The Hobbit's Transmedial Narrative Representation and Interactivation in The Hobbit : The Prelude to the Lord of the Rings

التمثيل الروائي والتفاعلي لرواية الهوبيت في الهوبيت: مقدمة لسيد الخواتم

La representation narrative et interactive transmédiale du Hobbit dans Bilbo le Hobbit

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Introduction

Narrative representations of imaginary worlds across media arrange and deliver textual content in complex ways. A media-conscious building of a virtual world and the structuring of its narrative follow transmedial strategies. The Latin prefix 'trans-' in transmedia stands for 'beyond', 'across', or 'through' to denote the expanding of storytelling across media borders to transmit stories and storyworlds through different delivery channels. That is, what originally exists in one medium is represented again by another (Ellestrom 2019). Despite the transfer, the medial nature of narration allows for narratives to be both represented and received again. Thon argues that few existing studies use the term 'storyworld' to refer to secondary worlds and narratives subcreated and represented across media. The concept of storyworld "can, at least on certain level of abstraction, be considered to be a transmedial one" (Thon 2016: 46).

Storyworld adaptations provide audiences with different narrative experiences that they can participate in and interact with. Being part of one large storyworld, each new representation contributes with new elements that can be, at times, medium specific. As an example, video games increase audiences' engagement with the storyworld by allowing participation in the building of the storyworld and interactivation within it. *The Hobbit: The Prelude to the Lord of the Rings* (2003) is a transmedial narrative representation of the storyworld of Middle Earth as introduced in J. R. R. Tolkien's novel *The Hobbit* (1937). This text based adaptation creates communicative content for players to interact with limiting, however, their transauthorial participation. This paper explores the transmedial interactive and participatory representation of storyworlds within the medium

of video games. The following sections investigate the degree of interactivity and participation with the narrative representation *The Hobbit* (2003). I will argue that while the game is interactive, its double genre classification -as *adaptation* and *text adventure*- it limits transauthorial participation by creating a linear narrative structure.

1. Interactive and Participatory Narrative Representations

Transmedia storytelling, coined by H. Jenkins, denotes stories that move from one medium to another contributing each time to the whole of the storyworld (2006). Each transposition is self-contained and delivers the narrative according to its own medial strategies. New versions are independent and require no knowledge about the original narrative to develop. They, in fact, "[expand] the storyworld, precipitating a very different kind of dialogical relationship with the originating text" (Harvey 2015: 78). Often, the expansion contributes to the original text with one particular element that is medium specific, such as, description in literary texts, visualization in films, comic books, and TV series, auralization in audiobooks, performances in theatrical adaptations, and interactivity in board and video games. It is important to note at this level that the transmedial perspective acknowledges that "stories are shaped but not determined by their presentational formats." (Herman 2004: 54)

When considering interactivity, Herman also identifies storyworlds as mental models of "the worlds evoked by narratives" (2009: 105). He explains narrative in terms of their conceptualizations in the mind of the recipient who builds up the represented world from details observed through texts and films. However, this subjective communicative construction of the storyworld is a mental representation based on fictional texts that is necessarily incomplete (Thon 2015). According to Thon, much could be said on the subjective communicative constructions of storyworlds when exploring the mediality of video games (2015). However, not every interactive element of a video game contributes in building its virtual world. In fact, a player's decision of whether to carry on exploring the village to find all the children or join the party of the dwarves instead is unlikely to contribute in the building of Middle-Earth.

Mark J. P. Wolf, on the other hand, explains that video games are moving in the direction of creating secondary worlds (2008). Following J. R. R. Tolkien's notion of 'subcreation', video games are imaginary worlds themselves with a "complete and internally consistent" reality (Wolf 2008: 308). That is, players

could encounter an enormous geography requiring constant exploration which confirms the secondary world's illusion of completeness and consistency. With reflective consideration to Tolkien's creations, one assumes his own conviction that world building and storytelling are indivisible concepts imbedded in his narrative. This inextricable intertwining of the two existed even in the mind of the author when he wrote his novel. Thus, a media-conscious storyworld combines a transmedial narrative and subjective communicative mental representations in constructing imaginary worlds.

Jenkins further explained this phenomenon of building cross-media narratives in terms of participatory relevance. Every new representation, mental or transmedial, contributes with a distinct addition to the whole of the storyworld. "A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" (Jenkins 2006: 97-98). In fact, recognizing narrative representations through different media is significant to build a world that contains one large whole. That is, a medium specific cultural representation participates in the construction of a growing body of narratives within one specific storyworld.

Jenkins' approach to transmedia storytelling is story oriented with focus on participatory subjective constructions of that storyworld. He explains that participants are able to actively share content through media in general and social networks specifically that would enable them to discover more in-depth narratives. The storyworld's continuity through multiple media representations creates a whole content that strives to maintain the truth about a narrative with multiple parallel universes of alternative narrative possibilities. The audience is then not only immersed in the narrative and the imaginary world as narrated by the author but encouraged as well to discover and extract elements about the narrative that can be applied into the real world. In fact, storyworld construction consists of supporting multiple story lines across different narrative adaptations and transmedia extensions that, when connected with immersion and extractability, encourages audiences to subjectively interact with the story world.

Subjective interactivity entails the existence of secondary perspectives in the storyline through narrative participation of secondary characters to support main ones. This perspective creates a new dimension of insights and backstory that is explored through narrative details. The latter allow for active interactions and participations that attract audiences to form a cultural collectivity of storyworld shared interests (Jenkins 2006). These storyworld cultural activators

motivate audiences to participate in activities and play interactive games because traditional text-based storyworlds deliver fixed content that readers cannot engage with (Langdon 2018). The reader can imagine the world but never interact with it nor participate in its construction. For interactions to be possible, the storyworld needs to be transposed into an interactive medium. A world that is experienced interactively engages not only imagination but "observational faculties" as well (Langdon 2018: 144). Audiences are hence participants who contribute transauthorially thanks to technologically provided platforms.

The transauthorial cultural and technological landscape- that has increasingly been gaining interest in the field of media studies- allows audiences to participate in the construction of imaginary worlds and their stories. Jenkins defined media participatory culture as one in which consumers create transauthorial content helping with its circulation cross-medially (Jenkins 2013). One particular form of engaging with imaginary worlds is the interactive process that asks participants to interact with narrative content in a specific medium, that of video games. Matthew Freeman explains that "[i]nteractivity is a property of technology, while participation is a property of culture" (2018: 199). In fact, on the one hand, this participation in storyworld building not only allows for its world to be transmedial, but for its narrative to become transauthorial. Mark J. P. Wolf explains that secondary worlds are "not only transmedial and transnarrative, but transauthorial as well" (2012: 194). Imaginary worlds not only expand across multiple media channels but also to authorial participations. On the other hand, interactivation, as Wolf puts it, is "a process of transmedial adaptation" (2012: 189) that requires the simplification of the world to allow for interactions and explorations within it. This simplification must maintain the inner consistency of a subcreation with its details since it arises more interactive possibilities (Wolf 2018).

2. Interactive Video Games and Storyworlds

Video games follow the process of interactive storytelling of a narrative structure that transforms traditional narration patterns into ones with participatory, interactive, and communicative characteristics. Wolf argues that video games are classified according to their interactivity rather than imagery (2008: 259). The interactive experience of the player in a narrative game encourages explorations of the storyworld. It is in fact the experience of interactivation in particular that motivates players to achieve the game's objectives.

In 2003, Sierra Entertainment published a licensed video game adaptation of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937) developed by Inevitable Entertainment entitled *The Hobbit: The Prelude to the Lord of the Rings* , or simply *The Hobbit*. It is a single player action adventure game released for several consoles that follows Bilbo Baggins' adventures in the storyworld of Middle Earth. The player controls Bilbo from third person perspective whose adventurous progression through the game is based on solving puzzles, completing tasks, and going on quests. Each level requires the completion of the indicated quests before advancing to the next one. Bilbo possesses three weapons: first, his walking stick and stones to throw, and then he acquires Sting, a dagger he finds on the path. He powers his weapons by collecting magical scrolls on the way. The player always watches Bilbo from outside except for when throwing stones the view switches to first person. Bilbo is both the player's avatar and their reflection. That is, the player not only explores Middle Erath and interacts with its inhabitants through this avatar, but also enjoys the scenes as a spectator. Being adapted from a text based storyline, the game still provides audiences with non-interactive narrative material to read, listen to, or watch.

In fact, *The Hobbit* is a linear game with no backtracking and several cutscenes that provide illustrated informative explanations. The player, in addition to interacting via Bilbo, is able to read descriptions, listen to soundtracks and auralizations, and watch visualizations. This content communicates necessary details for the player to explore the storyworld while granting the illusion of completeness and maintaining a sense of its consistent inner reality. Similarly, listening to non-playing characters' views about the storyworld while taking their instructions to complete the game's objectives allow the player to explore and interact with other characters in Middle Earth. Wolf explains that by interacting with the game's main objectives "we can start to divide the wide variety of video games into a series of interactive genres." (auteur 2008: 260)

Following its objective of completing tasks through a number of adventures and quests, the first interactive genre to which *The Hobbit* (2003) belongs is 'adaptation.' An *Adaptation Game* is a "[game] based on activities adapted from another medium … such as a book, short story, comic book, graphic novel, or play" (Wolf 2008: 261). This entails one question: What changes in the original text to allow interactivation in this new narrative representation? Second, the game is also a *Text Adventure* which "rel[ies] primarily on text for the player interface, and often for the description of the game's [storyworld]" (Wolf 2008: 273). The game is linear since adapted from novel. Such games are non-interactive and often follow a linear narrative with no backstory. Their

text based informational illustrations, computer controlled characters, and puzzles provide the descriptions allow players to interactively experience the storyworld but never participate in its building. In fact, *The Hobbit* (2003) is a non-participatory interactive video game that lets players experience the storyworld's narrative options without altering its main storyline. According to Wolf a game designed with interactivity in mind is often participatory, interactive and non-linear. However, when a game is adapted from a text-based narrative, it usually allows interactivity but limits transauthorial participations (2012). Interactivation, as a medium specific strategy, is best practiced through this genre as not all audiences choose to transmedially participate in a new narrative representation while interacting with storyworld. How interactive is *The Hobbit* as a *Text Adventure Adaptation* game?

The novel follows the quest of hobbit Bilbo Baggins to reclaim the kingdom of the Dwarves and the treasure guarded for long by the dragon Smaug. The stories of Bilbo's adventures are each told in a chapter forming together an episodic quest which introduces each time a specific creature, myth, or mission. The journey leads him from the comfort of his rural environment into unexpectedly gloomier lands. His adventurous Tookish side helped him react wittily to threats that endangered his life and the lives of his dwarf companions. Bilbo's common sense develops into wisdom throughout the novel demonstrating the increasing level of his maturity in dealing with crises. When the tale reaches its climax in the Battle of the Five Armies, a conflict gathers all creatures met earlier into a battle over the treasures of the Dwarves kept under the Lonely Mountain. It is then that Bilbo's fulfilled personal growth and wisdom are best shown as a drive for him to act with heroism and put an end to the conflict.

Similarly, the player leads Bilbo from his home to the Lonely Mountain to help retrieve the treasure and the Arkenstone for Thorin Oakenshield. He completes several quests throughout the game's chapters that loosely follow the novel's storyline. In fact, interactions occur primarily with added-material. Interacting with a storyworld also "includes the exploration of the world's spaces, the witnessing of events in the world, and interaction with other characters in the world" (Wolf 2012: 189). Throughout the game, the player's interactivity consists of fighting added monsters, crossing expanded chapters, and helping featured characters.

One particular medium specific addition is the opening chapter: *Dreamworld* that enhances the user's play-ability and, thus, interactivity with the storyworld. Throughout this level, the player can, first, rehearse game moves, try weapons,

and understand the overall game play. Rehearsal is a necessary step in video gaming to improve the player's performance and increase possibilities of high scoring (Neitzel 2015). As an example, Bilbo's dagger is present in this dream chapter to practice using it before the player actually finds it after completing a quest later on. Bilbo is invincible at this level for players to continue practicing without reloading the game each time the character is defeated and game is over. In fact, the challenging part at this level is completing the first quest of waking up and finding an exit.

This chapter is also a confirmation of Bilbo's unconscious heroism. A hero's journey according to Joseph Campbell starts with departure. The first stage of the hero's quest is accepting a calling for help (1949). It is often an unknown journey that the hero would go through. He must travel to an unknown world and challenge all the hardships on his way before achieving the journey's end. Bilbo is summoned to help a group of dwarves achieve their goal of retrieving their treasure and reclaiming their kingdom and homeland. The decision to accept the challenge and be the party's burglar is Bilbo's first role as a hero. At the beginning, he is unaware of his heroic calling. He never went on any kind of journey to become the hero he is expected to be. This idea is enhanced by the dwarves' elevated expectations of his heroic attributes. The player and Bilbo are given a chance to unconsciously explore this heroism in the game's first level: Dreamworld. They are both aware of Bilbo's ability to heroically go on an adventure and be of aid to the dwarves. The confirmation of the hero's ability to go on this adventure provides him with the necessary courage and eliminates fear and reluctance from his path. In fact, even the game's health system is based on courage points.

The imaginary interactive video game world "can also be used to communicate moral and ethical worldviews" (Wolf 2008: 308). The player not only reads, hears, or sees the moral deed but is asked to participate in accomplishing it. While completing the game's objectives, through a number of responses that involve "aggressive behavior or cooperative behavior, quick reflexes or contemplation, problem-solving ability or hand-eye coordination, navigational ability, suspicion, strategic thinking, and so forth" (Wolf 2008: 308), the player interacts with the storyworld's secondary reality. "In traditional storytelling, the internal conflict of a character often shapes the kinds of experiences encountered by the audience" (Tekinbas & Zimmerman 2004: 381). Bilbo's journey is a metaphor of his personal quest to achieve personal growth. His dangerous path, full of thresholds and enemies, in fact symbolizes his personal internal conflicts and fears. In the narrative he is able to simultaneously cross

the thresholds and overcome his fears. Similarly, through this interactive text adventure adaptation, players encounter conflicts and thresholds that they can virtually engage with to expand possibilities of experiencing the character's own internal conflicts imbedded within the game's secondary world. "How players are rewarded or punished for what they do, and the way causes are connected with effects, and actions are connected with consequences, will likewise suggest values for behaviors and suggest moral and ethical worldviews based on those valuations" (Wolf 2008: 308).

In *The Hobbit* (2003), Bilbo's health system is based on *courage points*. In every level, the player must complete several featured quests that mainly consist of helping other characters. The player is rewarded with courage points each time the good deed is completed. The gameplay, in fact, connects "moral and ethical worldviews" to the game's progression and the character's personal growth. Being linear, every stage must be completed before advancing to the next one. Bilbo's actions are connected with consequences leading to succeeding at every level. The player, virtually experiencing and interacting with secondary reality through a secondary storyworld, behaves according to the suggested values in the game. That is, the game's influence on players could be duplicated in their primary world reality. They would personally interact with cause and effect, reward and punishment, and action and consequence relations that in fact are primary world experiences.

Conclusion

Participation in the construction of Middle Earth is limited while communicative interactivation encourages players to act upon moral values and the good deeds of helping others. *The Hobbit*'s linear narrative guides players throughout the game providing explanatory cutscenes and informative illustrations to provide the illusion of completeness of the storyworld and a sense of its inner consistency. However, audiences sometimes choose themselves not to engage with the storyworld or its narrative representations. The question on why and how audiences choose or choose not to interact and participate in storyworlds has been given little attention academically, particularly because media industries regard the best form of participation as a "continuous consumption" (Freeman 2018: 203). Freeman explores both Jenkins and Wolf's arguments on interactive and participatory cultures to conclude that not much has been done to conceptualize the specificities of authorial participation (2018). In fact, research in the area should explore not only the specificities and politics of individual participation and interactivation in storyworlds and their narrative

representations but investigate their political, social, and economic implications. Storyworlds continue to be constructed, and are in fact very popular amongst audiences in the last decades, not only to immerse audiences in secondary world realities but perhaps to change the perception of their primary one.

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Abstract

Transmedia storytelling refers to the creation of content that engages audiences in new experiences with familiar narratives. Following transmedial strategies, narrative elements and storyworlds can move from one media channel to another. Every media transfer adapts its specific strategies to contribute to the narrative representation it offers. In the case of video games as text based narrative representations, players, on the one hand, engage in an interactive communicative experience within the storyworld, while, on the other hand, have their transauthorial participation restricted. This paper draws from the works of Henry Jenkins and Mark J. P. Wolf to investigate the implications of transmedial storytelling in representing storyworlds and narratives in the medium of video games. In order to apply the theoretical concerns of the transmedial approach, the study offers an analysis of *The Hobbit: The Prelude to the Lord of the Rings* (2003).

Keywords

Transmedia Storytelling; Storyworld; Transauthorial Participation; Interactivation; Narrative Representations; *The Hobbit*.

Résumé

La narration transmédia signifie la création de contenu qui engage les spectateurs dans de nouvelles expériences avec des récits familiers. En suivant des stratégies transmédiales, les éléments narratifs et le storyworld (monde de l'histoire) peuvent passer d'un canal médiatique à un autre. Chaque système adapte ses propres stratégies médiatiques pour contribuer à la représentation narrative qu'il propose. Dans le cas des jeux vidéo en tant que représentation narrative basées sur du texte, les joueurs, d'une part, s'engagent dans une expérience communicative et interactive au sein du monde du conte, tandis que, d'autre part, leur participation transautoriale est limitée. Cet article s'inspire des œuvres de Henry Jenkins et Mark J. P. Wolf pour étudier les implications de la narration transmédiale dans la représentation de mondes et de récits dans les jeux vidéo. Afin d'appliquer les préoccupations théoriques de l'approche transmédiale, l'étude propose une analyse du jeu vidéo The Hobbit : The Prelude to the Lord of the Rings (2003).

Mots-clés

Narration transmédia ; Storyworld ; participation transautoriale ; interaction ; représentation narrative ; Le Hobbit

مستخلص

السـرد القصصـي العابـر لوسـائل الإعـلام والاتصـال (ترانسـميديا) يشـير إلـى امتـداد القصـة أو العالـم الخيالـي الـذي تسـرد مـن خلالـه مـن أجـل إعطـاء الجمهـور فرصـة المشـاركة فـي بنـاء هـذا العالـم والتفاعـل معـه. تعطـي الألعـاب الإلكترونيـة هـذه الفرصـة للمتفاعـل مـع العالـم الخيالـي فتجعـل تجربتـه السـردية ممتعـة أكثر. تتضمـن هـذه الدراسـة شـرحا لمـدى إمكانيـة تفاعـل لاعـب الالعـاب الإلكترونيـة المقتبسـة مـن نـص أدبـي مـع سـرديات العالـم الخيالـي.

كلمات مفتاحيّة

السرد القصصي ترانسميديا، التفاعل مع العالم الخيالي، المشاركة في السرد، الهوبيت