

MMOGs and the Ecology of Fiction: Understanding LOTRO as Transmedial World

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The aim of this paper is to examine the (medium-related) particular strengths and weaknesses of computer games that are part of a wider ecology of fictions previously described by us as transmedial worlds.

In recent cultural history, certain imaginary universes have had a broad and highly engaging appeal for their audiences. The worlds of Middle Earth, Star Wars, The Matrix, or Final Fantasy are all examples of powerful universes which have continued to live on in a number of different instantiations and fan fictions produced across a variety of media platforms. In order to describe this phenomenon, we have earlier proposed the concept of transmedial worlds (Klastrup/Tosca, 2004), and a general analytical framework, with which to approach these.

"Transmedial worlds are abstract content systems from which a repertoire of fictional stories and characters can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms. " (Klastrup/Tosca, 2004: 409)

Our concept of transmedial worlds (TMW) is based on genre and adaptation theory and proposes a set of core features for the analysis (specifically the mythos, topos and ethos of the ur-world), which we will apply in this paper. Thus we will examine what are the particular strengths and weaknesses of having a gameworld instantiation of a transmedial world. Our case will be Lord of The Rings Online (LOTRO), in many ways the first and one of the most popular transmedial worlds altogether. We believe that a further understanding of the advantages and effects of launching a gameworld version of a popular universe will be of interest to both game researchers and media publishers working with transmedial world franchises, at the same time as we would like to emphasise the need to situate gameworlds such as LOTRO in a broader cultural context, relating it both to fan culture and its literary and cinematic predecessors. We thus argue that in order to fully understand how players engage with worlds like LOTRO, any analysis of one such world such be combined with both cultural and historical knowledge of the TMW.

Our study will take its point of departure in our own ethnographic observations of the game universe, combined with in-depth interviews with experienced players and fans of the world, as well as close readings of some of the "paratexts" surrounding the world, such as official fora, player forums, guild and fan sites. The methodology thus combines a traditional humanistic aesthetic approach with user-experience studies, game research and ethnography.

In the study we will particularly focus on how players interpret and act on the relation and couplings between the ur-universe of Middle Earth as known from Tolkien's original books, the LOTR movies, the tabletop roleplaying games, and the gameworld instantiation of the world. Our analytical method is built upon the concepts of repertoire and gaps (leerstellen) as proposed by Wolfgang Iser and adapted for the study of computer games by Tosca, for whom the process of playing is a "movement where the reader constantly readjusts his expectations, that can refer to plot, genre, form, or even world-knowledge" (2003: 7). We take our point of departure in the interpretive activity related to the ur-world, and see how it becomes operationalized in gameplay and the social relations around the game. This way we will be able to isolate the process of meaning production and world alignment which players perform, also inspired by previous work on fan fiction about the relation of the canonical text with its derivatives. For instance, if the gameworld violates the mythos, topos or ethos of the ur-world, how do players react? How does it affect their gaming experience? Do they consider the canonical status of the ur-world when engaged in their own gameworld modifications? Some key concepts here are credibility, immersion, interpretation, and realignment.

Works mentioned:

- Klastrup, Lisbeth & Tosca, Susana. 2004. "Transmedial worlds - rethinking cyberworld design" in Proceedings International Conference on Cyberworlds 2004. IEEE Computer Society, Los Alamitos, California, 2004.

-Tosca, Susana. 2003. "Reading Resident Evil: Code Veronica X". In Proceedings of the Fifth International Digital Arts and Culture Conference, RMIT, Melbourne, Australia. May 19 - 23, 2003.