BYTE-SIZED MIDDLE AGES: TOLKIEN, FILM, AND THE DIGITAL IMAGINATION

by Courtney M. Booker

"A note on the wall says, 'Magic word XYZZY.'"

—Will Crowther, programmer of *Adventure*

In a letter to the *New York Times,* Sherry Turkle, Abby Rockefeller Mauzé Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology in the Program in Science, Technology, and Society at MIT and the founder (2001) and current director of the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self, observed that the mass appeal of Peter Jackson's film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* "owes much to the computer culture that made J. R. R. Tolkien's fantasy world its own."[1] There is an entire book packed within this statement. Certainly many people—especially those born since the early 1960s—now understand that there is some kind of connection among Tolkien's fiction, the game of *Dungeons and Dragons,* and computer programming. Yet this connection is usually trivialized or ridiculed as nothing but a clear sign of the eccentric, tedious interests that define (male) misanthropes, freaks, and geeks.[2] Thus what Turkle's remark suggests is that to understand the success of the films of Tolkien's novel is to understand a revenge of the nerds, so to speak. Put another way, part of the reason many enjoy the *Lord of the Rings* films is because they seem to make sense visually—but this visual sensibility is one that was learned, and learned only relatively recently. Who were the teachers? In the early 1960s many readers of Tolkien's

[1]S. Turkle, "Lord of the Hackers," *New York Times,* 7 March 2002, sec. A, p. 31.

[2]See B. King and J. Borland, *Dungeons and Dreamers: The Rise of Computer Game Culture, from Geek to Chic* (Emeryville, CA 2003); and A. Leonard, "Lord of the Geeks," *Salon.com Technology*, 30 December 2002 <http://archive.salon.com/tech/ feature/ 2002/12/30/lord_of_the_geeks/>. For the two most accurate dramatic portrayals of the kids who played *Dungeons and Dragons* ca. 1980, see the television series *Freaks and Geeks,* episode 18, "Discos and Dragons," written and directed by Paul Feig (2000); and the film *SLC Punk!*, written and directed by James Merendino (1999). As I shall describe in more detail below, these same interests were for a time regarded with deep suspicion, and believed by some to lead frequently to unhealthy, dangerous, and even criminal behavior.

novel imagined its medieval fantasy world as a boundless place, filled with mystery, grandeur, and historical depth. Four decades later, the same book has been interpreted for screen audiences largely in terms of frenetic actions—chases, skirmishes, and battles reflective of a "modular" sensibility of episodic encounter and engagement wrought by the virtual reality of computer games. In the pages that follow, I wish to offer something of a prolegomenon to that book packed within Turkle's statement noted above and examine in historical perspective how and why this modern visual/cinematic understanding of Tolkien's Middle-earth in particular, and consequently of the Middle Ages in general, has come to rely upon and be shaped by a shared stock of stylized referents related to the virtual reality of computers.

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When I was a teaching assistant at UCLA, my colleagues and I were taught to be sensitive to the diverse cultural backgrounds of students in our courses, for these differences could subtly affect the dynamics of classroom discussion. Yet never was an equivalent recommendation offered about how to deal with the diversity of preconceptions held by students regarding the topic of the course itself. Rather, we were simply advised to deduce these preconceptions by asking students why they enrolled in the class—a question that typically elicited any combination of three unhelpful answers: "it suits my schedule," "it fulfills a university requirement," and/or "it seems like an interesting period and culture." In short, the basic pedagogical presumption was that students are a blank slate for the teacher to inscribe, or they are already inscribed with misconceptions that must be corrected. As Sharan Newman insists in an essay published in the Medieval Academy of America's September 2000 newsletter, it is incumbent upon medievalists to "un-teach" the "popular mythology" that people learn outside the classroom.[3] Now certainly there are cases where this is necessary—take, for example, a sardonic letter to the editor of the *Los Angeles Times* shortly after the events of September 11, which claimed that Jerry Falwell's inflammatory remarks linking the attacks to "homosexuals and abortionists" were not just "ill-timed," as Falwell himself grudgingly conceded, but belied a mentality "straight out of the Middle Ages."[4] Nevertheless, what Newman and others fail to realize in their hubris about "un-

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[3]S. E. Newman, "Reaching Way Out: Presenting the Middle Ages to Modern America," *Medieval Academy News* 137 (September 2000) 3.

[4]Letter from William Lorton, *Los Angeles Times,* 20 September 2001, sec. B, p. 14.

teaching" such views is that students often largely retain their prior understanding of the Middle Ages (as irrational, intolerant, prone to violence, etc.) and merely adjust this resilient image by replacing certain parts here and filling in gaps there with the philologically/archaeologically derived information they learn in the classroom.[5]

If this notion of a hybrid—or, as some might say, bastardized—view of the Middle Ages is correct, then it is justifiable to examine the popular view of the Middle Ages in historical perspective in order to understand, rather than condemn or trivialize, our students' preconceptions about the Middle Ages, as well as our own.[6] What is this popular view and how did it come about? There is, of course, no single popular view, but rather, as one might imagine, a multitude of ideas about what life was like during the Middle Ages. Umberto Eco's famous 1975 essay entitled "Dreaming of the Middle Ages," and Carlo Ginzburg's lesser-known article on the media's use of medieval analogies to characterize the electrical blackout that enveloped New York City in 1965 clearly reveal this rich variety of modern ideas about "medieval times."[7] Yet despite these taxonomies the predominant view in this variety is now unequivocally "Tolkienesque."

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[5]Morton Bloomfield was more optimistic (and self-congratulatory) about this process due to his narrow focus upon the "adjustments" made as a result of their classroom experience by those few students who would later go on to become professional medievalists themselves: "Many of our excellent scholars were, when young, driven to explore their delight in Arthur, knights, ladies in distress, lovely women, honest laborers, beautiful castles and paintings in greater detail by taking our courses." M. W. Bloomfield, "Reflections of a Medievalist: America, Medievalism, and the Middle Ages," in B. Rosenthal and P. E. Szarmach, eds., *Medievalism in American Culture* (Binghamton 1989) 26.

[6]See S. Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia 2001); idem, "Making Historical Sense" in P. N. Stearns, P. Seixas, and S. Wineburg, eds., *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives* (New York 2000) 306–325; together with O. G. Oexle, "The Middle Ages through Modern Eyes: A Historical Problem," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* series 6, vol. 9 (1999) 121–142.

[7]U. Eco, "Dreaming of the Middle Ages," in idem, *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays,* trans. W. Weaver (San Diego 1986) 61–72; C. Ginzburg, "Des ténèbres médiévales au Black-Out de New York (aller-retour)," *Europe: Revue littéraire mensuelle* 61 (no. 654) (October 1983) 5–14. See also A. Lindley, "The Ahistoricism of Medieval Film," *Screening the Past* 3 (1998) <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/www/screeningthepast/ firstrelease/fir598/ALfr3a.htm>. As a follow-up to Ginzburg's essay, it would be interesting to study the representations used to characterize the massive blackout that hit the east coast of North America in August of 2003; see "The Blackout of 2003," *New York Times,* 15 August 2003, sec. A, p. 1.

Translated into more than forty languages (including Esperanto), recently voted the "greatest book of the twentieth century" in a number of polls, and now a film having grossed nearly three billion dollars at the box office worldwide, J. R. R. Tolkien's pseudo-medieval, philologically constructed fantasy epic *The Lord of the Rings* has broadly become the standard referent in people's minds of medieval culture—of what those people who once inhabited the castles, churches, and walled towns that ornament much of England and the Continent were perhaps vaguely like. One important effect of this Tolkienesque Middle Ages to which I can attest both from personal experience and from my work in the classroom is the absence of religion from popular notions of medieval culture. Typically, American students understand the Middle Ages as a period that valued individual honor, nobility, heroism, and violence—that is, chivalric culture—but they have difficulty integrating the deep corporate religiosity of the era into this same understanding. Of course Tolkien was not the first to eschew religion in a tale of medieval fantasy—Walter Scott, Mark Twain, and Robert E. Howard are but a few of his many notable forerunners in this regard. But Tolkien's increasing influence over the last forty years in a variety of media has done much to secure this popular idea of a chivalric, impassioned, but essentially secular Middle Ages.

One thing that is certain is that Tolkien's influence *has* increased. First published in 1954–1955, ostensibly as a three-volume sequel to his popular children's book *The Hobbit* (1937), *The Lord of the Rings* is an epic tale of good against evil, set in a world populated with elves, dwarves, hobbits, men, orcs, goblins, and much, much more. By now widely familiar, the basic plot of the novel is the destruction by the forces of good of the master ring wrought by "The Enemy," Sauron, before he can recover this "One Ring" and with its great power (a tiny fraction of which is its bestowal of invisibility) enslave the world.[8] Al-

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[8]Perhaps what is less familiar is the similarity Tolkien's story bears to the anecdote told by Plato about the legendary ring of Gyges (*The Republic* 359–360). One day, after a period of heavy rain, the Lydian shepherd Gyges was out with his flock when he came upon a great chasm in the earth that the severe weather had washed open. Descending into the depths, Gyges encountered a large bronze horse with numerous doors in its sides. Opening the hatches, the shepherd discovered to his amazement that within the statue lay a giant corpse with a gold ring on one of its fingers. Gyges took the ring and returned to the surface. Sometime later, during a meeting with his fellow shepherds, Gyges began to fidget with the strange ring he was now wearing, and by chance turned it so that its bezel faced inwards, toward the palm of his hand. To his great surprise, the shepherd learned that he had become invisible; what was more, by returning the ring to its original posi-

though published in the mid-1950s, Tolkien's novel did not catch on in the United States and England until the late 1960s. At that time, the counterculture in the U.S. swiftly embraced Tolkien's epic of Middle-earth and the meek hobbits' victorious struggle against the seemingly insurmountable forces of darkness. A pirated paperback edition by Ace Books in 1965 made the book cheap and readily available; to counter this unauthorized edition and recover some of its losses, Houghton Mifflin, in conjunction with Ballantine Books, flooded the market with their own American paperback edition, this one bearing Tolkien's official authorization.[9] Due to the legal dispute with Ace Books that soon followed, a good deal of publicity was generated, which had the unintended effect of helping to put Tolkien's book at the top of the best-seller list.[10]

But it wasn't hype that caused the Tolkien phenomenon—and a phenomenon it certainly was. According to Tolkien's official biographer, Humphrey Carpenter, in the mid- to late 1960s badges began to appear

tion, he found that he could once again be seen. Recognizing the ring's great power and its even greater potential, Gyges immediately made off to the royal palace and, by means of the ring, committed adultery with the queen, slew the king, and took possession of the kingdom after killing all those who might pose a threat to his rule. According to Plato, the Gyges anecdote was used by an interlocutor of Socrates to challenge the old philosopher on his concepts of justice and human nature. To the interlocutor, the Gyges story suggested that even the purest, most virtuous person would not resist committing a wrong to fulfill his desires if he could do so with impunity. Thus, so-called just behavior is nothing more than a by-product of the fear of being caught and punished for wrongdoing. To prove that this view is incorrect, Socrates countered his opponent's argument by demonstrating that a man can act justly of his own innate will, and indeed, that such right conduct is preferable for its own sake; or, in other words, that it is possible for a just conscience to resist the temptation of Gyges's ring.

    If one were able to locate Tolkien's personal copy of *The Republic,* it would certainly be interesting to see what, if any, marginalia exist near the Gyges passages. Unfortunately Tolkien's library has been for the most part dispersed. For Tolkien's own comments on his marginalia and his library, see H. Carpenter, ed., *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* (Boston 1981) 356–358 [Letter to Zillah Sherring, 20 July 1965]; 397 [Letter to Christopher Tolkien, 2 January 1969]. To my knowledge, the earliest comparison of Tolkien's ring to that of Gyges was by R. Evans, *J. R. R. Tolkien* (New York 1972) 51. On the ring of Gyges, see K. F. Smith, "The Tale of Gyges and the King of Lydia," *American Journal of Philology* 23 (1902) 261–282, 361–387; idem, "The Literary Tradition of Gyges and Candaules," *American Journal of Philology* 41 (1920) 1–37; and C. M. Booker, "Writing a Wrong: The Divestiture of Louis the Pious (833) and the Decline of the Carolingians" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles 2002) 527–530.

    [9]See H. Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography* (Boston 1977) 226–229; and D. A. Anderson, "A Note on the Text" in J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: Collector's Edition* (Boston 1987) v–viii.

    [10]For Tolkien's own comments on this, see Carpenter, *The Letters* (n. 8 above) 364 [Letter to Michael George Tolkien, 30 October 1965].

on students' lapels with slogans that read, "Frodo Lives," "Gandalf for President," and "Come to Middle-earth." Tolkien fan clubs were forming in ever greater numbers—some devoted to the serious, scholarly aspects of the author's work, while others held "hobbit picnics" to which members came dressed as their favorite characters from the stories and dined on mushrooms, cakes, and cider. Numerous rock bands, such as Led Zeppelin and Rush, alluded to Tolkien's novel in their songs and concert films, while city streets were graffitied with catchphrases like "J. R. R. Tolkien is Hobbit-forming."[11] Depending on one's tastes, everyone has a favorite or contemptible example of the massive appropriation of Tolkien over the last forty years. Some personal favorites are the twenty student-residence halls at UC Irvine built in 1974 and named after characters and places in Tolkien's realm of Middle-earth; and the chimpanzee studied by Jane Goodall, whom she named "Frodo"; and the standard English text of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* having been translated at "Rivendell"; and "The Ballad of Bilbo Baggins" sung by Leonard Nimoy; and the adoption of Sauron's "Lidless Eye" as a battle emblem by South Vietnamese troops in 1967—this apparently having been the strange result of an American officer's botched attempt to improve his Vietnamese by translating Tolkien's book.[12] In 1972 one could walk from UCLA down to Westwood Boulevard, turn onto Gayley Avenue, and find a bookstore called "A Change of Hobbit," which was owned by a self-styled "Hobbitch" and was cooled not by air-conditioning but by "Aries Conditioning."[13]

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[11]Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography* (n. 9 above) 230. See now B. Rosebury, *Tolkien: A Cultural Phenomenon* (New York 2003) 193–220. On Tolkien and music, see W. Straw, "Characterizing Rock Music Culture: The Case of Heavy Metal" in S. Frith and A. Goodwin, eds., *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word* (New York 1990) 108; and M. Millar, "Led Zeppelin and the Pixies" in C. Roberts, ed., *Idle Worship* (Boston 1995) 35–45.

[12]On the residence halls, see <http://www.housing.uci.edu/UG/ME/mehalldsp.htm#Me%20Res.%20Halls>; on the chimpanzee (b. 1976), see <http://www.janegoodall.org/chimp_central/chimpanzees/f_family/frodo.asp>; on the translation of Hegel, see G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford 1977) xxxi; on Nimoy's ballad [for which a video exists (!) and can be viewed on the Internet], see *Two Sides of Leonard Nimoy,* side 2, track 1 (Dot Records, 1968: DLP 25835); on the battle emblem, see D. J. Stewart, "The Hobbit War," *The Nation* 205, no. 11 (9 October 1967) 333, quoting a report from *Publishers' Weekly,* 4 September 1967, although cf. Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography* (n. 9 above) 230, claiming that "in Saigon a Vietnamese dancer was seen bearing the lidless eye of Sauron on his shield."

[13]See the advertisement in the program to the "L. A. Con: The 30th World Science Fiction Convention, September 1st–4th, 1972," p. 132. A branch of this store, called "The Other Change of Hobbit," still exists at 2020 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley, CA.

While many theories have been offered to explain this outbreak of Tolkien fever, some consensus seems to have been reached on two explanations. First, many see the initial rage for Tolkien as the product of an early, pronounced desire for escapism by youth facing the rapidly escalating conflict in Vietnam, youth who, ironically, felt a vicarious sense of empowerment in their escape to Middle-earth, where even the most powerless, insignificant person can change the world.[14] Second, many also argue that the growing ecological movement of the 1960s found fertile ground in Tolkien's strong preference for natural landscapes and materials and his loathing for industrial society and its techniques of so-called development.[15] It should be kept in mind that Tolkien, who died in 1973 at the age of 81, had witnessed much of this phenomenon himself—something he characterized as "my deplorable cultus."[16] The only explanation he could find for the giddy enthusiasm of the countless young Americans phoning his home in the middle of the night and writing him sackloads of fan mail was that "Art moves them and they don't know what they've been moved by and they get quite drunk on it. Many young Americans are involved in the stories in a way that I'm not."[17] Certainly he rejected the criticism that his novel was escapist; indeed, he had anticipated such accusations years earlier when he wrote on the poetics of "fairy-stories":

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[14]See the strident criticism of such Tolkienesque escapism by D. J. Stewart, "The Hobbit War," *The Nation* 205, no. 11 (9 October 1967) 332–334.

[15]See Rosebury, *Tolkien: A Cultural Phenomenon* (n. 11 above) 175–178, 180; J. Bearman, "Fantasylands: J. R. R. Tolkien and the Power of Myth," *L.A. Weekly* vol. 24, no. 5 (21–27 December 2001) 36; and the "all-vegetarian" student cooperative house at UC Berkeley, "Lothlorien" <http://www.usca.org/coops/lot.htm>. For Tolkien's own feelings about the natural world and modern development, see Carpenter, *The Letters* (n. 8 above) 420 [Letter to the Editor of the *Daily Telegraph,* 30 June 1972], "nothing ... compares with the destruction, torture and murder of trees perpetrated by private individuals and minor official bodies. The savage sound of the electric saw is never silent wherever trees are still found growing." See also his comments in the following note below.

[16]Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography* (n. 9 above) 231. See also Carpenter, *The Letters* (n. 8 above) 359 [Letter to W. H. Auden, 4 August 1965], "such things fill me too with alarm and despondency"; 412 [Letter to Carole Batten-Phelps, Autumn, 1971], "The horrors of the American scene I will pass over, though they have given me great distress and labour. (They arise in an entirely different mental climate and soil, polluted and impoverished to a degree only paralleled by the lunatic destruction of the physical lands which Americans inhabit.)."

[17]Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography* (n. 9 above) 231–235. Cf. the observation by Mark Twain (P. Fatout, ed., *Mark Twain Speaking* [Iowa City 1976] 158) that literature might be treated with greater respect by the law if only "a body could ... get drunk on it."

> I do not accept the tone of scorn or pity with which "Escape" is now so often
> used: a tone for which the uses of the word outside literary criticism give no
> warrant at all.... Evidently we are faced by a misuse of words, and also by a
> confusion of thought. Why should a man be scorned, if, finding himself in
> prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he
> thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls? The world
> outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it. In using
> Escape in this way the critics have chosen the wrong word, and, what is
> more, they are confusing, not always by sincere error, the Escape of the
> Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter.[18]

Tolkien's good friend C. S. Lewis would only second this position, expressing his like feelings in the same terms: "The only people who worry about 'escapism,'" he explained, "are jailers."[19]

It is in the context of this hobbit mania of the early 1970s that we come upon the activities of two young men in the American Midwest. Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson were tabletop war-gamers, that is, they used lead miniatures to reconstruct historical battles and wage their own simulated "little wars." Now, the hobby of war-gaming has its beginnings in the early nineteenth century, when a Prussian staff officer, using topographical maps and metal miniatures, devised a game called "Kriegspiel" as a training aid for officers. The simulated tabletop conflicts were ideal for teaching cadets various elements of military tactics and strategy.[20] More than a century and a half later, such war-gaming—with early encouragement, endorsement, and codification by H. G. Wells—had spread beyond the confines of military instruction to become a thriving underground hobby, with clubs in most major American cities recreating nearly every type of historical battle imaginable.[21] Thus, despite the fact that Gygax lived in Lake Geneva, Wiscon-

[18]J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in idem, *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* (London 1983) 148 [originally delivered as a lecture at St. Andrews University in 1939, and subsequently published in 1945].

[19]Quoted in A. C. Clarke, *Profiles of the Future: An Inquiry into the Limits of the Possible* (London 1999) 81. On Lewis's friendship with Tolkien, see H. Carpenter, *The Inklings: C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and Their Friends* (London 1978).

[20]See G. A. Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (Chicago 1983) 8–9.

[21]See H. G. Wells, *Little Wars: A Game for Boys from Twelve Years of Age to One Hundred and Fifty and for That More Intelligent Sort of Girls Who Like Boys' Games and Books; with an Appendix on Kriegspiel* (London 1913). For an overview of war-gaming history, see A. Wilson, *The Bomb and the Computer: Wargaming from Ancient Chinese Mapboard to Atomic Computer* (New York 1968); A. H. Hausrath, *Venture Simulation in War, Business, and Politics* (New York 1971) with incredible photographs;

sin, and Arneson was enrolled at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis-St. Paul, the two met at war-gaming tournaments attended by their respective clubs. As founding members of the "Castle and Crusade Society," a war-gaming sub-group devoted to the Middle Ages, both men held a particular interest in recreating medieval battles. Yet they were also both becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the impersonal aspect of commanding entire armies. Something needed to change.

In 1971, Gygax and Arneson, by then in their early thirties, collaborated to create a game and a set of rules that allowed players to enact the roles of single characters on heroic quests; no longer generic troops on the battlefield, players could now direct fictional heroes—those with their own histories and personalities—through a variety of imaginary scenarios and environments.[22] Modifying the "Fantasy Supplement" and "Man-to-Man" rules added to the second edition of Gygax's previously published medieval wargame *Chainmail: Rules for Medieval Miniatures* (co-authored with Jeff Perren, Guidon Games, 1972)*, Gygax and Arneson created the first tabletop role-playing game—one that focused less on winning and losing than on the playing itself; the gradual development of an imaginary character was now understood to be its own reward.[23] Drawing up a list of possible names for the new game, Gygax read them aloud to his daughter, Elise, who chose "Dungeons and Dragons" for its alliterative, evocative qualities.[24] The new game was heavily derivative of the heroic fantasy fiction so popular at the time, borrowing liberally not only from Tolkien but also from the

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P. P. Perla, *The Art of Wargaming: A Guide for Professionals and Hobbyists* (Annapolis, MD 1990); and Fine, *Shared Fantasy* (n. 20 above) 9–10.

[22]Gygax acknowledged that the excellent quality of the tabletop miniatures he had recently acquired also served as some inspiration for this shift in focus: "... many of them were so heroic looking that it seemed a good idea to play some games which would reflect the action of the great swords and sorcery yarns." See G. Gygax, "Gary Gygax on Dungeons and Dragons: Origins of the Game," *The Dragon* 7 (June 1977) 7. Apart from such miniatures, the only other visual components of the game were the maps that players would draw of their imaginary environments, such as dungeons or castles.

[23]For the history of these developments, see King and Borland, *Dungeons and Dreams* (n. 2 above) 1–6; Fine, *Shared Fantasy* (n. 20 above) 13–15; G. Gygax, "D&D®, AD&D® and Gaming," *The Dragon* 26 (June 1979) 28–30; idem, "Gary Gygax on Dungeons and Dragons" (n. 22 above) 7; and L. Schick, *Heroic Worlds: A History and Guide to Role-Playing Games* (Buffalo 1991) 17–20. Gygax and Arneson would later become embroiled in a bitter legal dispute over credit for the game's origin and design.

[24]G. Gygax, "The Wink of an Eye" in *TSR Silver Anniversary: The Story of TSR, 1975–1999* (Renton, WA 1999) 2–3.

works of Fritz Leiber, Robert E. Howard, Jack Vance, Poul Anderson,
and Michael Moorcock, among others.[25] Yet Tolkien's fiction was
clearly the major influence;[26] the game included specific, copyrighted
creatures from Middle-earth, such as hobbits, ents, balrogs, and orcs,
whose names continued to be used until the game's sixth editon
(1976), when the Tolkien estate finally threatened legal action and had
them removed.[27] Gygax may have claimed to have taken inspiration for
his game from a broad spectrum of writers, but the fact remains that he
acted on it in the early 1970s, at the height of Tolkien's popularity.[28]
Eventually taking the invention out of his basement, Gygax formed the
company TSR (Tactical Studies Rules) and published the game in
January 1974 with the deceptively matter-of-fact title *Dungeons and
Dragons: Rules for Fantastic Medieval Wargames Campaigns Play-
able with Paper and Pencil and Miniature Figures*. Although he had
packaged only 1000 copies, expecting general indifference or a luke-
warm reception at best, the game set quickly sold out. Through word of
mouth alone, demand had rapidly outstripped supply. Consequently
those who wished to play the game first had to find someone who
owned it and make a photocopy of it for themselves, which they in turn
would then circulate to other friends throughout the war-gaming com-
munity. An underground phenomenon had been born.[29]

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[25]In the preface (p. 3) to "Men and Magic," the first of the game's three rule booklets,
Gygax makes reference to the work of Edgar Rice Burroughs, Robert E. Howard, L.
Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt, and Fritz Leiber. He provides a more comprehen-
sive list of sources in a later article, "Fantasy/Swords & Sorcery, Recommended Read-
ing," *The Dragon* 4 (December 1976) 29.

[26]J. E. Holmes, *Fantasy Role Playing Games* (New York 1981) 70–71, 212–213. But
see the vehement objections to this view by R. Kuntz, "Tolkien in Dungeons & Drag-
ons," *The Dragon* 13 (April 1978) 8. Kuntz's article itself serves as testimony to the fact
that the prevailing view among gamers at the time was that *Dungeons and Dragons* was
largely inspired by and derivative of Tolkien's fantasy fiction—a view Kuntz was trying
to correct for the record. Both Holmes and Kuntz worked for Gygax's company, TSR.

[27]Cf. Tolkien's own early comments about protecting his creations from unauthorized
usage: Carpenter, *The Letters* (n. 8 above) 349 [Letter to Rayner Unwin, 2 August 1964];
355 [Letter to W. H. Auden, 12 May 1965]. The illegal use of Tolkien's fiction by Gygax
is ironic, given Gygax's concurrent complaints about the unauthorized use of his own
fantasy creation. On this, see below.

[28]Cf. N. Walmsley, "Tolkien and the 60's" in R. Giddings, ed., *J. R. R. Tolkien: This
Far Land* (London 1983) 85, who argues unconvincingly that "the sudden ideological,
philosophical and political shift which took place in 1968 ended Tolkien's period of
influence on Western youth culture."

[29]Gygax estimates that "counting all of the illicit photocopies that were floating
around, and the players who didn't own their own set, it is a safe bet that no fewer than
10,000 persons then knew of and were enthralled by the D&D game." Gygax, "The Wink

Gygax soon realized that there was something special about his new game and attempted to capitalize on it, releasing several more editions of *Dungeons and Dragons* over the next few years.[30] Initially he believed the role-playing element of the game to be the reason for its popularity, and consequently released three other games with the same role-playing foundation, but based in different eras—one set in the Wild West (*Boot Hill* [1975]) and two others in the far future (*Empire of the Petal Throne* [1975], *Metamorphosis: Alpha* [1976]). All were failures.[31] In hindsight, Gygax would grudgingly attribute the particular popularity of *Dungeons and Dragons* to its "open-ended" nature. Because the game was rushed to print in 1974 without sufficient play-testing, and was not thoroughly revised for still another four years, there were many places in its rules that allowed much room for interpretation. As a result, each community of players developed their own version of the game, which they would tailor to suit their specific needs and interests.[32] Some players would even go so far as to publish their own emendations and additions to the rules, an "unauthorized" practice about which Gygax complained bitterly and tried ruthlessly to suppress.[33] Other, less enterprising players took the other logical step in

of an Eye" (n. 24 above) 4. Cf. the figures given in G. Gygax, "Dungeons and Dragons®: What It Is and Where It's Going," *The Dragon* 22 (February 1979) 29.

[30]For a detailed description of these editions, see <http://www.acaeum.com/DDIndexes/SetPages/Original.html>.

[31]Schick, *Heroic Worlds* (n. 23 above) 21–22. *Empire of the Petal Throne* was a game based on the extremely complex fantasy world of Tékumel invented by M. A. R. Barker, former professor of linguistics and South Asian studies at the University of Minnesota. See Fine, *Shared Fantasy* (n. 20 above) 21–22, 123–152.

[32]Schick, *Heroic Worlds* (n. 23 above) 21, also makes the important observation that the homespun graphic design and overall look of the game contributed to its modification by players: "Paradoxically, one of the best things about the set was that so many players found it confusing or seemingly unfinished. To those unfamiliar with miniatures games, the *Chainmail* conventions seemed arbitrary and inexplicable. Furthermore, the rulebooks were amateurishly produced and poorly edited and illustrated, apparently the work of game fans rather than professionals. Players were excited by the revolutionary concepts of the game, but once those were grasped, many looked at the rules and rulebooks and said, 'You know, even *I* could do better than that!' So, many *D&D* game masters, perhaps even a majority, started tinkering with the rules, and this unleashed a flood of creativity that might never have come about if the first role-playing game had been complete, self-contained, and slickly professional."

[33]See the letter from Scott Rosenberg and the editor's response in *The Dragon* 3 (October 1976) 20; G. Gygax, "View from the Telescope Wondering Which End Is Which?" *The Dragon* 11 (December 1977) 5–6, 30; idem, "Role-Playing: *Realism* vs. Game Logic; Spell Points, Vanity Press and Rip-offs," *The Dragon* 16 (July 1978) 15–16, 21; and Schick, *Heroic Worlds* (n. 23 above) 20–21. In an interview conducted at the Salon de Jeux in Paris, 17 April 1993, Gygax even claimed to have utilized thugs to

order to clarify the many ambiguities in the rules; Gygax, like Tolkien, soon began to receive phone calls in the middle of the night from eager fans asking him to answer various questions about his creation.[34] Before long, Gygax would alter his opinion about the game's mounting success yet again and ascribe it neither to the game's role-playing component nor its desultory rules, but now to its resonance with the "mythic." As he wrote in 1979,

> We somehow relate to stories of young princes going out into the world to seek their fortune, of knights rescuing maidens in distress and slaying dragons, of dealings with wicked magicians and evil witches. The myth of all peoples contain [sic] great stocks of such fantasy lore. If nothing else, the desire to believe in such seems to be innate in humanity. Whether or not there are parallel worlds or places where fantastic creatures actually live and magic works is not germane, for most of us are familiar with the concepts as if they were actual, and we have a desire to become involved, if only vicariously, amongst such heroic epics of magic and monsters.[35]

It is difficult not to see the pervasive influence of Joseph Campbell and his study of myth behind these words.[36] In fact, what Gygax acknowledges and glosses here in "Campbell-speak" is something that the commercial failure of his science fiction and Wild West role-playing games had already demonstrated—people prefer to escape into a world of heroic fantasy set *specifically* in a medieval key.[37] Indeed, even the modern computerized recommendation generator on the Amazon.com website assumes as much: a search for a scholarly work of non-fiction

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search out and destroy mere photocopies of his game that were in circulation: "We had rude boys going through conventions, and if they caught someone with photocopies 'chrchr' [he makes some tearing gestures] ... They were *big* guys. Oh, we did it!" See M. Kliehm, "Gary Gygax: Interview with a Legend ..." <http://www.rpg.net/252/news/13/gygax/e.html>.

[34]Kliehm, "Gary Gygax: Interview with a Legend ..." (n. 33 above); and Schick, *Heroic Worlds* (n. 23 above) 132.

[35]Gygax, "Dungeons and Dragons®: What It Is and Where It's Going" (n. 29 above) 29. See also Gygax, "The Wink of an Eye" (n. 24 above) 4.

[36]Cf. the later, explicit discussion of Campbell and myth in G. Gygax, *Master of the Game: Principles and Techniques for Becoming an Expert Role-Playing Game Master* (New York 1989) 165–170.

[37]Schick, *Heroic Worlds* (n. 23 above) 25, however, suggests that this initial failure was due more to the misunderstanding of how to constitute a modern persona in a role-playing game: "the basis for all R[ole]P[laying]G[ame] design in the midseventies was *Dungeons and Dragons,* and *D&D*'s class-and-level structure isn't well suited to situations where characters can't be defined as simplistic archetypes. In science-fiction (or modern) cultures, characters are better described as collections of skills than as character types, but in 1976 everyone was still stuck on the idea of character class."

on medieval history currently calls up not only the book title but also the option to purchase the *Lord of the Rings* films on DVD, and provides the following hyperlink as well: "So You'd Like To ... Run a Historically-Based R[ole]P[laying]G[ame]."[38]

So we return to the question with which Gygax was grappling: why are the Middle Ages the realm of choice for escape? Broadly construed, this is a question that takes one all the way back to Cervantes and *Don Quixote,* if not earlier, for, as Umberto Eco has famously argued, this privileging of the Middle Ages has been a "continuous return" of dreamers for centuries.[39] It is not a question I shall attempt to address here. However, if one narrows the focus to the circumscribed context of gamers in the 1970s, I would agree with sociologist Daniel Dayan's claims that the Middle Ages were appealing to players for their "parenthetical" aspect, situated as a dark interval between two periods of Enlightenment, being largely free of restraints and seemingly open to the rule of violence. Dayan takes his argument even further and suggests that medieval settings offer an alluring metaphor due to a combination of particular semantic features: that they appear as a catastrophic time, filled with the chaos of a civilization's collapse; that they therefore allow, and even seem to call for, a ruthless ethic; and that they permit a playful paganism, being rife with superstition and the presence of the supernatural.[40] Here I would simply note that this conception of a brutal, chaotic Middle Ages is not all that different from the image that historians themselves until quite recently held of the tenth century, that period of "feudal anarchy" ushered in by the collapse of the Carolingian empire. Yet, as many gamers of the 1970s knew from their familiarity with Tolkien's Middle-earth, and as most historians from their reinterpretation of the primary sources know now, a "stateless" medieval world was not entirely ruthless and brutal, for it was governed less by tangible external constraints than by potent internal forces such as

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[38]On the logic and criteria that govern Amazon.com's assumptions about its customers' interests, see G. Linden and B. Smith, J. York, "Amazon.com Recommendations: Item-to-Item Collaborative Filtering," *IEEE Internet Computing* vol. 7, no. 1 (January/February 2003) 76–80 <http://dsonline.computer.org/0301/d/w1lind.htm>.

[39]Eco, "Dreaming of the Middle Ages" (n. 7 above) 61–72.

[40]D. Dayan, "Copyrighted Subcultures," *American Journal of Sociology* 91 (1986) 1226.

honor, shame, peer pressure, and a sense of moral and spiritual obligations.[41]

By the end of 1974, play of *Dungeons and Dragons* had spread from the Midwest to the country's coasts, taking hold particularly in New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Boston.[42] But it was in the last of these cities that the game—despite the great notoriety it would gain in the 1980s—would make its most enduring impact. One night in 1975, Dave Walden, a young computer programmer at the small Cambridge, Massachusetts-based engineering and consulting firm of Bolt, Beranek and Newman (BBN), was introduced to *Dungeons and Dragons* by a student in a class he was teaching at Harvard. The student, Eric Roberts, had created "The Mirkwood Tales," a customized version of *Dungeons and Dragons* based explicitly on Tolkien's realm of Middle-earth. Fascinated by the game, Walden soon gathered a number of his colleagues from BBN for frequent Mirkwood sessions at his house. Among the regulars was Walden's old friend and new partner at BBN, Will Crowther.[43]

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[41]Cf. the remarks of Fine, *Shared Fantasy* (n. 20 above) 165–180, regarding the self-imposed constraints on rivalry and selfishness among fantasy role-playing gamers, with the recent work on the "feudal revolution" by P. J. Geary, "Moral Obligations and Peer Pressure: Conflict Resolution in the Medieval Aristocracy" in C. Duhamel-Amado and G. Lobrichon, eds., *Georges Duby: L'écriture de l'Histoire* (Brussels 1996) 217–222; P. J. Geary, "Living with Conflicts in Stateless France: A Typology of Conflict Management Mechanisms, 1050–1200," in idem, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY 1994) 125–160; G. Koziol, *Begging Pardon and Favor: Ritual and Political Order in Early Medieval France* (Ithaca, NY 1992); T. Head and R. Landes, eds., *The Peace of God: Social Violence and Religious Response around the Year 1000* (Ithaca, NY 1992); M. Frassetto, ed., *The Year 1000: Religious and Social Response to the Turning of the First Millennium* (New York 2002); and W. C. Brown and P. Górecki, eds., *Conflict in Medieval Europe* (Aldershot 2003).

[42]See the cumulative listings of players' names and addresses, published in TSR's industry magazines, *The Strategic Review* 6 (February 1976) 10; 7 (April 1976) 7; and *The Dragon* 1 (June 1976) 20; 2 (August 1976) 10; 3 (October 1976) 19; 4 (December 1976) 26; 7 (June 1977) 7; 22 (February 1979) 18–20, 22–24, 26–28; 33 (January 1980) 23–36; 37 (May 1980) 40–43. This feature ends in May 1980, likely due to the fact that the game by that time had simply become too widespread to continue to list individual players.

[43]For these details and much of what follows I rely heavily upon N. Montfort, *Twisty Little Passages: An Approach to Interactive Fiction* (Cambridge, MA 2003); and the excellent documentary account of K. Hafner and M. Lyon, *Where Wizards Stay Up Late: The Origins of the Internet* (New York 1996). On Roberts, Walden, Crowther, and the "Mirkwood Tales" sessions, see Hafner and Lyon, *Where Wizards Stay Up Late* 205–208; and Montfort, *Twisty Little Passages* 86. A transcript of an interview with Crowther conducted by Hafner is available online at <http://ia200128.eu.archive.org/hdc1/texts/WillCrowtherInterview>.

Within the nascent field of computer science and engineering, Crowther was known as an eccentric, but exceptionally brilliant, programmer. Inspiring, operating on a higher plane, and having an uncanny, intuitive talent, he was "regarded among his colleagues as being within the top fraction of 1 percent of programmers in the world."[44] At the end of 1968 BBN had been awarded a million-dollar contract from the Defense Department's Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) to develop and build the first "Interface Message Processor" (IMP), a device that would allow disparate computers to communicate with one another and share information. The thirty-two-year-old Crowther, who had already made significant contributions to BBN's initial bid proposal to ARPA, was a vital member of the team that was assembled to realize the project. As one of the dozen "IMP Guys," he was admired for his ability to improvise one ingenious solution after another during the headlong invention and construction of what would become the Internet's progenitor, the "ARPAnet."[45] In addition to his knack for writing "wire-tight," ultra-efficient computer code—an especially valuable skill in the days of highly limited computer processing and storage capacities—Crowther was renowned for his exploits as an avid spelunker, or caver. His wife Pat was even relatively famous for her caving; together with a small group of explorers, she discovered the existence of a long-sought link between the Mammoth and Flint Ridge caves in Kentucky, a complex of tunnels, caverns, chutes, and crawlspaces that make up the longest known cave system in the world at 144 miles.[46]

During his off-hours at BBN, Crowther would make use of the company's equipment to combine his interests in programming and caving. Gathering the detailed surveys of numerous subterranean expeditions

[44]Hafner and Lyon, *Where Wizards Stay Up Late* (n. 43 above) 98, 111, 128, and for the quotation, 129.

[45]For example, Crowther invented a crucial "dynamic-routing algorithm" that heuristically told the IMP both where to forward data and, given current network conditions, which path was the most efficient to send it along; Hafner and Lyon, *Where Wizards Stay Up Late* (n. 43 above) 128–129. Interestingly, when describing his team's work on the IMP, Crowther uses language suggestive of his involvement with role-playing games. When he states that "we'd steal ideas from anywhere, but most of the time we had to roll our own" (Hafner and Lyon 120), his expression of "rolling" an idea sounds strange at first, until one learns that in role-playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* one's personal attributes and success within scenarios are dictated by the rolling of dice.

[46]See R. W. Brucker and R. A. Watson, *The Longest Cave* (New York 1976) 170–177, 233–253; Hafner and Lyon, *Where Wizards Stay Up Late* (n. 43 above) 206; and Montfort, *Twisty Little Passages* (n. 43 above) 87–88.

he had charted as cartographer for the Cave Research Foundation, he and Pat input the topographical data into BBN's computers to map and plot the progress of their adventures.[47] When Crowther and his wife divorced in 1976, the maps from these sessions provided the material, and *Dungeons and Dragons* the inspiration, for a remarkable game that Crowther devised for his children, one that fused his love of computers, caving, and role-playing games (Crowther's game persona, or "player character" was called "Willie the Thief"). "I had been involved in a non-computer role-playing game called *Dungeons and Dragons* at the time," he explains,

> and also I had been actively exploring in caves—Mammoth Cave in Kentucky in particular. Suddenly, I got involved in a divorce, and that left me a bit pulled apart in various ways. In particular I was missing my kids. Also the caving had stopped, because that had become awkward, so I decided I would fool around and write a program that was a re-creation in fantasy of my caving, and also would be a game for the kids, and perhaps had some aspects of the *Dungeons and Dragons* that I had been playing. My idea was that it would be a computer game that would not be intimidating to non-computer people, and that was one of the reasons why I made it so that the player directs the game with natural language input, instead of more standardized commands. My kids thought it was a lot of fun.[48]

Given his passion for caving, it is little wonder that Crowther held such an affinity for *Dungeons and Dragons,* for as Gary Gygax has recalled, at first "the game [of D&D] went a long way into exploring the subterranean world. Then it started to become a matter of whether you had a sword or an axe, and a backpack, and rope and spikes and all these spelunking tools."[49] Taking only three or four weekends to write (in FORTRAN language), Crowther's revolutionary game, called "Adventure," was an immediate hit with his children. It was a text-only adventure, the first of what would later be dubbed "interactive fiction" games. Players are given terse descriptions of rooms, chambers, and

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[47]Some of which are chronicled in Brucker and Watson, *The Longest Cave.* For the computer map, see Brucker and Watson (n. 46 above) 171–172, 253; and V. Burnham, *Supercade: A Visual History of the Videogame Age, 1971–1984* (Cambridge, MA 2001) 134.

[48]R. Adams, "The Origins of 'Adventure,'" (2002) <http://www.rickadams.org/ adventure/a_history.html>; D. Peterson, *Genesis II: Creation and Recreation with Computers* (Reston, VA 1983) 187–188; and Montfort, *Twisty Little Passages* (n. 43 above) 87.

[49]B. E. Sones, "Here There Be Dragons," *Computer Games Magazine,* 18 December 2001 <http://www.cgonline.com/features/011218-fl-fl.html>.

other environments by the computer, with which they interact by typing brief instructions indicating what they want to do and where they want to go.[50] Many of the virtual places that players explore in the game were explicitly named and modeled after Crowther's favorite caves in reality, such as the Mammoth "Bedquilt" segment. Proceeding from "room" to "room" (caver parlance for specific caverns) through a labyrinthine system of underground passageways, the player must systematically solve puzzles, kill numerous, knife-throwing dwarves, collect curious objects and magic treasures, and return to the game's starting point, all before one's lamp goes dark.[51]

Not long after writing *Adventure,* Crowther left BBN in 1976 to join the Computer Science Lab at Xerox Corporation's Palo Alto Research Center (PARC) in California. But before taking his leave, he showed his game to a few friends. Crude though it was, *Adventure* quickly became an underground sensation, being circulated and shared among programmers on the fledgling ARPAnet (Crowther had left the game behind on a BBN computer).[52] Early that same year, Don Woods, a twenty-two-year-old graduate student in the Computer Science department at Stanford University, learned about *Adventure* from a friend (the game had already somehow migrated to the Stanford Medical Center's

[50]For the important distinction that *Adventure* allowed one to play *with* a computer, rather than *against* it, see Hafner and Lyon, *Where Wizards Stay Up Late* (n. 43 above) 207. Cf. Holmes, *Fantasy Role Playing Games* (n. 26 above) 157. As I. Livingstone, *Dicing with Dragons: An Introduction to Role-Playing Games* (New York 1983) 186, notes, like in role-playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons,* visual elements were entirely lacking in *Adventure:* "Visual Display Units were not in common use and the player, after typing in his command, was expected to read the output from the program as hardcopy on a teletype." For an image of a computer session using a teletype, see C. Wurster, *Computers: An Illustrated History* (Cologne 2002) 110–111.

[51]An excellent simulation of the game is given by T. Kidder, *The Soul of a New Machine* (Boston 1981) 86–90. On the game in general, see M. A. Buckles, "Interactive Fiction: The Computer Storygame *Adventure*" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, San Diego 1985); J. Dibbell, "Adventure," in V. Burnham, *Supercade: A Visual History of the Videogame Age, 1971–1984* (Cambridge, MA 2001) 135; Montfort, *Twisty Little Passages* (n. 43 above) 88; and for links to downloadable versions of it and a good deal more, R. Adams, "The Colossal Cave Adventure Page," (2002) <http://www.rickadams. org/adventure>. Cf. the cryptic report in an early issue of TSR's role-playing game magazine *The Strategic Review* 1, no. 3 (Autumn, 1975) 6, that "in the Cincinnati area" there were "several computorized [sic] games going on there—D&D and a scifi one among them."

[52]See R. Adams, "A History of 'Adventure,'" (2002) <http://www.rickadams.org/ adventure/a_history.html>, "Often someone would install 'Adventure' in the wee hours of the night—without mentioning it to the computer staff—and move on, resulting in a mysterious yet impressive game program seeming to appear as if by magic"; and Kidder, *The Soul of a New Machine* (n. 51 above) 86–90.

computer) and managed to obtain a copy.[53] At the time, the Stanford computer labs were deeply immersed in a flood of Tolkien references: the rooms—and even vending machines—were named after various places in Middle-earth, while the printer was loaded with elvish fonts, such as "Tengwar."[54] Excited by the blend of caver realism and Tolkie-nesque fantasy of the new game, Woods thoroughly play-tested it and noted several "bugs" in the program. He determined to contact Crow-ther (whose name was mentioned in the game) in order to obtain per-mission to tinker with his creation. Woods sent out a mass e-mail—the ARPAnet was still small enough that one could send a message to Crowther@xxx for all hosts xxx on the net and expect it to reach the correct person—which Crowther received (being just down the road at Xerox). He replied that he was only too happy to oblige, sending Woods the source code for the program. Woods soon expanded the game significantly in size and scope, and made his revised version available to others on the network. Indeed, he encouraged people to pirate the game, installing his and Crowther's e-mail addresses in the program to allow people to contact them should they require help or have any questions about it.[55]

In their documentary account of these events, Katie Hafner and Matthew Lyon here stress the point that Crowther's and Woods's atti-tude about sharing their creation demonstrates the free spirit and em-phasis on openness that characterized the mind-set of the computer science community in its early days.[56] What they neglect to mention, however, is the utterly *Dungeons and Dragons*–Tolkienesque sensibil-

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[53]On the development and afterlife of *Adventure,* see the interview with Woods, "Interactive Fiction? I Prefer Adventure," (June 2001), <http://www.avventuretestuali. com/interviste/woods_eng.html>; Dibbell, "Adventure" (n. 51 above) 135; and Hafner and Lyon, *Where Wizards Stay Up Late* (n. 43 above) 207–208.

[54]Dibbell, "Adventure" (n. 51 above) 135; Hafner and Lyon, *Where Wizards Stay Up Late* (n. 43 above) 208; Kidder, *The Soul of a New Machine* (n. 51 above) 136–137; and S. Levy, *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution* (Garden City 1984) 132–134.

[55]Dibbell, "Adventure" (n. 51 above) 135; Montfort, *Twisty Little Passages* (n. 43 above) 89–90; Hafner and Lyon, *Where Wizards Stay Up Late* (n. 43 above) 208; and Levy, *Hackers* (n. 54 above) 132.

[56]Hafner and Lyon, *Where Wizards Stay Up Late* (n. 43 above) 208. Cf. the practice developed a short time later by Warren Robinett, a disgruntled programmer, who gave himself unauthorized credit on the Atari 2600 game system version of Adventure "by causing his name to appear on the screen when the player entered a secret room, like some mad monk signing his name to an illuminated manuscript to set himself apart from his anonymous fellow toilers"; see D. B. weiss, *Lucky Wander Boy* (New York 2003) 57–58.

ity of this same (young) mind-set, evident not only in the *Adventure* program itself but also in its massive, lightning-quick reception by the computer science community. "As this program, referred to by computer users as 'Advent.,' became available to computer facilities over the country," explained John Eric Holmes in 1981, "one programmer assures me that as the personnel of each center discovered it, all other work would come to a virtual halt until all the programmers had played their way through the dungeon!"[57] Hafner and Lyon concur, "People grew bleary-eyed searching for treasure into the small hours of the morning. 'I've long ago lost count of the programmers who've told me that the experience that got them started using computers was playing *Adventure*,' [Don] Woods said."[58]

The obsession with *Adventure* quickly spawned an entire industry of computer games, such as the popular *Dungeons and Dragons*-based *Zork* (created by MIT students and, like *Adventure,* disseminated across the ARPAnet), and inspired work on the first "MUD" or multi-user dungeon, a text-based multi-user virtual game environment (again explicitly based on Tolkien's Middle-earth) which players logged into, explored, and interacted with one another in a limited fashion.[59] The boom in computer gaming really occurred, however, only after 1981 with the development and proliferation of the personal computer, which expanded the player pool beyond those elect few who had access to large mainframe systems at institutions.[60] At the same time, interest in *Dungeons and Dragons* was also skyrocketing; by 1982 sales of the

[57]Holmes, *Fantasy Role Playing Games* (n. 26 above) 155.

[58]Hafner and Lyon, *Where Wizards Stay Up Late* (n. 43 above) 207–208. See also Levy, *Hackers* (n. 54 above) 294–295.

[59]C. J. P. Moschovitis et al., *History of the Internet: A Chronology, 1843 to the Present* (Santa Barbara, CA 1999) 98–102; King and Borland, *Dungeons and Dreamers* (n. 2 above) 51–57; and Montfort, *Twisty Little Passages* (n. 43 above) 95–117, 223–228.

[60]For an excellent, early account of the rise and influence of the personal computer, see Levy, *Hackers* (n. 54 above); and for images of the computers, Wurster, *Computers* (n. 50 above) 130–297. Between 1979–1981 a fascinating column entitled "The Electric Eye" appeared in TSR's role-playing game magazine *The Dragon.* It documents the history, software, hardware, and vocabulary of computer adventure gaming, and profiles the players themselves. See *The Dragon* 26 (June 1979) 26; 33 (January 1980) 50–51; 36 (April 1980) 62; 38 (June 1980) 52–54; 39 (July 1980) 40; 40 (August 1980) 46, 49; 42 (October 1980) 42–43; 46 (February 1981) 70–71; and 57 (January 1982) 72. The results of the player profile in the last installment of the column are particularly interesting: the typical player was "a 17-year-old male high school student. He has owned a 48K Apple-II+ with a disk drive, a printer, and a joystick or a paddle set for about a year. He has spent a little over $100 on software, but he mainly either copies [it] out of magazines or does it himself."

game and its many supplements had exceeded twenty million dollars. The game was eventually translated into more than a dozen languages and sold in thirty countries, and even had its own cartoon in 1983–84 that was the leader in its time slot.[61] While it may not be true that most computer devotees in the 1970s were also players of *Dungeons and Dragons,* the reverse was very often the case, a combination that became an instant national stereotype after a notorious event in August of 1979.[62]

The disappearance of James Dallas Egbert III, a gifted sixteen-year-old student attending Michigan State University for computer science and math courses, caused a sensation when it was speculated—erroneously—that his involvement in playing *Dungeons and Dragons* had led him to vanish within the school's subterranean maze of steam tunnels.[63] A year after being found, Egbert committed suicide, which only fueled the public's interest in the strange game, its alleged reality-warping, addictive qualities, and its relationship with computer geniuses. In 1982 the made-for-TV movie *Mazes and Monsters* (based on the sensationalist book of the same title inspired by the Egbert disappearance), together with a potboiler memoir in 1984 by the private detective involved in the Egbert case (a man far more detached from reality than Egbert ever was) added even more fuel to the fire.[64] The comments

[61]"Twenty-Five Years of TSR," in *TSR Silver Anniversary: The Story of TSR, 1975–1999* (Renton, WA 1999) 7–19; "Dungeons and Dollars," *New York Times,* 2 November 1980, sec. 3, p. 19.

[62]On the aesthetics and architectonics of rule-governed worlds common to both computer programming and *Dungeons and Dragons,* see S. Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (New York 1984) 79–81, 285–286; King and Borland, *Dungeons and Dreamers* (n. 2 above) 27–40; and D. S. Bennahum, *Extra Life: Coming of Age in Cyberspace* (New York 1998) 33–37, 90–115.

[63]See D. Weathers and D. M. Foote, "Beware the Harpies!" *Newsweek,* 24 September 1979, p. 109. A similar leap from imaginary to "live" gaming has now occurred with the recent nostalgia for classic video games: S. Totilo, "Revenge of Pac-Man: Vintage Games Are Back," *New York Times,* 3 June 2004, sec. G, p. 5; W. St. John, "Quick, After Him: Pac-Man Went Thataway," *New York Times,* 9 May 2004, sec. 9, p. 1.

[64]See R. Jaffe, *Mazes and Monsters* (New York 1981); and the movie *Mazes and Monsters* (1982), directed by S. H. Stern, written by R. Jaffe, T. Lazarus, and starring Tom Hanks. For the memoir by the detective, see W. Dear, *The Dungeon Master: The Disappearance of James Dallas Egbert III* (Boston 1984), which is remarkable for its misunderstanding of computers, *Dungeons and Dragons,* and Tolkien's fiction. Cf. C. Hall, "Into the Dragon's Lair: Detective William Dear's Story of a Student Suicide," *Washington Post,* 28 November 1984, sec. F, p. 1. For a scathing critique of the detective's latest exploits, see T. Ortega, "O. J. Confidential," *Los Angeles New Times* 6, no. 21 (24–30 May 2001) 17–23.

from a contemporary feature in *Life* magazine profiling one player are emblematic of the rigid stereotyping that had already taken hold:

> The antithesis of such prepackaged entertainments as TV and video games, Dungeons and Dragons—D&D to the cognoscenti—is so demanding, so cerebral, so unbelievably complicated, that it takes a whopping intelligence just to penetrate its rule books. Dungeon Masters—the designers of each fantasy scenario, generally the most experienced and charismatic players in a group—are an elite within an elite, and of these, Gary Huckaby, whose skill and imagination have become legendary, is the crème de la crème. Gary is a scholar of fantasy. Leading figures of Greek mythology and medieval history, two of D&D's chief sources, are as familiar to him as the characters in TV serials are to most boys his age. He knows the difference between a broadsword and a glaiveguisarme, and he can discourse knowledgeably on the fall of the Titans. His devotion is of heroic proportions. He has, he estimates, spent over $2,000 on D&D, mostly for transportation to conventions, and over 6,000 hours developing a private D&D computer simulation on his Apple II home computer.... he has a full scholarship at Menlo, where he helps run the school's computer ... his history teacher, Dwight Perkins, says Gary is among the most brilliant students he has ever had.[65]

By 1985 the idea of fantasy role-playing gamers as poorly socialized computer whiz kids (or "wizards") often at risk of losing touch with reality had become connected in the minds of many with an apparent rise in teenage suicide and criminal behavior. Indeed, the Egbert case and still more television melodramas, together with shoddy reporting, such as an episode of CBS's television show *60 Minutes* on the "problems" caused by the game, as well as a host of "Satanic panic" books by religious zealots demonizing *Dungeons and Dragons* as a gateway activity leading youth into the occult, suggested to a credulous public that there was an actual cause-and-effect relationship between the game and crime, satanism, and suicide.[66] Patricia Pulling, the mother of one

[65]A. Fadiman, "A Teenage Master of Wizardry and Enchantment," *Life,* March 1982, p. 20. However, as Fine, *Shared Fantasy* (n. 20 above) 41–47; and J. F. Denman, "Misfit Dragons: The Psycho-social Implications of Fantasy Role-Playing Games" (M. A. thesis, University of California, Los Angeles 1988) 47–52, have shown, gamers largely internalized, and flattered themselves with, this same stereotype of high intelligence and eccentricity-understood-as-creativity.

[66]For the television melodramas, see *Honor Thy Mother* (1992), directed by D. Greene, written by R. D. Adams, based on the book by J. Bledsoe, *Blood Games* (New York 1992); *Cruel Doubt* (1992), directed by Y. Simoneau, written by J. Gay, starring Blythe Danner and Gwyneth Paltrow, based on the book by J. McGinnis, *Cruel Doubt* (New York 1992). See also the episode of *60 Minutes,* CBS television series, 15 Septem-

teen who committed suicide, was so certain that her son's death had
been the result of his involvement with the game (which she learned
about only after his death) that she formed "Bothered about Dungeons
and Dragons" (B.A.D.D.), an interest group that supplied "expert" wit-
nesses to trials and "educated" police departments about the "dangers"
of the game.[67]

As my colleague John Eldevik has noted, the paranoia over the neo-
pagan, cultic elements of *Dungeons and Dragons* arose at a time when
evangelical Christianity in America was first emerging as a self-con-
scious social-political movement.[68] The presidential campaign of
Ronald Reagan in 1980 was supported by religious conservatives, who
with Reagan's victory assumed a new collective identity and sense of
empowerment and purpose. Hal Lindsey's books on the Apocalypse
were just topping the best-seller charts, while a concern was growing
within the far Right that a very evil, but unseen "other" was working in
the shadows to usher in the age of the Antichrist.[69] Within this context,

ber 1985. For the religious attacks, see B. Larson, *Satanism: The Seduction of America's
Youth* (Nashville,1989) 48–61; P. Pulling, *The Devil's Web: Who Is Stalking Your Chil-
dren for Satan?* (Lafayette, LA 1989) 77–102; C. A. Raschke, *Painted Black* (New York
1990) 178–194; J. H. Robie, *The Truth about Dungeons and Dragons* (Lancaster, PA
1991); and the response by G. Gygax, "Blue Demons, Red Devils and RPGs, or What's
in a Name?" in idem, *Master of the Game* (New York 1989) 157–164; and M. Stackpole,
"The Truth about Role-Playing Games" in S. Carlson and G. Larue, *Satanism in America*
(El Cerrito, CA 1989) 231–283.

[67]Pulling, *The Devil's Web* (n. 66 above); J. Adler and S. Doherty, "Kids: The Deadli-
est Game?" *Newsweek*, 9 September 1985, p. 93; M. Stackpole, "The Pulling Report"
(1990) <http://www.rpgstudies.net/stackpole/pulling_report.html>; K. Lancaster, "Do
Role-Playing Games Promote Crime, Satanism and Suicide among Players as Critics
Claim?" *Journal of Popular Culture* 28, no. 2 (1994) 72. Pulling filed suit against her
son's high school for introducing *Dungeons and Dragons* to students, but had her case
thrown out of court; see M. Isikoff, "Parents Sue School Principal: Game Cited in
Youth's Suicide," *Washington Post,* 13 August 1983, sec. A, p. 1; E. Zibart, "Judge Re-
jects Suit Tying Suicide to Fantasy Game," *Washington Post,* 27 October 1983, sec. B, p.
7. The school district banned the game shortly after the filing of the lawsuit. Pulling then
went on to sue TSR, the game's manufacturer: "Parents Sue Game's Maker," *Washington
Post,* 16 June 1984, sec. B, p. 2.

[68]For much of what follows in this paragraph, I would like to thank John Eldevik for
his keen observations and suggestions following the presentation of an early version of
this article on 6 June 2002 at the UCLA Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies.

[69]See D. D'Souza, "Is This the Year the World Ends? Even for Evangelicals, Betting
on Armageddon Can Be Dangerous," *Washington Post,* 4 January 1987, sec. C, p. 1; E.
Duffy, "Faith and Reason: Rapture at the Time of Armageddon," *The Independent* (Lon-
don), 5 May 1990, gazette, p. 17; G. Johnson, "Portrait of the 1980s: Back in 1979, the
Word Was Malaise," *New York Times,* 24 December 1989, sec. 4, p. 6. Lindsey's most
famous book, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (New York 1973), was described by the *New
York Times* as the number one non-fiction best seller of its decade. It has gone through

fantasy role-playing games were viewed as just a ripple on the surface of a vast and deep satanic conspiracy to subvert and conquer first America, and then the world.[70] Central among the many urban myths that perpetuated this hysteria was the widespread belief in satanic ritual child molestation. The McMartin preschool case in California was undoubtedly the most infamous example of this phenomenon. Several very young children claimed, in their answers to leading questions, that in addition to being molested by their teachers they were regularly taken down to dungeon-like secret tunnels and shown ritual sacrifices of animals.[71] When the case finally ended in 1990 in a hung jury after seven years in two trials, the crowd who had been so outspoken about the reality of this underground network of child-molesting, dungeon-keeping satanists was thoroughly discredited. The manipulation of the children's memories was deemed so egregious that the people preaching of satanic conspiracies were now themselves regarded largely with suspicion and contempt, as being nothing but zealots blinded by their own feelings of sanctimony, hatred, and fear. The mass hysteria involving panic-stricken parents, overzealous prosecutors, irresponsible talk shows, and an out-of-control tabloid press in the end ruined several people's lives and evoked a sense of embarrassment and soul-searching by the public. Taken together with an economic recession and the ending of the Cold War, the "evil forces" that once seemed poised to take over the world had been thwarted—at least for the time being.

Thus by the mid-1990s the scapegoating of role-playing games had largely subsided along with the abandonment and deprecation of the witch-hunt for America's purported satanic underground. But there was still another reason that the scare over fantasy role-playing games dis-

more than 108 printings with sales of more than 18 million copies in English, with estimates varying between 18–20 million additional copies in 54 foreign languages.

[70]Larson, *Satanism: The Seduction of America's Youth* (n. 66 above); Pulling, *The Devil's Web* (n. 66 above); Raschke, *Painted Black* (n. 66 above).

[71]P. Eberle, *The Abuse of Innocence: The McMartin Preschool Trial* (New York, 1993); C. Gorney, "The Terrible Puzzle of McMartin Preschool: In California, the Long-Running Trial of a Baffling Child Molestation Case," *Washington Post,* 17 May 1988, sec. B, p. 1. On the made-for-TV movie of the case, see J. J. O'Connor, "The Horrors Behind the McMartin Trial," *New York Times,* 19 May 1995, sec. D, p. 16. See also the obituary for the owner of the preschool by M. Talbot, "Peggy McMartin Buckey, b. 1926: The Devil in the Nursery," *New York Times Magazine,* 7 January 2001, p. 51. On the existence of the tunnels, for which some parents were still searching after the trial, see "Developer Will Raze McMartin Preschool," *New York Times,* 28 April 1990, p. 9; "Parents Seek Tunnels at McMartin School," *New York Times,* 1 May 1990, sec. A, p. 20; and <http://www.religioustolerance.org/tunnels.htm>.

appeared in the late 1980s–early 1990s. Thanks to advances in computer technology and software, an increasing number of people were playing and designing *Dungeons and Dragons*–type games on the personal computer. Realistic computer games were apparently considered safer than groups of people meeting together to play fantasy role-playing games, for they seemed to define more explicitly the boundary between fantasy and reality. Fantasy gaming on the computer appeared to be no different than watching television or playing a video game at the arcade, which at least were familiar forms of entertainment. Of course, as technology improved the community of gamers who once gathered in a physical space continued to meet, but now more often in a virtual, computer environment. Due to the widespread implementation and availability of the Internet, one could sit alone at a computer terminal and interact with others sitting in front of their own terminals—*e unibus pluram,* as David Foster Wallace has put it.[72] Such virtual communities had their origins in slow "play-by-mail" games of the 1970s, in which disparate players declared what they would do and where they would go through letters sent to a remote central game processor, who in turn would reply with additional descriptions and the summary outcome of the players' actions and decisions. Play-by-mail games were eventually superseded by the development and popularity of computer "multi-user dungeons" (MUDs) in the 1980s, which with the rapid improvements in computer processing power and graphics would themselves transform into the massively multi-player online role-playing games of the late 1990s to the present. While tabletop fantasy role-playing is still very much alive, the vast majority of people who play such games today do so on the Internet, logging into virtual, real-time medieval fantasy realms like *EverQuest* or *Ultima Online*—after paying a monthly subscription fee, of course.[73]

[72]D. F. Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," in idem, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (Boston 1997) 21–82.

[73]On massively multi-player online role-playing games, see the articles by D. Kushner, "Where Warriors and Ogres Lock Arms Instead of Swords," *New York Times,* 8 August 2002, sec. G, p. 4; S. Schiesel, "Voyager to a Strange Planet," *New York Times,* 12 June 2003, sec. G, p. 1; and for the economics—virtual and real—of such games, C. Thompson, "Game Theories," *The Walrus,* June 2004 <http://www.walrusmagazine.com/article.pl?sid=04/05/06/1929205&tid=1>.

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So we come at last to Peter Jackson's cinematic representation of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings.*[74] In the 17 January 2002, issue of the *New York Review of Books,* Louis Menand, professor of English and American literature and language at Harvard University, made the following observations after taking his fourteen-year-old nephew to see Jackson's recent film, *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring.*[75] Menand noted with some surprise that Jackson's movie bore little resemblance to the memory he himself had of Tolkien's fictional world. Turning to his young nephew, whom Menand now realized was an indispensable aid to his understanding, he asked whether the images on the screen matched the impressions his nephew had formed when reading the book. "Yeah, pretty much," the teen said. The remainder of Menand's review explores the reasons for this generational difference in the visualization of Tolkien's world.

In short, Menand concludes that the reasons for this difference between his and his nephew's views of Tolkien's novel are twofold. Tolkien's grand but often vague descriptions of characters and places in *The Lord of the Rings* allow the mind's eye, so to speak, to fill in the gaps. For Menand and his nephew, these gaps were smoothed over using the differing stock of stylistic referents each possessed—referents that gave a particular shape to their visual imagination. Menand had read *The Lord of the Rings* in 1963 when he was eleven years old. What he remembered most clearly about the experience of reading Tolkien's novel was its sense of historical depth, and the fact that the book was unillustrated, except for a "red and black hand-drawn map ... which names places never explored in the book—something that was darkly wonderful to an eleven-year-old's imagination." Due to the paucity of images, Menand reasoned that "I must have pictured the characters,

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[74]*Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring.* Directed by Peter Jackson; screenplay by Frances Walsh, Philippa Boyens, and Peter Jackson, based on the novel by J. R. R. Tolkien; 2001; color; 178 minutes (special extended edition, 208 minutes); WingNut Films/New Line Cinema. *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers.* Directed by Peter Jackson; screenplay by Frances Walsh, Philippa Boyens, Stephen Sinclair, and Peter Jackson, based on the novel by J. R. R. Tolkien; 2002; color; 179 minutes (special extended edition, 223 minutes); WingNut Films/New Line Cinema. *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King.* Directed by Peter Jackson; screenplay by Frances Walsh, Philippa Boyens, and Peter Jackson, based on the novel by J. R. R. Tolkien; 2003; color; 201 minutes (special extended edition, 250 minutes); WingNut Films/New Line Cinema.

[75]For what follows, see L. Menand, "Goblin Market," *The New York Review of Books* 49, no. 1 (17 January 2002) 8–9.

most of which are fantastic creatures, by means of a set of already learned visual styles. These were probably 1) the heroic and rather grim realism of the N. C. Wyeth drawings for books like *Kidnapped* and *The White Company,* pictures I found a little frightening, and 2) the muddy colors and romantic attitudes of comic strips like *Prince Valiant ...* I imagined the landscape more or less on the model of my own back-yard."

After duly praising Peter Jackson's attempts to stay faithful to the spirit of Tolkien's work, Menand accounts for his fourteen-year-old nephew's understanding of the film by alluding to the youth's different visual sensibilities and vocabulary. What Menand had read as a kind of historical novel, his nephew had read as a heroic fantasy adventure. His visual imagination was shaped by a stock of stylistic referents that include *Xena Warrior Princess, Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon,* and above all the virtual reality of computer games. To Menand there are certain telltale scenes in Jackson's movie—such as the shots of countless orcs swarming up huge pillars in underground caverns, enormous armies flattened by a burst of supernatural light, and people being swept up hundreds of feet into the air—that smack of imagery regularly found on Sony PlayStation, Nintendo, and computer games like *Age of Empires* or *Diablo II.* They are images, concedes Menand, that were unimaginable to a kid in 1963, for whom Rocky and Bullwinkle represented the cutting edge of visual culture.

As the preceding pages have documented and suggested, the process by which a fringe subculture, through its idiosyncratic reception of Tolkien's fiction, ultimately came to define the "medieval" imagery, pacing, and plotting of one of the most popular film series in history is a relatively recent development. What was once a conception of Tolkien's medieval fantasy realm held by an eccentric few has since become the predominant visualization of the medieval world— Tolkien's and otherwise—held by the generations, like Menand's nephew, raised in a world of personal computers.

Yet there is an important distinction that should be appended to this statement. If the cinematic interpretation of Tolkien's novel has been informed by computer medieval fantasy games, then it is specifically the games developed during the "Satanic panic" of the 1980s and early 1990s that have had the greatest influence. These were the games that began to place an increasing emphasis upon graphics at the expense of plot and interactivity. Stunning visuals and sound, intermixed with

first-person perspective ("first-person-shooter," in gamer parlance), were deemed the most effective techniques by which to provide a player with an experience of deeper and deeper immersion into the game's virtual realm. This is the direction that game designers have continued to follow ever since. But as Mike Singleton, a successful programmer in the mid- to late 1980s, has observed, this direction has also created its own constraints. "So often we see linear plots" in these games, he explains, "and often this can be ultimately traced to the sheer cost of producing additional graphics that may not be seen [in] every gameplay."[76] In other words, as the graphics become more complex and consequently more expensive to produce, open-ended plots—with their requisite supply of additional visuals—become a rarely afforded luxury. Instead, what one gets in such games is an extremely vivid and detailed image of a virtual environment, but one that allows a rather narrow set of choices, routes, and scenarios that are typically encountered sequentially as stages on the path to success in the game. Gamers often refer to these as "hack-and-slash" adventures, in which one does little more than, as a colleague of mine has put it, wander around, kill things, collect treasure, and gain "experience" points to increase one's powers and abilities. In such streamlined, guided, linear games, little is left to the imagination. But they sure do look great.

And so it is with Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* films. The first installment, *The Fellowship of the Ring,* for example, can largely be reduced to a host of dramatic helicopter and swooping bird's-eye-view shots of landscape, and a linear sequence of frantic hack-and-slash video-game scenarios: the Black Riders chasing the hobbits to Buckleberry ferry; the battle at Isengard between the wizards Gandalf and Saruman; the battle at Weathertop between the Black Riders and Strider and the hobbits; the Black Riders chasing Arwen and Frodo to the Bruinen ford; the battle between the Fellowship and the Watcher in the Water at the West Gate to the Mines of Moria; the battle at Balin's tomb between the Fellowship and the goblins and their cave troll; the Fellowship's encounters with perilous obstacles during the flight to the bridge at Khazad-dûm; Gandalf's battle with the Balrog on the bridge itself; and the battle between the Fellowship and the Uruk-hai at Amon Hen. While Jackson clearly had to sacrifice many of the details and lengthy digressions of Tolkien's novel due to the constraints of his me-

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[76]Leonard, "Lord of the Geeks" (n. 2 above).

dium—being allowed a mere eleven hours to depict the entire story on film—nevertheless his interpretation moves through a series of scenarios in much the same fashion that computer games are structured. There is little time for character development or interaction; instead, stunning visuals and special effects are relied upon to breathe life into a fantasy realm encountered largely apace. Of course, all of Jackson's movies *do* typically move at breakneck speed—one look at the opening shot of his first major motion picture, *Heavenly Creatures* (a true story about the blurring of medieval fantasy and modern reality leading to murder), is enough to leave one breathless and reeling.[77] But the visual style and narrative presentation of his interpretation of *The Lord of the Rings* is also highly reminiscent of computer games. Jackson may protest that "as filmmakers, as writers we had no interest whatsoever in putting our junk, our baggage into these movies," but one would do well to remember that such "junk" or "baggage" consists not only of content but also of form—and that this form has baggage of its own.[78] As Brian Rosebury has noted, "in Tolkien's narrative, the fighting in the Chamber of Mazarbul [containing Balin's tomb] is over in little more than a page: its focal point is the ominous fact that the orc-chieftain has selected Frodo for his spear-thrust (just as the Watcher in the Water has chosen Frodo to seize at the West Gate). In the film, the scene lasts over five minutes, and its theme seems to be: how very, very difficult it is to kill a cave-troll. It comes as no surprise that *The Two Towers* PlayStation game features a version of just this scene, in which one is required to deplete the 'health' of the troll, as well as a version of the warg attack at the Gap of Rohan in *The Two Towers,* another dramatically unnecessary interpolation."[79] To this list one could also add, among other such scenes, the lengthy combat between the wizards with their staffs, and the Fellowship's perilous leap over a stairway crumbling beneath their feet into the abyss. Indeed, this last interpolation

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[77]*Heavenly Creatures.* Directed by Peter Jackson; screenplay by Frances Walsh and Peter Jackson; 1994; color; 99 minutes; WingNut Films/Miramax International.

[78]"J. R. R. Tolkien: Creator of Middle-earth" documentary on the Special Extended Edition DVD of *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring.* Cf. H. White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore 1987).

[79]Rosebury, *Tolkien: A Cultural Phenomenon* (n. 11 above) 211. For additional comments on the growing relationship between movies and video games, see R. Levine, "A Kurosawa Epic Turned Video Game," *New York Times,* 14 March 2004, sec. 2, p. 13; M. Marriott, "Movie or Game? The Joystick Is a Tipoff," *New York Times,* 25 March 2004, sec. G; p. 1; and L. M. Holson, "In Land of Oscars, Rich New Category Is Best Video Game," *New York Times,* 10 April 2004, sec. A, p. 1.

was the very first shot designed and programmed by the film's computer "pre-visualization" team, a shot that, in its "pre-viz animatic" version, looks like it came right out of a video game from the early 1980s.[80]

In conclusion, the emphasis in both fantasy computer games and Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* films upon graphics at the expense of plot has two implications regarding the popular conception of the Middle Ages. First, the linear string of hack-and-slash and/or problem-solving scenarios in the games and films subtly leads one to believe that people in the Middle Ages, like the virtual characters in our computer-enhanced pseudo-medieval realms, reasoned or strategized as we do. Within such scenarios, one challenge after another is overcome typically by means of a combination of violence and logic, a process that is impressed into the minds of many as being ahistorical. While the possibilities and constraints during the Middle Ages were different, surely, it is assumed, when threatened, people reasoned then in the same way as they do today. Here the absence of religion and theology is especially evident. Second, the reliance upon graphics to achieve an immersion effect means that the increasing amount of attention devoted to illustrating the pseudo-medieval world, down to the smallest detail, comes at the cost of a personalized Middle Ages. Fantasy role-playing gamers were already concerned about this concession in the early 1980s, when the technology of personal computers had improved enough to permit electronic gaming; the open-ended quality that had contributed to the initial success of *Dungeons and Dragons* was suddenly seen to be at risk.[81] Indeed, this open-ended quality was often considered a vital catalyst for the creative imagination, as we have seen—recall Menand's experience as a child wondering what those unexplored places named on Tolkien's map were like; or the widespread fascination with the text-only descriptions of caverns in Crowther's and Woods's *Adventure*

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[80]See the "Storyboards and Pre-Viz: Making Words into Images" documentary on the Special Extended Edition DVD of *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring.* On Peter Jackson's views regarding the use of computers to realize Tolkien's novel, see F. Topel, "CGI That Doesn't Suck: An Interview with Peter Jackson" <http://action adventure.about.com/cs/weeklystories/a/aa121703_2.htm>.

[81]See R. Krebs, "D&D Meets the Electronic Age," *The Dragon* 26 (June 1979) 26; and the observations Livingstone, *Dicing with Dragons* (n. 50 above) 190–191. See also the comments of Dayan, "Copyrighted Subcultures" (n. 40 above) 1227–1228, on the consequences of Gary Gygax's attempts to delimit, copyright, and profit from the fantasy realm he had created.

game; or even the chilling effect that the minions of Sauron possess in the 1978 animated movie of *The Lord of the Rings* thanks to their dark and blurred appearance.[82] If, as I have argued, the popular conception of the Middle Ages is now largely Tolkienesque, it is a conception that will be increasingly based on Jackson's high-definition "C[omputer] G[enerated]I[magery]" of Tolkien's novel, with all the baggage—the history, possibilities, and constraints—that CGI brings with it.[83]

Tolkien himself foresaw all this more than half a century ago. It is only fitting, therefore, to allow him to have the last word: "It is a curse," he lamented in 1944, "having the epic temperament in an over-crowded age, devoted to the snappy bits."[84]

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[82]See *The Lord of the Rings*; directed by Ralph Bakshi; screenplay by Peter S. Beagle and Chris Conkling, based on the novel by J. R. R. Tolkien; 1978; color; animated; 132 minutes. This blurring effect is enhanced by the combination of live action shots of actors overlaid with animation, a process known as "rotoscoping." As Leonard, "Lord of the Geeks" (n. 2 above) points out, the BBC radio dramatization of *The Lord of the Rings* (script adapted by Brian Sibley and Michael Bakewell, 1981, 13 hours) similarly leaves much to the imagination.

[83]On representations of the Middle Ages in film, see S. Airlie, "Strange Eventful Histories: The Middle Ages in the Cinema" in P. Linehan and J. L. Nelson, eds., *The Medieval World* (London 2001) 163–183 (although Jackson's films of Tolkien's novel are not discussed, since they were released after the article was written).

[84]Carpenter, *The Letters* (n. 8 above) 90 [Letter to Christopher Tolkien, 1 August 1944]. See also Tolkien's comments, Carpenter, *The Letters* (n. 8 above) 228 [Letter to Molly Waldron, 30 November 1955]; 272–276 [Letter to Forrest J. Ackerman, June 1958], where he states that *The Lord of the Rings* is "quite unsuitable for 'dramatiza-tion,'" and that, by contracting and hurrying time in his novel, such dramatizations "have the effect of reducing the importance of the Quest." Again and again, Tolkien stressed the fact that, in a dramatic representation, it would be far better to omit scenes from his book altogether than to present them in a meaningless way and thus make a farce of them and the journey as a whole.