers also add their own creative work to the main story, one may ask if the game is an adaptation at all, or if it is just loosely based on *The Lord of the Rings*. This depends on how the word *adaptation* is defined. In *Building Imaginary Worlds. The Theory and History of Subcreation* Mark J. P. Wolf defines adaptation as "when a story existing in one medium is adapted for presentation in another medium, but without adding any new canonical material to a world" (245). So, this definition does not fit *LOTRO*'s version of the book then. However, Wolf also introduces a concept he calls *growth*, which is another way to transmediate, and he explains it as "when another medium is used to present new canonical material of a world, expanding the world and what we know about it" (245). The new canonical material may be added by other writers than the original author of the world and thus provide the audience with more content, for example, backstories of characters and new areas of the world. With a large imaginary virtual world, such as Middle-earth in *LOTRO*, the expansion is the work of both writers and designers, work heavily influenced by Tolkien, but also creations based on their own ideas. This expansion opens more opportunities to increase the players' choices. In addition to meeting familiar characters and experiencing events from the main source, the players are given the opportunity to meet new characters and participate in added plots.

Since *LOTRO*'s world is adapted from an already existing literary world, players will have expectations based on the world in the book. Therefore, it may be more challenging for this game to adjust to the game format than other games where the world is tailored to the

game. In Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca's interviews with the producers of *LOTRO,* it appeared that the producers were determined to be truthful to the Tolkien universe and wanted to emphasise the importance of the general ethos and mythos, rather than the specific events of the stories in the books (Klastrup and Tosca 55). So instead of having Frodo and hundreds of his friends (player characters) going to Mordor they designed the game to be about the war of Middle-earth that has been raging for a long time between good and evil. However, the epic storyline of the game is largely determined by the plot development in *The Lord of the Rings*. For the designers, this could be both restrictive and liberating. It restricts the designers because they are not free to create something that would go against the book's lore, for example putting a spaceship in the game. On the other hand, since the plot of the main storyline is mostly set and the designers do not have to create a plot from scratch, they can focus more on the game features, such as design, audio, or other technical details.

Even though *LOTRO* is a successful transmediation of Middle-earth, the game fails to be completely true to the original text. However, conflicts between game and book are inevitable when the developers, in addition to taking into account Tolkien's lore, must also allow for the limitations of the game mechanics of an MMORPG. In *LOTRO*'s discussion forums, people discuss various lore breaches, varying from unrealistic combat skills to small details in quest texts that do not make sense. Klastrup and Tosca analyse how *LOTRO* relates to the mythos, topos and ethos of the transmedial world, Middle-earth, in their essay, "When fans become players: *The Lord of the Rings Online* in a transmedial world perspective". Their definition of mythos is: "the creational backstory that allows us to understand the current situation of the world. It defines the establishing conflicts and battles of the worlds, the religions, factions, historical development, and all we need to know to be able to interpret events and interact successfully in the world" (53). In other words, information about the circumstances in the game, the where and when, and also understandable reasons as to why there are certain things the players must do. In the starting area for elves in *LOTRO,* the first quests give the players information about the long battle between the elves and the evil forces, and that after 600 years, which is the game's 'present time', the same elves are still alive and fighting, which in turn informs about their immortality. This is one example of how the game refers to the mythos of Middle-earth. The topos is "the setting of the world, not only as pertaining to its geography but also in relation to time and history: how places have changed and events have unfolded in relation to the current time of the story" (54). Even if the players are not a part of the fellowship that sets off from Rivendell to destroy Sauron's ring which is the primary event in Tolkien's novel, the tasks they are given are often related

to this major mission, and therefore even the smallest task gives meaning. This does not mean that players who have not read the book will find the tasks meaningless, but for those who have the knowledge, this will increase their immersion in the game. An example of this is when player characters receive a quest that involves paying Bill Ferny a visit. Bill Ferny has a minor role in *The Fellowship of the Ring.* He was a spy who reported to the Ringwraiths about the hobbits' arrival in Bree. In the game, he lives in a cottage in Bree-Land, so when the player's avatar rings his doorbell, he actually comes out and says something less polite, being the thug he is. See figure 1.
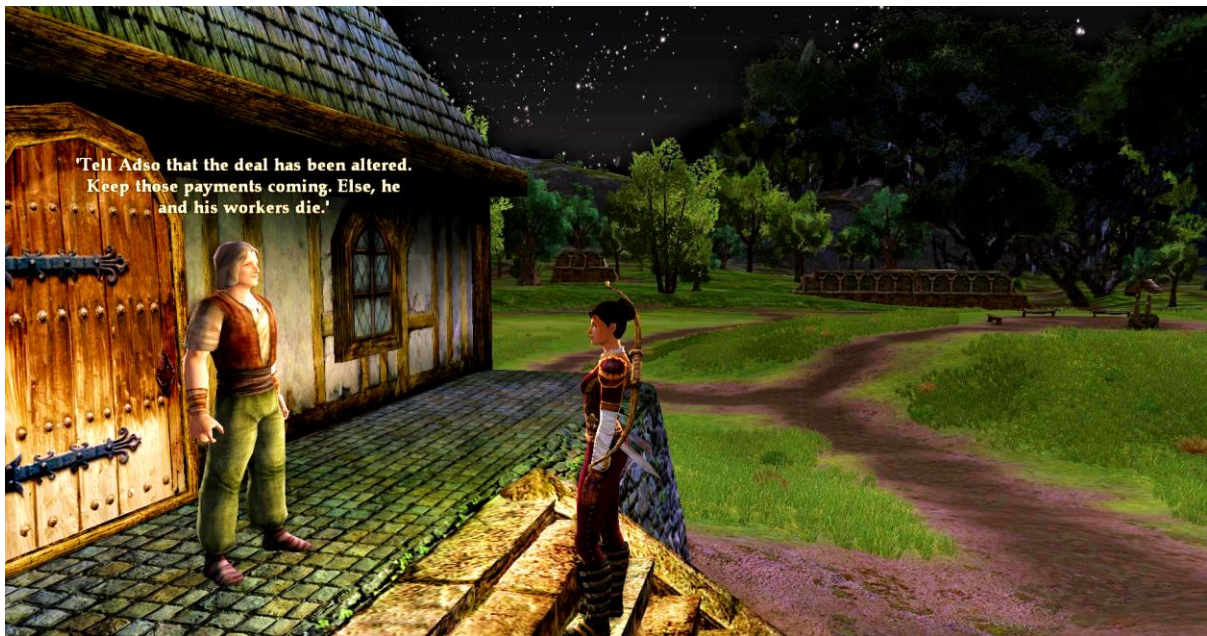


 Fig. 1 The player character's encounter with Bill Ferny.

Players who have read the novel know what Bill Ferny has done, so they may want to punch him. This NPC appears to be a petty criminal for any player regardless of whether the player has the background information about him or not, but for someone with this knowledge, there will be a higher degree of immersion. Since this is a nice game, or due to constraints in gameplay, the player's avatar has to do with giving him a slap on the cheek which is a fitting illustration of the ethos of *LOTRO*. According to Klastrup and Tosca, ethos is "the moral essence of the world" and it "pervades the codex of behavior of the different inhabitants, allowing us for example to tell if an event, a characterisation or even an utterance 'belong' or not to that world" (54). This means that there are restrictions on player versus player mode of play for example. If a player wants to fight another player, she has to invite the other player to a duel. The other player may accept or reject the challenge, no one dies in

the match, the player that loses the duel is incapacitated for a few seconds, and there are no rewards or experience points gained for the player who is victorious. This feature is just a fun activity that is mainly done among friends. There is a mode of gameplay called Monster Play where the players can enter a Player versus MonsterPayer (PvMP) area. In this mode, players can kill each other, but it is not possible for the Free Peoples of Middle-earth (Men, Elves, Dwarfs, Hobbits) to fight among themselves. They must fight the servants of Sauron, which are players who have created monster-characters for this purpose. Some Tolkien fans who are particularly concerned with the ethos of the world think Monster Play goes against Tolkien's spirit. Players who are upset about ethos breaches say it ruins their immersion in the transmedial world (55).

Players who are fans of Tolkien's work may have an ambivalent relationship with the transmedial world. On the one hand, they are excited to visit a new version of Middle-earth, on the other, they are afraid of being disappointed if there are too many deviations from the original in the new interpretation. In Klastrup and Tosca's survey, the players showed an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of an MMORPG and a willingness to accept the changes needed to adjust the storyworld to the new medium. To fully make sense of *LOTRO* it is an advantage to have knowledge of the source material. However, the game can add to this knowledge, and as Wolf puts it: "Transmedial growth and adaptation enrich an imaginary world beyond what any single medium could present" (Wolf 267). Having the opportunity to participate in the events of Middle-earth and to learn more about the world's history through playing the game can provide more insight into and a greater overview of Tolkien's universe, which in turn may change the way readers experience the book.

## 1.7 The Moral Implications of Playing as a Monster in *LOTRO*

The player characters are included in the narrative in *LOTRO* to such an extent that the players might develop empathy towards the people (NPCs) in the villages when they are attacked and killed by Sauron's servants. It is therefore with conflicting emotions that players enter the Player vs. Player area, which is a part of the game where players can join Sauron's forces and fight against other players. This game mode is included to satisfy those players who like the competitive element of games. Many computer games have demonically marked elements (monsters) as a huge part of the game, and it is interesting to look at why this as a ludic feature is so popular.

In *LOTRO* players do not only fight monsters but can also play as a monster character. In "From the demonic tradition to art-evil in digital games: Monstrous pleasures in *The Lord of the Rings Online*" Frans Mäyrä explores why such games are popular and how they are experienced. There are mixed feelings of fear and fascination associated with demonic monsters, Mäyrä argues (112), and because of the fascination with danger, a "protective frame", such as a video game, can enclose the danger so that it can be safely enjoyed (113). Humans have always been fascinated by demons and the demons from folklore traditions are not solely evil, but powerful creatures that can be both good and evil, and this ambiguity makes them interesting. Furthermore, their behaviour, which "borderlines between reason and insanity, human rationality and animalistic irrationality" (113) and their appearance as half-animal, half-human are aspects that make humans to both reject them and identify with them. Demonic monsters are allowed to behave in a way that "we deny from ourselves, but which we are also somehow simultaneously attracted to" (116). In a video game where it is possible to play as a demonic character, players can experiment with evilness "with no fear of consequence" (118). However, this does not mean that the players are sadistic since the monstrous actions take place in a virtual world (119).

Because *LOTRO*'s narrative is based on Tolkien's novel, it is not as irrelevant as it is in some other games. The game mirrors the battle between good and evil from the book. The Free People (Men, Hobbits, Elves, Dwarves) fight the servants of Sauron. All players have to play as a morally good character in *LOTRO*'s main faction which is PvE mode (player versus environment) meaning players fight computer-controlled enemies in contrast to the second faction called Monster Play which is PvP mode (player versus player) meaning players fight each other. In Monster Play mode players can play as an orc, uruk, spider or warg, all evil characters who fight the good player characters that choose to enter the area. The main faction of the game is true to Tolkien mythos, having a Christian dualistic worldview where the demonic is one-dimensionally evil, in contrast to "the daimonic non-dualistic concept" (Mäyrä 112). In Christianity there is either good or evil, but in folk traditions monsters could be more ambivalent, therefore a distinction is made between the demonic (an evil creature) and the daimonic (ambivalent creatures). The cultural frame of contemporary fantasy is more open to the daimonic concept than "the classic dualistic world view Tolkien still largely relied on", and as a consequence the Monster Play option in *LOTRO* "can be seen in this kind of framework, balanced between the dualistic frames of the original Tolkien mythos, and more relativistic postmodern frames" (125). Mäyrä argues that the strong emphasis on narrative in *LOTRO* contributes to the player's immersion "with the lives of the Free People"

and the gameplay provides "emotional motivation for the larger conflict between good and evil" (125). In the starting area, a village called Archet, the player helps the inhabitants and learns to know them, so when the villagers are brutally attacked by the servants of Sauron, it is with mixed feelings that the player joins forces with the monsters in Monster Play (the PvP area). The moral implications of choosing the evil side are thus implied very early on in the game. This makes *LOTRO* different from other similar MMORPGs where the monster player characters are "valid, value-neutral player options" from the beginning of the game (126).

Although the participation in Monster Play feels more like a harmless and fun team sport than assisting or supporting the evil side, the "darkly ominous aesthetics" that permeates Monster Play can deter some players because the monster characters are remarkably aggressive and hostile in appearance (129). The aggressiveness of this gameplay mode can appear as an alien element in the friendly and cooperative main mode of the game.

## 1.8 Emergent Narrative

MMORPGs have a unique ability to tell emergent stories. Emergent narratives are events that occur during playing that are not written anywhere, nor are they planned to happen. These events emerge when player characters interact with other players or the game system, but they can be unintentional, such as a player character accidentally falling off a cliff, or spontaneous, as in running off the road to explore what is behind a hill. The emergent narratives can be shared with other players, or they can exist only for one player.

In "A Poetics of Virtual Worlds" Lisbeth Klastrup argues that "a virtual world is both something imagined, something fake (something pretending to be real, as we know it from realistic fiction) and something lived in, an actualised reality we create, inhabit and share with other people" (102). There are real people who act through their avatars in *LOTRO*, the events performed by players in interaction with other players and the game world are real. Most likely, stories will be produced, or rather players will "live" stories that they can recount afterwards. Since the players' behaviour is not pre-scripted but instead contributes to the online version of Middle-earth being a living world, there is infinite potential to generate a personal narrative. R. V. Kelly's first reaction to the MMORPG world he was introduced to may also apply to *LOTRO*'s world:

This isn't a game at all, I realized. It's a vast, separate universe with its own rules, constraints, culture, ethos, ethics, economy, politics, and inhabitants. People explore here. They converse. They transact business, form bonds of friendship, swear vows of vengeance, escape from dire circumstances, joke, fight to overcome adversity, and learn here. (Kelly 9)

All these activities and features of the game world can contribute to a player's own story. In *LOTRO* this can include the participation in events arranged by other players such as a pub crawl, market haggling, or concerts. This is where the element of role-playing is most apparent. During a pub crawl, the players are encouraged to role-play, and the players' characters should ideally behave according to Tolkien's spirit. This may include drinking, smoking a pipe, and telling stories in front of the fireplace. In the pubs, the player character can buy beer and wine which after consuming more than one of these will make the screen go blurry, affecting the player character's vision, and eventually, she will swoon and fall to the ground. There is a limit to what the players can make the NPCs do, but they may respond to other players' stories and actions through chat and *emotes*. Emotes are actions described with a sentence or shown through the movements of the avatar or both. There is a menu that allows players to choose among actions such as "flirt", "hug", "dance", "scold", "pat on the head", and so on. So, for example, if I chose the emote "scold" from the menu, and at the same time had another player character or NPC targeted, my player character, Symbel, would start scolding the targeted character with her index finger waving in the air and the text "Symbel scolds (name of the other character)" would appear in the chat window. Symbel's action does not visually affect the other character's emotions, but the player controlling the character may react emotionally to it and may choose to respond verbally or with a counter emote. This feature of the game is extensively used during role-play. Additionally, players can include a background story and a family tree for their character which can be written in-game, visible for others to read under a tab called "Bio" on the character journal page. It is also possible to purchase a house that can be decorated and furnished, serving as a setting to support the character's personal narrative. The address can be included in the biography so that others can come on a visit.

However, for these personal narratives to be considered real stories, they must have a believable context and a plot. Most emergent narratives are only of interest to the one player, or a small group of players. Nevertheless, their narrative qualities are important for players' immersion in the game.

## 1.9 Alterbiography

In MMORPGs, some players want to maintain a certain reputation, so they dress their avatar in a certain way and keep up a certain behaviour, to be recognized and gain celebrity status among fellow players. If a player character changes her behaviour, this may correspond to the literary device character development. This kind of character development, where the player decides the behaviour of the character, is unique to ergodic literature.

Even if the designer of a game has outlined a linear narrative, the actions of the players can not be predetermined or constrained if the game at the same time maintains a form of ergodicity. This is especially true regarding MMORPGs where the players interact freely with the game environment separate from the predefined narrative. Gordon Calleja has coined the term *alterbiography* to refer to "the ongoing narrative generated during interaction with a game environment" (124). But in addition to being about events that the player character takes part in, alterbiography is also about the player character controlled by the player. The perspective is from the player's point of view and the alterbiography is activated in the mind of the player, so the centre of attention, or focalisation, depends on the individual player's disposition.

*LOTRO* is a game where the game world, Middle-earth, is to a large extent an open world where players can walk, run, or ride a horse, for example, from The Shire to Rivendell, explore the landscapes, approach objectives, and other players freely. The world has a myriad of creatures and figures, mainly derived from Tolkien's encyclopaedia, which interact with the player and each other. The encyclopaedic detail in Tolkien's fictional work has made it possible to create a huge game world with varied opportunities for interactivity. In contrast to a single-player game, the player of an MMORPG is never alone. The game world is filled with other players which gives the feeling of being in a world that is alive and filled with real-time activity. Players can interact with each other, in contrast to single-player games which are static, and where the only other characters are computer-controlled. The presence of other player characters with their unique appearances, behaviour, and ways of communicating adds to the narrativity of the game.

Players can customise the avatar to look like themselves, or they can create a character that is the opposite of themselves. The cosmetic differences between characters can be in the form of outfits and items. In *LOTRO*, players can equip casual wear, such as a dress, so they do not have to walk around in armour if they participate in social events. There is also the possibility for players to change their hairstyle and facial hair at barbershops. Another

cosmetic element is the ability to own a pet, or several, that accompany the character. Titles to go with the character's name can be earned through various activities in the game, but they do not enhance the character's abilities in any way, so the title is worn purely for role-playing reasons, to reflect something about the character's personality. An example of this is when my avatar, Symbel, after finishing a special task called a deed, which in this case involves killing a number of half-orcs who have been pestering the elves in Eregion, is rewarded with the title "The Just". I think this fits her personality, so she wears it over her head saying "Symbel The Just". Since titles are rewards for achievements in the game, it is not possible to customise them, but there are many to choose from, so it should be possible to get one that fits the character.

The player characters' behaviour and ways of communicating depend on the types of players. Some players prefer to explore the game on their own, some enjoy role-play with others, and some play to achieve the highest level and best reward and might not be interested in interacting with narrative elements at all. Richard Bartle explains in his article "Hearts, clubs, diamonds, spades: Players who suit MUDs", how the four player types: achievers, explorers, socialisers, and killers, regard other players and how they interact with each other. Players' interaction with each other influences the narrativity of the game. Explorers like to discuss the narrative elements of the game and tell other players about their latest discoveries.



Fig. 2 The stone tolls, Bert, Tom and William.

Explorers are the players most likely to discover the three trolls in Trollshaws that the Fellowship comes across in *The Fellowship of the Rings*: "There stood the trolls: three large trolls (...) one of them has an old bird's nest behind his ear" (206). These trolls waylaid Bilbo and the dwarves in *The Hobbit* but were turned to stone when the sun rose. The designers of the game have even included the bird's nest on the shoulder of the troll on the left.

Explorers are deeply immersed in the game world and are therefore largely engaged with the story of the game. Bartle argues that if a MUD consisted of explorers only, it "would add depth and interest, but remove much of the activity. Spectacle would dominate over action". In other words, the game would appear as an online book. The same would be true for an MMORPG. The player type called socialisers likes to talk a lot and sometimes they gossip about other players' achievements. The "world chat" in *LOTRO*, which is the chat that all the players on that particular server can take part in, can sometimes appear as a soap opera where the talkative socialisers inform everyone about which of the achievers has reached the maximum level first and what their perceived motives are for racing to the end, and the discussion may continue the next day. Socialisers also like to talk about and flaunt their newest outfits and ask other players for their opinions or invite other players to inspect their in-game house. This type of player enjoys the aspect of role-playing that the game facilitates.

The scripted narrative functions as a framework for players' own stories. Regardless of the players' actions, the scripted narrative will always be the same in *LOTRO*. But instead of seeing this as a limitation, players can weave elements from the scripted narrative into their alterbiography. To give an example, a player can pretend that her player character has a close relationship with Aragorn and therefore is particularly eager to help his friends, the Rangers, who are involved in several optional quests outside the main questline. Thus, the player creates an alterbiography that is a combination of something imagined: the relationship with Aragorn, and something that the player character actually does: help the Rangers. If the player gets tired of helping the Rangers and wants to do something else, this can be explained in the alterbiography as a personality change in the player character. In this way, the scripted narrative influences the alterbiography and gives context to the narrative, in addition to helping with the interpretation of other events in the world.

## 1.10 Side Stories

Because *LOTRO* is an interactive narrative, the player's character must necessarily be a part of that narrative. The player's character cannot be a member of the original Fellowship, so the game puts the player characters close to the events in the book. If a player chooses to follow the epic questline, their character follows the Fellowship a few steps behind. So even though the player character does not exist in the book, this positioning of the player character makes the players feel included and important for the development of the story.

The epic questline provides several opportunities to meet and fight alongside characters from the book, and not only the members of the Fellowship, but also Éomer, Theodred, Theoden and Éowyn to mention a few. Players may even get a little starstruck when they meet characters from the novel. In an instanced quest in Rivendell, the player takes a walk with Frodo and listens to his thoughts and worries, and the player gets some insight into his mind. Eventually, the members of the Fellowship become familiar with the players' characters, and they are expected to aid the Fellowship as best they can, even if it is at a distance. There is another instance in Rivendell where the player character is included in the scene where the Fellowship departs and is waved off. These two examples of instances have no combat at all, just short narrative scenes, and they add "a sense of place in events" for the player character (Brown and Krzywinska 32). Still, the player character will never be the protagonist, as Brown and Krzywinska put it, she is just "one of many heroes, always a looker-on to the true action of the text" (33), and the world will continue to exist and be populated regardless of the individual player character's actions or lack of actions. However, the player character is the protagonist in her own story, her alterbiography.

Instead of outright expanding the original story, *LOTRO*'s designers create a sense of deeper insight through short stories that are so well done that they are not easily identified as something invented by the game writers (Brown and Krzywinska 34). The developers' narrative strategy assumes that the players already know the main story. The Ring is never mentioned in any of the dialogues the player has with the NPCs, and Frodo's mission is not told in full detail, but it is assumed that the player character, being considered as a conspirator, knows about the secret errand. According to Brown and Krzywinska, the players' knowledge is followed up and their expectations are fulfilled. The epic quests (the main quest series) which are separated into volumes, books, and chapters, also contribute to "the player's position as a reader as well as a controller of her character" (34).  An example of a story invented by the designers that gives the player a unique point of view, different

from the reader of the book, and its characters, is an epic quest called "The Fallen Shadow" (*Volume 3. Book 6. Chapter 10)*, which involves investigating the fallen creature that Legolas shoots down. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, neither the Fellowship nor the reader knows what the creature is when it first appears:

> (...) a dark shape, like a cloud and yet not a cloud, for it moved far more swiftly, came out of the blackness in the South, and sped towards the Company, blotting out all light as it approached. Soon it appeared as a great winged creature, blacker than the pits in the night. Fierce voices rose up to greet it from across the water. Frodo felt a sudden chill running through him and clutching at his heart; there was a deadly cold, like the memory of an old wound, in his shoulder. He crouched down, as if to hide.
>
> Suddenly the great bow of Lórien sang. Shrill went the arrow from the elven-string. Frodo looked up. Almost above him the winged shape swerved. There was a harsh croaking scream, as it fell out of the air, vanishing down into the gloom of the eastern shore. (387)

The creature is greeted by the orcs on the banks of the river which indicates that it is in alliance with the enemy, but it is because Frodo feels the wound in his shoulder that the reader suspects the creature may be somehow linked to the Nazgûl: "there was a deadly cold, like the memory of an old wound, in his shoulder". Frodo was stabbed by one of the Nazgûl with a poisonous knife when they where camping at Weathertop, on their way from Bree to Rivendell. In addition, it screams like them. The assumption that the creature has a connection to the Nazgûl, is later confirmed by Gandalf in *The Two Towers* when he meets Legolas, Gimli, and Aragorn in Fangorn and tells them that the Nazgûl now have winged steeds and that Legolas killed the steed, but not its rider (498). The player character finds the beast in "the gloom of the eastern shore" which turns out to be a place called The Brown Lands in East Rohan, and Legolas' arrow protrudes from its throat. See figure 3.

Fig. 3 The fallen, winged beast found in the Brown Lands.

The game writers have been inspired to create a story that is about finding both the beast and the rider. The story stays within the original framework, but at the same time, it is a story that is not found in the book. In this way, the player gets to know more than the main characters in the book, although the player character does not know who shot it. There is a harness on the beast which suggests that there must have been a rider. So, the player character's next task is to find the missing rider. In the game, the people of Rohan do not know what could have ridden it, but the player character suspects it is one of the Nazgûl. Several times throughout the searching for the rider, the quest texts state what the player character thinks, but she does not reveal her thoughts to the NPCs: "You do not voice your guess to Gamal, but the word is loud inside your head: Nazgûl." Here, the game writers suggest what the player character should think, but the assumption is probably quite correct. Another evidence that there is a Nazgûl on the loose is the hissing sound one NPC heard when he encountered a strange and frightful figure. He says the figure hissed at him before he was knocked unconscious.

Fig. 4 The encounter with the Nazgûl.

Eventually, the player character and an NPC called Nona, come across the Nazgûl. See figure 4. This event takes place in an instance, which is a private version of a small section of the world for one player or a group of players, which means that the player or group is separated from other players. This makes the event with the Nazgûl feel more immersive since there will not be other players interfering.

Events around the invented characters in the game often mirror things that happen to the main characters in the book, which in some cases increase the suspense for those who are familiar with the original material. When the NPC, Nona, is stabbed by the Nazgûl and NPC-Galadriel worries about the effect if the wound should come from a "Morgul blade", the player will know what is at stake, that Nona can become a wraith, just as Frodo would have been, if he had not been healed by Elrond in time. Fortunately, it is a regular knife, so Nona quickly recovers. Another character from the game, a Ranger of the North, called Amdir, is not so lucky after his encounter with one of the Nazgûl and its poisonous dagger. Amdir is grievously wounded and is on the brink of turning into a wraith. The player character has to collect kingsfoil, a healing herb, to treat Amdir's wound. Players may remember that kingsfoil is also mentioned in *The Fellowship of the Ring* when Aragorn uses the herb to ease Frodo's pain on Weathertop. There can only be nine Ringwraiths if the game stays within the framework provided by Tolkien's books, so Amdir dies before the process of turning into one of them is completed.

## 1.11 Summary of Chapter 1

In this chapter, I have looked at the concept of narrative in MMORPGs in general and in *LOTRO* specifically. These types of games differ from other video games because they are more like worlds in which players stay for years. In ordinary video games, the goal is generally to win, but in MMORPGs, the goal is not really to win, although it is possible to play that way, most players in these worlds are there for reasons other than competing. MMORPGs are interactive narratives. Narrativity is what gives the game meaning, while interactivity is a type of play. Due to the interactive aspect, some researchers, the ludologists, argue that video games should be analysed in terms of the game's rules and what the players can do in the game. But others, the narratologists, argue that since games have narrative elements they can be analysed as literature. What is interesting to discuss regarding the aspect of interactivity is the unique way interaction takes place when playing a video game. Most importantly, the outcome of the game's story will largely depend on the players' ability or willingness to evoke it. Of course, this argument can also be used in relation to reading a story in a book. The difference is that even if players wish to learn the story, they may be unable to bring it out because they made the wrong choices during the process. They may have taken the wrong path and got lost, as Aarseth says, which can happen when dealing with texts that are ergodic cybertexts. Consequently, players who take the wrong turns in *LOTRO* may miss out on parts of the story of Frodo and the Ring conveyed in the game.

If a video game has a setting, characters, and events, it can at least be considered to have narrative elements. If the events occur in a story-like order, the game can be regarded as just another way of telling a story, and not be much different from a story written in a book. There are various ways to convey the narrative in video games, but in MMORPGs, it is usually through quests, voice-over, and cutscenes. The quests have short or long texts with information about the context the player is currently in. In addition to the narrative laid out by the developers, there are also emergent narratives, stories that emerge during gameplay. These can be roleplaying events created in collaboration between players or they are short narrative events that only take place in a player's mind. There is a great opportunity to create unique characters in *LOTRO*. The players customise their character's appearance and choose a name and a title. All the different player characters with their individual appearance and behaviour also contribute to the game's narrativity.

*LOTRO* is special because its story is based on a very famous novel, *The Lord of the Rings*. The players have most likely read the book or seen the movies and are therefore a

critical audience. The designers of the game have been careful to take this fact into account, and they have also shown respect for Tolkien's work of art. In this MMORPG, it is not possible for the player characters to kill each other, which I am sure Tolkien would have thought was a good trait in a game like this. Every player must fight on the good side against the evil servants of Sauron. There is an exception to this principle in the game mode called Monster Play where the player can fight on the bad side, but then they must create an evil character, that cannot be a man, an elf, a dwarf, or a hobbit. In general, players who are fans of Tolkien's work, are only happy to have yet another version of Middle-earth to frolic in.

# Chapter 2

# Immersion

## 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the many forms of immersion readers/players can experience while reading/playing. It is particularly interesting to find out why maps are often included in fantasy literature and video games, and what role maps play in spatial immersion in both books and games. Spatial immersion is related to geography, and in the game, players can choose a geographical background for their characters. These kinds of details, elaborated maps and background information, make the fictional world appear more real, or immersive. Another type of immersion that is not very different between the two mediums is the temporal immersion, which is about the way a story is told, how it unfolds, and how it manages to keep the interest of the audience. I have used a story from the game as an example to show both similarities and differences between the game and the book regarding literary devices such as suspense, curiosity, and surprise. Lastly, I look at emotional immersion, and it is perhaps this type of immersion that is felt more strongly while reading the book compared to playing the game. In any case, there are different emotions that are activated while playing the game.

## 2.2 Definition of Immersion

Even if immersion in a video game is a powerful experience due to the game's interactivity, it is not necessarily more immersive than 'being lost in a book'. Offering immersive situations in video games is important because once players are immersed in a video game, they will continue playing, so without immersion, interest in the game will quickly decline. The concept of immersion is often featured when games are advertised using phrases such as "get immersed in …" and "the most immersive game". An example of such advertising can be found on *LOTRO*s website:

> From the crumbling, shadowed ruins of Weathertop to the ageless, golden wood of Lothlórien, immerse yourself in Middle-earth as you have never seen it before. Visit

the peaceful, verdant fields of the Shire, brave the dark depths of the Mines of Moria, and raise a pint at the Prancing Pony in Bree!

What is perceived as immersion can vary between people, but it means being deeply engaged in something, such as a game or a book, and it involves the pleasure of reading or playing. So, absorption and enjoyment are two keywords here. However, there are several types of immersion, and they vary in importance to the players. Some players are content with the process of playing a game, something to enjoy and kill time. Others demand of the game more than that, such as the time spent also being meaningful, and perhaps that it is both intellectually and technically challenging.

The different types of immersion have been dealt with by Calleja and Marie-Laure Ryan in separate studies. Both Ryan and Calleja talk about immersion in virtual worlds, such as MMORPGs, but while Ryan distinguishes between ludic immersion and narrative immersion, Calleja uses the term involvement instead of immersion when he talks about immersion in video games. In *In-Game, From Immersion to Incorporation*, he proposes the player involvement model that consists of six dimensions of involvement: kinesthetic involvement, which is about controlling the avatar, spatial involvement, which is about the sense of place, shared involvement, which is about being with other entities in a shared environment, narrative involvement, which is about engaging with story elements, affective involvement, which is about various forms of emotional engagement, and ludic involvement, which is about personal goals and rules that give the game meaning.

Ryan defines ludic immersion as "a deep absorption in the performance of a task, comparable to the intensity with which a mathematician concentrates on proving a theorem or a soloist performs a concerto", whereas her definition of narrative immersion is "an engagement of the imagination in the construction and contemplation of a storyworld which relies on purely mental activity" (*Narrative as Virtual Reality* 246). In other words, ludic immersion is when a player is performing a task with great concentration, totally absorbed in the work, for example, focusing on hitting a golf ball. The experience goes for both abstract games, such as golf, football, or chess, and children's games with narrative elements such as Cops and Robbers. Video games such as Grand Theft Auto and Call of Duty are also considered to cause ludic immersion because they are intense and require concentration from the player. Narrative immersion is more intellectually challenging, but it also involves mentally imagining the fictional world and caring about what happens in it. Ryan explores the compatibility between ludic immersion and narrative immersion in video games,

operating with three types of narrative immersion: spatial, temporal, and emotional (246), which roughly correspond with setting, plot, and character in literature. Therefore, her concepts of immersion are interesting to look at when comparing the game with the book, but Calleja's player involvement model is also relevant.

## 2.3 Spatial Immersion (Strategic and Emotional)

Spatial immersion in the book changes after having played the game because Middle-earth, the storyworld, becomes so familiar that it is perceived as *place*, and not *space*. Place is the setting of the story, for example a town, and it is more connected to emotions than space. Space is the whole fictional universe. However, when players spend years in the game, they become familiar with all the places in Middle-earth, so when they read the book, they know the places the characters visit because they have 'lived there'.

A story needs a setting, a place with characters and events that readers can immerse themselves in. To be immersed is to take a virtual body into an imaginary world (*Narrative as Virtual Reality* 7). The term *virtual body* does not have to mean a computer-generated body, it can mean an imaginary body. In other words, readers imagine themselves in the setting they are reading about. In a video game, however, the virtual body is an avatar, a figure representing the player. *LOTRO* is not just a game but also a virtual world and it is when players find themselves in this world with three-dimensional graphics where they can move their avatars in the environment, that they feel immersed. This type of immersion, which is called spatial immersion, where players are drawn into the environment because they are fascinated by the world and curious to find out what they can discover about it, is one of the things that keeps players dedicated to a game. Ryan operates with two forms of spatial immersion, strategic and emotional. The strategic spatial immersion is about orienting in the landscape and looking at maps to plan the next move. The emotional spatial immersion "can involve an emotional attachment to certain locations". The emotional spatial immersion in the game mirrors the importance of setting in a novel, and according to the cognitive psychologists Jean Mandler and Nancy Johnson, whom Ryan cites, "setting is the most easily remembered narrative component" (*Narrative as Virtual Reality* 247). The setting is important because it provides context for the story, and therefore it is the setting that the readers remember best.

## 2.3.1 Emotional Spatial Immersion

If people have a desire to explore new lands, but they are stuck at home due to lockdown (as was the case during the pandemic in 2020), this desire can be fulfilled by visiting virtual worlds. Calleja argues that "digital games and virtual worlds are particularly adept at facilitating spatial exploration that enables players not only to project their imagination into the represented landscapes but also to traverse them" (73). In other words, due to modern technology, it is possible to create virtual worlds that people can enter with avatars and explore the environment through interactivity. In his description of spatial involvement, Calleja emphasises the difference between ergodic and non-ergodic representations of landscape. For example, when reading *The Lord of the Rings*, one can imagine oneself wandering in Middle-earth, but the experience of the fictional world is restricted to mental images. In the game world, players, represented by their avatars, 'literally' walk or ride between the famous locations in Middle-earth. The joy of travelling around in a virtual world, according to Calleja, is the exploration of new areas and the discovery of hidden places and objects. It can even be compared to being on holiday in an unfamiliar country where one goes sightseeing and takes pictures of the view (74). However, for players of *LOTRO* who are familiar with the novel, it is perhaps more like the joy of coming home because they recognise the places from the book.

Players return to *LOTRO* after years without playing for the same nostalgic reasons readers return to their favourite book. Stories are remembered because of the setting and if the setting is an appealing place, people will want to visit this place again. Ryan explains how "place and narrative have natural affinities" and that readers develop affective bonds with the places where the stories are set (*Narrative as Virtual Reality* 86). The difference, of course, is that immersion in a book evokes mental images in the reader's mind, while the game provides visualisation of the places, and therefore immersion in the game is a kinetic experience, where places can be revisited by the player's avatar.

Re-reading *The Lord of the Rings* after having played the game, evokes a different type of immersion. The images from the game are present in the mind and contribute to the reader's experience of spatial immersion, and perhaps also to a better understanding of what is going on. This might be the case with the battle scenes particularly. Tolkien is known for his elaborate and detailed descriptions in *The Lord of the Rings*, and some of the descriptions can be overwhelming. But it is because of "the profusion of details with which Tolkien imagined Middle-earth" that readers have a sense of being there, Ryan explains (*Narrative as*

*Virtual Reality* 91). The description of the battle of the Pelennor Fields (in the novel) evokes such a presence. Here is the part when Théoden arrives with his riders:

> Ahead nearer the walls Elfhelm's men were among the siege-engines, hewing, slaying, driving their foes into the fire-pits. Well nigh all the northern half of the Pelennor was overrun, and there camps were blazing, orcs were flying towards the River like herds before the hunters; and the Rohirrim went hither and thither at their will. But they had not yet overthrown the siege, nor won the Gate. Many foes stood before it, and on the further half of the plain were other hosts still unfought. (*The Return of the King*, 839)

The detailed description may be irrelevant to the plot, but because the scene is described with unimportant details, the reader experiences this as real and gets a sense of being present. In *LOTRO*, players' avatars participate in this battle and interact with Elfhelm and Théoden, therefore reading about this after having been there, adds another dimension of immersion, which is not only emotional spatial immersion related to the place but also emotional immersion concerning the fate of the characters. (See more on emotional immersion later in this chapter.)



Fig. 5 Théoden and the player character at the Pelennor Fields.

The emotional spatial immersion, the devotion to the place, makes players want to come back to the game again and again. It can be compared to wanting to read one's favourite book over and over because there is a longing to revisit places and relive the story. A particular sense of place occurs when players invest time in decorating their virtual houses and gardens. Players share a neighbourhood with other players, and it is possible to visit each other's houses and have gatherings in the residential area. Knowing their neighbours adds to this sense of place.

## 2.3.2 Strategic Spatial Immersion

For a huge fictional world such as Middle-earth, the use of maps is almost a necessity. The maps in the game are an important element regarding spatial immersion. When maps are used frequently, they can evoke emotional spatial immersion as well as being useful for strategic spatial immersion. In other words, a map of a place associated with good memories can be studied just for the sake of those memories. However, maps are primarily made for strategic purposes.

Tolkien began his stories by drawing maps of the setting. Later other authors of fantasy literature have also included maps in their novels. Maps that accompany the story have proven to work well as an additional framework, especially in fantasy literature, where travel is often a central part of the narrative. Maps can replace language in stories where the "spatial configuration of the storyworld" can help readers understand the characters' choices of routes. In contrast to the sense of place (emotional spatial immersion), which can easily be described with language, the aspect of *space* as in "global view of the spatial organization of a storyworld" is harder to convey (*Narrative as Virtual Reality* 92). One way of gaining "global view" is the use of graphic maps to make stories more immersive. This type of immersion is strategic spatial immersion. Both in *LOTRO* and in *The Lord of the Rings*, there are maps that help the players and readers understand where in the world the characters are, and how far or close they are to strategic locations. The maps also give information about how large the world is and fill in the gaps not otherwise covered by the narrative. Maps are particularly important in interactive imaginary worlds. Because the players are active participants in the world, they will not be able to complete certain tasks without the knowledge that the maps provide, such as showing locations, resources, and obstacles.

## 2.4 The Significance of the Maps

The maps in both the book and the game are part of the text and they provide a framework and spatial immersion. By basing the maps of Middle-earth on Europe, Tolkien manages to make his imaginary world seem as real as the actual world, even though Middle-earth is a continent that has been exposed to the forces of erosion, according to Tolkien. Thus, mountains have been worn down and land has been covered by sea (Kocher 149). To counterbalance the alien topography, Tolkien puts familiar constellations in the night sky. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, when the hobbits encounter a group of elves camping for the night in the Shire, two familiar constellations appear in the sky. One is the Pleiades, but in Middle-earth, it is called "Remmirath, the Nettled Stars", and the other is Orion, described as "Swordsman of the Sky, Menelvagor with his shining belt" (81).



Fig 6 Orion to the left and Pleiades at the top of the image.

At midnight in Bree-lands on a clear night, players can see three famous constellations, the Big Dipper, Orion, and the Pleiades among the other stars. In Appendix E (in *The Lord of the Rings*) Tolkien identifies "Menelvagor" as the constellation Orion. "Remmirath, the Nettled Stars", however, he has not explained, but Hammond and Scull argue it must be another name for the Pleiades (*A Reader's Companion* 108). On the night of the Black Riders' attack on the "Prancing Pony" in Bree, Frodo looks out the window and sees "the Sickle" that is "swinging bright above the shoulders of Bree-hill" (*The Fellowship*

*of the Ring* 174). There is a footnote at the bottom of the page that says Sickle is the Hobbits' name for the Plough (the Big Dipper in America). This subtle trick makes the readers assume that Middle-earth is like our world and thus makes it easier to believe the story. The familiar constellations also make the game appear like a real place.

In *LOTRO*'s landscape, there are maps laying around the tables everywhere, in military camps as well as in private houses. In Grimbold's Camp in the Gap of Rohan there is a map table. (See figure 7.) The map on the table is an item that the players interact with. This particular map functions as a portal to several instances after each other which are a part of *Book 5: The Prince of Rohan* in *Volume 3*. In this chain of quests, the players experience what happened to Théodred, King Théoden's son.



Fig. 7 A map table at Grimbold's Camp in the Gap of Rohan.

Gandalf says there are many maps in Elrond's house (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 283), and he and Aragorn "pondered the storied and figured maps and books of lore that were in the house of Elrond" (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 277). The characters in the book often discuss which route to take. Aragorn is a well-travelled man who has good knowledge of the terrain, even without using maps. Frodo, on the other hand, must put all his trust in Gollum to find the right path. The reader may feel Frodo's desperation in having to trust a deceitful creature like Gollum. Some readers can probably relate to Sam's relationship to maps: "Maps conveyed nothing to Sam's mind, and all distances in these strange lands seemed so vast that he was quite out of his reckoning" (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 285). This is when Sam thinks

the mountain, Redhorn near Moria, is Mount Doom. Frodo remembers at one point having seen a map of Mordor that someone showed him in Rivendell and is able to recollect its features, but for the most part he is quite lost as to where he is, not having a map or any clear mental image of the terrain. Gandalf, however, knows the geography so well that with the information he receives from Faramir about Frodo and Sam's whereabouts, he can calculate approximately how far they have come.

The maps in the game act as an ergodic feature that allows for a distinctive type of experience unlike that of the book. In *Following in the footsteps of fellowship: A tale of there and back again - text/translation/tolkienisation* Douglas Brown and Tanya Krzywinska explore the ways that *LOTRO* translates *The Lord of the Rings* franchise and 'tolkienises' the MMORPG format, and they talk about the significance of the maps both in the game and the book. In general, maps help people to better understand the landscape and to locate destinations, and they are believed to be reliable and accurate. So too are the imaginary maps that appear in *The Lord of the Rings* meant to be trusted because "veracity is signified through the use of conventions established for maps of real terrain, and these act thereby as an associational bridge across which we begin to suspend disbelief" (Brown and Krzywinska 15). In other words, readers are familiar with how a map works and are able to understand and use this kind of representation of the world, thus accepting, or, allowing themselves to believe in the imaginary world's existence. In *Building Imaginary Worlds*, Mark J. P. Wolf claims Tolkien "produced one of the most successful secondary worlds ever created" (23). The "secondary world" (imaginary world) is Arda in which Middle-earth is a continent. Tolkien had his own theory concerning his creative work. He did not think Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief" was a good description of what happens to the state of mind when readers enter an imaginary world (24). Tolkien said the events inside an imaginary world were true if they were in accordance with the laws of that world. So, it is a form of belief, rather than suspended disbelief. Tolkien coined the terms *Secondary Belief*, *Secondary World*, and *Primary World*. The Primary World is the world we live in, and secondary worlds are the imaginary worlds created by authors. Secondary worlds are similar to the Primary World to varying degrees. Secondary worlds that are well developed and highly detailed are more detached from the Primary World, while others that rely heavily on existing Primary World standards, only have a minimum of inventions (25). A Secondary World will be more believable if it has some of the most basic standards of the Primary World, such as gravity and some kind of sustenance. Suspension of disbelief, Secondary Belief, and immersion are all terms that describe the experience readers have when they read fiction and perhaps,

especially fantasy literature. However, readers must choose to believe in the world, the characters, and events, when they themselves enter the imaginary world, for it to be enjoyable.

The first thing the reader encounters in the book is the maps that show roads and landscapes. These maps, together with the descriptions in the prologue to *The Fellowship of the Ring* provide the reader with thorough information about the places. Tolkien writes in a letter to one of his proofreaders, Naomi Mitchison, who had not seen the maps, about the importance of them:

> I am sorry about the Geography. It must have been dreadfully difficult without a map or maps (...) I wisely started with a map, and made the story fit (generally with meticulous care for distance). The other way about lands one in confusion and impossibilities, and in any case it is weary work to compose a map from a story - as I fear you have found. (*The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 177)

In other words, the maps came before the plot. The development of the maps and their richness of detail provided the support Tolkien needed to get started, and they also became his motivation to go on. They were both inspiration and invention at once (*The Road to Middle-earth* 133). The maps may also have been important to Tolkien because they helped him to be consistent. The readers use the maps as a guide to the whereabouts of places and characters while reading. There are many lengthy descriptions of the landscape in *The Lord of the Rings.* Some of the characters "have a strong tendency to talk like maps", Tom Shippey observes (114). When the Fellowship is leaving Lórien, Celeborn explains the way:

> "There the Entwash flows in by many mouths from the Forest of Fangorn in the west. About that stream, on the side of the Great River, lies Rohan. On the further side are the bleak hills of Emyn Muil. The wind blows from the east there, for they look out over the Dead Marshes and the Noman-lands to Cirith Gorgor and the black gates of Mordor." (*The Fellowship of the Ring*, 373)

This is only a fraction of the long, enthusiastic demonstration of Celeborn's knowledge of the lands. Extended descriptions such as this can cause some readers to skim through these parts of the book, but readers who also play *LOTRO* will recognise the place names from the game, which makes both reading the book and playing the game more

immersive. Tracing The Fellowship's journey on the maps while reading the novel creates a mental image of space and contributes to strategic spatial immersion. In other words, locating the characters on the map helps to mentally visualise where in the world they are, and how close or far apart they are. In the game, the maps assist the players in a similar way. Players can find each other on the map if they are in a group together. They will then appear on the map as green dots with their name tags.

Unlike the book, the geographical maps are not the first the player encounters, but the screen for creating characters. However, this is also a kind of map, a map of cultures and races of The Free People in Middle-earth with brief information about each race and their respective places of origin. On the character creation screen, the player can choose between five races: man, hobbit, elf, dwarf, and beorning, and ten classes: Beorning (which can only be played by the beorning race), Burglar, Captain, Champion, Guardian, Hunter, Lore-master, Minstrel, Rune-keeper, and Warden. Classes are character archetypes that have specific fighting abilities. All the classes have different roles if players play together in a team, or, as it is called in this game: *a fellowship*. It is the set of skills of each class that defines the role. The different races also have different traits, but they are not unbalanced, so playing an elf is not more advantageous than playing as a hobbit. The races represent the fellowship in the book, apart from the beorning, but the classes are similar to the ones found in other MMORPGs where distinctive skills are necessary for ludic purposes. Adding to the game's Secondary Belief, to use Tolkien's term, the players must also select a background, a place of origin, for their character. Each origin description provides brief background information on the various races of Middle-earth. A human can, for example, come from Bree-land, Dale-lands, Rohan, and Gondor.

It is not until the players have finished the introductory quests that they are given a map. The map is not complete, because the places that the player has not yet visited are not marked on the map, therefore it is less detailed. However, the map shows the whole of Middle-earth, the player can view all the regions, which makes it easy for the player to orientate, to know where in the world she is and see what areas she still has to discover. The map also assists in finding quest locations, NPCs, and other players. Brown and Krzywinska argue that "affording a transcendent view, as well as helping with the task of navigation, the game's maps are ostensibly a means of supporting a player's sense that they are an active, reasoning, agent" (16). In other words, the maps contribute to the ludic element of the game due to their basic functionality that allows the player to immediately get an overview of the

world, which in turn allows the player to choose her route, learn about distances and calculate how long it will take to walk or ride to the desired destination.

In addition to providing a framework and spatial immersion, the maps also help the readers to believe the world is complete. An imaginary world can not really be fully complete, therefore Wolf talks about completeness as "the degree to which the world contains explanations and details covering all the various aspects of its characters' experience, as well as background details which together suggest a feasible, practical world" (38). The background information provided on the character creation screen and the maps contribute to this sense of completeness. The completeness of a world is significant for the degree of immersion readers and players experience. The maps provide an overview of Middle-earth's infrastructure, and because these maps have places that are not directly connected to any of the events or characters in the story, they inform the readers that the story takes place in a relatively small part of the world, suggesting that there may be other populations and events happening at the same time elsewhere. Those who read the appendices in *The Lord of the Rings* know that this is a fact, and it is also true in *LOTRO* where players are spread all over the world engaged in many different events.

## 2.5 The Kinesthetic Pleasure

Kinesthetic engagement is related to strategic immersion, it is about orientating in the landscape, not by maps, but through the movements of the player's avatar. It requires some skill on the part of the player, so when the player manages to move the avatar in a satisfactory way, the feeling can be called kinesthetic pleasure. It is due to kinesthetic engagement over time that the universe of *LOTRO*, Middle-earth, feels like a familiar place, thus reinforcing both emotional spatial immersion and strategic spatial immersion.

Kinesthetic pleasure can be achieved on two levels. Since the game is an ergodic medium, players do not merely consume the content, but must actively participate to get the desired result. First, the player must gain control of the buttons on the computer so that the outcome of the game is satisfactory. It is not until the player has gained technical mastery over the machine, that the pleasure of seeing the movements of the player's avatar can take place. For example, to know which keys to press to make the avatar walk, jump, or fight. Once mastery of the buttons is achieved, the pleasure of controlling the avatar's movements can provide the player with "the satisfaction derived from the performance as well as the

cinematic visuals" (Calleja 66). An example of this type of satisfaction from *LOTRO* could be when the player character is swinging her sword successfully in a fight with an enemy, and the player watches the scene from a third-person perspective. If the movements performed by the avatar are of the kind that the player is not likely able to do in real life, there might also be the joy of the ability to simulate these actions. Another reason why the kinesthetic sensation can be powerful is that once players have mastered controlling their avatar, the running and leaping through the game environment can be so appealing that "players can then physically and cognitively interpret those actions as *their own* running, leaping, and flying, rather than as those of an external agent" (Calleja 68). In other words, when players master the movements of their player character effortlessly, it is so engaging that it can almost feel as if it is the players themselves that are running around in the virtual world.

## 2.6 Temporal Immersion

The reason why readers return to *The Lord of the Rings*, repeatedly, is not only because of the richness of detail but also because Tolkien manages to keep readers caught up in suspense even though they know what happens next. Ryan connects a story's ability to play with the readers' expectations, creating suspense, curiosity, and surprise, to temporal immersion. Temporal immersion is the reader's involvement in the development of the story, the unfolding of events. The art of creating interest in a story has to do with the sequence of events and that the readers understand the logic of the story (*Narrative as Virtual Reality* 99). In other words, it is about the author's way of creating progress in a story to make it interesting, and it may include the use of various literary means.

One such literary device can be the element of surprise, something that is unexpected that surprises the reader. When Frodo suddenly decides not to throw the ring into the fire of Mount Doom after the arduous journey to get there to do so, this is an element of surprise. The reader does not expect this to happen. There are elements of surprise in *LOTRO*'s scripted narrative as well. In a quest called "Oakheart's Might" in the epic questline (*Volume 1, Book 9, Chapter 2*), the players are in for a big surprise when a nice, old lady named Sara Oakheart, turns out to be Amarthiel in disguise, an evil and powerful enemy who has the favour of Sauron. This character does not exist in Tolkien's works but is the protagonist in one of the stories added by the game's developers. Stories like this are included because

players cannot follow the Fellowship everywhere, they must have some other meaningful missions that involve fighting powerful, evil forces in Middle-earth.

Ryan argues the element of surprise is not enough to provide temporal immersion because it is too short-lived for that purpose. However, if the surprise has to do with new information that affects the identity of a character, as is the case with Sara becoming Amarthiel in the example, the reader may want to go back and look for clues. Such cases where the reader's attention is turned "toward an extended period of time, rather than being limited to a single moment" can be considered temporal immersion, Ryan suggests (*Narrative as Virtual Reality* 101). Perhaps most readers would just think back to the course of events, to see if they can remember noticing any pointers, but some would flip back through the pages, reread, and try to find hidden clues. In the game, this would be a bit more complicated. The player would have to create a new character to play through that particular storyline a second time to look for possible clues. In this case, there are specific clues, but these details are often overlooked the first time. When experiencing the story again, the players may feel reluctant to help Sara, knowing the truth about her identity, and of course, players can refrain from doing this part of the game and thus never meeting Amarthiel at all. If players choose to skip this questline, it is still possible for them to continue levelling and enjoy the game, but they will miss out on a great story.



Fig. 8 Sara picks up her stick in the cave.

The ruffians have taken Sara's stick and put it in a chest. On the way out, she passes the chest and retrieves the stick. The players are a bit annoyed at this point because Sara walks very slowly and takes her time, while the players are eager to get out of the cave. The difference between a game and a book here is that book pages can be skimmed or skipped, while in a game players have to endure, there is no fast forward button. If the players do the quest a second time, it may be even more tedious, or on the contrary more immersive, since they now know the reasons for Sara's actions, which are clues that she is not who she pretends to be.

Sara turns up suddenly at the end of another quest in the same questchain when the player character has defeated the Steward of Angmar (an evil servant of Sauron) with one of the Rangers (NPC). The Ranger asks her who she is, but she answers: "Your question will be answered in time" (*Volume 1, Book 8, Chapter 5*). This is another hint that there is something mysterious about the old woman. Furthermore, after completing this quest, there is a cutscene with Sara Oakheart accompanied by NPC-Gandalf's voice suggesting an unknown power that may appear to claim Angmar. For observant players, these literary devices create both suspense and surprise.



Fig. 9 Sara Oakheart is an agent of Angmar, Amarthiel.

Suspense is another literary device that creates dramatic tension in situations where, for example, a character is in danger and the reader is interested in how it turns out (*Narrative as Virtual Reality* 101). Usually, a story starts with a challenge that the character has to take on or a problem that has to be solved. Once the character has chosen a path, her actions will

either lead to success or to failure, and it is these conflicting actions that lead to the suspense. Ryan lists four types of suspense: *what suspense*, *how (wh*y) *suspense*, *who suspense*, and *metasuspense*. "What suspense" is the kind of suspense that occurs when the reader is curious about what will happen next, for example, what fatal choice the character will make. It is this kind of suspense that is most relevant to look at in both the game and the book.

Owing to its ergodicity, suspense in the game is experienced differently from suspense in the book. The quest about Sara Oakheart involves defending her against attacking men that the players must defeat to succeed in the mission. So, there is suspense connected to the fighting as both Sara and the players are in danger and the fight may lead to success or failure. The players may also be curious about what will happen to Sara and ponder why this old lady was taken captive by the brigands in the first place. It is a mystery what Sara was doing in the back of a cell together with one of the rangers, Amdir, a friend of Aragorn, who is the one the players think they are going to rescue. The players may be eager to find out how and why Sara was held prisoner together with Amdir. In that case, it is what Ryan calls "how (why) suspense". "Since the fate of the hero is known from the very beginning, involvement is not a matter of wishing for a favourable outcome but a matter of curiosity about the solution to a problem" (*Narrative as Virtual Reality* 103). Sara's fate is known, for the time being, after the rescue, but there is no information about the previous circumstances. An example from *The Lord of the Rings* of "how (why) suspense" is when the reader learns why Gandalf did not meet Frodo at *The Prancing Pony* like he said he would. It is not until the end of the second chapter of *Book Two* in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, that Gandalf finally reveals what delayed him. By then the reader has known he is safe in almost two chapters, so there is not as much suspense around the outcome as there is curiosity about his absence.

People who re-read *The Lord of the Rings* are caught up in suspense even after multiple readings. This phenomenon stands in contrast to the definition of suspense if suspense is dependent on uncertainty. Ryan argues that "the best account of anomalous suspense should therefore be one that tolerates some degree of recidivism but predicts a loss of intensity and eventual decay" (*Virtual Reality* 105). She argues that people must surely get bored after too many re-readings. Nevertheless, there are people who never stop re-reading Tolkien's books, although it is probably not because they still experience suspense, but because of their emotional involvement in the stories.

## 2.7 Emotional Immersion

Players see the character from the book come to life in a new way in the game. It is unlikely, however, that players feel empathy with them in the same way as in the book. In other words, there is less emotional immersion with the characters due to this lack of empathy. This is because they function mainly as a means for the player's progression in the game. Nevertheless, empathy with an NPC is possible in situations where the player character gets a relation to the NPC. This can happen, for example, during a chain of quests where there is one NPC that reappears several times. One such occasion is during the siege of Minas Tirith, where the player 'gets to know' a father who lost both his sons in the battle. The player character interacts with both the father and his sons several times, fighting alongside them in the battle on the Pelennor Fields, so seeing them dead on the battlefield may evoke a certain empathy with the family.

Readers care about the fate of characters that never existed, Ryan says, and she calls this emotional immersion (*Narrative as Virtual Reality* 106). Emotional immersion is the type of immersion that readers experience when they are touched or provoked by what they read or have empathy or other feelings towards the characters in the story. Ryan mentions three types of emotions that lead to immersion in fiction. One is "subjective reactions to characters and judgments of their behaviour" which includes "admiration, contempt, pity, amusement, schadenfreude, and exasperation". Another is empathy towards characters and the third is "emotions felt for oneself", for example, fear and disgust (108). All these emotions can also be experienced when playing *LOTRO* since it is a game with a story and characters that the player can have feelings for. But the strongest emotions are "emotions felt for oneself", and mainly excitement and delight, but also frustration and anger. Thus, emotional immersion in the game is more related to the ludic aspect of immersion than to the narrative. Players may experience "excitement, triumph, dejection, relief, frustration, relaxation, curiosity, and amusement" (249), but these feelings reflect the player's success or failure in completing a task in the game, or they reflect a person's interest in playing the game. The characters in the game are regarded by the player more as a means to achieve something than 'real' persons, therefore, the interest in them is of a ludic nature, in contrast to narrative interest. Emotional immersion will very rarely be the type connected to empathy because this type of immersion requires interpersonal relations between the player and the non-player characters (NPCs). The player's emotions are not strong enough to really feel

sincere pity for the characters even if the player character meets orphans and participates in funerals.

Calleja's "affective involvement" may be more relevant regarding emotional immersion in games. He says that there are rhetorical strategies of the game design aimed at creating specific emotional responses, but that these emotional responses do not necessarily occur during gaming, and that this could be due to factors such as a player's lack of interest or interruptions (139). Affective involvement can be related to appealing graphics, sound, or intense combat situations, factors that aim to make a game convincing or attractive. Calleja argues furthermore that digital games have the potential to affect players emotionally differently from other media due to "the way they place the player in a cybernetic feedback loop between human mind and machine" (135). In other words, the experience is of a more powerful nature than non-ergodic media can provide, because the player's interactive efforts may be simultaneously cognitive, emotional, and kinesthetic and therefore may affect the player's mood more. An example of an occasion where the player might have all these experiences at once is when the player rides towards Minas Tirith, and on the way encounters Faramir who is surrounded by enemies. The player has to defend Faramir, but he is shot and falls off his horse. During the heat of the moment, the player sees a bright light coming toward the crowd. It is Gandalf on Shadowfax who uses his powers and scares away the rest of the enemy. In this scene, the player gets to experience excitement, empathy, and awe, all at once. There is the thrill of the fight, empathy with Faramir, and witnessing Gandalf's powerful abilities is a little awe-inspiring, especially for those players who have read the book. See figure 10.

Fig. 10 Gandalf on Shadowfax.

Just like in the book, Gandalf turns up when things are darkest. When Pippin peers over the wall in Minas Tirith he catches "a flash of white and silver coming from the North, like a small star down on the dusky fields". It is Gandalf on his white horse and from his raised hand "a shaft of white light stabbed upwards". The enemy passes away eastward and vanishes into the clouds, "and down on the Pelennor it seemed for a while less dark" (*The Return of the King* 809).

## 2.8 Summary of Chapter 2

Immersion is the key to why people are entertained by games and books. In this chapter, I have looked at various types of immersion and compared immersion in the book to immersion in the game. The most apparent aspect is the distinct experiences of spatial immersion in the game and the book. In the game, the players enter Middle-earth physically, not literally, but through their avatars. They see the world with their eyes, not only in their minds, and they can make things happen in the world. As opposed to immersion in the book, where it is all in the mind of the reader.

Spatial immersion is a concept that includes both aspects of space and place in literature. Spatial immersion can be experienced as an emotional connection to a place, peoples' hometowns evoke such a feeling. In literature, both books and games, emotional

spatial immersion is connected to places that readers and players are familiar with. These places, which are easily described with words, are set in a fictional universe which can be harder to describe with words. Therefore, the use of maps is useful to illustrate the extent of the fictional world. The maps are particularly useful for players to navigate the game and make strategic moves. Maps also make the world seem complete and real.

When discussing temporal immersion, I have used a story created by the game's designers as an example and looked at how the elements of surprise, suspense and curiosity contribute to the player's immersion. The story is really engaging, which proves that the game can provide a satisfying literary experience. However, emotional immersion in connection with the characters in the game is an ephemeral thing. Players' empathy with the NPCs is short-lived and leaves no permanent impact. In books, if the story is seen from the characters' perspective, readers may be more emotionally immersed in the characters' inner struggles.

# Chapter 3

# The Transformation of the Themes

## 3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the themes in *The Lord of the Rings*, and study how the game has transformed and incorporated the book's themes into the game's structure of progression, combat system, and visual effects. It is perhaps the most challenging task to remediate the themes from book to game. Several of the main themes in the book are related to the characters, and since the players do not get a thorough insight into the book characters' mind, these themes are conveyed instead through gameplay. It is interesting to see whether this way of transforming the themes will affect narrative immersion, to what extent the players will experience a sense of presence and investment in the themes.

I investigate the themes of corruption, good versus evil, hope and fear, and friendship when I compare how the themes are presented in the two mediums. The theme of corruption is linked to the Ring in the book, but in the game the players do not come close to the One Ring, so corruption is instead a type of damage effect. The theme of good and evil is presented in the game through visualisation of the landscape. The conflict between hope and fear is another theme that the game presents through its visual design and combat system. Lastly, friendship is an important part of both the book and the game, and the friendship between Legolas and Gimli is the most relevant to explore when making a comparison with friendships that arise in the game world. I also study the message conveyed in some of the themes in the book. One major theme in the book is free will, and in the next section I look at how free will influences the characters' fate.

## 3.2 Will and Fate

Early critics of Tolkien claimed that *The Lord of the Rings* was about a simple confrontation between good and evil, much like the basic theme of tragedy, epic, and myth. Patricia Meyer Spacks, however, argues that Tolkien's presentation of this topic is not so simple (53). The theme of the struggle between good and evil is complex in *The Lord of the Rings* because it takes place in a philosophically complicated context, Spacks says (56). Two of the main themes are freedom of will, and fate, emphasised by Gandalf early in *The*

*Fellowship of the Ring*: "All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us" (51). This means that the people of Middle-earth are free to choose, they have freedom of will, but the time they live in, they cannot choose. That is their fate. It was also fated that Bilbo found the Ring, as asserted through Gandalf's words again a few pages later: "... there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and *not* by its maker. In which case you also were *meant* to have it" (56). (The italics are Tolkien's.) Then Gandalf moves on to talk about responsibility. Since Frodo has been chosen, he "must therefore use such strength and heart and wits" as he possesses to ensure that the Ring is destroyed (61). When Frodo realises that he must not refuse the task of destroying the Ring, the recognition that it is his burden alone becomes a means by which he benefits when others try to take the Ring for themselves. His determination based on his virtue and courage is what sustains him all the way to the Crack of Doom.

There is one ordering power in the universe of Middle-earth, however, this power's source is never mentioned in the story (59). Gandalf talks about a purpose in the world which he refers to as fate. He says it was fate that made Bilbo spare Gollum's life; however, it was also Bilbo's own act of will. Throughout the whole story, the existence of mere chance is denied, there is a purpose to the good things that happen, and therefore there is also hope. Sam has a glimpse of hope when he sees a white star twinkle in the night sky in Mordor: "... the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach" (*The Return of the King* 922). Sam realises that his own fate is connected to a greater purpose in the world. Hope has returned to Sam and that night he is able to put away all his fear before he goes to sleep, knowing that he has made the right choice. Free will plays an important role in Tolkien's universe, and therefore there is also "enormous possibility for immediate evil" (60).

The people of Middle-earth cannot rely on luck, they must make choices. When Éomer, the leader of the Riders of Rohan, asks Aragorn what doom he brings out of the North, after having seen the horse they lent Boromir return to Rohan riderless, he answers: "The doom of choice" (*The Two Towers* 434). In this short reply, there is a play between the words doom and choice. Doom is literally another word for fate, but Aragorn must choose, because free will is the fate of men. According to Spacks, Aragorn's answer indicates that all must choose good or evil (60), and in these choices lies the answer to who is good and who is evil. The evil characters have used their freedom to choose evil, but in doing so they destroy freedom: "emphasis is consistently upon the essential *slavery* of the servants of Sauron, who

can no longer accept freedom when it is offered to them" (62). Saruman is offered freedom after he has been overthrown, but he is too corrupted by pride to make such a choice and remains in slavery to Sauron. The most dramatic choice is made by Frodo at the Crack of Doom when he has finally reached the place where the Ring must be destroyed, he even says it out loud: "I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!" (*The Return of the King* 945). He uses the language of free will, but the act represents "rather a crucial failure of will" (Spacks 64). Frodo could no longer withstand the corruption of the Ring when it was so close to its maker: "He was come to the heart of the realm of Sauron (...) all other powers were here subdued" (*The Return of the King* 945). Even the strong will of Frodo breaks down here. However, fate intervenes and saves him. Frodo has made some right choices, the most crucial of them, it turns out, was to show Gollum mercy despite his betrayal. Gollum bites off Frodo's ring finger and in his joy of having the Ring back, he accidentally steps over the edge and falls into the fires of Mount Doom, destroying the Ring and with it Sauron. This incident in particular shows how free will and fate are connected. Gandalf was right when he suspected that Gollum had some part to play in the story: "And he is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end …" (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 59).

To sum up, the themes in *The Lord of the Rings* are many and important. The book is not just about the good versus the evil. It is about taking responsibility for one's fate and understanding the consequences of the choices one makes. It is also about hope, such hope that can lift morale and make people endure fear in Middle-earth as well as in our world. Too much power will always lead to corruption, as evidenced by the wars started by powerful men in leading positions throughout history right up to the present day.

## 3.3 Corruption

In a long conversation between Frodo and Gandalf in chapter two of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Gandalf makes some severe statements about the Ring. He asserts that the Ring is extremely powerful, it will devour its possessor, turn everything into evil, and it must be destroyed where it was made. If the reader does not accept these assertions, the point of the story collapses. However, these assertions are believable because they can be compared to what power can do to people in our own world today. Gandalf says that the Ring is so powerful it will make Sauron stronger than ever if he regains it. For anyone else who should

own the Ring, it will dominate and destroy them, and eventually turn them to evil. "There is no one who can be trusted to use it", even "all good purposes will turn bad if reached through the Ring", Tom Shippey explains (*Author of the Century* 114). Shippey quotes Lord Acton's famous words when he reflects on what Gandalf says about the Ring: "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men…", (115). Shippey's point is that Tolkien wrote his book in a century that had experienced leaders that could not be trusted, "least of all if they expressed a wish for the betterment of humanity" (116). The fact that political leaders, under the pretext of good intentions, have started wars also in the twenty-first century, is the reason why the topic of how power triggers corruption is still easily recognisable to readers of *The Lord of the Rings.*

The concept of corruption in the book is conveyed through some of the characters' lack of resistance to the power of the Ring. They are corrupted by it, and it makes them weak, meaning that they make bad decisions. Shippey clarifies in *The Road to Middle-earth* that the Ring "has to work through the agency of its possessors, and especially by picking out the weak points of their characters - possessiveness in Bilbo, fear in Frodo, patriotism in Boromir, pity in Gandalf" (161). The ring acts as an amplifier, it enhances the traits people already have. That is why Gollum was so easily corrupted by it because he was already weak-minded and prone to evil. Frodo, on the other hand, is strong-minded and kind-hearted and therefore resists corruption better, but in the end, he too fails to withstand the Ring's power and for a short time is totally under its curse until Gollum forcibly takes it from him. Boromir is affected by the Ring even though he never held it. In his desire for it, he turns to violence and confirms Elrond's words that "The very desire of it corrupts the heart" (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 267). Boromir follows Frodo and tries to persuade him to hand over the Ring. He fantasises about what he could become if he had it:

> "The Ring would give me power of Command. How I would drive the hosts of Mordor, and all men would flock to my banner!"
>
> Boromir strode up and down, speaking ever more loudly. Almost he seemed to have forgotten Frodo, while his talk dwelt on walls and weapons, and the mustering of men; and he drew plans for great alliances and glorious victories to be; and he cast down Mordor, and became himself a mighty king, benevolent and wise. (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 398)

Boromir has not only forgotten Frodo, but also the discussion and warning given at the Council of Elrond, that no one can use the Ring without becoming evil and corrupt like Sauron himself. But Boromir is proud and perhaps deep down desires to be a king and rule over others as the line "all men would flock to my banner" indicates. The influence of the Ring strengthens his pride and makes him believe that he is worthy to use the Ring to protect his country. His speech sends out all the signals which the twentieth century has learned to distrust, Shippey notices (*Author of the Century* 117). The syntax of this section changes from hypotactic to paratactic with the use of "and" to bind many clauses in succession. This stylistic choice makes the language breathless and dramatic. The closest one comes to a description like this in *LOTRO*, the game, is through combat sequences, when the player character is engaged in fast-paced fighting. Standing alone against multiple enemies, waving the sword wildly around, hoping that it hits and destroys the opponents before it is too late, can make a player's heart pound faster.

Tolkien critics have pointed out that the Ring has a bad effect on some people, but no effect at all on others, and this fact has made them critical of the whole story about how the Ring is the source of evil. Several of the characters show no interest in having the Ring, others admit that they are tempted to take it, but manage to resist the temptation. Another contradiction is that although Gandalf has declared that taking the Ring from Frodo by force will break his mind, his mind is still intact after Gollum has taken the Ring from him by force. Shippey says both these inconsistencies can be explained by declaring that the use of the Ring is addictive. "One use need not be disastrous on its own, but each use tends to strengthen the urge for another" (*Author of the Century* 119). Suddenly it all seems logical, because those who have had the Ring only for a short time, like Sam, give it up more easily than Gollum and Frodo, who are completely addicted to it. In Gollum's case, the addiction has gotten so far that he has forsaken all his friends and family and is a wreck hiding in a dark cave. Furthermore, if anyone were to try to make Frodo give up the Ring willingly, he would have to be hypnotised, or be exposed to some other form of mental force, which is what Gandalf meant by saying that taking the Ring by force would break his mind. The Ring was taken by physical force, so the incident did not break Frodo's mind, only his hand.

Concerning corruption as a theme in the game, the player characters do not have the opportunity to come close to or try to take the One Ring and are therefore not corrupted by it. However, the player's character can be affected by corruption in other ways, for example, when fighting certain mobs that use corruption as a *debuff* to make their opponent weaker. A debuff is an effect used to reduce the opponent's health or fighting ability. There is a skill (an

ability) that the players can use to remove corruption to reduce its effect and to succeed in some boss fights it is crucial to time the removal of corruption. A boss fight is a fight against a particularly challenging NPC, and in some cases, good knowledge of the game's mechanics is required to win. One such boss is The Lieutenant of Dol Guldur, who is one of the nine Nazgûl. The Nazgûl, also called the Ringwraiths, are Sauron's most powerful servants. They were originally mighty men who each received a ring that had a corruptive influence, and in the course of time, they did not die but became wraiths (undead creatures) and were forever bound to the will of Sauron. The Lieutenant of Dol Guldur appears in more than one quest. In the epic questline, he turns up at the end of a solo instance in *Volume 2, Book 9*. A solo instance is a private version of a place that a player cannot enter with a group. Through dialogue with an NPC the player is given this information about the lieutenant:

> "Lord Celeborn believed some of the Nazgûl had come to Dol Guldur, but did not know for certain which of the Nine had done so. Now we do, though it is of little comfort to us. The Lieutenant of Dol Guldur commands the others; he is second only to the Witch-king, he who hailed from Angmar in the north. The Lieutenant of the Tower rules the fortress; it is he who struck down Achardor." (Standing Stone Games, 2021)

In this instance, the player is too weak to even attempt to fight the lieutenant. The player is told to flee. The NPC-elf, Achardor, however, chooses to confront the Nazgûl and is killed. When the players know who they have to deal with, an enemy that is under the command of Sauron, it comes as no surprise that this enemy is corrupt and dangerous. The effect of corruption on the characters in the book can also be compared to the effect corruption has on player characters in terms of their strengths and weaknesses. Through armour and statistics (numeric values), the player character can be more or less resistant to corruption as a type of damage. Compared to the novel, this may correspond to the weak-minded characters who are more affected by corruption than the strong-minded.

In addition, Hobbits in the game have a racial characteristic that gives them a certain resistance to corruption, which is in accordance with the original lore since the hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings* show remarkable resistance to the effects of the Ring. In the book, the four hobbits in the Fellowship are not warriors to begin with. Hobbits in general are humble, peace-loving people who for the most part leave the affairs of the world outside the Shire to "the big folk". Most hobbits also have high morals. There are no real criminals in the Shire,

as Frodo says: "No hobbit has ever killed another on purpose in the Shire" (*The Return of the King* 1006). In addition to humbleness, it is also because of their honesty and resilience that they are not so easily corrupted by power. Even though these qualities are assigned to the hobbit race in the game, which is consistent with the book, the possibility to create a great hobbit warrior is a lore break, because in the book, very few hobbits ever leave the Shire. However, the game must consider that if it is to work well as an MMORPG, it must have as many options for the players as possible for it to keep players interested.

As mentioned, power corrupts the mind and reduces moral reasoning. Owning the Ring would mean having powers that would lead to selfish, evil behaviour. This would not be compatible with the intention of *LOTRO* which is to keep a high morale, collaborate with other players and make new friends. This is a good reason why the Ring is not within reach of the player characters. It would also ruin immersion since it would be a major ethos breach. After all, there is only one Ring, and Frodo is not going to hand it over to a random player character. In *The Lord of the Rings* and in *LOTRO*, the loss of morale makes the characters vulnerable to evil. The characters in the book are more or less corrupted by the power of the Ring. Corruption in the game is a ludic feature that causes the player characters to lose health points and be in danger of becoming incapacitated and thus be unable to fight for the good.

## 3.4 The Visualisation of Good and Evil

The good and evil forces in the novel are not only linked to moral choices but also play a role in relation to nature. Frodo's journey from the Shire to Mordor is a journey from "natural fertility to the desolation of nature". The lands of the Enemy are physically and morally wastelands; "the implication is strong that the barrenness of nature here is a direct result of the operations of evil" (Spacks 55). As one of the elves in Rivendell says: "We see that Sauron can torture and destroy the very hills" (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 266). An interpretation of this could be that Sauron abuses nature by making deep mines for evil purposes. There is another description of ruined nature when the Fellowship is paddling on the river, Anduin: "What pestilence or war or evil deed of the Enemy had so blasted all that region even Aragorn could not tell" (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 380). Both Sauron and Saruman destroy nature by building huge industries on their lands. Treebeard, the Ent, describes Saruman as having "a mind of metal and wheels" who "does not care for growing

things" (*The Two Towers* 473). The resident of Sauron is described as "that vast fortress, armoury, prison, furnace of great power" (*The two Towers* 555).

There are dangerous places with evil beings and safe places with good people in both the book and the game. The game highlights the difference between these places by using visual effects and especially colours. Colours are used not only to make the environment realistic, but also to communicate thematic meaning via "the evocation of psychological and moral associations through the archetypal use of landscape and season" (Brown and Krzywinska 23). Unlike Frodo, the players do not have to leave the Shire or the other homely starting areas of the game. They can stay, take up a profession as a farmer and make things grow. Thus, they can avoid dangerous and evil places if they wish. Brown and Krzywinska have studied how the rendering of landscape connects the game visually to the original story. They argue that great emphasis is placed on realising geographic descriptions provided by Tolkien, so that players are provided with detailed landscapes and the ability to see far into the distance, pleasures that are of "the type that belong to those of the tourist's gaze" (21).

Verlyn Flieger writes in *Splintered Light* that Tolkien suffuses "the pastoral quiet of the Shire" and "the melancholy gold-and-silver beauty of Lórien with nostalgia for time past. Counterposed to these are the belching furnaces, reeking smoke, sooty chimneys, and machinery of Saruman and Mordor (...)". The descriptions of the various parts of Middle-earth are coloured by Tolkiens's own longing for the simple world in the past and his view of modern technology which he thought could be both ugly and destructive (26). Several places in the book are black and red associated with evil. One example is Sam's vision in Galadriel's mirror: "There was a tall red chimney nearby. Black smoke seemed to cloud the surface of the mirror" (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 363). Sam sees the despoiling of the Shire when Saruman's men replace the old mill with a new, industrialised, polluting mill. The starting areas in *LOTRO*, the homely lands of The Shire and Breelands, have a pastoral appearance, with beautiful villages and farms where it is always summer season. Rivendell, on the other hand, has the hues of autumn, which may illustrate the fact that the elves are leaving Middle-earth (Brown and Krzywinska 23). However, not all is well in these areas. Bandits have camps in abandoned farms, backwoods, and ruins, and as Brown and Krzywinska observe: "A clear moral code is keyed into the visual design of the geography of the game, built around the theme of corruption" (24). Between Bree and the Lone-Lands lie the Midgewater Marshes where goblins, spiders, and sickle flies live among part-submerged ruins and shrines decorated with skulls and red paint. See figure 11. The sun is not visible, the sky is grey with no hope-inspiring blue and the water is red and sickly pink indicating blood

sacrifices. Corruption and evil have infected these waters, whereas the lakes and waters in the homelands are clear blue and pure. The atmosphere in evil areas like this fills the player with such dread and claustrophobia that the player will be relieved when going back to green, lush areas and brightly lit places. In *The Fellowship of the Ring,* the Midgewater Marshes are described as an unpleasant place with quagmires that were "bewildering and treacherous" (182). When the company left for Weathertop "the land became drier and more barren; but mists and vapours lay behind them on the marshes" (184). No colours are used in this description, but the designers of the game have used colours and various hues of colours to enhance a certain atmosphere. According to Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen the varying degree of saturation of a colour could be interpreted as "emotive temperatures", and that "pale or pastel, or dull and dark manifestations of a colour" can in certain contexts mean "cold and repressed", whereas "pure manifestation of a colour" may symbolise positivity, joy, and adventure (233).



Fig. 11 The Midgewater Marshes

Before Frodo and his friends reach Bree, they encounter a very colourful character in The Old Forest, namely Tom Bombadil. He has yellow boots, a blue coat, a long brown beard, blue and bright eyes, and a face as red as an apple (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 119). Tolkien says that Tom Bombadil was put in the story because he represents something important: "The story is cast in terms of a good side, and a bad side, beauty against ruthless ugliness" (*Letters* 178), and Tom Bombadil, with his friendly and cheerful appearance, acts

as a contrast to the bad and ugly. Tom Bombadil is a joyful character who sings for no apparent reason. He believes one must be jolly even in dark situations, he laughs so much that he has "wrinkles of laughter", and he dresses in "happy bright colors reminiscent of the pastoral world" (Chapman-Morales 66). Most importantly, his joyfulness allows him to resist evil, so that even the Ring has no effect on him, and his mission is to "show the hobbits the power of joy as a means of resisting evil" (Chapman-Morales 71). The way Tom Bombadil is described adds humour and play to the novel. In the game he has lines such as: "Old Tom's a merry fellow" and "Hey dol merry dol whither are you going?" These lines are part of a poem Tolkien wrote about Tom Bombadil several years before *The Lord of the Rings*, but they are also included in the book. The origin of Tom Bombadil was a doll owned by one of Tolkien's children. The doll was dressed exactly as Tom is described in the book, and most likely his name was invented by one of the children, and not Tolkien himself. Tolkien writes in one of his letters that he wanted to put Tom Bombadil in *The Lord of the Rings* because he was already invented (Hammond and Scull 127). In the game, he appears as a jovial figure, and some of his lines are sung through a voice-over. Even if the players have not read the book, they learn through the quest text who and what Tom Bombadil is. It describes him as "oldest and fatherless" and the players learn that he is wise and master of the wood. His house is located between two dangerous areas, The Old Forest and the Barrow-downs. This part of the landscape is an example of what Brown and Krzywinska call "a strong juxtaposition of homely and uncanny" (25). In other words, the house of Tom Bombadil is a safe zone for players, while the surrounding forest and the Barrow-downs are areas that are inhabited by evil creatures that will attack players.

Fig. 12 Tom Bombadil outside his house.

The contrast between hope and fear, or good and evil, are present between these areas on the ludic level as well as in the design. NPC-Tom Bombadil radiates an aura of Hope that increases the player characters' health bar when they are close to him. The Barrow-downs is an area with tombs, and it is inhabited by undead soldiers with bodies in various states of decay, and these mobs use *fear* to cause damage to the player characters. Fear effects can be removed by using items called *hope* tokens. Thus, the game brings together hope and fear just as the story in the novel does. In the book, Frodo and his three hobbit friends are twice rescued by Tom Bombadil in these dangerous places, first from an evil tree in The Old Forest and then from a wight in the Barrow-downs. The player characters are also rescued by Tom from a wight-lord called Sambrog, in a barrow in the Barrow-downs, in *Volume 1, Book 1, Chapter 11*. Tom does not appear as a warrior of any kind, on the contrary, he is as jovial as always when he defeats the wight-lord. The dialogue at the end of this quest is amusing. Sambrog calls his minions and tells the player she cannot defeat him. Then a voice is heard in the distance: "Hey dol! Merry dol!" This is not done with voice-over, but as written text in the chat window and over the NPC's head (see figure 12). Sambrog is confused and says: "What? It cannot be!" But Tom says: "What be you a-thinking? Dead men should not be waking!" Then Sambrog dies. Tom tells the player: "Leave the Dead to sleep their dreamless sleep and walk yourself upon the green grass under the sun!" (Standing Stone Games, 2022).

In both pictures the colour is greenish. However, in the evil area, the green is darker and mixed with yellow, it gets a sickly greenish colour. In Tom's garden, the green colour

stands for green grass and healthy nature. In addition, Sauron's colours are black and red, his symbol is a red eye on a black field. This combination of black and red is also seen in Figure 11. Another example of how colours can denote good and evil, is how elven swords glow with a blue colour. Examples of this from the books are Gandalf's sword, Glamdring, which shines blue or white, and Frodo's sword, Sting, which gets a blue glow to it whenever there is a foe nearby. Contrary to the sword of the evil Balrog which glows red *(The Fellowship of the Ring* 330). Both the book and the game use colour to identify good or evil. Based on Tolkien's descriptions, *LOTRO* has a visual design that distinguishes between safe and dangerous places using colour codes.

## 3.5 Hope and fear

One of the concepts that gives *The Lord of the Rings* its form is all the contrasts, the conflict between good and evil, free will and fate, hope and fear, and light and dark. Some of these conflicts appear as internal struggles in the characters. This is impossible to convey in the game where the NPC-characters from the book are very shallow. However, Brown and Krzywinska argue that through a combination of the aesthetic and the narrative elements with gameplay features and the gameplay combat *LOTRO* manages to "deepen its translation of Tolkien" (34).

To bring out the essence of the novel, the game uses various methods in addition to text, such as the names and functions of the mechanics of the game. An example is a skill called Summoning Horn Use where the player character blows a horn to summon fellow player characters from great distances when there is a need to gather for group-based activities. The only player class that has this skill is Captain. Boromir is a captain, and in the book, the Horn of Gondor is a sign of Boromir's lineage, and he uses it to call the other members of the Fellowship to his aid at a crucial point in the story. Other gameplay features are modified, or *tolkienised*, to verify the trademark. One example is what is usually called a health bar in other video games, which is an image that displays how many health points a player has and how much damage she can take before the bar is empty. When the bar is at zero, the player usually dies. In *LOTRO*, however, this bar is called morale, and according to Brown and Krzywinska "this significant, paradigmatic replacement is prompted by one of the major themes in the book: the morale, dramatic and psychological importance of Hope" (36). One of Gandalf's roles in the book is to give hope to the people of Middle-earth, and it is

often in the most desperate situations that Gandalf talks about hope. Hope and fear are closely linked, as indicated in the conversation between Gandalf and Théoden when Gandalf says: "that way lies our hope, where sits our greatest fear" (*The Two Towers* 516). He is looking towards the east, thinking of Frodo on his way to Mordor to destroy the Ring. In the hours before Sauron's assault on Gondor, Pippin asks Gandalf if there is any hope, and Gandalf replies that he thinks there is hope because he can feel Sauron's "haste and fear" (*The Return of the King* 815). Gandalf has just received the news from Faramir that Frodo is alive and on his way to Mount Doom while Sauron's mind is turned away from his own land, and towards Aragorn, whom he fears.

Sam is the character who retains hope until the very end. In the tower of Cirith Ungol when he is unable to find Frodo who has been captured by orcs, he sits down feeling defeated, but "to his own surprise" starts to sing (*The Return of the King*, 908). In the middle of his singing, he thinks he hears a faint voice answering him, but then he hears footsteps and a door being opened. Thus, he notices the trap-door in the ceiling that leads to the room where Frodo is being held and is able to rescue him. Frodo thinks he is dreaming when he hears the singing and tries to answer and asks Sam if it was him. Sam says: "'It was indeed, Mr. Frodo. I'd given up hope, almost. I couldn't find you'" (*The Return of the King*, 910). Sam had almost given up hope, but through the song, he seems to give new hope to himself and probably also to Frodo. When players are defeated in the game, they do not die but are incapacitated because their morale fails. The Minstrel character class can revive defeated player characters, increase their morale, and give hope by playing songs, similar to what Sam does with his song. Without hope, the morale of the player character can drop drastically, which is the same thing that happens with the characters in the book. If they lose hope, they despair. A character from the book who has lost all hope is the steward of Gondor, Boromir and Faramir's father, Denethor. When he loses all hope, his morale drops, he succumbs to despair and ends up committing suicide. Gandalf says at the Council of Elrond that "despair is only for those who see the end beyond all doubt" (269). In other words, if the end is not entirely certain, there is hope.

The fact that the player characters lose morale instead of health, affects immersion in the way that after regaining hope, the players can return to the fight while the morale bar gradually fills up, giving the player new hope of defeating the mob. If the player died, it would be less immersive, because it would be difficult to explain how the player character came back from the dead. When the player characters cannot die, it makes the deaths of NPCs more believable. When a named NPC dies in a quest, for example, one of Aragorn's

Ranger friends, the players who have completed that quest, will not encounter the particular NPC again. Thus, it makes more sense that the player characters are incapacitated as opposed to getting an infinite amount of extra life. However, the fear of losing morale is real, and often when the player characters are incapacitated, players would still say that they died, and the feeling of failure will be the same as in other games where the morale bar is called a health bar.

Hope is strongly connected to light in the book, and in the game, increased hope will actually make the world look brighter. "The alternation between the vision of hope and the experience of despair - between light and dark - is the essence both of Tolkien and of his work" Flieger says (*Splintered Light* 4). In *The Lord of the Rings,* there is a constant struggle between forces, and the dark force is the dominant one. For Tolkien, Flieger argues, light cannot exist without darkness (5). Darkness is despair, and hope is light in Tolkien's work. One famous quote from *The Fellowship of the Ring* is when Frodo is given the phial containing the light of Eärendil's star and Galadriel says: "'It will shine still brighter when night is about you. May it be a light to you in dark places, when all other lights go out'" (376). Galadriel is emphasising the contrast between light and dark, that the light will shine brighter in the dark. She also wants it to give him hope when all hope is gone, and Frodo truly needs it when he stands in the giant spider Shelob's lair "darkness about him and a blackness of despair and anger in his heart" (*The Two Towers* 719). He remembers the phial and mutters: "'*A light when all other lights go out!* And now indeed light alone can help us'" (*The Two Towers* 720). The light from Galadriel's phial does not only help against the darkness of the night or the cave, but it also gives Frodo hope, because the light is hope. In *LOTRO*, there is an item called hope token, that gives the player characters increased morale, better healing ability and a decrease in damage received in addition to removing fear. There is also a class skill called Light of Hope that provides healing, and the name of the skill is an example of how the game combines hope and light.

An interesting way to emphasise fear in the game is the Eye of Sauron, which is a burning red eye that replaces the mini-map in the corner of the screen. This may happen if the player enters a dangerous area inhabited by the servants of Sauron or is close to an enemy that is in Sauron's service. It indicates that Sauron has spotted the player character. The player character's morale drops significantly and there is a chance of being paralysed, unable to move or wield a weapon. In some cases, it generates an animation that shows the player character bent with her hands held up in front of her face in an attempt to shield herself. Brown and Krzywinska identify this as "a graphical and ludic translation of the effect of the

Eye of Sauron in the book" (38). When Frodo puts on the Ring to get away from Boromir and runs to the top of the hill, Amon Hen, he feels the Eye of Sauron searching for him:

> And suddenly he felt the Eye. There was an eye in the Dark Tower that did not sleep. He knew that it had become aware of his gaze. A fierce eager will was there. It leaped towards him; almost like a finger he felt it, searching for him (...) he threw himself from the seat, crouching, covering his head with his grey hood. (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 401)

Frodo is looking towards Mordor and feels a power calling him, but just in time he takes the Ring off and is not exposed. Just like Frodo is crouching, so does the player's avatar when affected by the Eye. Frodo is not fully incapacitated in this incident, in contrast to two other encounters between the Nazgûl and two other hobbits in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. The first one is when Merry encounters a Nazgûl in Bree and faints from fear, or from The Black Breath, as Aragorn confirms (173). The Black Breath is another word for the fear that paralyses the victim. Tolkien explains in a letter that the danger of the Nazgûl is due to the unreasonable fear they inspire (*The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* 272). The second incident is with Fatty Bolger who sees a black shadow move outside his house, is seized with terror, and stands "trembling in the hall" (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 176). These events have probably inspired the developers of the game to create this concrete sense of dread. In the book, however, Frodo feels the Eye of Sauron more than he actually sees it. He does see something that looks like an eye in Galadriel's mirror, but on those occasions when he puts on the Ring, he only feels the Eye watching him. Seeing the burning eye on the computer screen may give an indication of how Frodo feels when Sauron is searching for him. It fills the player with fear in two ways, through the ludic element of the declining morale bar and through the narrative meaning of the unpleasantness of imagining having the attention of Sauron.

For designers of a game adaptation, the conflict between hope and fear is a welcome concept to work with, considering that digital games must be balanced between two poles, victory and defeat. This game is about having progress and a sense of freedom of action, but there must be some fear of failure, otherwise there will be no progress either. The concept also generates tension which is an important ingredient in a game. However, fear in *LOTRO* is rationalised and measurable, so with the right knowledge it can be mastered.

## 3.6 Friendship

The theme of friendship in *The Lord of the Rings* is important even though it is an underlying theme throughout the novel. The friendship between Frodo and Sam is different from the one that slowly grows between Legolas and Gimli. Legolas and Gimli's friendship grows as a result of a common quest, whereas Frodo and Sam have always known each other, although they were originally master and servant. But because they both commit to a common mission, they become friends. The world is saved due to their friendship because Frodo would not have come far without Sam. All the way through Mordor, Sam is there to support Frodo, and when Frodo, towards the end, is unable to get up by himself, Sam carries him: "'I can't carry it for you, but I can carry you and it as well'" (*The Return of the King* 940).

Brown and Krzywinska state that "*LOTRO* aims not for a direct veracity but rather towards a remediation of the 'spirit' of the books within an aesthetic landscape (…)" (34). Themes, such as corruption and hope, are presented both on a ludic level and aesthetically through the landscape. Friendship is another theme in the novel. When comparing the theme of friendship in the game and the book, the friendship between the elf Legolas and the dwarf Gimli is perhaps the friendship from the book that resembles the friendships made between players in the game. The friendship between Legolas and Gimli develops due to their shared mission, which is the only thing that unites them, to begin with. This mission, which is about saving the world from Sauron and his evil servants, is more like a "common necessity" (Nelson 30) that brings them together because they are both warriors. Legolas and Gimli are of different races and start the journey together with an inherent distrust of each other because of their very different backgrounds, but after a while, they start to at least respect one another. In the battle of Helm's Deep, they compete for who kills the most orcs, both respecting the other's number. They turn from their former racial dislike to a more friendly rivalry. Legolas also takes sides with and supports Gimli in a couple of incidents in the story where the dwarf is treated unfairly. In *The Two Towers* when they ride through Fangorn forest and Legolas wants to stop and walk among the trees, Gimli starts to elaborate on the beauty of the caves in Helm's Deep. Legolas listens sympathetically:

> "You move me, Gimli," said Legolas. "I have never heard you speak like this before. Almost you make me regret that I have not seen these caves. Come! Let us make this bargain - if we both return safe out of the perils that await us, we will

journey for a while together. You shall visit Fangorn with me, and then I will come with you to see Helm's Deep."

"That would not be the way of return that I should choose," said Gimli. "But I will endure Fangorn, if I have your promise to come back to the caves and share their wonder with me."

"You have my promise," said Legolas. (548)

This shows some of their very different interests and attitudes to the nature of the world. Legolas loves the forest, whereas Gimli is uncomfortable with it, and would rather spend his time in caves. The ride in the forest takes place after the battle of Helm's Deep when they had their friendly competition. Their shared struggle has created a bond between them. They now seem to regard their different cultures and perspectives with respect and interest. They address each other by name during this conversation and show fondness and appreciation for each other. Legolas keeps his promise and he and Gimli stay friends long after the war has ended, and they both have returned home to their respective lands. Legolas and Gimli abandoned old conventions, overcame the prejudices of their ancestors, and built a lifelong friendship based on honesty and acceptance. It is interesting that the starting areas for elf players and dwarf players in *LOTRO* are geographically close to each other, and for a long while they are in the same area and can do quests together before they move on to other areas where they meet men and hobbits.

Because *LOTRO* is an MMORPG, the themes are approached differently, and friendship is something that can grow from collaboration with other players in the game. In order to take full advantage of all aspects of the game, including defeating particularly tough monsters, players must work together in groups. It is easy to contact other players in the game to do group quests, but it may not be that simple to make new friends. Players who want to get to know other players can join something called *a kinship*, which is often called a guild in other MMORPGs. A kinship is a group of players who have their own chat channel that is used for communication between members. In this chat, the members talk about everything, from specific game mechanics to real-world topics. It varies how much detail each member wants to share about their personal life, but after being an active member of the same kinship for several years, there usually are some bonds made, and some people end up meeting each other in real life. Just like Legolas and Gimli, the players can have very different backgrounds and live in different countries. Big kinships often have their own websites and social media accounts which are administered by the kinship leader or team of leaders. In

addition to in-game communication, websites and social media make it easier for the members to stay in touch. It is as a member of a kinship that a player is most likely to succeed in creating new, long-lasting friendships.

Tolkien himself was very dependent on his friends. He said that if it were not for the support of his close friend, C. S. Lewis, he would not have completed *The Lord of the Rings*. Lewis "encouraged, criticised, prodded, and kept at the perfectionistic Tolkien till the book was done" (Nelson 29). Tolkien said it was from Lewis he got the idea that his writings could be more than a private hobby. The two men's shared enthusiasm for literature, their common hobby, was one of the things that united them (Nelson 29).

## 3.7 Summary of Chapter 3

In this chapter I have looked at some of the themes in the book and explored how these are presented in the game. Throughout the novel, there is this competition between polarities such as fate and free will, fear and hope, and good and evil. Moreover, all the pairs are interconnected, and all these conflicting forces are what generate the story. Free will makes it possible to choose evil, but in doing so, the characters lose their freedom and are subject to their fate which they fear. If the characters make good choices, their fate is more likely to take a happy turn, and they will be rewarded with new hope. The evil characters are corrupted by power, the power they have or the power they want.

The corruption of the Ring can be compared to the effect that addiction has on people. People can become addicted to drugs or gaming, and the effects and consequences are to some extent similar. The urge to have more, drugs, playtime, or power, will eventually devour and destroy the user. The addicts no longer care about anything other than themselves and their addiction which they love and hate, just as Gollum loves and hates the Ring (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 55). Leaders who are corrupted by power will also fail in the end because they lose the ability to see the consequences of their actions. They turn greedy and selfish, and because they have lost all moral reasoning, they will eventually be unable to make the right choices. However, as Gandalf says, that he would use the Ring's power to do good (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 61), shows that not every powerful leader is corrupt, and that the power of the Ring only reinforces what qualities the user already has. But Gandalf does not dare use the Ring because it would dominate him to such an extent that even he would have no free will left in the end and fall under the curse of addiction. In the game too,

corruption is connected to the player characters' morale. Players who are exposed to corruption gradually lose their morale and finally become immobilised, unable to do anything. Only hope, in the form of class skills or game items, can save the player characters from the fear effect that corruption gives.

Hope in the game is also found in areas where the good people of Middle-earth dwell, such as in Rivendell and in Tom Bombadil's house. Standing very close to Tom increases the player character's morale even more. He radiates hope and brings joy in more ways than one. His mere appearance is such a cheerful sight, the way he is jumping and singing, that it makes the players laugh. Hope and fear are presented through gameplay features and visual effects in the game. The game uses colours and various hues of colours to distinguish between good and evil areas, drawing on the common notion of colour symbolism. Black and red are associated with evil, and blue and white with good in the book, and often these colours also represent the contrast between industrial and rural areas. Gameplay features are tolkienised to bring out the themes from the book. Thus, when the player's health bar, called morale bar, is drained, the player character does not die, which is common in other video games, but can return to the fight when morale is restored. Hope is strongly connected to light in the book, and in the game, they put the words hope and light together when naming the ludic features that restore hope. The fear effect that drains the player characters' morale is used to weaken the players if they come to the attention of Sauron. When Sauron's eye appears on the screen, it means that he is sending his most devoted servants to deal with the player characters. These mobs are corrupted, so their type of damage is improved, which means they can harm the player character more severely with fear effect. Through the elements of gameplay then can meaning and themes be found. And if the themes are difficult to spot, the game still manages to convey the spirit of the book.

An MMORPG is an excellent arena for making new acquaintances. This is because the players share a common interest. Not all the members of the Fellowship are friends to begin with, but the common quest brings them together and they learn to know each other in new ways. Just as the players who start their new relationships through shared quests and collaboration to solve them, these new acquaintances can also end in lasting friendships.

# Chapter 4

# The Joy of Being the Hero

## 4.1 Book Characters and Player Classes

In this chapter I find direct links between descriptions of the main characters'
qualities in the book and the fighting skills of the various player classes in the game. I also
compare the player classes with the characters in the book. Heroic deeds are essential to both
the book and the game; therefore, I also explore the concept of heroism. Being able to act as
the hero in the game contributes to both spatial immersion, especially the kinesthetic
involvement, and emotional immersion with the player's own character.

*The Lord of the Rings* is a modern novel, but its style and content are written in the
mediaeval tradition. The book has elements from fairy tales, epics, and romance, such as a
hero, a quest, and a struggle with evil forces. The focus of the mediaeval story is the hero
who in romance and epic is great like a knight or a king, but in fairy tales is an ordinary man
who stumbles into a heroic adventure. In *The Lord of the Rings* there are both kinds of
heroes: "the extraordinary man to give the epic sweep of great events, and the common man
who has the immediate, poignant appeal of someone with whom the reader can identify"
(*Green Suns and Faërie* 142). In *LOTRO*, the players can choose whether to create a
character resembling a great knight or a humble hobbit. The player characters in *LOTRO* are
addressed as heroes by the NPCs, and all the character classes are based on heroes from
Tolkien's universe. Heroism is one of the themes in *The Lord of the Rings*, and for the
players, the chance to act as the hero provides a different experience than merely observing
the heroes in the book.

The appearance and the characteristics of the player's avatar play an important role
regarding immersion in the game. Some players will not fully enjoy playing as a character
they cannot identify with. Results from research on the topic show that character appearance
is strongly linked to identification (Turkay and Kinzer 16). However, the choice of character
abilities and appearance can be a mixture between the ideal and the real self. When players
create their avatars, they may select features that fit their own appearance or personality.
Selecting a race also has to do with what players consider to be the most powerful. For
example, one tends to believe that elves are more powerful than hobbits, so playing as an elf
character can make the player feel more important. Regardless of the players' preferences, all

these different choices make the game more interesting and provide greater empathy (immersion) for the player's own character, which perhaps make up for the lack of emotional immersion with the NPCs.

Players can create an avatar based on their favourite character from the book. All the members of the Fellowship have unique abilities that the game has drawn heavily on when designing the character creation options. In addition to emotional immersion with their own character, there is the joy of the kinesthetic feeling of wielding a two-handed greatsword like Aragorn, using a staff to cast spells like Gandalf, or sneaking behind the enemy with a surprise attack like Bilbo. On the other hand, there are players who think it ruins the ethos of the game because there are certain things that a given race cannot do. For example, men are not meant to be able to perform magic like the wizards. So, the fact that men can be Lore-masters, which is a class that has abilities similar to the wizards Gandalf and Radagast, feels wrong for some players. Although the game designers cannot fit each of the main characters from the book into the class types, it is interesting to look at to what extent they have actually managed to do so. In this chapter, I compare Gandalf, Aragorn, Boromir, and Sam, with class types in the game, and look at what their heroic abilities are.

The game's combat system is largely based on teamwork, so the theme of fellowship, the need for a group effort, is taken care of through the design of the combat system. Similar to most MMORPGs the character classes are divided into categories where each class has its particular role to fill in a group. The main combat roles are defence/tank, damage (DPS), healer and support. The tank's role is to keep the attention of the enemy, be in the frontline and defend the other players in the group. According to *LOTRO*'s official website, the primary tank classes are Warden and Guardian. They wear shields, medium and heavy armour and should ideally have high morale. Characters from the novel that fits this description are Aragorn and Boromir, because they are leaders and put themselves in the frontline. DPS means *damage per second* but is used as a noun to describe a character class. The role of the DPS is to deal large amounts of damage to multiple foes at the same time. DPS classes in *LOTRO* are Champion and Hunter which are inspired by Gimli and Legolas, who both can kill an enemy with only one hit with the axe, or one shot with the bow. The healer is needed to keep the group members' hopes up and ensure that they do not lose their morale, or, in other words, prevent them from being wiped out. The main healer class is Minstrel, and it is inspired by Elrond's great-grandmother, Lúthien, who is not a character in *The Lord of the Rings* but is a major character in other works by Tolkien. Her singing has a healing effect on both people and nature. When Beren meets Lúthien in the woods of

Neldoreth, he hears her sing: "(...) and the song of Lúthien released the bonds of winter, and the frozen waters spoke, and flowers sprang from the cold earth where her feet had passed" (*The Silmarillion* 165). It is clear that Lúthien's song has some kind of power because not only nature is affected by her song, but also Beren is healed when he hears it. Frodo calls out "'By Elbereth and Lúthien the fair (...) you shall have neither the Ring nor me!'" when the Black Riders are chasing him on the East Road. Frodo has heard the stories about the great beings, Elbereth and Lúthien, and believes that their names have a certain power.

## 4.2 Gandalf the Lore-master

Of all the heroes in *The Lord of the Ring*, Gandalf is the most powerful. He is not a human being, Tolkien states, but "an incarnate angel". Tolkien explains that Gandalf was embodied in a human body capable of feeling both physical and mental suffering, and of being killed, but since he is "supported by the angelic spirit" he can endure longer than men and only slowly show weariness. He was sent to Middle-earth primarily to "train, advise, instruct, arouse the hearts and minds of those threatened by Sauron to a resistance with their own strengths" (*Letters* 202). In other words, Gandalf is not there to take part in the fight directly, but through support and inspiration. However, he does on a few occasions reveal his power.

According to *LOTRO*s website the Lore-master class is inspired by Elrond, although many players argue the class has a lot in common with Gandalf's skills. The Lore-master is a support class, and their role is to protect and support the team, as well as hinder enemies by using traps and immobilising them with flashes of light, or, what in the gaming world is called *crowd control*. Crowd control is an MMORPG concept that refers to a class skill that enables the player to stop monsters from attacking or moving for a period of time. It limits the number of active opponents during a fight and therefore it can be crucial to the outcome of the fight. Lore-masters can also summon animal companions, such as an eagle, to fight by their side. The Lore-master's main weapon is a staff. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Gandalf is described as a wise, knowledgeable wizard who is skilled with fire, smoke, and light, and at one point he refers to himself as a lore-master (308). He can summon eagles to fight by his side and his main weapon is a staff.

There are a few incidents in the book where Gandalf uses his magical power to hinder and delay the evil crowd. One of them is when the Fellowship is attacked by wargs on a

hilltop in Hollin, on the road to Moria, and Gandalf delays their attack by lifting a burning branch which he turns into a bright light that makes the wargs hesitate. There is also great team effort here:

> "Fling fuel on the fire!" cried Gandalf to the hobbits. "Draw your blades, and stand back to back!"
>
> In the leaping light, as the fresh wood blazed up, Frodo saw many grey shapes spring over the ring of stones. More and more followed. Through the throat of one huge leader Aragorn passed his sword with a thrust; with a great sweep Boromir hewed the head of another. Beside them Gimli stood with his stout legs apart, wielding his dwarf-axe. The bow of Legolas was singing.
>
> In the wavering firelight Gandalf seemed suddenly to grow: he rose up, a great menacing shape like the monument of some ancient king of stone set upon a hill. Stooping like a cloud, he lifted a burning branch and strode to meet the wolves. They gave back before him. High in the air he tossed the blazing brand. It flared with a sudden white radiance like lightning; and his voice rolled like thunder.
>
> *"Naur an edraith ammen! Naur dan i ngaurhoth!"* he cried. (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 299)

There are a number of things worth mentioning in these passages. First, there is the mental image the reader gets from the description. It is easy to picture the four warriors, Aragorn, Boromir, Gimli, and Legolas, in action as they advance with their swords, chopping off heads with great sweeps, wielding the axe and letting the bow sing. The description makes the reader confident that this is an easy task for the heroes. Then there is Gandalf with his fire and his thunderous voice so powerful that the reader hears him when he calls out his "Word of Command" in Sindarin, an elvish language: *"Naur an edraith ammen! Naur dan i ngaurhoth!"* which translates to: "Fire save us! Fire drive back the werewolves!" (Hammond and Scull 276). The many alliterations (fling fuel on the fire, leaping light, burning branch, blazing brand) create a rhythm and speed up the text. The sounds of the repeated letters suit the action that is described. The members of the Fellowship fight together, do what each one is best at, and play their role in the group. From a game perspective, Aragorn and Boromir are in the front line, getting the attention of the enemy and delivering the death blows. Gimli and Legolas are ready to thin out the horde by dealing huge amounts of damage. Gandalf, the Lore-master, distracts the wargs with fear and provides fire for Legolas's arrows so that they

may be more harmful. From this incident alone, many of the Lore-master's skills can be recognized in both name and function. The class' abilities have names inspired by elements from the book, such as Burning Embers, Wizard's Fire, Lightning Strike, Sign of Power: Command, Blinding Flash, Ring of Fire, and Light of the Rising Dawn. Finally, when players ride through Hollin, a stop at the burnt-out hilltop is in order. See figure 13.



Fig.13 Burnt Tor

The place is called Burnt Tor in the game. It shows signs of a large fire, and it is swarming with wargs. An elf is sitting at the bottom of the hill, and she seems to know what has transpired since she says: "A powerful command was used to set the Burnt Tor ablaze". The powerful command was Gandalf using a spell when he set fire to the trees. Players cannot choose to create a wizard character because that would be against the original myth, since there are only five Istari (wizards) in Middle-earth. So, it would break the mythos of the world and perhaps ruin immersion. The Istari are also terribly powerful beings and cannot compare to the people of Middle-earth in strength and skill. Gandalf does, after all, fight and defeat the Balrog in Moria on his own. In the game, a fight with a balrog requires a team of twelve players to match Gandalf in strength.

## 4.3 Boromir the Guardian

Boromir is an epic hero, a proud and strong warrior and leader. As he rides out of Rivendell, he recklessly blows his horn, to Elrond's annoyance, since the Fellowship is meant to leave in secret. But Boromir declares: "Always I have let my horn cry at setting forth, and though thereafter we may walk in the shadows, I will not go forth as a thief in the night" (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 279). Historically, the horn has been used as a warning of battle, or to mark the start of something. Boromir is a man who honours the traditions of his people, so it would not occur to him not to signal that the journey had begun. The honour of this warrior depends on his valour, but it is his need for great deeds that ultimately drives him too far. After trying to take the Ring, he regrets his actions, and perhaps by sacrificing himself by rescuing Merry and Pippin, he makes amends for his former misdeeds.

An argument among *LOTRO*-players is whether the Guardian class is most similar to Sam, which is what Standing Stone Games declares, or whether Boromir is the guardian the class is based on. The Guardian in a group is often the leader, but the class' main role is to get the attention of the enemy and force them to attack the Guardian instead of the other, more vulnerable classes. The class has several skills that challenge and force attacks from opponents, and it is the only class that is strong enough to use a heavy shield. Boromir is a warrior of Gondor who is unflinching in battle, and he is the only one in the Fellowship that wears a shield. The guardian's role is a tank, as mentioned earlier, and in the book, there are several episodes where Boromir shows his fearlessness and ability to protect others. One of them is in *The Fellowship of the Ring* when the Fellowship is struggling to cross the mountain, Caradhras: "'Well', said Boromir, 'when heads are at a loss bodies must serve, as we say in my country. The strongest of us must seek a way'" (291). Boromir suggests that he and Aragorn, whom he considers the two strongest in the company, should plough a path through the snow back to the campsite. Boromir is described as not as tall as Aragorn, but broader and more heavily built. He leads the way and Aragorn follows him. When they return, having made a path through the snow, Boromir, even if he is weary of the hard work, lifts the hobbits, one by one, and carries them to the campsite. "Pippin marvelled at his strength (...) burdened as he was, he was widening the track for those who followed, thrusting the snow aside as he went" (293). Due to Boromir's strength, the Fellowship survives and gets away from the mountain. The Guardian class in the game has abilities and traits that make the player strong and resilient like Boromir. Another example of Boromir proving to be a true guardian is when he protects Pippin and Merry from the orcs at Amon Hen. Pippin

recounts the incident to himself as he is carried off by the orcs who attacked Boromir and captured Pippin and Merry:

> Then Boromir had come leaping through the trees. He had made them fight. He slew many of them and the rest fled. But they had not gone far on the way back when they were attacked again, by a hundred Orcs at least, some of them very large, and they shot a rain of arrows: always at Boromir. (*The Two Towers* 444)

Boromir, just like a tank in the game, takes on all the aggro (aggressive interest) and is eventually killed because the rest of the Fellowship does not come to help him. He fights alone against too many foes, and at the same time tries to protect the hobbits. Despite his strength and heavy armour, he fails when he is on his own, which shows the importance of well-organised teamwork. It is as Aragorn says: "This is a bitter end. Now the Company is all in ruin. It is I that have failed" (*The Two Towers* 414) The Fellowship has failed which is something *LOTRO*-players also experience from time to time. Aragorn was appointed by Gandalf to be the leader of the Fellowship, therefore he blames himself for the death of Boromir, for not being there and fighting together as a group.

## 4.4 Sam the Guardian

Gandalf, Boromir, and Aragorn are typical heroes. Hobbits, on the other hand, are not exactly born heroes. Frodo's friend and servant, Sam, represents the common man as a hero. At the end of Sam and Frodo's journey, Frodo chooses to go weapon less, focusing the rest of his strength on his inner struggle. Sam takes care of the physical burden and carries Frodo the last stretch to Mount Doom (Crowe 7). When Sam thinks Frodo is dead and takes the Ring determined to continue alone, he does so, knowing about its dangerous power, and that it is unlikely that anyone would know that he was the one who completed the quest. This is how humble and selfless Sam is.

It may not be Sam's appearance and physical strength that links him to the Guardian class in *LOTRO*. It is rather his moral strength. Apart from Tom Bombadil, Sam is the only character in the book who wears the Ring, resists its power, and is able to give it up without a struggle. For a second, he feels reluctant to give up the Ring, but presumably only because he knows it is burdening Frodo, and he offers to share the burden and carry it for him (*The*

*Return of the King* 911). Marion Zimmer Bradley analyses love in the form of hero worship evident in the relationship between Frodo and Sam in her essay "Men, Haflings, and Hero Worship". She argues Sam does not care "for heroic deeds; he simply wishes to guard and remain with Frodo" (84). This is clear at the Council of Elrond when Elrond agrees with Frodo that the task of taking the Ring to Mount Doom is Frodo's, and Sam emerges from his hiding place and exclaims: "'But you won't send him off alone surely, Master?' cried Sam, unable to contain himself any longer, and jumping up from the corner where he had been quietly sitting on the floor" (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 271). Elrond smiles at him and decides that Sam should at least go with Frodo. The love Sam has for Frodo is also shown earlier when Frodo is recovering from the wound he received at Weathertop: "He ran to Frodo and took his left hand, awkwardly and shyly. He stroked it gently and then he blushed and turned hastily away" (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 225). This is the beginning of the intensity in the relationship between Frodo and Sam (Bradley 84).

After Frodo has been stung by the giant spider, Shelob, and Sam thinks he is dead, Sam decides to take the Ring and finish the quest: "'(...) the Council gave him companions so that the errand should not fail. And you are the last of all the Company. The errand must not fail'" (*The Two Towers* 732). Even if Sam knows about the terrible power and effect the Ring has on people, he chooses, after a long debate with himself, to go through with it on his own. This shows remarkable character development in Sam. Bradley observes that Sam "has become, not the devoted dogsbody of volume 1, nor the sometimes fierce but simple and submissive watchdog of volume 2, but the "tall, towering elf-warrior" of the orc's vision" (87). In other words, Sam has become like the Guardian in the game, taking on the role of the tank, he sets off to do the final task, to complete the quest that the fellowship started. Sam is the last one standing, the other members of the group incapacitated or scattered, out of reach to be of any help to him. Frodo, however, is not dead after all. He is found by patrolling orcs and taken to the orc fortress. But Sam, who becomes the great warrior that the orcs mistake him for, rescues Frodo and in the end, he carries him to the Cracks of Doom where he can destroy the Ring and complete the quest. Sam is free to abandon the quest at any time. He does not have to endure the terror and agony, but he does so out of love and a commitment to protect Frodo (Bradley 90). Ultimately, he is willing to sacrifice himself to save others.

## 4.5 Aragorn the Captain

Aragorn first appears as the vagabond, Strider, one who wanders between places and who seemingly does not interfere with people. The innkeeper in Bree, Butterbur, is even a little sceptical of him. It turns out, however, that Strider has been keeping an eye on things, and acted as a protector of the Shire. But his good deeds are invisible, so when Butterbur learns that Strider has become king, he is a little surprised.

There is no race or class the player can choose that is identical to Aragorn. However, the Captain class in *LOTRO* has some qualities that are similar to Aragorn's special skills, such as the ability to heal and inspire. Although the Captain according to *LOTRO*'s official website is not based on Aragorn, it is justifiable to say that it is at least inspired by him. Verlyn Flieger analyses Aragorn in her essay "Frodo and Aragorn: The Concept of the Hero" and argues he is "a traditional epic/romance hero, larger than life, a leader, fighter, lover, healer. (...) He is above the common herd" (*Green Suns and Faërie* 142). He is indeed above the average man as he is a descendant of the Númenóreans, an ancient race of humans, who were taller, wiser, and lived longer than other people. His race is called the Dúnedain and the Dúnedain were known among common people as the wandering folk or Rangers. Aragorn is first introduced to the reader as Strider, a "silent, watchful, road weary" man. Flieger argues the reader may associate him with a mythic folk hero because of his quiet toughness, but when he transforms from Strider to Aragorn the folk-hero quality is lost, and paradoxically he becomes less familiar to the reader. Flieger compares him with the traditional mediaeval romance hero, "the disguised hero, the rightful king, (...) who steps from the shadows into the limelight when his moment comes" (143). Aragorn's identity has been concealed from everyone except a few because he, as Isildur's heir, is a threat to Sauron, and thus in danger of being killed by Sauron's servants. Aragorn himself is not even aware of his own heritage before Elrond decides to tell him when he is twenty years old. The fact that Aragorn grew up in a home that is not his own is another typical feature of the mediaeval hero (145). His mother takes him to Rivendell to live among the elves, so his true identity is well hidden. Aragorn's origin has elements from the classical myth where one of the hero's parents often is divine, although there are no gods or magic involved in Aragorn's conception, his lineage goes back to Elros, who was half-elven and immortal, thus "supplies him with the immortal or supernatural origin necessary to hero figure" (144). In other words, Aragorn is the archetypal literary hero.

*The Lord of the Rings* is about the War of the Ring. Aragorn is actually the Ring's rightful owner, being Isildur's heir, therefore Sauron fears him, but he also fears Aragorn's sword, The Sword Reforged. After Elendil was killed by Sauron, his sword was broken under him, but his son, Isildur, took up the pieces and cut the Ring off Sauron's hand. Then the broken sword pieces were brought to Rivendell and given to Aragorn when he was twenty years old. The idea of the hero and his weapon is another aspect of mediaeval literature (*Green Suns and Faërie* 147). At the Council of Elrond, the time has finally come for Aragorn to reveal himself:

> He cast his sword upon the table that stood before Elrond, and the blade was in two pieces. "Here is the Sword that was Broken!" he said.
>
> "And who are you, and what have you to do with Minas Tirith?" asked Boromir, looking in wonder at the lean face of the Ranger and his weather-stained cloak.
>
> "He is Aragorn son of Arathorn," said Elrond; "and he is descended through many fathers from Isildur Elendil's son of Minas Ithil. He is the Chief of the Dúnedain in the North, and few are now left of that folk." (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 246)

By showing that he is the owner of the famous, broken sword, Aragorn announces his true identity and is ready to have the sword reforged and claim the throne of Gondor. Boromir tells of a dream he has had where he heard a voice say something about a sword that was broken, and he is unable to figure out the meaning of the dream. Therefore, Aragorn takes the opportunity to make it clear to him. Flieger notes that "the sword proclaims the emergence of the hero", and she compares Aragorn to other literary heroes from classical mediaeval literature where there is always a sword involved in the part of the story where the character appears as a hero (148).

Flieger argues that Aragorn's capacity to heal and to renew is also an element of the mediaeval romance (149). Although when Aragorn first demonstrates his healing skills, he is still only known as Strider to the reader, so his ability to heal may just as well come from his experience as a Ranger and a common knowledge of herbalism. It is not until after the war, when he heals Éowyn, Faramir and Merry, and the old woman in the Houses of Healing, Ioreth, proclaims that "the hands of the king are the hands of a healer" (*The Return of the King* 860), that it becomes clear to the reader that Aragorn has always been a king and a

healer. One of the Captain class' sets of character traits in *LOTRO* is called "Hands of Healing", and this is almost a direct quote from Ioreth, which in turn is a clear reference to Aragorn.

Aragorn has many titles and at one point he is called Captain of the Host of the West (*The Return of the King* 967). He was the one who led the Host of the West to Mordor in a final attempt against Sauron to divert his attention away from Frodo. Furthermore, the Captain class in the game is the only one that can have a bannerman to accompany him. After summoning the army of the dead, the Oathbreakers, Aragorn asks one of his fellow Dúnadain to unfold his standard before he leads the "Shadow Host" towards Gondor (*The Return of the King* 789). Finally, the names of the Captain's skills and traits such as Shield of the Dúnedain, Blade of Elendil, Blood of Númenor, and Oathbreaker's Shame point to Aragorn.

## 4.6 Summary of Chapter 4

In this chapter, I have shown how *The Lord of the Rings* is an ideal material to adapt to an MMORPG due to its many and diverse heroes despite the fact that players cannot choose to play as any of the characters from the book. This challenge that *LOTRO* faces due to the game being based on existing material, is then solved through the possibility of creating player characters that mirror the characters from the book. I have looked at the concept of heroism and compared the heroes of *The Lord of the Rings* to character classes in the game. All the heroes have different abilities that reveal something about who they are. If the players wish to identify with one of the heroes from the book, it is possible for them to make their avatar resemble this character. If they only like the way the hero fights, then they can choose a class that is similar to the hero's combat style. These opportunities to choose both different races and styles of combat, make the investment in the player character more immersive. Some players may want to be a great elf warrior, while others may want to be a humble hobbit who can traverse long distances undetected. They are both necessary and equally valued in tasks that require group work in the game. *LOTRO* is very different from first-person shooter types of games where the effectuation of the skills is much faster, so if players want to have a continually fast-paced fighting experience, they could try playing as a Champion, which is a class based on Gimli, but the game is overall slow-paced in comparison. A player's preferences regarding the selection of race and class may also be related to the aspect of role-playing or the player's alterbiography. Finally, through the

complex combat system the game offers, players learn about the heroes' strengths and weaknesses that are described in the book.

# Conclusion

While the Fellowship of the nine companions is off on their perilous mission, the players have to help in the war against Sauron as best they can, whether it is collecting supplies, looking for lost items or fighting the enemy. After Frodo and his friends have left The Shire, it is the players who have to deal with Frodo's relatives, Lobelia Sackville-Baggins and her cheeky son, who have taken over Bag End. On the players' adventures, they are constantly reminded of the main story through references to the famous characters. In addition to meeting the main characters from the book on certain occasions, players also meet their uncles, aunts and other distant relatives which is something that adds an amusing element to the narrative in the game and makes it very immersive.

It is important to distinguish between MMORPGs and all other types of digital games when considering the concepts of narrative, interaction, immersion, and themes. The narrative in MMORPGs is different from other video games in so many ways. First of all, MMORPGs are not only games but virtual worlds where real people can connect. The narrative is a combination of a built-in narrative written by the game's authors and the emerging narrative that takes place when players interact with objects and other players in the game. Another difference from other types of digital games is that the players do not have to follow the built-in narrative in order to advance in the game. Players can just 'live' in the game world, and do 'ordinary' things, such as taking up a profession, making items to be sold to other players, hunting animals or evil creatures, or exploring the environment. All these activities contribute to the game's narrative, and it differs from the narrative in books due to this type of direct participation in the storyworld.

The revelation of the built-in narrative in a video game will depend on the players' actions. Unlike readers, who follow the story in a book linearly, players can to some extent control the narrative. Whether the players have real choices, however, depends on the type of game. If the story in the game is revealed linearly, then there is not much difference in how the plot is perceived in the two mediums. In *The Lord of the Rings Online* (*LOTRO*), players can choose to follow the built-in, linear narrative or not. If they choose not to follow the embedded narrative but instead choose to explore and roleplay, then they control the narrative themselves. But the players have no say in how the embedded story will develop, so that story will end just like the story in the book. However, on the way to Mount Doom, the player characters get insight into events that are only mentioned in the book. Because the player characters' path is not laid out as it is for the members of the original Fellowship, they

are free to roam around and investigate incidents that are not explained in the book. This they are able to do because they have more time than the Fellowship. The story of the Ring does not continue until the players choose to take on the next quest in the epic quest line. In the meantime, the players can spend as much time as they want on other activities in the game.

Because *LOTRO*'s main story is *The Lord of the Rings*, players cannot change this story in any way. What is interesting, though, is how the game has written the player characters into the story. Even if they are minor roles in events that are not directly related to the main plot, the game still manages to make the players feel important for the main events. Since the players themselves are characters in the game's general narrative, they can not know everything that happens to Frodo and the other characters in the main story. The players only get fragments of what is going on, and no one knows how Frodo, Sam, and Gollum are faring. The players can only guess, much like Gandalf guesses Frodo's whereabouts after the breaking of the Fellowship. Consequently, those who have read the book will have a better overview, since the book presents the story from the main characters' point of view. In the game, the players meet the members of the Fellowship and hear about some of their events, but far from everything. But in the end, the player characters stand with the Host of the West in front of the Black Gate to defy Sauron.

As a substitute for those parts of the story that are not directly communicated to the players, the game provides in-depth information about some of the events in the story that the book does not reveal in detail. The game expands the story, for example by letting the players experience what really happened when Legolas shot down a creature from a long distance, or what became of Gandalf and the Balrog in Moria. The players find Gandalf's hat in the depths of The Foundation of Stones, and they also get to meet him in Lothlórien after the Fellowship has left, thus knowing that he has been revived. Finding Gandalf's burned and battered hat laying there on the ground is a moment of awe, and I, at least, had to take a moment. This immersive experience is not due to the way the story is told in the game, but because I have read the book, and already have sympathy with the characters and what they go through.

The point of view in the game is from the player characters', and in contrast to the characters in the book, whose paths are laid out, the player characters are to a certain extent free to choose their own paths. On their way, news of the events of the Fellowship is gradually revealed. However, there are restrictions on players' freedom also because the game writers determine the path of the players through quests that they must complete in order to get to the next part of the story. In this sense, it can be argued that the players may be

less free than the readers since the book pages are not locked in any way, as is the case with the quest texts which will not be revealed until the players have completed the previous quest. When examining temporal immersion, which has to do with the desire to know what happens next in the story, I found more similarities than differences. Through *LOTRO*'s narrative, the players will experience suspension, surprise, and curiosity in much the same way as readers.

A significant difference between the book and the game is the experience of place and space. In the book, the readers visit places in Middle-earth together with the main characters and they stay there as long as the characters stay there. In the game, the players can stay as long as they wish, and they can explore and learn more about the place and its inhabitants. In the book, the readers have a sense that the fictional world contains more than the places described, and they have the maps in the book to assist them in getting the global overview. In the game, the players can travel to all the places on the map, and each place is filled with people (NPCs) that the players interact with. Interaction with characters enhances emotional spatial immersion and travelling and studying maps improves strategic spatial immersion. Thus, the universe, the space, becomes familiar and feels more like a place. Players who read the book after years of playing will experience spatial immersion in the book differently. They have become so familiar with both the universe and the places through years of kinesthetic engagement, that their understanding of how all the places are connected has improved. The maps in the book are also better understood because the players can visualise the places, including places not described in the book.

When players read about characters in the book that they have encountered in the game, emotional immersion with these characters may be stronger. However, this does not always work the other way around, because the main characters from the book act as a means to gain experience points in the game. The players do not know the characters' inner struggles and are therefore not fully invested in neither the characters nor the themes. Although immersion in the game's narrative can be achieved through several modes simultaneously, the sense of presence, relation to the characters, and investment in the themes cannot compete with the book.

The deep message of *The Lord of the Rings* and the seriousness of the themes can only be experienced by reading the book. The game has done well by including the themes in the gameplay and to a certain extent in the narrative. However, the main story told through hundreds of quests in the epic quest line is too fragmented to evoke compassion and a deeper understanding of the message that the book conveys. The book's message might not be clear in the game, but it can be argued that the spirit of Tolkien is present. The game manages to

capture the same feeling that is evoked in the book. Especially the sadness, the theme of death and immortality, can be felt in Lothlórien where the music is melancholy, and the NPC-elves have lines such as "The age of the Elves has ended" and "There is little comfort left beneath the eaves of the Golden Wood". The elves are leaving Middle-earth, and therefore, some players prefer to play as humans, since they are staying, at least a little longer, or until the world's "whole evil-aroused story is complete" as Tolkien writes in one of his letters (*Letters* 246). Hobbits and Dwarves will also dwindle, leaving the race of humans as the last one left. The decision on which race to choose affects immersion because players believe in the doom of elves and men described in the book. However, immersion also depends on the players' ability to act, or pretend. The player characters are not supposed to know what will happen in the end, so they can live happily ignorant of their fate. Players who know the end of the story can instead focus on hope, or in other words, the features of the game that bring joy. Joy is found among the hobbits in the Shire, where players can take part in festivals and festivities at the Party Tree in Hobbiton. These are some of the activities that are safe and relaxing. The story about the hobbit farmer asking players to court his widowed neighbour for him, which I quoted from in the first chapter of this paper, ends with an ultimatum in which the widow asks the farmer to abandon his dog for her, something he cannot do, and in doing so, he proves his worth to her. This is a charming story that conveys the spirit of the hobbit society and provides emotional immersion to those players who take the time to get involved in the story. There is joy and merriment in the book as well, perhaps most strongly represented by the character Tom Bombadil who is a cheerful and carefree character.

Despite the powerful immersive effects that the narrative and the scenery of the game provide, players are always reminded of the ludic aspects of the medium, such as the progression bar or a stable-master in the middle of Mordor. Therefore, my experience with the game is actually less immersive when it comes to engaging with the themes. The game's best feature is the ability to create spatial immersion, especially the joy of going to places that are recognisable from the book or movies. When there is a new expansion in the game, the first thing many players do is explore the new areas, often without picking up any quests. They are merely on a sight-seeing tour to find out what the new area has to offer and whether there is anything hidden to discover or new things to do. All the new areas are in Tolkien's universe, on the maps, but perhaps only mentioned in the text.

I have found narrative meaning in the game's combat system. It is not just about the opposition between fear and hope, because when studying the various class skills, it becomes clear that the game developers have also drawn heavily on the book characters' abilities. The

main characters in the book have unique qualities that set them apart and make them interesting. They are all different kinds of heroes. Whereas Aragorn is the epic hero, Sam represents the common man as the hero, who out of love for his friend is transformed from a humble companion to a brave protector. The plot type in *LOTRO* resembles the epic plot where the hero embarks on a journey and must overcome obstacles and fight monsters. The main story in the game can be said to be about the player character, who is one of the heroes in Middle-earth, where the story of Frodo and the Ring takes place, but that story is sometimes perceived as secondary, as a story that runs in the background. The epic pattern in *LOTRO* allows for endless amounts of deeds and events that contribute to the glory of the heroes.

The game may not be intellectually challenging when it comes to complex characters and themes, but it can instead provide the thrill of living and acting in a virtual world. Comparing the different experiences of *The Lord of the Rings* in the book and the game has been a complicated task to do. Mainly because I am not only a player but also an actor in the story. But who is this character that I have created? What are her (or his) qualities and inner thoughts? Does the character reflect the player's personality? Does the game change that personality, or can I learn something about myself from the game? Can the game be an example of a Faërian Drama?

Faërian Drama is a storyworld created by elves for men to enter, Tolkien says in his essay *On Fairy-stories*. (Tolkien does not say who or what exactly the elves are.) The experience of being in this world is similar to dreaming, but the difference is that it is not one's own dream-world, but someone else's, and it feels real to those who enter it, Tolkien explains. What he is trying to convey is that a Faërian Drama is different from both dramas created by humans and the magic created by magicians, where the first is too constrained, limited to the stage, and the second is a fraud. Faërian Drama produces "fantasy with a realism" that is different from magic and "beyond the compass of any human mechanism" (63). What Tolkien could not imagine when he wrote his essay was how technology in the twenty-first century would make his concept of Faërian Drama take on a whole new meaning. Péter Kristóf Makai argues that Tolkien's idea of Faërian Drama can compare to a virtual world such as an MMORPG (Makai 530). In the game, it is possible to put 'living trees' on the 'stage', and it is even possible to interact with the trees, because these events do not take place in one's mind, but in a virtual world where the participants can enter. The result of participating in a Faërian Drama is ideally to gain a new perspective on things in the real world (*On Fairy-stories* 67).

The goal of an MMORPG is not to win, but to develop the player characters until they are the best possible versions. Through this process, the players also get a better understanding of themselves and the real world because these games are "models for the lifelong maturation process of human beings" (Kelly 85). Players start from scratch and develop through experience. On the way, players learn much about themselves, such as their abilities to concentrate under pressure, handle frustration, and lead others. Through collaboration with other players, one also learns a lot about different personalities and how to handle them. This knowledge can be transferred to real life. Tolkien says the goal of Faërian Drama is Recovery which is a "regaining of a clear view" (*On Fairy-stories* 67). The experience the players gain from the game can make them look at themselves and the world differently, perhaps gain a better understanding of themselves and others.

# Glossary

**aggro.** Short for aggressive interest. The player who has aggro is prioritised by the mobs.

**avatar.** The player's character in the game.

**boss.** An enemy that is often at the end of a quest and that is stronger than the previous opponents leading up to it.

**buff.** An effect placed on the characters that enhances their statistics.

**cutscene.** A cinematic narrative sequence in the game that is not interactive.

**debuff.** An effect placed on the characters that weakens their statistics.

**deeds.** Special tasks that give rewards in the game.

**instance.** An instance is a part of the game that takes the player away from the normal game world into a private zone.

**mob.** Short for mobile or mobile object. It is a computer-controlled character that can attack or be attacked.

**NPC.** Short for non player character. NPCs are computer-controlled characters that are in the background or that players can interact with.

**quest.** A mission, or task, that the players complete in order to gain experience or rewards. Quests are also used to tell stories.

**skills.** The avatar's abilities. The actions that the avatar is capable of.

**stats.** Short for statistics. Stats are numbers that give information about the player character's strengths and weaknesses.

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