2016

Playing with the History of Middle Earth: Board Games, Transmedia Storytelling, and The Lord of the Rings

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Playing with the History of Middle-Earth: Board Games, Transmedia Storytelling, and *The Lord of the Rings*

The rise of television in the 1950s brought about a huge surge in licensed board game adaptations of popular programs. A visit to many large retail outlets reveals that this process continues unabated with the transfer of film and TV products onto the tabletop evidenced by the *Sherlock* version of *Cluedo*, the *Despicable Me* version of *Operation*, the *Game of Thrones* version of *Risk*, and many *Monopoly* spin-offs of programs such as *The Office*, *The Walking Dead*, and *The Big Bang Theory*. The recent reinjection of *Star Wars* euphoria resulting from Disney's $4 billion purchase of Lucasfilm has seen adaptations of all those games listed above, along with *Guess Who?*, *Stratego*, *Trouble*, and *The Game of Life*, among others. These mass-market products by industry monoliths Hasbro, Milton Bradley, and Mattel often treat their source material as character names and images to "re-skin" their company's already established games. David Parlett has condemned this phenomenon as "mind-numbing, and ultimately [of a] soul destroying degree of worthlessness" (7). Stewart Woods similarly dismisses them as "typically derivative and uninspired" because they use well-known mechanics and seldom bring anything new or innovative to tabletop gaming (19). While such judgements are not our concern here, the widely-known "mainstream" of board game culture is only part of the story.

The recent surge in tabletop gaming has been significantly aided by the increasing popularity of digital gaming, the opportunity to crowdfund tabletop games online, and gamers' extensive use of participatory digital media generally. Individuals and companies have launched thousands of tabletop-related *Kickstarter* projects since 2010, and a once relatively isolated hobby has become a globalised subculture through the sharing of game reviews on YouTube, interactions on discussion forums via *boardgamegeek.com*, and Geek & Sundry's online web series *TableTop*. These and similar developments have provided tabletop gaming with considerably more depth and breadth, though the commercial power of licenses to adapt major franchises into board, card, and miniature games (the generic term "board games" will often be used here) still remains. The non-exclusive licensing of J.R.R. Tolkien's world of Middle-Earth to a range of companies is an exemplary case in point. The swath of tabletop adaptations now available is far from immune to the kind of mass-market appropriation highlighted above, as can be seen in Milton Bradley's *The Lord of the Rings: Trilogy Edition* of *Stratego*, or Hasbro's *Risk* and *Monopoly* versions, yet the storytelling and strategic intricacy of many other games belonging to what are often categorised as "designer" or "hobby" games distance them from the simplicity of the former group. This article seeks to explore the innovative ways in which

the theme of Tolkien's writings and Peter Jackson's films is blended with board game mechanics, giving rise to complex transmedia processes of narrative construction and gamer identification. Adapting narrative theory to tabletop games, we examine how games can offer different kinds of engagement with Middle Earth from other forms of media, and the processes by which players can co-create narratives in the storyworld.

The ongoing expansion of the world that the young Bilbo Baggins first stepped out into has been an important feature of Middle-Earth since its inception. The transmedia possibilities of Tolkien's various novels and short stories have been seen in the 1955 BBC radio dramatisation that Tolkien himself denounced (White 219), the 1978 animated film *The Lord of the Rings*, and the Hollywood blockbuster movies released from 2001 to 2014. Games have also played a key role in many people's experiences of the fantasy world for some time. Tolkien's books continue to be read widely, though it is an interesting feature of contemporary popular culture that one need not read a single page in order to garner a more than passable knowledge of the broad narrative of the "Third Age" – as well as many details from before its dawn. Video games have had a strong impact on fans' engagement with Tolkien mythology. Snowblind Studios' action role-playing game *The Lord of the Rings: War in the North* (2011) draws on elements of both novels and films to allow PC, Playstation 3, and Xbox 360 gamers to play out a separate narrative occurring simultaneously with Frodo's quest to Mordor. On the other hand, Pandemic Studios' design of *The Lord of the Rings: Conquest* (2009) injects players into various key battles depicted in the films, though providing different perspectives and characters for players to choose, control, and identify with. Both of these games varied markedly from the two Electronic Arts games, *The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-Earth* and its sequel (released in 2004 and 2006), which – in the vein of immensely successful war games such as *Command & Conquer* – positioned players as strategic commanders of either good or evil armies with a seemingly omnispective view of the battlefield. The numerous tabletop incarnations of the different times, places, characters, and events of Middle-Earth offer similar diversity to players.

A great deal has been written about the influences on Tolkien's writing and his own influence on subsequent fantasy (Day; Carter; Colbert), and the coverage of Jackson's epic film adaptations has been extensive (Barker and Mathijes; Mathijes; Thompson). However, scholarly attention to the intersection of Middle-Earth and gaming has been limited beyond a few studies on online/video games (Krzywinska, MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler; Wallin; Young). Indeed, the study of the broad area of tabletop games generally has been sorely lacking, and the narrative complexities they offer in relation to the role of games as "world-building activities" (Goffman 27) is rarely considered in game studies research (with partial attention paid to this in a study by Wolf). Transmedia storytelling facilitates considerably more diverse, flexible, and interactive frameworks within which textual meanings

are generated than traditional notions of "adaptation" have typically allowed for. The fluidity and subjectivity of (game)play itself impacts to varying degrees on the construction of board game narratives and the ways in which these engender player positioning, perspective, and identification. In the case of Tolkien-inspired tabletop games, the possibilities that stem from players' likely familiarity with, and attachment to, the "narrative core" (Scolari 598) – which usually comprises a storyworld's first form – mean that subsequent or concurrent texts extend, enrich, and above all provide a fundamentally different (though always also strangely familiar) experience of that world. Here we offer a close analysis of the transmedia intertextualities at work in two particularly successful and influential board games, Reiner Knizia's *Lord of the Rings* (2000) and the war strategy game *War of the Ring* (first published in 2000 and 2004 respectively). These two games are very different due to their cooperative and competitive modes of gameplay respectively, inviting players to engage with the history of Middle-Earth in a collaborative or combative mode, and enabling them to experiment with the realignment of protagonist influence, events, and the temporality of Tolkien's storyworld in ways that do not undermine its core.

TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING ON THE TABLETOP

In his conceptualisation of the fundamentally transformed ways many fictional narratives are built in the digital age, media theorist Henry Jenkins writes that transmedia storytelling "represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story" ("Transmedia Storytelling" 944). While this process is not always what one would conventionally perceive as a "unified" or "coordinated" one given the fragmented nature of media production, participatory nature of online media, and the impact that play has in the context of toys and games, a growing number of researchers of contemporary film, television, comic books, toys, novels, and digital games have found the concept of transmedia storytelling to be a highly valuable one (Bainbridge; Mittel; Perryman; Scolari). Jenkins highlights that for something to be a worthy example of a transmedia text, it must make a contribution "to our understanding of the narrative or the world of the story" in a way that "enhances the continuity and coherence of the fictional world" ("Transmedia Storytelling," 945). Using the example of Star Wars-themed breakfast cereal, he notes that the simple branding of products in this way has limited storyworld-expanding value – a judgement that may to some degree be applied to the kinds of tabletop games mentioned at the beginning of this article, which do little but re-skin. Nonetheless, acknowledging that the act of playing with toys or video games engenders the simultaneous expansion and alteration of a transmedia story (Jenkins "Transmedia Storytelling," 945; Gray 176) raises the question of how

more complex Tolkien-inspired board games enable the formation of narratives about Middle-Earth.

While adaptation theory has for a long time emphasised the crucial importance of intertextuality in understanding textual relations, with precursor texts being situated, for instance, as "resources" (McFarlane 10), the pressures of fan expectations of "fidelity" on those who adapt earlier stories (particularly those of cultural monoliths such as the *Harry Potter* series) are far from insignificant. It almost goes without saying that a narrative must be irrevocably changed when it is "re-told" using different media than the source text(s); nonetheless, the risk to an effective (and commercially viable) expansion of a given storyworld can grow apace with the level of deviation from the tone and substance of the narrative core. Carlos Scolari (2009: 598) conceptualises the "narrative core" as principally consisting of a storyworld's first form – the primary plot threads, themes protagonists, antagonists, and so on which are generally repeated across platforms and versions. In the case of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, for instance, the adaptation of Tolkien's novels for the screen in Jackson's film trilogy – despite their close links to the pre-text overall – can be seen to shift or expand some narrative elements with the increased involvement of certain characters and the elision of certain scenes (or their inclusion in "Extended" versions of the film sold after its cinema release). Yet the overall core narrative drives remain the same: the protagonist-heroes must complete their quest to the Lonely Mountain (*The Hobbit*) or destroy the One Ring of power while avoiding its corrupting influence (*The Lord of the Rings*). This is not to suggest the "narrative core" cannot be destabilised – or even subverted – given the multitude of ways people can be exposed to a given "story" in contemporary transmedia culture, but there are important factors that maintain the narrative core in transmedia storytelling.

Existing scholarship on tabletop games has given far more attention to "role-playing games" (Bowman; Cover; Mackey; Schick; Fine) than to board (and card) games. Role-playing games are generally enacted via verbal storytelling and interpersonal conversations with less extensive use of components (dice are common, while maps and miniatures or tokens are less so). By contrast, board and card games are fundamentally reliant on various physical elements, the quality of which (in addition to game mechanics) is frequently integral to a game's commercial success. This is not to suggest that such games are necessarily less reliant on narrative than the typical *Dungeons & Dragons* session: while many modern European games (or Eurogames) tend toward the highly abstract and focus more on accumulating points via game mechanics, story-making is central to numerous board games, particularly American productions – often called "Ameritrash" games. Reflections on board games rarely touch on these recently emerged genres, and have generally approached the subject from historical perspectives detailing game types and trends (Peterson; Finkel; Hofer; Parlett), psychological and

pedagogical perspectives examining their effectiveness for learning (Mayer and Harris; Hinebaugh; Miller; Gobet, de Voogt and Retschitzki), and practitioner perspectives providing "how-to" advice on designing engaging games (Costikyan and Davidson). The issue of how board games generate narratives and meanings as cultural products – particularly those created in a transmedia context – has until recently been marginalised. We therefore contribute to a gap in knowledge regarding what has recently been identified as "the widely overlooked consideration of board games as works of (interactive) art" (Jones and Clayton 2).

Telling/Making Stories

The concept of the "fabula pool" provides a useful starting point for theorising narrative construction in board games. In (literary) narrative theory, a "fabula" is "a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors" (Bal 5), which an author "presents in a certain manner" as a "story" (Bal 5).[1] A fabula consists of events, actors, time, and location, and when these are organised into a story, the events are arranged in a sequence (not necessarily chronologically), actors are given traits so that they become characters, and a point or points or view are selected. However, in different kinds of narratives, such as board games, the process of story construction is somewhat different. More particularly, the material which can be drawn on is not a linear, chronological series, but can more helpfully be thought of as "a collection of events and actors from which a writer selects, to organise into a story" – a "fabula pool" (Waterhouse-Watson 14). In addition, while in a conventional, literary narrative, an author constructs the story, and has absolute control over how the elements are arranged, in a board game control is shared, and both game designer and player choices can influence the outcome. Indeed, in many narrative-based games, the story will be quite different each time it is played.

In adventure role-playing games such as Fantasy Flight's *Runebound* (2015) or *Talisman: The Magical Quest Game* (2007), players might select different characters, travel to different locations, acquire different items, encounter different events, and engage in different battles – all in an order that does not replicate a past game (and is unlikely to replicate a future one). In other words, markedly different narrative outcomes can be drawn from the same "fabula pool." Further, the process of constructing the story is as much about which elements are selected as it is about how they are arranged; a conventionally linear sequence of events, for instance, may be randomised to play out differently every time. If the final narrative(s) of a game session begin from a fabula pool, one must also figure in the role of chance or "luck," which depends on the level of randomisation involved and varies from game to game.

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[1] It is important to note that terminology in narrative theory is not uniform. However, Bal's terminology helpfully uses "story" as a construct, and the more abstract "fabula" for something that exists only in theory.

Of course, player decisions (moderated as they are by a blend of rules and luck) also have a considerable influence on how the story plays out. This ensures that even when the "template" offered by a game's components and mechanics is relatively inflexible to gamer agency, a multiplicity of narratives ensue and the subject positions of "author," "narrator," "narratee," and even "protagonist" can be slippery at best. The size and scope of the fabula pool will vary with each game, though players can be seen to "participate" in a narrative's construction through eclectic processes of telling/discovering/ building stories, which many have viewed as pivotal to the success of a transmedia storyworld (Bernado; Phillips; Pratten). Of course, the "freedom" given to players is seldom overwhelming; player agency constantly fluctuates alongside the constraints of game rules and mechanics.

Despite the enhanced choices that games offer compared with the more "passive" reception of many other media forms, there is an important tension between what Eric Lang and Pat Harrigan call "the authorial dictatorship of storytelling and the decision trees of game-playing" – a tension that ensures games maintain a "narrative flow" (86). Indeed, Greg Costikyan (2007, 6) argues that although games are non-linear, most tabletop narratives only offer "the illusion of free will to the player; players must feel that they have freedom of action – not absolute freedom, but freedom within the structure of the system." While variability (different set-up options, alternate objectives, randomised event ordering, and/or multiple endings) is key to engaging players in a meaningful (and replayable) game, the limitations placed on gameplay – even at the base level of the number of provided components or character options – can have significant implications for how players are "guided" through and positioned toward a seemingly open-ended narrative. There are some exceptions, with a few (mostly card) games designed to evoke a "pure" story-making environment in which players create and tell new stories with little guidance beyond basic instructions (Wallis); however, these are relatively obscure and lack the consumer interest and widespread dissemination of the board games we discuss. In considering the many synergies between form and content in relation to tabletop games, it is therefore important to keep in mind the pre-constructed nature of narratives and how this impacts on narrative perspective and gamer identification.

IDENTIFICATION AND NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The ways in which board game narratives are (pre-)constructed and players are positioned to identify with (or against) the characters within these narratives is crucial to the transmedia experience. The alternative perspectives offered, even within the same game session, are also central to the kind of experience that tabletop games offer. Depending on a game's design, which may or may not involve a player focusing on an individual character within the story, narrative perspective and gamer identification are negotiated in different and – in contrast to the positioning of readers and viewers of literary or screen texts

– often unconventional ways. In her recent article "Rethinking Game Studies: A Case Study Approach to Video Game Play and Identification," Adrienne Shaw (349) stresses the need for game studies scholarship to "more thoroughly interrogate how and when specific games invite identification, as well as be more attentive to the way in which individuals are more or less inclined towards identification." While issues of identity and identification are receiving increasing attention in relation to video gamers, much of this literature cannot be readily applied to tabletop game culture. Bob Rehak (107), for instance, writes of a virtual avatar that a gamer adopts as more than "simply a means of access to desired outcomes, but an end in itself – a desired and resented lost object, existing in endless cycles of renunciation and reclamation." Using even more emotive language, Sheila Murphy (234) contends that gamer identification "sutures" the video gamer to the game. Within board games that provide cardboard or plastic characters, a similar scenario in which these "stand in" for or *as* the player is evident, and the chance to play as a favourite character can also be an end in itself; however, this relationship is likely to be less intense, if for no other reason than because gameplay is shorter and more finite (even if the character is used repeatedly in subsequent games). On the other hand, some video game scholars find that an interest in narrative is subsumed by the obsessiveness of many players with accruing points and achievements in a form of "deep play" (McMahan 69). This characterisation can apply to board game(r)s, and in a few games we have experienced players sideline the narrative almost entirely and focus solely on winning. Nevertheless, this is quite rare as the social experience of board gaming (and the part narrative often plays in this, at least in more thematic games) is usually central – even when winning is also (Woods 178-179), and those who regularly play thematic games tend to appreciate this aspect. This point is reiterated in the countless evaluations of "theme" in board game reviews, particularly those that contribute to storyworlds originating in other media.

James Gee (58) argues that the interplay between a video gamer and the (virtual) avatar they control "transcends" the forms of identification experienced through books and films due to the "active" and "reflexive" relationship that the player develops with "their" character. In similar ways to video games, elements of *ownership* are evident in the conceptualisation of tabletop game characters (represented by miniature figurines, tokens, profile cards, or a combination of these) as "belonging" to players. Further, numerous tabletop games require (often as the path to victory) the incremental "improvement" of one's character(s) by enhancing their traits, equipment, and/or powers. This seems to suggest that board games invite the possibility of a form of "projected identity" that Gee (2003: 55-56) defines as the "interface" between virtual avatar and player identities in digital games. However, the degree to which a board gamer is positioned to identify with characters in games often depends on the relative "permanence" or "discardability" of the character, and the significance of the character's role to gameplay. Social

elements of a game vis-à-vis the interactions between players sitting around a table must also be considered, and the degree to which a game relies on such interactions for the narrative to progress. The tabletop texts we consider here are designed to be played only as multiplayer games (without considerable "home-made" adjustments to the rules), and interpersonal communication during gameplay may not always relate to the game's narrative or characters. With these points in mind, it is arguably unlikely that the fundamental blurring of person, player, and persona possible in fantasy role-playing (Waskul 32) will be engendered in many board game settings. Nonetheless, tabletop narratives rely on player positioning just as narrative texts in other media do, and the ways in which stories are designed and played out in the context of Middle-Earth are often highly sophisticated in their construction of narrative perspective and identification.

As literary theory has long established, individuals interpret and engage with texts in a number of ways. Theorising about gamer identification generally presumes a particular "type" of player, who engages with the game in particular ways, and it is therefore useful to adapt a concept from literary theory to tabletop gaming: the "implied reader" or "ideal recipient". In literary theory, the implied reader is the abstract reader who "understands the work in a way that optimally matches its structure and adopts the interpretive position and aesthetic standpoint put forward by the work." (Schmid, para 11). We will adopt the term "ideal player" for the (imagined) player whose engagement with a game most closely matches that which the game's mechanics and immediate paratext (such as the rulebook) implies. In using this term, we fully acknowledge that it will not be representative of all players (any more than the implied reader represents all readers), but that it represents a *likely* means of engaging with a game.

In his seminal work *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006), Jenkins writes of the need for a transmedia text to remain "consistent with what viewers know" about the broader storyworld, (106) even though they do not necessarily need to have this information in order to independently consume or interact with the text. Of course, it is possible that some players have little or no knowledge of the source text for Martin Wallace's simple trick-taking card game *The Hobbit* (2012), though this is unlikely to be the typical case when it comes to a widely-recognised storyworld such as that of Middle-Earth, where games are predominantly designed for and marketed to fans, many of whom take the universe very seriously. Certainly, the "ideal player" would have a working knowledge of the storyworld. Certain modes of gameplay can threaten the potential for identification where it seems to undermine the narrative core. To take one example, there is an intriguing irony in competitive games which are inspired by source texts that revolve around working together to solve problems or survive life-threatening situations. The mechanics of Cryptozoic's deck-building games (2013-2014) for *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* films require players to recruit or "gain" allies and other useful cards (such as

weapons) from a central area to defeat the fellowship's enemies and gain more points than the other players attempting to do the same. When opposing players "possess" Legolas and Gimli as their starting characters, the irony deepens as the in-film friendship between the two characters is at best set aside, and at worst actively undermined. In this way, the game contradicts a significant sub-theme of the narrative core which sees the elf and dwarf struggling to overcome their race-based hatred for one another and eventually forging a friendship that long outlives the ending of the Fellowship (Tolkien 1053). This example underlines the fact that a game's theme and mechanics do not always match, and this kind of disjuncture may even lend itself to fans of the storyworld rejecting the game (certainly Cryptozoic's deck-building games are not anywhere near as highly regarded online as the games we analyse in the following sections).

When players (with the requisite intertextual knowledge) are able to experience a storyworld from the perspective of the narrative core's antagonists, it might be tempting to claim that the processes of narrative construction and identification in these games signify a radical departure from the storyworld. However, such departure is not a new phenomenon, with *Doctor Who*'s evil Daleks starring in a series of spin-off books in the 1960s and 70s (Perryman 22), for example. Despite some players taking on the role of villains in tabletop games ranging from Decipher's *Star Wars: Customisable Card Game* (1995) to Fantasy Flight's *Star Wars: Armada* miniatures game (2015), the narrative core remains intact, just experienced from a different perspective. This multi-perspectival approach can be found in a number of Tolkien-inspired tabletop games. Eric M. Lang's *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey – Journey to the Lonely Mountain Strategy Game* (2013), which combines WizKids' innovative "Heroclix" miniature technology with a conventional board and tokens, requires one player to be Bilbo Baggins and up to three players to control one of Gollum, Azog, or the Goblin King. Likewise, Reiner Knizia's two-player game *Lord of the Rings: The Confrontation* (2002) adopts a pseudo-chess style of gameplay to position one player as representing the Free Peoples of Middle-Earth and the other playing Sauron and his evil minions. We will reflect on this dynamic further in relation to *War of the Ring*, but it suffices here to say that it adheres to the narrative core of Tolkien's mythology. As Tom Dowd et al. note in their brief reflection on Middle-Earth as a transmedia narrative property, "successfully translating [*The Lord of the Rings*] to a wider audience remains an example of how to balance the factors of staying true to a universe that has an almost 'religious' fan base and bringing the intellectual property to a wider audience" (228).

In the past fifteen years, companies such as Hasbro, Eagle Games, Cryptozoic, Ares Games, WizKids, and Fantasy Flight Games (recently merged with Asmodée) have released a wide range of tabletop games set in the storyworld of Middle-Earth. These board, card, and miniature games exhibit a variety of storytelling modes and gameplay mechanics that is far too wide to do justice to here. In what follows, we examine two immensely successful

games: Knizia's cooperative game *Lord of the Rings* and the large-scale strategy board game *War of the Ring*. While these games were first published just either side of the release of Peter Jackson's film *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), they do not use movie images in their artwork, as many subsequent games have, and both adopt Tolkien's writing as their principal source. Indeed, the artwork of both board games is created by prominent Tolkien artist John Howe. Both games reveal a certain "respect" – if not "reverence" – for their pre-text, which is perhaps unsurprising given the novel's canonical status, but can also be seen as an awareness on the designers' part of what is likely to be accepted and valued by fans when producing a transmedia text.

Originally published in German, Knizia's *Lord of the Rings* (different from his children's game of the same name released in 2003) has been translated into English, Italian, French, Polish, Hungarian, Dutch, and ten other languages. While not the first cooperative board game, Knizia's innovative design is commonly considered to have influenced a variety of subsequent games that rely on the collaboration of players to defeat "the game," with the "antagonist" represented by an automated and/or randomised series of steps. Since his game's publication, Knizia has applied very similar mechanics to his design of *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* and its compatible sequel *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug*, both released by Cryptozoic in 2013. The popularity of *War of the Ring*, on the other hand, can be seen in its continued high placing in the BoardGameGeek website's overall Board Game Rank: 39 for the first edition released in 2004 and 14 for the second edition published eight years later ("Board Game Rank"). The game's first and second edition also rank an impressive 11 and 2 respectively in the "Thematic Rank." A deluxe Collector's Edition with improved components (such as painted miniatures) was released in 2010, and a similarly "upgraded" five-year Anniversary Edition of the game's second edition is currently available on pre-order for between US$369.00 and US$439.11 at the time of writing; it has almost sold out with its release some months away. In an industry where board games generally age and become unavailable via retail outlets within a few years, *Lord of the Rings* and *War of the Ring* have demonstrated a remarkable staying power that makes them valuable case studies for this reason alone. While we do not engage in a study of reception, our analysis of tabletop game textualities (rulebooks, mechanics, components) is also informed by our own extensive engagement with the board games in question. A close analysis reveals that both of these games take unique approaches to enabling players to engage with the storyworld of Middle-Earth, and in doing so reveal the complexities of transmedia storytelling on the tabletop.

ADAPTABLE HOBBITS:

Narrative Flexibility and Collaborative Necessity in Reiner Knizia's *Lord of the Rings*

In an analysis of several board game adaptations of Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* novels, Bethan Jones argues that such games function as "paratextual transmedia, providing players who are fans of the books with alternative ways of understanding the novels while fulfilling a different transmedia storytelling element than that usually examined following Jenkins' work" (56). This reveals how the conventional notion of "paratext" as, for example, a novel's preface or illustrations, has been destabilised by contemporary transmedia processes. To understand games inspired by Pratchett's fantasy world, Jones adopts Jason Mittell's conceptualisation of "What If?" transmedia, which "multipl[y] the possibilities of… fictions into the realm of hypothetical variations and transmutations" and "feature more of a sense of *paidia* dress-up or performative role-play, spinning off scenarios with no 'real' outcome or canonical narrative function" (315-316). The role of imagination and performativity in playing any board game version of *The Lord of the Rings* (or any thematic board game for that matter) will vary by degree, though each playthrough provides a hypothetical glimpse into a "what-could-have-been" scenario that is different from – but always also similar to – Tolkien's narrative. Both *Lord of the Rings* and *War of the Ring* demonstrate this aspect of thematic tabletop gameplay.

Identifying Knizia's *Lord of the Rings* as "the quintessential collaborative board game," José Zagal, Jochen Rick, and Idris Hsi have focused at length on the benefits and limitations of its mode of gameplay from a practitioner perspective (28-35). Elsewhere, Megan Condis compares Knizia's game with a board game adaptation of *Dawn of the Dead*, briefly describing the designer's use of different boards to spatially represent the hobbits' various adventures alongside their "*spiritual* conflict" as they are gradually corrupted by the burden of the One Ring (86). However, these authors do not address broader questions of how narrative is configured and re-configured in *Lord of the Rings*, how players are positioned in relation to Tolkien's characters (who appear differently in the game's various components), and how abstract imagery and narrative flexibility ensure a different though always familiar engagement with the hobbits' quest. The success of Knizia's game has prompted a number of expansions (*Friends & Foes* in 2001, *The Black Gate* in 2001, *Sauron* in 2002, and *Battlefields* in 2007), which add new components but do not generally alter the dynamics of gameplay discussed here – excepting the added option of one player controlling the side of evil in the *Sauron* expansion. For the sake of clarity, and given that the latest reprint of the base game by Fantasy Flight offers players a competitive variant of its own (to be discussed further) – we focus on the core game alone, making mention of the *Sauron* expansion. We will show that many aspects of gameplay that might seem to undermine the narrative

core can really be considered different ways of engaging with it, and further examine the process of story construction in a co-operative game.

Lord of the Rings is one of many contemporary fantasy board games that reflexively highlight their reliance on narrative through the provision of brief – or detailed – paratextual backstories that outline a storyworld's mythology. After mapping out the instructions for gameplay, Knizia devotes over three pages at the end of the rulebook to a detailed synopsis of Tolkien's novel, gesturing to both his "fidelity" to his source material and the apparent (though not actual) need for players to be familiar with it in order to play the game. Indeed, Knizia (who has worked on several game adaptations of Tolkien's writings) has emphasised elsewhere his intention to "stay within the spirit of the book" when designing *Lord of the Rings* (22). As the rulebook's preface notes:

> In this game, players become members of the Fellowship and prove themselves worthy of saving the lands of Middle-Earth. It is the collective aim of the players to destroy the Ring and gather as many of the runes of Gandalf as possible. The runes symbolize each player's contribution to driving back the dark forces… Without cooperation, there can be no success. There is no individual winner – the group scores points as a whole. (*Lord of the Rings* rulebook 2)

This passage alone points to a number of interesting features of Knizia's engagement with Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. A game can markedly shift the narrative emphasis compared with the source text, without significantly altering the narrative core. The conclusion of the game is not simply judged by whether or not the players successfully destroy the One Ring in Mount Doom (i.e. the game's ending is not merely assessed as a win or a loss, as is conventional in most board games), but, whether they succeed or fail, the value of "Gandalf's runes" accumulated throughout gameplay are totalled. Runes are obtained by both completing the "Conflict Game Boards" and making progress on these boards' different "Activity Tracks" (explained further below). As such, the goal of destroying the Ring, while important and necessary to maximise game points scored, is not the overriding feature of gameplay; simply making it to Mount Doom and then succumbing to the Ring's corrupting influence will score sixty runes in itself. Perhaps signifying that the *journey* is the most important facet of the narrative (rather than the endgame *destination*), the rulebook does not use the phrasing "winning" or "losing": destroying the Ring counts as "success" for the Fellowship, but totalling points is explicitly intended to "indicate how well the players performed compared to previous games" (*Lord of the Rings* rulebook 13). This highlights an important aspect of transmedia storytelling when a singular literary narrative is transformed into a multiplicity of story-making possibilities in a board game. The closure of Tolkien's "happy ending" is

substituted (or complemented) by a gaming mechanic that positions players to accept that even an eventual victory for Sauron can be a worthwhile journey and enjoyable gaming experience. This might seem to contradict the narrative core – a victory for Sauron in a film adaptation, for example, would undermine the source text's premise that good will triumph over evil, and likely generate a fan outcry. However, the goal and struggle remain the same, even when a player takes the role of Sauron in the expansion of that name. From a narrative perspective, an author or filmmaker has absolute control over who succeeds and who fails, whereas in gameplay, the "authors" are trying their utmost to fulfil the goal set out for their character in the narrative core: the hobbits are still attempting to destroy the One Ring at Mount Doom, as Sauron is trying to stop them.

   The crucial tension between player agency and the constraints of a game's rules can be seen in the way(s) in which a "Conflict" can play out in *Lord of the Rings*. Each Conflict Game Board (depicting the battles of/adventures in Moria, Helm's Deep, Shelob's Lair, and Mordor respectively) features several Activity Tracks: a mandatory track, supplemented by up to three additional tracks, the completion of which is always optional. These tracks correspond to a certain activity that players can undertake, including "Fighting," "Traveling," "Friendship," and "Hiding." A combination of randomly selected "Story Tiles," and the players' strategic use of cards, advance Activity Markers along these tracks each round. The central and compulsory track must be traversed to complete the Conflict Game Board and move to the subsequent setting/conflict, while the optional tracks generally provide new ally character cards and other tokens to help avoid negative outcomes once the board is completed or later in the game. The design decision to make the "Fighting" tracks necessary to complete the first three of four Conflict Game Boards has important implications for narrative-making. On the one hand, having only one compulsory track per board ensures game variability and hence replayability, with players able to choose between finishing the Fighting track as fast as possible or progressing other tracks first to stock up on useful ally cards and tokens. On the other hand, the prominence of fighting with the central positioning of the "Battle Against the Balrog," "Battle of Helm's Deep," and "Fight against Shelob" tracks (reinforced by the boards' background artwork) places considerably more emphasis on warfare, which is perhaps not entirely in line with Tolkien's own aversion to detailed descriptions of battles and preference for more expansive description of the cultures, politics, and geography of Middle-Earth. As a result of this disjuncture, the Helm's Deep board, for instance, only requires players to complete the "Battle of Helm's Deep" track without any fundamental need to see the emergence of the Riders of Rohan or Ents on the Traveling track or encounter any of the characters on the "King Théoden" Friendship track. The ideal gamer inevitably engages in much more fighting than any other kind of track, even though the final Conflict Game Board of "Moria" reverses this emphasis, giving the hobbits' "Struggle Up Mount Doom" (a Traveling track)

precedence over the "Siege of Minas Tirith" Fighting track. Additional "Event Tracks" on the left hand side of each Conflict Game Board, which mostly consist of additional hazards for players to overcome, deepen the connections to Tolkien's story and will impact on gameplay differently each time, depending on players' luck (or lack of it) when drawing Story Tiles and their ability or willingness to avoid the events in question. While the Conflict Game Boards progress the story chronologically in an overarching sense, the many variables at play ensure the gaming experience is anything but exclusively "linear," with the flexibility of the process of narrative-building held in innovative tension with(in) the constraints of the game's design and ruleset.

The game employs symbols with varying degrees of abstractness to connect players to Tolkien's storyworld. "Gandalf's rune", the symbol used for the points system on the cardboard tokens and various game boards, is a very minor part of Tolkien's narrative; in fact, the rune's most well-known appearance is Gandalf's inscription of the "queer sign" on Bilbo Baggins' front door in the opening pages of the earlier novel, *The Hobbit* (Tolkien 8). Yet in Knizia's game, the importance of the rune is expanded to be the key tool by which the players' combined overall achievement is evaluated. Symbols also play an important role on the conflict boards: Fighting is symbolised by a crossed sword and axe; Traveling by a wandering hobbit; Friendship by a smoking pipe; and Hiding by a shield. These track symbols mirror those on character and item card abilities and enable a straightforward application of the game's mechanics to the broad thematic links being made with Tolkien's writings.

Another important feature of Knizia's contribution to the storyworld of *The Lord of the Rings* is the centrality of the hobbits to the board game's narrative. While some tabletop adaptations of the franchise, such as Cryptozoic's aforementioned deck-building card games for *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* films, give the hobbit characters an equal "presence" to the major human, dwarf, and elf characters, Knizia's *Lord of the Rings* positions players squarely in the storyworld from the perspective of hobbits, declaring (in the above-quoted passage from the rulebook's epigraph) that it is the players "*as*" hobbits who "must prove themselves worthy of saving the lands of Middle-Earth" (*Lord of the Rings* rulebook 2). Players determine who will control or *be* which hobbit during setup. A two-player game must host Frodo and Sam, whereas up to three more players can take on the roles of Pippin, Merry, and – in a five-player game – "Fatty." Depicted on a card kept by each player and an upright two-dimensional cardboard token to be maneuvered on the "Corruption Track" of the "Master Game Board," each hobbit is individualised not only by their portrait, but also a different ability that affects game mechanics. In the case of Sam, his allocated character trait has a thematic element: his "loyalty protects him from the worst results on the Threat die," with the associated player being affected to a lesser degree when obtaining Corruption points or discarding cards (*Lord of the Rings* rulebook 17). The ideal player takes on the persona of their chosen hobbit character and

participates in the narrative from their perspective. Nonetheless, game mechanics do not (and cannot) always replicate specific details of the source text's narrative, and Knizia's representation of "The Power of the Ring" is a useful example of this. When the team's progress on a Conflict Game Board is not ideal, the current "Ring-bearer" can put on the Ring of Power in an attempt to accelerate the group's advance on an Activity Track. Invisibility comes with its risks, however, as the decision to use the Ring requires an extra roll of the Threat die (which may burden the player with corruption points or another negative outcome). To ensure that one player's influence is not skewed beyond that of others, the designated Ring-bearer (who is Frodo at the beginning of the game) can change to any of the other hobbits several times during gameplay, depending on who has accrued the most Ring Life Tokens. This may include Merry, Pippin, or Fatty – none of whom ever possess the ring in Tolkien's narrative. Along with other examples in the game, this alteration exemplifies the flexible treatment of source material that can occur within a board game design without fundamentally altering the narrative core: while the characters may share the burden to a greater extent, the Ring remains something that is both a corrupting influence and needs to be destroyed to save Middle-Earth.

The fact that Fatty (the nickname of hobbit Fredegar Bolger) is included as a playable character in *Lord of the Rings* – only very briefly mentioned in Tolkien's novel despite initially having a larger role in earlier drafts ("Fredegar Bolger") – further reinforces the centrality of the hobbits as the primary subject positions constructed for player identification (in the novels, Fredegar could have fled into the Old Forest with the other hobbits, but chose to remain behind). Other major characters belonging to the Fellowship or its allied forces, such as Gandalf, Aragorn, Galadriel, and Arwen, are portrayed on cards almost identical in design to the hobbit player cards, but have a very different function in the game. These additional character cards are either shared among the players when they reach certain "Safe Havens" on the Master Game Board, such as Rivendell and Lothlórien, or obtained when that character's portrait is reached on Activity Tracks. Once a player has a character card of this kind in their hand, they may play it at any time to gain the bonus noted on the card. The relationship of the character card to the aspect of play they contribute to is only vaguely connected to how the character operates in Tolkien's narrative; for instance, Boromir and Gimli contribute two "Fighting" resource points each, while (less obviously) Faramir provides two "Travelling" and Legolas two "Hiding" points. Gollum provides three "wild" star symbols that can stand for any resource, but (in keeping with his ambiguous persona) also requires the Threat die to be rolled. Apart from Gandalf, who is portrayed with different powers on five cards and available to all players to use from the game's beginning, each subsidiary character is only portrayed on one card and, importantly, can only be used once. This creates a sharp distinction between the "permanence" of the hobbits, who remain the players' only means of taking part in the quest to Mount Doom (unless the hobbit is corrupted, at which point the player is eliminated), and the

"discardability" of the rest of the story's dramatis personae. The lack of impact non-hobbit characters have on the game is further underlined by the inclusion of very similar one-use-only item cards, such as "Gandalf's Staff" and his sword "Glamdring," which actually have stronger powers than many of the Fellowship character cards. Even though technically the marginalised characters from Tolkien's novel such as Boromir and Éowyn can be "used" in Mordor and other settings that the storyworld does not generally see them in, the simplicity and transitory nature of the single-use character cards, which remain in a player's hand until use, arguably positions them "outside the narrative" rather than alongside the hobbits. Unlike the protagonists, who serve as sole points of identification for the players, non-hobbit characters are likely to be considered disposable resources (particularly given that only Gandalf cards count as extra rune points if left unused by the end of the game). Due to the aforementioned optional nature of the tracks on which many of these characters are "encountered," in some games they will not make any appearance at all (that is, beyond their static portrait adorning a game board). Their relative unimportance to the game can be read as representing their comparative transience in the hobbits' quest, and the fact they cannot ultimately be relied upon. The final task is for the hobbits.

Jenkins once summed up the nature of transmedia storytelling as the expansion of "the range of narrative possibility" beyond the typical beginning, middle, and end (*Convergence Culture* 119). Knizia's game demonstrates that tabletop games that contribute to pre-existing storyworlds achieve this through a range of radically different conventions from their literary, filmic (or sometimes video game) narrative precursors. Moving along the Master Game Board from Bag End to Rivendell to Moria and so on, the narratives generated by *Lord of the Rings* certainly begin in a similar enough fashion to Tolkien's novel, at least insofar as they adopt the story's major plot points and settings. However, the game could end in any number of ways – and at different points along the journey – depending on the choices and the luck of the players. Thus the "middle" as conventionally understood with reference to Tolkien's novel could very quickly become the "end," and as noted above, any number of character and event possibilities could be elided from a given game. While fairly typical of co-operative tabletop games, this is a very different dynamic from conventional narrative-based video games such as *War in the North* or *Conquest*, where the game is only considered "finished" once a player has reached the end – any character deaths along the way do not complete a narrative, but remain failures to be corrected as a player figures out how to pass each successive level.

Perhaps most importantly, the multiplicity of narratives generated by Knizia's game occurs within a cooperative framework, where players are working *with* rather than against each other. This results in a highly collaborative story-making process for ideal players. Through the numerous possibilities stemming from player agency combined with the ever-present influence of chance via randomised Story Tile draws and Threat die rolls, the

game encourages discussion and debate between players regarding what in the always-changing circumstances is the best option (or often the lesser evil) to choose. The choice of whether or not a certain player should use a powerful ally card in an early round becomes a dilemma for the team, some of whom may feel it best to reserve the card for the game's more difficult later stages. The cooperative decisions that propel the game also entail the very real possibility that a player may choose (or be asked) to sacrifice themselves – and thus exit the game – to give the other players a chance of proceeding on their quest to destroy the One Ring. This reflects the findings of Zagal, Rick, and Hsi in their analysis of why Knizia's use of a cooperative framework is effective: even though there are "many opportunities for selfish behavior at the expense of the team," successfully destroying the ring is ultimately less reliant on "good luck and careful resource management" than it is on "good collaboration: Specifically, active communication amongst the players and timely sacrifices for the good of the group" (29-30). Given the frequent tensions within Tolkien's Fellowship and the disagreements between characters over the best strategy to defeat Sauron, this "divided we fall, united we stand" dynamic fits the theme of the storyworld well.

In many ways, the cooperative mode of Knizia's board game plays a significant part in capturing the narrative core of *The Lord of the Rings*. It is therefore unsurprising that the "Game Variants" spelled out toward the end of the rulebook do not radically alter the storytelling/making mechanisms of the game. Suggested changes to the starting positions of the Sauron token on the Corruption Track, for example, which increase or decrease the difficulty for "Introductory," "Standard," and "Expert" games, leave the rest of the game's rules untouched – although these potential changes do reinforce the flexibility of a game to offer players choices. Likewise, the main alteration of the "Competitive Game" option briefly articulated for more experienced players is to keep collected rune tokens secret throughout the game to calculate separately, should the hobbits successfully destroy the ring. In a seemingly tongue-in-cheek manner, Knizia notes that the highest scorer "shall be celebrated in song ever after" (*Lord of the Rings* rulebook, 19). If the Ring is not destroyed, on the other hand, there is a slight chance that the Ring-bearer (if in possession of three Ring tokens when succumbing to corruption) will "join Sauron" and win the game separately from all other players. This scenario is unlikely to eventuate often, and Knizia takes care to emphasise the value of collaboration immediately after describing this rule: "*Remember that the spirit of* The Lord of the Rings *is the cooperation of light in fighting the forces of darkness. Even the competitive game needs a high degree of cooperation for the Fellowship to succeed*" (*Lord of the Rings* rulebook, 19; designer's emphasis). In any case, selfishness on the part of players arguably mirrors the selfishness some of the Fellowship display in the novels, and the threat it poses to the success of the quest. This is not to suggest that a cooperative mode of gameplay is essential to engaging effectively with the narrative core of Tolkien's mythology. The *Sauron* expansion alters the co-

operative dynamic somewhat, in that one of the players is working against the others, so the hobbit players need to be more circumspect as they discuss strategy. But as one forum contributor notes, this reflects another aspect of the source text: "The Sauron expansion adds the constant paranoia that is also present in the books: the Enemy's spies are everywhere" (Ben-Ezra). Immensely different processes of merging board game mechanics with theme in a transmedia text can be found in *War of the Ring*, which employs a competitive framework to offer an arguably even more compelling depiction of the adventures, politics, and conflicts of Middle-Earth.

COMPETING FOR MIDDLE-EARTH: BLENDING THEME AND MECHANICS IN *WAR OF THE RING*

In *War of the Ring*, the complexities of the game's mechanics ensure that the narrative possibilities are considerably more diverse than Knizia's *Lord of the Rings*. We focus here on the second edition of *War of the Ring*, which makes some minor alterations to the original version but is fundamentally the same game for the purposes of our analysis. Designed by Roberto Di Meglio, Marco Maggi, and Francesco Nepitello, *War of the Ring* is a competitive game in which players are constantly at odds with one another, seeking for the most part to undermine and destroy an opposing player's forces. This creates a very sharp divide in the dynamics of gameplay between *War of the Ring* and Knizia's game, and thus the ways in which the former seeks to capture the narrative core of Tolkien's Middle-Earth are radically different. Designed in essence for two players, each controls the characters and armies of the "Free Peoples" of Middle-Earth, or the evil "Shadow" forces bent to the will of Sauron, who aims to destroy and enslave the world. There is a potential collaborative element to the game, where a third and fourth player can split control of either side's forces with another, but it suffices here to focus on what is likely to be the more common two-player experience of the game. Despite some stylistic similarities in their artwork, the scope (and sheer physical size) of *War of the Ring* allows for considerably more story-building potential. While Condis optimistically asserts that Knizia's game "creates the feeling that the players' journey is epic and expansive, too big to be easily contained on a single map" (86), *War of the Ring* represents this immensity more directly on an over-sized play area which comprises two large separate boards (measuring a total of seventy-two centimetres in width and just over one metre in length), and encapsulates the world of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* by segmenting the map into key areas. Along with several gameplay tracks and spaces for various tokens and decks of cards, the highly detailed visualisation of "western Middle-Earth at the end of the Third Age" (*War of the Ring* rulebook 9) differs greatly from Knizia's depiction of setting, given that his Conflict Game Boards map portrays fixed "steps" on a journey rather than Middle-Earth's geography, which players must learn to navigate, and static background artwork portrays a snapshot of one event. *War of the Ring*'s

map, on the other hand, depicts the "Regions" (designated by coloured borders) that are occupied by Middle-Earth's "Nations," and is complete with rivers, seas, and uncrossable mountain borders. The strategic value of a number of areas within each Region is highlighted by the presence of "Settlements" (Strongholds, Cities, or Towns) and less developed "Fortifications." The vast scope and thematic depth of gameplay, which is estimated on the box to span 120+ minutes and is likely to exceed this in the vast majority of cases, potentially provides players who are willing to devote enough time to learn and play *War of the Ring* with a notably immersive board gaming experience.

With a rulebook of almost fifty pages, the high degree of complexity involved in *War of the Ring* means that we cannot do justice to all of the various mechanics and other aspects of the game here. Our analysis focuses on several key elements that highlight different ways players can interact with the storyworld via gameplay. One crucial element that gives some insight into the narrative flexibility engendered by the game though is its various endgame scenarios. Here the designers create a multi-layered system of "Ring-based" victory conditions (numbers 1 and 2 below) and "Military victory conditions (numbers 3 and 4):

1) Corruption of the Ring-bearers: If the Ring-bearers [the game conflates Frodo and Sam into this role] have 12 or more Corruption Points, they failed [sic] their quest, Sauron regains the Ring for himself and the Shadow player wins the game.
2) Destroying the Ring: If the Ring-bearer's figure is on the "Crack of Doom" step on the Mordor Track and the Ring-bearers have fewer than 12 Corruption points, the Ring is destroyed. Sauron is utterly vanquished and the Free Peoples player wins the game.
3) The Shadow Conquers Middle-Earth: If the Shadow player controls Free Peoples Settlements worth 10 or more Victory Points, he [sic] wins.
4) Sauron is Banished from Middle Earth: If the Free People's Player controls Shadow Settlements worth 4 or more Victory Points, he [sic] wins.

Importantly, the two Ring-based victory conditions take precedence over the Military conditions. Further, in the event of two conditions occurring simultaneously, the Shadow player wins. This not only provides a range of narrative possibilities for gameplay to end with, but also subtly gestures to the storyworld's narrative core by demonstrating that the quest of Frodo and Sam to reach Mount Doom is of utmost importance and that the physical strength of Sauron's forces is overwhelming. This last point is further reinforced by the "recyclability" of the Shadow army miniatures, which when destroyed are returned to the player's supply for redeployment, whereas the Free Peoples player's reinforcement supply can never be "restocked" from casualties

inflicted on her armies. Further, despite the formal prioritisation of the Ring-bearers' journey, a tension between "flexibility" and "fidelity" can be seen in the designers' decision to allow the Free Peoples player another avenue to victory by military warfare alone. This feature does have a pragmatic element in that it prevents a game from lasting an exorbitant amount of time, allowing the game to end another way than by the Ring's destruction in the event the Shadow player successfully hinders the Ring-bearers' advance to Mordor, or the Free Peoples player has simply focused her energies and resources elsewhere. Yet the impact this option has in narrative-building terms on the storyworld is immense.

In their respective roles, the Free Peoples and Shadow players are for the most part encouraged to adopt very different circumstances and motivations (i.e. survival and domination respectively) at the beginning of the game, which represent the relative military strength of and political tensions between various "races" evident in Tolkien's novels. A particularly nuanced way in which the designers of *War of the Ring* engage with Tolkien's narrative is through the game's "Political Track" mechanic. Exemplified in the racial antagonisms between Elves and Dwarves, and the isolationist habits of the inward-looking Hobbits and people of Rohan, solidarity is – at least initially – a scarce commodity among the Free Peoples of Middle-Earth. In their typical manner of drawing on details of Tolkien's mythology to explain the game's various rules, the designers note that the Political Track found on the game board represents the nations' "diplomatic stance" as "[w]hile the basic allegiances of the Free Peoples were clearly defined, their individual opinions towards the threat of Sauron differed widely" (*War of the Ring* rulebook 35). The simple track consists of three boxes progressing downwards to a fourth and final "At War" box, with space for the starting position of each nation's "Political Counter" (a token with its symbol printed on it). The political counters of Dwarves, Elves, Rohan, and The North (portraying The Shire, Bree, and the lands patrolled by the Rangers of the North) start on the box farthest from being "At War"; Gondor (presumably due to its close proximity to and frequent contact with Mordor's forces) and the "Southrons & Easterlings" tokens begin one step down; and Isengard and Sauron are initially placed just above the "At War" box. Players can move any token downward using a relevant Event card or a "Muster" result on an action die, though a Free Peoples nation must become "active" before being fully mobilised to "At War" status. Flipping a Political Counter from "passive" to "active" is most often the result of being attacked by an opposing army or having one of their Cities or Strongholds visited by the Fellowship, which brings the news of impending doom (Rivendell is already active due to the Fellowship's initial presence there). This innovative mechanic not only gives further significance to the journey the Fellowship takes on its way to Mordor, but also deftly simulates the substantial military advantage that Sauron has. The Shadow player's nations are all active from the beginning and can move to being "At War" immediately, and the generous numbers of soldiers placed on the board

during setup allows the Shadow player (if she decides to) to attack almost at once. At the same time, deciding not to invade the opponent's territory instantly, but rather build up one's armies even more beforehand, is another valid strategy that can leave the Free Peoples player impotent for some time, if they cannot be activated another way (as Free Peoples armies cannot cross friendly sovereign borders unless their nation is "At War"). In short, there are countless ways in which a game can play out from the very first roll of dice, engendering – through both chance and player choices – a multiplicity of story-making opportunities that is also highlighted in the specific activities each player undertakes each turn.

Narrative perspective and potential modes of identification in *War of the Ring* are considerably more changeable and transitory in *War of the Ring* than in Knizia's game, in which players control one hobbit alone for the duration of play (or until they perish and are eliminated). A game turn in *War of the Ring* comprises, among other things, rolling and using the results of "Action Dice," drawing and playing "Event Cards," and – through these mechanics – moving or attacking with armies, mustering reinforcements, and moving, hiding, or revealing the current location of the Fellowship. While the "Regular," "Elite," and "Leader" categories of figures (which are distinct for each nation but identical within them) are somewhat "anonymous" in narrative terms (just as they are in Tolkien's novel, it must be noted), there is a much greater individualisation of the storyworld's major characters than there is in Knizia's game. This is partly achieved through the provision of unique three-dimensional plastic miniatures to complement the character cards that portray each character's physical likeness. Knizia's game relies more heavily on prior knowledge of the storyworld that ideal players can bring to their interactions, which is more feasible given that they only have one character to identify with/as. With gameplay beginning just after the Council of Elrond has been convened, the Fellowship has already been formed and starts the game in Rivendell. As a result (and to save on board space), the miniature depicting Frodo and Sam is used to represent the entire Fellowship on the map of Middle-Earth while the other hero cards and figurines are kept on "standby" elsewhere on the board. Importantly, the seven members of the Fellowship (excepting Sam and Frodo) can be "separated" from the Fellowship at any time during the game. This has both benefits and downsides for the Free Peoples player, as removing companions renders them more mobile and gives them the "Leader" status that allows them to move and attack with armies, but also increases the diminishing Fellowship's vulnerability to corruption and other negative outcomes. This complex process contributes intricate story-building possibilities to the game, as rather than conform to "The Breaking of the Fellowship" as authored by Tolkien (*The Lord of the Rings* 386-398), gameplay may see Sam and Frodo on their own (and joined by Gollum, only once all others have departed) in the game's opening turns, or alternatively accompanied by a range of companions (if the luck of the Free Peoples player holds) all the way to Mount Doom.

In a feature not present in any other of the many board game adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings*, the character abilities of several members of the Fellowship in *War of the Ring* connect them to their heritage in ways that can influence gameplay. As a "Prince of Mirkwood," for instance, Legolas (as noted on his character card) allows the player to use the result of "any Action Die to advance the Elven Nation one step on the Political Track" if his character is no longer part of the Fellowship. Gimli and Boromir can do the same for the Dwarven and Gondor nations respectively. Another interesting facet of characterisation in *War of the Ring* is the ability of some characters to transform into different versions of themselves: namely, when meeting certain requirements (such as being separated from the Fellowship) "Gandalf the Grey" can be turned into "Gandalf the White," while "Strider, Ranger of the North" can become "Aragorn, Heir to Isildur." This transformation is symbolised by their character card being swapped for another card with more powerful traits and the provision of a valuable extra Action die to be rolled each game round. The conditions that result in the appearance of "Minions" controlled by the Shadow player (which have equivalent status to the "Characters" controlled by the opposing side) also highlights interesting connections to the game's source text. The traitorous wizard Saruman, for instance, can be recruited by the Shadow player as soon as the region of "Isengard" is "At War". The character card that then comes into play spells out the ways in which his presence strengthens the armies of Isengard, and his exclusive role in that area of Middle-Earth in Tolkien's narrative is reinforced by the rule that "Saruman cannot leave Orthanc" (the main stronghold of Isengard). This again underlines what Lang and Harrigan describe as the necessary tension between "the authorial dictatorship of storytelling and the decision trees of game-playing" to ensure a game's ongoing "narrative flow" (86). That is, the tension between player freedom in decision making and the restrictions placed upon that freedom in order to maintain the narrative core.

Significantly, the results of the choices made by players – or simply the luck involved in combat dice rolls – means that all characters in the game (barring Frodo and Sam, whose corruption would spell an overall loss for the Free Peoples player) are vulnerable to being killed. This is not to suggest that characters are "discardable" akin to the single-use only status of non-hobbits in Knizia's game. All characters in *War of the Ring* can be maneuvered multiple times, but there is the distinct (even likely) possibility that many will die in the game who do not perish in Tolkien's narrative. This contributes to a disruption in conventional understandings of character identification, although this disruption is even more strongly influenced by the ways in which a player typically shifts their focus between their various characters and armies during gameplay. The players' omnispective view of the game board (including the visibility of opponent reinforcement figures that are essentially "outside" the world of Middle-Earth), as well the agency with which players undertake (legal) actions wherever and whenever they want to, leads to a degree of

"distance" from what are in Tolkien's writings the key focalising characters. This more closely resembles a "third person" narrative perspective in literature than one aligned with an individual character. Compared with Knizia's game, it offers brief engagements with a wide range of characters and requires players to consider how different individuals' or groups' narratives might affect one another on a large scale, rather than more sustained, interpersonal engagement with a few characters and their one goal. Indeed, a player's ability to shift focus from certain individuals or groups to others for substantial periods of time entails the possibility that a player can choose to essentially "neglect" certain well-known characters for the entire game. In one game we experienced, the Free Peoples player barely moved the Ring-bearers Frodo and Sam beyond Rivendell, but rather concentrated on trying to win the game through a military victory. As a result, the quest to destroy the One Ring, while still "present" in the storyworld as a primary victory condition, did not actually play a particularly significant role in that particular game narrative. The game's flexibility in this regard offers players the chance to engage more deeply with particular aspects of the narrative – which could be different in subsequent games – to explore the world more fully, or focus repeatedly on favourite aspects.

The multiplicity of narrative possibilities within *War of the Ring*'s second edition has been enhanced even further by Fantasy Flight's release of the *Lords of Middle-Earth* expansion. This small-box expansion provides extra components, such as playable Lord Elrond and Lady Galadriel characters for the Free Peoples player and Gothmog and The Balrog minions for the Shadow player, as well as a few optional modifications to the rules of the base game. As the designers note, the expansion:

> presents new game mechanics designed to introduce fresh gaming opportunities, inspired by events and characters not fully explored in Tolkien's novels… *The Council of Rivendell* rules constitute a stronger departure from the Lord of the Rings story as we all know it. For this reason, they are presented as optional. What would have been the course of the War of the Ring if the Council of Rivendell, instead of dispatching a Fellowship of nine Companions to accomplish the Quest for Mount Doom, sent one or more heroes back to their homelands? *The Council of Rivendell* variant explores such a possibility (*War of the Ring: Lords of Middle-Earth* rulebook 2, 30).

The emphasis on the *optional* nature of the rules points to the sensitivity game designers (are wise to) have in relation to storyworlds that have extremely devoted fan bases. Furthermore, while the above description implies a radical departure from the "standard" narrative, the variant does not actually change the fundamental dynamics of gameplay, and it is overtly positioned as a "What If" scenario, which the ideal player can see as speculation rather than a

rejection of the narrative core. The *Council of Rivendell* variant allows major Characters to start the game in their respective homelands (and thus technically not be part of the Fellowship at any stage), but this can similarly eventuate in a slightly slower fashion within the base game if the Fellowship is separated early enough. Similar to the restrictions on Saruman's movements, the now-playable Galadriel and Elrond, while now having an increased role in the game, cannot be moved from Lórien and Rivendell respectively – further signalling the tension between providing players with a diverse fabula pool and story-making leeway, and enforcing limitations on this freedom through rules and mechanics that reflect elements of the source text. To this end, the Ring of Power cannot be used to defeat Sauron, as Tolkien's Boromir unsuccessfully argues for in Rivendell (Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* 260-261), nor can any of the characters of the Free Peoples change sides and become minions of Sauron (and vice versa), lest the game veer too far from course of events that Tolkien set down. To be accepted, the hypothetical "performances" that Mittell identifies in his reflections on transmedia storytelling (315-316) must be "believable" enough to be able to happen, but not deviate from the narrative core too sharply to the point that they contradict the fundamental social, political, and environmental principles of the storyworld.

As the preceding analysis shows, the two games offer quite different means of engaging with the narrative core, taking up different aspects of the key experiences that games offer in contrast with other media. Both games offer the opportunity to explore alternative narrative perspectives, from a close focus on a limited series of events – resembling a first person narration – to a broad perspective taking on a range of characters – a third person perspective. Where Knizia's game focuses on the "social" side of the Fellowship's quest, and close identification with one hobbit character, ideal players of *War of the Ring* engage with the broader socio-political landscape of Middle-Earth as well as military strategy. Co-operative and competitive game modes also offer different means of engaging with the narrative core, with ideal players of Knizia's game engaging in collaborative discussion to build the narrative, while those of *War of the Ring* (and the *Sauron* expansion of *Lord of the Rings*) have an active, "evil" presence with which to contend – or take the perspective of. The varied narrative possibilities the two games offer also differ significantly from typical video games, with different endings as well as paths to victory available.

THERE AND BACK AGAIN:
PLAYING OUT/WITH TOLKIEN MYTHOLOGY

> People often read *The Lord of the Rings* repeatedly, sometimes annually. I wonder if they aren't unconsciously enacting the myths and folk-tales, whose repetition, varying within certain limits, is so integral to their cultural role in oral traditions. (Curry 140)

In *Defending Middle-Earth: Tolkien, Myth and Modernity*, Patrick Curry highlights not only the ongoing influence of Tolkien's mythology, but the crucial place of "playing out" his stories to their ongoing significance. The ever-growing forms and modes of transmedia storytelling ensure that the "repetition" this involves both converges with and diverges from Tolkien's narrative in intriguing ways. Gaming – in digital and analogue forms – has taken its place alongside other media in engaging new (and older) generations of people with the history of Middle-Earth. As we have shown, contemporary board game adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* engender narrative flexibility and a resultant multiplicity in the story-telling/discovering/making process. The innovative blending of content and form, or theme and mechanics, brings about unconventional and sometimes ever-shifting modes of narrative perspective and player positioning/identification, as well as a constant tension between gamer agency and the restrictions on player choice(s) imposed by an always "limited" fabula pool of components and mechanics. Through a complex intersection of structured rulesets, player decisions, and chance, games develop interactive (though pre-constructed) narratives for players to progress through, discover, and make that open up new paths into and through the world of Middle-Earth. The narratives created in the course of playing a tabletop game adaption never contribute to the "canon" of a storyworld, transient as they are, although players might remember and recount particularly interesting and unusual instances. Instead, they offer different means to engage with aspects of the storyworld, from perspectives often not offered in more "conventional" narrative modes.

Many other Tolkien-inspired tabletop games display various forms of storytelling and story-making that could have been addressed here, from the more intensive role-playing capacity of *Middle-Earth Quest* (2009), to the semi-cooperative game *The Lord of the Rings: Nazgul* game (2012), to the tactical fantasy-war game *The Battle of Five Armies* (2014) by the designers of *War of the Ring*, to Fantasy Flight's extensive *Living Card Game* that crosses over both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* histories and has added hundreds of characters, creatures, and events to the storyworld of Middle-Earth. We have analysed two highly successful games that offer access to the storyworld of Middle-Earth through radically different means than their literary precursors (and each other), while not undermining the narrative core at the heart of their source text. Of course, the preceding analysis must be qualified as the very nature of "play" opens up tabletop games to numerous possible "readings" and uses (particularly given that a number of players create customised "house-rules"), thus any assessment of player positioning and story-making is always provisional. Nonetheless, our examination of the textualities of games sheds significant light on how cultural texts like board games work – particularly in terms of how they translate more or less "coherent" narratives set out in literary form to fragmentary physical collections of boards, cards, tiles, plastic pieces and dice.

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