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Digital Gaming and Tolkien, 1976-2015

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Digital Gaming and Tolkien, 1976-2015

Cover Page Footnote

I have revised the submission in align with the reviewre's comments.

DIGITAL GAMING AND TOLKIEN, 1976-2015

“Tolkien has become a monster, devoured by its own success and absorbed into the absurdities of the times.” Christopher Tolkien.¹

Whether or not one agrees with Christopher Tolkien’s value judgment about the impact Warner Bros’ film franchise has had on his father’s legacy there is no question that ‘Tolkien’ the phenomenon is far bigger than J. R. R. Tolkien the author or even J. R. R. Tolkien the author-and-*oeuvre*. When Christopher Tolkien asserted in 2012 that his father’s legacy has been rendered monstrous he blamed its fate on the gross depredations of commercialization generally and the Warner Bros’ franchise in particular: “they gutted the book by making it an action movie for 15-25 year-olds...commercialization reduced the aesthetic scope and philosophy of the creation to nothing.”² Explorations of – and encomiums on – the afterlives of Tolkien’s novels generally, like this one, focus on the impact of Peter Jackson’s films. There is substantial body of scholarship on Jackson’s adaptations of Tolkien’s novels (e.g. Bogstad and Kaveny 2011; Harl 2007; Hogset 2004), on the franchise built around them (Thompson 2007; Wallin 2007; Brookey and Booth 2006; Young 2016; Baker 2014), and on their reception (Mathijs 2006; Kuipers and de Kloet 2009). The forces which have shaped contemporary ‘Tolkien’ are not only commercial however, as recent interest in what fans *do* with Tolkien’s writings demonstrates. The drive to make money has played a significant part in shaping Tolkien’s legacy,³ but audience engagements and technological change have also been highly significant as this article shows through an exploration of digital games (computer and console) which adapt Tolkien’s writings from the 1970s to the present.

Existing scholarship on digital games set in Middle-earth has explored only those produced in the twenty-first century. While some pieces take up questions around adaptation (Wallin 2007; Brookey and Booth 2006; Young 2016), and Courtney M. Booker (2004) has argued convincingly for the influence of video-game aesthetics on Jackson’s first film trilogy,⁴ the now four-decade history of digital gaming in Middle-earth has not been traced in detail to date. The

¹ “Tolkien est devenu un monster, dévoré par sa popularité et absorbé par l'absurdité de l'époque.” Quoted in (Rerolle 2012). The translation is my own.

² “Un tel degré de commercialisation réduit à rien la portée esthétique et philosophique de cette création.” Quoted in (Rerolle 2012). The translation is my own.

³ It is worth noting here that making money was one of the reasons Tolkien sought to publish his fiction, and shaped a number of his decisions. He wrote, for example, of the decision to publish *The Hobbit* in paperback: I am no longer able to ignore cash-profit.” (Tolkien 2012, sec. 6572, letter 225).

⁴ Critics have also labelled being in the audience of *The Hobbit* films as being like watching someone else play a video game (Hamilton 2013; Lawson 2013).

influence of Tolkien's world on gaming, especially fantasy-role-playing, has been widely recognized and discussed (e.g. Tresca 2011), but the impact of gaming and gamers on 'Tolkien' has not. This article first examines the history of both unlicensed and licensed digital games, going into greater detail with those produced in the twentieth-century than the twenty-first because the history of the latter has been provided in existing scholarship (Thompson 2007, 224–253; Young 2016, 345–349). It identifies tracing concurrent a history of commercial consolidation by rights holders into the current single franchise owned by various subsidiaries of Warner Bros. The article then focuses on the most recent offerings, children's games produced in partnership between Warner Bros and the toymaker Lego. Since 2010 the franchise has taken a distinct turn towards the family and children's market, meaning that it is increasingly likely that new audience members will encounter Middle-earth through its products instead of the literary works which it adapts.

Playing in digital Middle-earth(s)

Kristin Thompson rightly argues that the revolution wrought by digital technologies on computer-generated imagery and film-making created an environment in which Jackson's movie project could be attempted (Thompson 2007, 2). Nonetheless, both licensed and unlicensed Tolkienian digital games existed long before Jackson's films. Chris Bishop (2015) suggests that the vast success of Tolkien's work in the last three decades of the twenty-first century was largely the result of it being taken up and re-imagined through successive *existing* formats, media, and movements from the paperback through comic books, pen-and-paper and live-action role-playing. Bishop does not include digital gaming in his discussion, but Tolkien's influence was felt from its early years and, as this article argues, that influence went both ways. Gaming and Middle-earth have been entangled in since the mid-1970s. Early iterations of pen-and-paper role-playing-games (RPGs), such as *Tunnels and Trolls* (1975), and more famously *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) owed a significant debt to Tolkien's vision.⁵ Video-games began to appear in the same era, and the influence of Middle-earth – both direct and filtered through pen-and-paper RPGs – was also evident.

Will Crowther, an RPG-er, created the first text-based adventure game for computers *Colossal Cave Adventure* in 1975.⁶ When Don Woods developed it into *Adventure* in 1976-1977 he added the Tolkienian elements of trolls and elves. Initially distributed as open access 'freeware,' commercial iterations of the game

⁵ TSR, the company which published the latter, was infamously sued for infringing copyright by using terms such as "hobbit" and "balrog," and had to make changes to the second edition as a result.

⁶ Also known as *Colossal Cave* and *ADVENT*.

were available from 1979; one notable instance was its inclusion on the first IBM MSDOS computer in 1981. *Adventure* was highly influential in the development of the multi-user dungeon (MUD) format and text adventure games.⁷ While its various iterations did not claim to adapt Tolkien's writing directly the presence of trolls and elves and the underlying fantasy elements of the game certainly referenced Middle-earth. The precise interconnections are impossible to trace, but it can be no coincidence that such games were created and circulated most widely among university students, the same audience that sparked the explosion of popularity of *The Lord the Rings* novels and the fantasy genre in the late 1960s and 1970s (Walmsley 1983, 79–82; Bishop 2015, 29). David Hartwell writes that in the late 1970s when the fantasy fiction genre became a strong presence in the market what audiences wanted was “not more *fantasy* but more *Tolkien*” (2010, sec. 375).⁸ Computer games allowed them not just to have more but to make it themselves, and to interact if not with Middle-earth as Tolkien had created it, then with Middle-earth in recognizable forms.

In 1982 the first authorized digital game based on Tolkien's writing appeared: *The Hobbit* was developed by Beam Software and published by Melbourne House;⁹ a later edition for new platforms was released as *The Hobbit Software Adventure* in 1985.¹⁰ It was licensed by the Saul Zaentz Company,¹¹ by the Tolkien Estate, and the book publishers George Allen and Unwin,¹² as were the subsequent licensed games of the twentieth-century. *The Hobbit Software Adventure* game was critically acclaimed, winning a Golden Joystick award, and was commercially successful.¹³ Copies of the novel were included with the game by arrangement with Allen & Unwin.¹⁴ It is, of course, very likely that many players already had their own copies but without knowing the story it is would be very difficult if not impossible to finish the game. The graphics were not based on the illustrations of any edition of any of the books, and were limited by the

⁷ MUDs are text-based role-playing worlds influenced by pen-and-paper RPGs. The game describes the player's location and the player gives commands by typing. These typically include movement, opening objects, and attacking monsters or other players.

⁸ Italics in the original.

⁹ The game can still be played and downloaded from multiple sources. I have used the Internet Archive, at https://archive.org/details/The_Hobbit_v1.0_1982_Melbourne_House. A Youtube video of gameplay for the Commodore 64 platform can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SZsyv5aKw4U>

¹⁰ I have used the later, longer title in the discussion to avoid confusion between it, the novel, and a later game.

¹¹ In 1976 the Saul Zaentz company bought ownership of the adaptation rights Tolkien originally sold to United Artists in 1968.

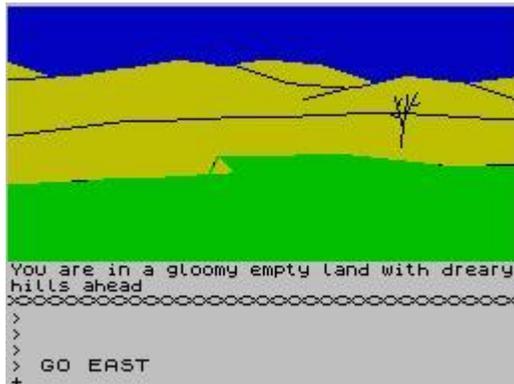
¹² The trading names of these entities have varied across the decades.

¹³ An estimated 100 000 copies had been sold according to an August 1984 article in *The Guardian* (Gerrard 1984). A 1986 parody of it, *The Boggit*, further confirms its popularity.

¹⁴ A guide to the game, written by David Elkan, a player, was published in 1984.

capabilities of computers in the 1980s (Figure 1), but compared to many games of the era which were purely text-based it was highly developed. The text-based nature of the game requires a high level of engagement from the player, who receives a brief description of the character's surrounds and then types words to direct the action.¹⁵ Non-player characters in the game vary their engagements with players, meaning that the each experience of the digital Middle-earth is different.

Figure 1. An image from *The Hobbit Software Adventure*



The game engine designed and built by Veronika Meagher – then a student at the University of Melbourne, Australia – enables players to engage with the game world in open ways not possible in any other game of the era. In a 2012 interview Meagher said: “I wrote the game to be very general and to not restrict people from doing things. Everything was an object. If you killed a dwarf you could use it as a weapon – it was no different to other heavy objects” (quoted in Sharwood 2012). The capacity to engage actively with this first licensed digital Middle-earth contributed to the success of the game, while that success also added to the ‘Tolkien’ phenomenon. The core story is the same with each play-through – players complete the same goals to ‘win’ – but the details, and thus the player’s experience of Middle-earth is different with every game and players choose how to accomplish Bilbo’s quest. Gaming – whether digital or pen-and-paper – is a different kind of experience to reading; whether or not the Middle-earth created in *The Hobbit Software Adventure* and the many licensed and unlicensed games which followed it reflect the author’s aesthetic and philosophical vision, players recognize the digital worlds as ‘Tolkien.’

¹⁵ The text parser (interface) English, was advanced for its time and allowed players flexibility when entering their commands.

Table 1. Licensed digital games of the twentieth century¹⁶

Title	Year	Publisher	Game genre
<i>The Hobbit/ The Hobbit Software Adventure</i>	1982	Melbourne House	Illustrated text adventure
<i>Lord of the Rings: Game One / The Fellowship of the Ring: A Software Adventure.</i>	1986	Melbourne House	Illustrated text adventure
<i>The Shadows of Mordor/The Shadows of Mordor: Game Two of the Lord of the Rings</i>	1987	Melbourne House	Illustrated text adventure
<i>War in Middle Earth</i>	1988	Melbourne House	Strategy
<i>Riders of Rohan</i> ¹⁷	1990	Konami and Mirrorsoft	Strategy
<i>The Lord of the Rings, Volume I</i>	1990	Electronic Arts (EA) and Interplay	RPG
<i>The Lord of the Rings, Volume II: The Two Towers</i>	1991	EA and Interplay	RPG

Melbourne House released three other licensed games in the next six years (see Table 1), although none broke as much ground in design as *The Hobbit Software Adventure*. Seven licensed games in total were published between 1982 and 1991, after which there was a decade-long gap. These followed the pattern of adaptation established by *The Hobbit Software Adventure* in that the key events of the game are the points of action in the plot of the relevant novel. For example, in *The Hobbit Software Adventure*, the player-character (Bilbo) leaves his home and within a few commands encounters the trolls who must be defeated before the play can progress. Many games also added incidents – almost invariably encounters with enemies – to the action of the novels; in *War in Middle Earth* (1988) the hobbits fight wolves in the Shire before reaching the Buckland ferry. These games added new material and modes of experiencing Middle-earth while maintaining a recognizable narrative structure that connected it to the original.

Publishers of twenty-first-century games actively work to connect their products with existing movie franchises, for example through inclusion of film footage and music, with the purpose of attracting existing audiences to new products (Wallin 2007; Brookey and Booth 2006). Twentieth century adaptations were constructed in similar ways by their publishers, albeit with different tools.

¹⁶ Only the year of first release listed in this table; all of the games were developed and re-released as new commercial gaming platforms became available.

¹⁷ This should not be confused with the unlicensed freeware RPG of the same archived at <https://archive.org/details/RidersOfRohan-MiddleEarthTaleI>

Small amounts of text from the novels are used as framing devices at the beginning of many. *War in Middle Earth* (1988) used the rings poem “Three rings for the elven kings under the sky...” in the opening sequence. All of the licensed games from this era use Tolkien’s name on the packaging and or in the opening sequence to establish unequivocally the authorized link to the popular books and their author before play actually begins (Figure 2); *War of the Rings* also used an illustration from a recent edition of *The Lord of the Rings* (Figure 3). The game publishers explicitly link their products not just with the works that potential players might have read and enjoyed, but also with the figure of the author himself. For games adapted from Jackson’s films, as Mark Wallin observes, “the author is a shadowy figure” because there are two possible authority figures: Jackson and Tolkien (Wallin 2007, n.p.), for earlier games there is no such ambiguity. As a result, not only is each game associated with Tolkien but Tolkien is associated with the game itself, and both become part of the ‘Tolkien’ phenomenon which is greater than the sum of its parts.

Figure 2. Screenshot from opening title sequence of *Riders of Rohan*

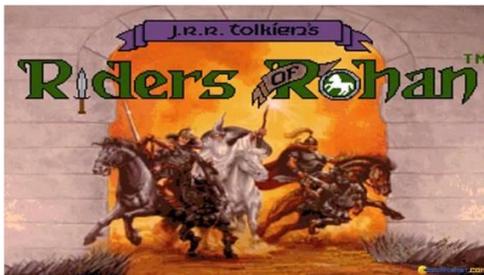
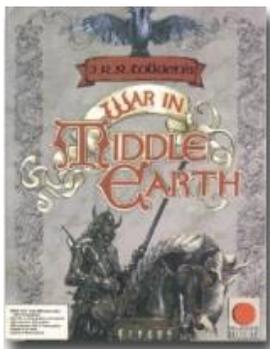


Figure 3. The cover of *War in Middle Earth*



Source:https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War_in_Middle_Earth_%281988_video_game%29#/media/File:Newwimebox.jpg

The history of unlicensed games is much more difficult to track than that of licensed games, and no definitive list can be made; it is possible, even likely, that coders made games which have been lost to memory if they were ever known outside a very small number of players. I have, rather than making the attempt, selected some examples which illustrate common tendencies among them. Both freeware and commercial unlicensed games were produced in the 1980s. The 1982 illustrated text-adventure game *Moria*¹⁸ was an unlicensed commercial release from Severn Software which without question used Tolkien's work, although I have found no evidence of any attempt by the various holders to enforce their rights. The game required players to explore the 'dungeons' of Moria to find Durin's Ring.

To complicate matters, a second, unlicensed, game also called *Moria*¹⁹ but in a different game-genre circulated as free software from mid-1983. It was initially developed by Robert Alan Koenecke, then a student at the University of Oklahoma in conjunction with his friend Jimmey Todd. The game is an RPG with strong influence from pen-and-paper games like *Dungeons and Dragons*: players create a character, first selecting from a range of races with given characteristics the strength of which is randomly generated from a fixed range for that race,²⁰ then choosing gender and character class and a name. The player then explores the realms of Moria before defeating a balrog to 'win' the game. *Moria* was widely circulated and reworked. Koenecke released his last version (4.7) in late 1986 to 1987, but at least 25 others built on his work, developing it for MSDOS and later platforms and adding improvements and new features.²¹ A web archive of the MSDOS-based *Umoria* derived from it was still being maintained at the time of writing.²² Again, no threat or actual lawsuit has been issued by any of the rights holders. Neither game follows narratives found in Tolkien's writing, instead they associate themselves with rather than adapt Middle-earth by using a few highly recognizable words to lend only the appearance of specificity to otherwise very general and generic game settings.

¹⁸ Also known as *Mines of Moria*

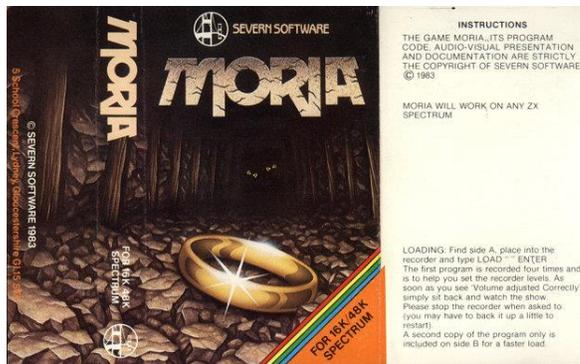
¹⁹ Also known as *Dungeons of Moria*. This game is available online, including the version I have used at <https://archive.org/details/TheDungeonsOfMoria>

²⁰ Human, half-elf, elf, halfling, gnome, dwarf, half-orc, and half-troll.

²¹ In 1996 Koenecke posted a brief history of the history of the game on a discussion board, now hosted at https://groups.google.com/forum/?hl=en#!msg/rec.games.roguelike.angband/gFiS2tV_-AA/Gp7g-TfuJmUJ

²² The current "Free Moria Project" at <http://free-moria.sourceforge.net/> lists contributors (last updated 3/3/2015).

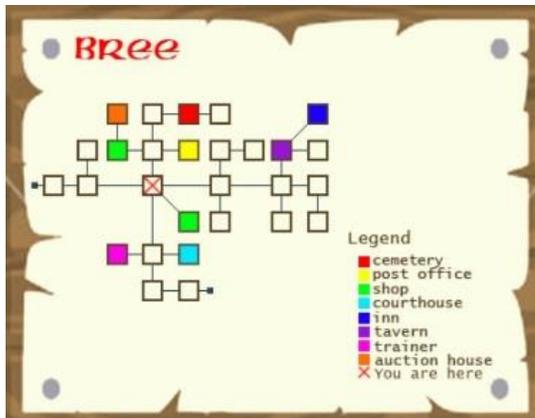
Figure 4. Cassette inlay image for Severn Software's *Moria*



The development of new gaming platforms in the 1980s and 1990s meant that all of the games listed above in Table 1 were re-released at least once in the years following their initial publication. The latest was the 1994 dual issue of *The Lord of the Rings, Volume I* and *The Lord of the Rings, Volume II: The Two Towers*. Gamers were not, however, restricted to re-playing older games because unlicensed games proliferated. The 1990s saw the creation of large numbers of MUDs which drew on Tolkien's writing and world to varying degrees. *The Two Towers*, created in 1994 is one salient example. The unlicensed game, created and maintained entirely by volunteers, is still actively played at the time of writing.²³ The world created over more than twenty-years is entirely text-based aside from maps produced by users most of which are simple grids designed to help players move through their surroundings (Figure 5); only one is recognizable as Middle-earth outside the context of the game (Figure 6). It is set, as the title indicates, during the War of the Ring, but does not require participants to play through the narrative of the novels as the principal form of engagement, rather the world is open to exploration. It extends to parts of Middle-earth not visited in either the novels or films, particularly regions south of Gondor.

²³ <http://t2tmud.org/>

Figure 5. Map of Bree in *The Two Towers* MUD



Source: <http://t2tmud.org/resources/maps/Bree.html>

Figure 6. Graphical map of Middle-earth in *The Two Towers* MUD



Source: <http://t2tmud.org/resources/maps/Middleearth.html> Created by Thomas Lornsen.

A third trend in unlicensed games, which again can only be broadly considered as adaptation, is ‘modding.’ This is when the code of an existing, usually highly successful game, is over-written with new sections of code to create what can also be thought of as a veneer of Middle-earth (or one of myriad other variations). Modding existed before the twenty-first century, although I have not been able to locate any games modded to Middle-earth from before 2000. Unlicensed ‘mods’ – and maps – of Middle-earth have been produced by players of countless games. This practice has become increasingly obvious in the twenty-first century since the release of Jackson’s films provided a ‘look’ for Middle-

earth that would be collectively recognized by players. Some, nonetheless, were made prior to this. Notable examples include *Jet Set Willy: Lord of the Rings* and *Manic Miner: The Hobbit*, both of which were released in 2000 and reproduced carefully the narratives of the respective novels over existing platform games.²⁴ Recent and current examples include *Minecraft*,²⁵ *Civilization*, *Total War: Attila*, and *Age of Empires II: the Age of Kings*. Among the most well-known is *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim*; the initial project to provide a free Middle-earth mod for the game was shut down for copyright infringement in 2012,²⁶ although other version can still be found online at the time of writing. A key difference between a ‘mod’ and a game like Koenecke’s *Moria* is in the coding and technical creation process; Koenecke’s was written from the ground up, as it were, whereas ‘mods’ build on existing codes.

Between 2001 and 2009 a complex state of affairs shaped the production of video games set in Middle-earth, with different companies licensed by Tolkien Enterprises – but not the Tolkien Estate or Allen & Unwin – to adapt Tolkien’s novels and Jackson’s films into games. Vivendi Universal Games held the license to adapt the novels from 2001 to 2005. In 2001 Vivendi Universal Games announced three role-playing games based on *The Lord of the Rings* books although ultimately only one in the trilogy was published by its subsidiary Black Label Games. Three games in total were published under this license before Vivendi transferred its rights to Turbine Inc in 2005 (see Table 2 below). Two years later, Turbine released the massively-multiplayer online role-playing-game (MMORPG) *Lord of the Rings Online (LOTRO)*. Electronic Arts (EA), which had created licensed games in the early 1990s, acquired the rights to make video games based on Jackson’s films from New Line in 2000. The license to create mobile games based on the films was held first by Riot E, and then from 2002 by Jamdat. In 2007 EA gained the rights to include material from Tolkien’s writing which had not been referenced in the films in their games from Allen & Unwin. The following year EA purchased Jamdat. EA’s license expired in 2009, at which time the rights were acquired by Warner Bros Interactive Entertainment (WBIE). WBIE bought Turbine Inc in 2010, and now holds all the digital gaming rights to Middle-earth under its single franchise.

²⁴ A video of gameplay of *Jet Set Willy: Lord of the Rings* can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5F0LlzYb2c> and of *Manic Miner: The Hobbit* at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a50e0M-UEMM>

²⁵ http://lotrminecraftmod.wikia.com/wiki/The_Lord_of_the_Rings_Minecraft_Mod_Wiki

²⁶ <http://www.theonering.net/torwp/2012/10/05/62775-warner-bros-shut-down-free-skyrim-lord-of-the-rings-mod/>

Table 2. Post-2000 digital games licensed to adapt Tolkien's novels only

Title	Year	Publisher	Game genre
<i>LOTR:</i> ²⁷ <i>The Fellowship of the Ring</i>	2002	Black Label Games	Action-adventure
<i>The Hobbit</i>	2003	Sierra Entertainment	Platform
<i>LOTR: War of the Ring</i>	2003	Sierra Entertainment	Real time strategy (RTS)
<i>LOTRO: Shadows of Angmar</i>	2007	Turbine Inc	MMORPG

The games published by Vivendi's subsidiaries and Turbine had the greatest scope to adapt Middle-earth because they could incorporate any material – such as characters, places, and events – that appeared in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* novels while those licensed by New Line Cinema (see Table 3) could only include material which had already been adapted in the movies. In practical terms few salient differences in narrative or scope resulted. Vivendi's and Turbine's games, however, did not have the resources – notably computer-generated images – that were available to EA from the film production process. The overall design of their games had to avoid infringing copyright by aligning too closely with the appearance of the franchised material. The packaging, by 2002, had changed noticeably: only *LOTR: The Fellowship of the Ring* included Tolkien's name on the cover, and that in very small type. *The Hobbit* (2003) was subtitled “the prelude to *The Lord of the Rings*.” The author's name had become less powerful than that of his best-known work – and its adaptations – in marketing terms at least.

Thompson traces the history of licensed games in the “Frodo franchise,” demonstrating that early mobile games were chiefly marketing exercises that nonetheless fitted in with the pattern of convergence – of both copyright and technology – that shapes the franchise overall (2007, 224–253). Game-makers had been adapting films and television series since the 1970s with improvements in technology bringing games closer and closer to film (Wolf 2001, 1–2). As Thompson observes however: “*Rings* helped revolutionize that way that games are made from films” principally because the game makers had access to the digital assets produced for the films (2007, 235). The graphics of games in the franchise, most noticeably those produced for consoles, are derived from the Middle-earth of the films, reinforcing the ‘look’ imagined by Jackson as

²⁷ I have used LOTR to abbreviate “The Lord of the Rings” in game titles throughout for brevity and clarity to distinguish from novels and films of the same or similar titles.

canonical.²⁸ The one exception to this is *LOTRO* which was, as noted above, brought into the franchise some years after it was first released; the most recent expansions of the game bring the visuals more closely into line with those of the films although the digital world has not been entirely revised at the time of writing. More than a decade of copyright consolidation, combined with the dominance of Warner Bros franchise in the popular culture market, has attached a strong visual vocabulary to ‘Tolkien,’ one that over-rides the author’s descriptions in some instances at least.²⁹

Table 3. Digital games licensed to adapt Jackson’s films only

Title	Year	Publisher	Game Genre
<i>Fellowship of the Ring</i> ³⁰	2001	Riot E	Mobile
<i>LOTR: The Two Towers</i>	2002	EA	Third-person RPG
<i>The Lord of the Rings Pinball</i>	2003	Jamdat	Mobile
<i>The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers</i>	2003	Jamdat	Mobile
<i>The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King</i>	2003	Jamdat	Mobile
<i>The Lord of the Rings: Two Towers Trivia</i>	2003	Jamdat	Mobile trivia
<i>The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King Trivia</i>	2003	Jamdat	Mobile trivia
<i>The Lord of the Rings Trivia</i>	2003	Jamdat	Mobile trivia
<i>LOTR: The Return of the King</i>	2003	EA	Third-person RPG
<i>LOTR: Battle for Middle-earth</i>	2004	EA	RTS
<i>LOTR: The Third Age</i>	2004	EA	Turn-based RPG
<i>LOTR: Tactics</i>	2005	EA	Turn-based strategy
<i>The Lord of the Rings Trilogy</i>	2005	Jamdat	Mobile
<i>LOTR: Tactics</i>	2005	EA	Turn-based strategy
<i>LOTR: Battle for Middle-earth II</i>	2006	EA	RTS

²⁸ Use of film footage in cut-scenes, which occurs most notably in the early games, does the same. One result is that problematic racial stereotypes, for example of the Uruk-Hai, are reproduced across the entire franchise (Young 2016, 350).

²⁹ The racialized appearance of the Uruk-Hai in the franchise is a case in point (Kim 2004).

³⁰ Not released in North America.

Table 4. Digital games licensed to use material from books and films

Title	Year	Publisher	Game genre
<i>LOTR: Conquest</i>	2009	EA	RPG
<i>LOTR: Middle-earth Defense</i>	2010	WBIE	Tower defense (mobile devices)
<i>LOTR: Aragorn's Quest</i>	2010	WBIE	Third person action-adventure
<i>LOTR: The Fellowship of the Ring</i>	2010	Microgaming	Slot (gambling)
<i>LOTR: War in the North</i>	2011	WBIE	RPG
<i>Guardians of Middle-earth</i>	2012	WBIE	MOBA ³¹
<i>Lego LOTR</i>	2012	WBIE	Action-adventure
<i>The Hobbit: Kingdoms of Middle-earth</i>	2012	WBIE	Tower-defence (mobile)
<i>The Hobbit: Armies of the Third Age</i>	2013	WBIE	MMO RTS
<i>Lego The Hobbit</i>	2014	WBIE	Action-adventure
<i>Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor</i>	2014	WBIE	RPG
<i>The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies Fight for Middle-Earth</i>	2014	Warner Bros	Mobile
<i>Lego Dimensions</i>	2015	WBIE	Toys-to-life

LEGO Games

That consolidation of rights was immediately followed by an expansion of franchise reach and profit via partnerships. The first saw the release of a digital gambling game in 2010 by the company Microgaming; this occurred with relatively little fanfare outside the online and bricks-and-mortar casinos in which it appeared.³² In December 2011, the toy-maker Lego announced that it had acquired a multi-year license until the end of 2015 to make building-brick sets

³¹ Multi-player Online Battle Arena. Teams of players, each controlling one or more characters, compete against each other. MOBAs are a sub-genre of RTS games.

³² The gambling games were decommissioned in June 2012, following legal action. The Tolkien Estate and book publishers sued Warner Bros and The Saul Zaentz Company for \$80 million claiming they not were licensed to produce “downloadable video games” or gambling games (“Fourth Age Limited et Al v. Warner Bros Digital Distribution” 2012). Warner Bros et al countersued and the matter is still pending at the time of writing.

based on Jackson's first film trilogy and what was at the time expected to be the two films of *The Hobbit*. Although there was no mention of games at the time, speculation was rife: an article on the gaming website *Kotaku* commented "if there aren't multiple games based on the franchise I'll eat my large hairy feet" (Plunkett 2011). In June 2012 *Lego The Lord of the Rings* was announced, with the full game following at the end of October that year. *Lego The Hobbit* was released in April 2014 and took action up to the end of *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug*. Rumours of a downloadable content (DLC) expansion to take the game to the end of the final film circulated but Warner Bros announced in March 2015 that this would not happen.³³ The partnership between Warner Bros and Lego did not, however wind up with that announcement. Less than a month after a *Lego The Hobbit* update was officially taken off the cards *Lego Dimensions*, a game which combines not only physical and digital play but, according to the press release, "many fan-favourite universes" was announced (Trangbæk 2012). It was released on 27th September that year, and expansions continue at least into 2016.

The Lego digital games and brick sets are illustrative of an overall shift in the franchise towards the family market which was initially marked by *LOTR: Aragorn's Quest* (2010). The Lego video-games, not limited to those based on Tolkien's work, are developed by TT (Time Traveller) Games the studio which made *LOTR: Aragorn's Quest*. Enough common features of the Lego video-games develop from *LOTR: Aragorn's Quest* to warrant a brief discussion of a game which was not very popular with audiences or critics. *Aragorn's Quest* presented a cleaner, more colourful, and less violent Middle-earth than anything previously licensed by New Line. It follows the central narrative of the film trilogy through the frame story of Samwise Gamgee recounting it to his children. The Wii and Playstation versions of the game depended not on conventional controllers but on the then relatively new motion-sensing technology of the Wii platform and the Playstation Move device. There are two main sections to the gameplay: in the first gamers plays as Aragorn, following the core narrative; in the second they are Sam's son Frodo who is in the Shire organizing a party to celebrate the arrival of King Elessar. Experience and abilities gained in the Shire section can be taken over to the narrative levels. The double-stranded gameplay, brighter and less bloody Middle-earth, and focus on the family market all foreshadow the Lego digital offerings.

The timing of the franchise's move into the children's and family market makes commercial sense. The children's gaming market has become in the past few years a testing ground for innovation and commercialization (Grimes 2013, 392). Jackson's second trilogy, moreover, was well into pre-production in 2010

³³ Brick sets for *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* have also been discontinued.

when *LOTR: Aragorn's Quest* was released. Although the films received the same PG-13 rating as did *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *The Hobbit* has been understood as children's literature since it was first published. Further, ten years after the first film trilogy debuted many of its original fans – specifically the 15-24 year olds Christopher Tolkien considered it was aimed at – would have had children, a new generation of potential audience for the franchise's products. This last point is not merely a commercial one. Adult fans – many of whom would at least see the movies with or without children – also of course gain pleasure and find meaning through their engagements with Middle-earth in its myriad forms, and many would value the ability to share those engagements through age-appropriate products like Lego brick sets and video games.

Lego The Lord of the Rings and *Lego The Hobbit* are easily recognizable as adaptations from Jackson's films rather than Tolkien's novels. Where any plot points differ they follow the narrative of the films not the books. This is most visible in *Lego The Hobbit* with, for example, the inclusion of Radagast and his rabbit-drawn sled, the central role of Azog and his personal vendetta against Thorin, and the dwarfs' plan to kill Smaug by drowning him in gold. The central narrative of each game comprises only approximately 25% of possible play. In a structure which is typical of *Lego* video-games, in the first play-through gamers only have access to those characters which are present in that part of the narrative in the source text. In *Lego the Lord of the Rings*, for example, only Legolas, Gimli, and Aragorn can be used during the defense of Helm's Deep. Once a level has been completed, players can return to it, picking between "Story Mode" when the same canonically-present characters can be used and "Free Play" when they can access all unlocked characters and their abilities; thus Saruman, Lurtz, and Sauron might fight alongside Frodo and Pippin at Helm's Deep. Completing all the possible game-play of a level always requires this second mode of play using the abilities of characters that are not canonically present. Once they have completed all the core narrative levels players can also explore a map of Middle-earth in *Lego The Lord of the Rings* and *Lego The Hobbit*, locating and solving puzzles. By playing through narrative levels in Free Play mode and exploring the wider world of Middle-earth players gain rewards in the forms of mithril bricks and blacksmith designs which allow them to gain new abilities. The two layers of gameplay resonate with the separation of the core narrative and Shire spaces in *Aragorn's Quest*; the non-narrative sections offer safe(r) spaces to improve gamers' in-game capacities and, ultimately, experiences.

Lego The Lord of the Rings and *Lego The Hobbit* are structured as conventional role-playing games, with levels populated by a high number of easily-defeated 'cannon-fodder' enemies and culminating in a 'boss fight' which requires tactical puzzle-solving is usually combined with the repetitive kicking and hitting (often but not always with weapons) that has dispatched his foot-

soldiers throughout.³⁴ In a conventional RPG, the player's character would gain new abilities through experience and achievements. Lego games vary this: players instead gain access to new characters which have different abilities and attributes. Some of those characters are 'unlocked' as each level is completed, but others must be 'purchased' in-game with virtual Lego studs that have been collected in the course of play. In *Lego The Hobbit* and *Lego The Lord of the Rings* players can also gain abilities by making items once they have found the blacksmith designs and gained enough mithril bricks; a mithril gardening spade, for example, allows any character to replicate Sam's plant-growing abilities in *Lego The Lord of the Rings*.

Lego Dimensions brings together multiple franchises into a single multiverse: *The Lego Movie*, DC Comics, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Doctor Who*, *Portal 2*, *Back to the Future*, *Midway Arcade*, *Scooby-Doo*, Lego's *Legends of Chima* and *Ninjago*, *The Simpsons*, and *Ghostbusters*.³⁵ Like *LOTR: Aragorn's Quest* it uses new gaming technology, combining the digital play with buildable Lego figurines which must be placed in certain combinations on a touch-pad to interact with and solve puzzles in the virtual world. The player (or players as it has a multi-player option) has available three core characters with different abilities that are included in the Starter Kit: Gandalf, Batman, and Wyldstyle from *The Lego Movie*. Other characters with different abilities, and their vehicles, can be purchased separately; these are in staged release. Three *The Lord of the Rings* 'fun packs' – each containing one character and a vehicle – were released at the same time as the game was launched: Legolas and an arrow launcher; Smeagol and Shelob; and Gimli and an axe-chariot.³⁶

The game narrative takes players through fourteen levels, each one loosely based on a franchise world which has been taken over by the villain (or villains) of a different franchise. Gandalf's abilities – magically moving objects from a distance, casting a shielding spell, and throwing bolts of fire – are essential to getting through each level, as are the abilities of Batman and Wyldstyle.³⁷ The Middle-earth level, titled "Riddle-earth," features Brainiac from DC Comics while the 'boss' is The Riddler from *Batman*; his "pet" in the final fight of the level is a balrog. Saruman appears as a minor villain in the level "Elements of Surprise" set in the *Ninjago* world. Sauron is the 'boss' in "Paint the Town Black," which is set in the DC Comics city Metropolis, home to Superman;³⁸ in Figure 7 (below)

³⁴ There are no female bosses in *Lego The Lord of the Rings* or *Lego The Hobbit*.

³⁵ This list is complete at the time of writing although more are rumoured.

³⁶ No 'team pack' or 'level pack' has been released or announced for *The Lord of the Rings*. Team packs include two characters and two vehicles/gadgets from a franchise, while level packs contain one character and two vehicles/gadgets and also allow access to the digital world of that franchise.

³⁷ Gandalf's abilities are matched by those of The Wicked Witch of the West.

³⁸ Superman is sucked through a dimensional rift in the opening sequence of the level.

Gandalf, Batman, and Wyldstyle face-off against the flaming eye of Sauron atop a Dalek space-ship. Orcs of various kinds appear as minor soldiers of evil across multiple levels, while cave trolls wielding Grond, the battering ram which shatters the gates of Minas Tirith, accidentally aid the heroes in a *Back to the Future*-set level “Once Upon a Time Machine in the West.”

Figure 7. Gandalf, Batman, and Wyldstyle face the burning eye of Sauron



In addition to the fourteen narrative levels which can be played and re-played, *Lego Dimensions* includes an “Adventure World” for each franchise which can only be accessed if the gamer has purchased the figurine of a character from that franchise; Middle-earth, DC Comics world and *The Lego Movie* world are all accessible with the Starter Pack. The Adventure Worlds are separate to the worlds of the narrative level in terms of the spaces and action of the game. In “Riddle-earth” Minas Tirith has been overrun by orcs, but in the Middle-earth Adventure World it has not. The Adventure World spaces give gamers large areas to explore, puzzles to solve, and side-quests to complete, although doing so has very limited impact on future gameplay in the narrative levels. Practice may enable mastery of puzzle-solving skills or manipulation of the controller, but completion of the narrative levels of the game depends more on the player’s ability to recognize what needs to be done than on skill in actually doing it. The structure of the two sections of the game thus mirrors those of *LOTR: Aragorn’s Quest* and the earlier Lego games, but the purpose is different.

The need to purchase new items in order to gain new abilities and access new areas is a key difference from the previous Lego games in the franchise. When encountering a puzzle which cannot solve with existing characters, players can “Hire A Hero” for just long enough to complete it using studs collected throughout the game, but this is not always an option. Adventure Worlds can only be accessed by purchasing a character from the relevant franchise. Progressing through the game itself and increasing one’s experience does not change the experience of game play, or the amount of game that can be played. This follows a trend set in recent years by mobile games for phones and tablets which are free to play but require in-game purchases to access higher levels.³⁹ In-game purchases are a standard feature of contemporary gaming, especially although not exclusively in mobile games. As Sara N. Grimes points out, the feature can be particularly lucrative in children’s games because it bypasses the “special regulatory and ethical requirements” placed around advertising to children (Grimes 2013, 392). Each puzzle that cannot be solved by the characters a player already has acts as an advertisement for new products to be purchased and, potentially, as a gateway into a new fandom/franchise.

Lego Dimensions is certainly the kind of product that Christopher Tolkien meant when he spoke of the monstrosity of commercialization and could be taken as marking a shift from “building transmedia intertextuality to cross-promoting brands and products” (Grimes 2013, 388). The game, however, develops directly from the underlying logic of a design feature central to LEGO: the capacity to make connections. With physical Lego Galadriel can stand (giant-like) next to Big Ben wearing a Roman legionary’s helmet and holding a baseball glove (Figure 8); every piece can connect with every other piece whatever the theme, franchise, or historical period from which it comes. Individual characters cannot be re-made in this way in *Lego Dimensions*, but they can be placed in any narrative level or Adventure World. The game also resonates very strongly in this capacity with the structure of cross-over fan fiction in which characters from one narrative world are placed into another. Crossovers designed to increase viewer numbers have been a feature of television programming since at least the 1980s and are a staple of franchises launching new spin-offs, they are however relatively new and unusual in digital gaming. The Lego Group has been highly successful in the past decade or so because it has involved consumers in design processes, using their creativity and ideas to shape new products (Botoric 2015). *Lego Dimensions* builds on this policy by adopting and monetizing fan practices.

³⁹ There are literally thousands of examples of such games available through outlets like Apple’s App Store. Rovio Entertainment’s *Angry Birds* is one of the most well-known examples.

Figure 8. Lego-brick Galadriel in a Roman helmet and baseball glove with Big Ben



Making the “Tolkien’ Monster

Lego Dimensions had not been announced let alone released when Christopher Tolkien told *Le Monde* that his father’s legacy had been made so monstrous that he could no longer bear to look at it. The game would certainly not have ameliorated his feelings. The game, however, is not attempting to reproduce J. R. R. Tolkien’s aesthetic and philosophical vision, rather it is a product of shifts in technology, commerce, and audience. Middle-earth is still a place people want to go not *just* because of the novels in which it first appeared to the public, but because the imagined world is both deep and flexible enough to encompass change.

The history of digital gaming in (or near) Middle-earth bears out Bishop’s argument that a central reason for the continuing popularity of Middle-earth is that it has been grafted onto existing formats. By the mid-1970s when digital games were first developed and circulated *The Lord of the Rings* was an easily recognizable reference point; the complexities of Tolkien’s world brought depth and meaning to games that either entirely lacked or had only very rudimentary graphics to help players’ imaginations. The novels act in ways that are not dissimilar to the function of the tales now published in *The Silmarillion* for readers of *The Lord of the Rings*. Knowing that the world one reads about or plays in is much bigger than the areas and stories accessed in the current iteration lends depth to the experience and a sense of wholeness to the world. The participatory nature of the early internet continued in MUDs and still does in the games of the

present; fan practices shape even the most recent and highly commercial of games, *Lego Dimensions*.

Exploring the history of digital games which adapt Middle-earth more or less closely demonstrates that multiple forces shape what ‘Tolkien’ has become, and that audience pleasures and playfulness rank highly among them. Fans who make games, from Crowther’s *Colossal Cave Adventure* through Koenecke’s *Moria* to the mods for *Minecraft*, do so for fun not profit, while their games add to the cultural work and value that has accreted around Tolkien’s novels since they entered the popular consciousness in the late 1960s. The logic of franchise expansion, which produces new games as new technologies and genres develop, never has *only* commercial effects but can also expand Middle-earth through the creation of new narratives (Young 2016, 349). That there is a vast gulf between some of those narratives and Tolkien’s aesthetic and philosophical visions does not prevent players from enjoying them on their own terms, or recognizing them as ‘Tolkien.’ From 1960s counterculture to white supremacist webpages of the 2010s, ‘Tolkien’ has meant so many things to so many people that its beauties and pleasures – whatever they may be – are necessarily in the eyes and hearts of the beholder. Those multiplicities, of readings and of perspectives, form part of the whole, even if it is a monstrous one.

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