Malleable Mythologies: Competing Strategies for Adapting Film Narrative to Video Games in *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings*

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I'm thirty-two years old. Since I was eight, I've been playing video games—staying up late, stealing hours from school, work and family, shirking social responsibilities, and wreaking havoc on my natural circadian rhythms. I can barely remember the two weeks I spent at a beach house last summer with my wife and her family, when I immersed myself in *Morrowind*, lost all sense of time, and eventually returned home without having achieved the expected suntan or in-law bonding. Only within the last year have I made video games a part of my daytime academic work and recognized them as an area of legitimate cultural inquiry. I don't think my evolving experience with gaming is unusual, considering the way games themselves have lately evolved in the culture. One no longer escapes the mainstream through video games; video games themselves have escaped into the mainstream.

Video games' growing influence is perhaps most visible in their relationship with the established media and their spectacular success in the entertainment market during the last decade. Game enthusiasts, industry insiders, movie moguls, and even some academics are now speaking in eschatological terms: The age of film has passed! The age of video games is dawning! In a December 2003 National Public Radio interview, Jonathan Dee, whose *New York Times Magazine* article, "Playing Mogul," hails the commercial ascendance of interactive media, said, "I can see a future in which when the technology gets a little better . . . I would be hard-pressed to think of a reason why anyone would pay to go see, for instance, a new James Bond movie as opposed to playing the new James Bond game" ("Joystick Nation").

But as media conglomerates absorb game companies, the traditional rivalry between film and game producers dissolves in corporate synergy, and the fortunes as well as the creative interests of the two industries fall into harmony. Predictions of video game

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supremacy in the entertainment market often overlook that games and films share largely in each other's commercial success. Undoubtedly, game companies have grown rapidly, but they have not usurped movie studios so much as they have become viable subsidiaries capable of functioning in financial and creative concert with long-established venues such as film, television, and sports entertainment. Such consolidation shapes even the experience of the individual consumer, who will not be conflicted, as Dee imagines, by a choice between the new Bond movie and the new Bond game, but more likely will go see the movie *and* buy the game without the sense that his or her experience of one has been diminished by the other. The future will not witness more games and fewer films but rather more games, more films, more games based on films, and more films based on games.

The breakdown of traditional media boundaries and the consequent cross-fertilization of entertainment venues have changed the way filmmakers and game designers tell stories. Film producers are viewing video games as a new field of commercial and creative opportunities, pursuing hybrid ventures that forge connections between the game and film markets. In what has been the among the most celebrated of these ventures, Larry and Andy Wachowski, co-creators of *The Matrix* trilogy, created the game *Enter the Matrix* (2003) simultaneously with the last two films of the trilogy, shooting scenes for the game on the movie's sets with the movie's actors, and releasing the game on the same day as *The Matrix: Reloaded*. Game companies regularly pay more than ten million dollars for film licenses and sometimes more than twenty million dollars. In their appropriation of *Enter the Matrix*, Atari acquired not only the license for *The Matrix* franchise, but the entire studio, buying Shiny Entertainment for fifty million dollars (Dee).

The unprecedented deal represents a harbinger of the hybrid film-game productions likely to become more common in the near future. Electronic Arts has relocated to Hollywood, building the first new studio in Los Angeles in seven decades. Gaming analyst James Lin says, "We like to call it EA Hollywood" (Fan). While the appearance of Hollywood actors in video games became a novelty in the 1990s, games now commonly feature A-list celebrities. Electronic Arts' *James Bond 007: Everything or Nothing (*2003) stars Pierce Brosnan, Willem Dafoe, and John Cleese; Sony's *Rise to Honor* (2003) features Jet Li; and Universal's *The Incredible Hulk* (2003), like the film, stars Eric Bana. In 2003, action filmmaker John Woo formed his own game company, Tiger Hill Entertainment, to develop a heist game that he plans to adapt to film. Ridley Scott, who is also seeking to form his own game company, produced a series of live-action online short films in 2004 promoting the release of Atari's *DRIV3R* (2004). Scott finds greater creative potential in games than in films, not only because production costs are smaller, but also because interactive entertainment is not limited by the formal conventions of film. Scott told the *New York Times*, "The idea that a world, the characters that inhabit it, and the stories those characters share can evolve with the

audience's participation and, perhaps, exist in a perpetual universe is indeed very exciting to me" (Holson).

The interactive nature of game narrative that intrigues Woo and Scott has prompted more independent filmmakers to reconsider the ways a story can be told on film. Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run* (1999), for instance, portrays a young woman trying to aid her desperate boyfriend as he rushes to repay a debt to a crime boss. Even with its chic rapid-fire editing and animation sequences, *Run Lola Run* looks like a standard caper film until Lola, surprisingly, is shot dead about twenty minutes into the action. Rather than accept this outcome, however, she simply opens her eyes and says, "No," transporting herself back in time as if restarting the game, which she replays twice throughout the film until she achieves the desired ending.

Run Lola Run reveals that interactivity has begun to destabilize the way filmmakers view their craft, even at the fundamental level of narrative structure. Tykwer's film is not nonlinear but multilinear, like a game that a player can complete or fail to complete in any number of ways. The convergence of film and video games has had an even more pervasive effect on game design, producing what developer Peter Morawiec, co-founder of Luxoflux and lead designer of *True Crime: Streets of L.A.* (2003), calls "a sort of hybrid active-passive experience," a consciously narrative-based style of game that merges cinematic animations or actual film clips with "action time," or game sequences that follow a script and yet submit to the control of the player (12). For designers, filmmakers, critics, and gamers, these emergent "hybrid active-passive experiences" present the most intriguing narrative possibilities. In "Playing Mogul," Dee argues that video game analysts should abandon the critical red herring of simulated violence and give more attention to the narrative transformations manifested in the interactive experience. "The revolutionary aspects of interactive entertainment," Dee writes, "have less to do with realism than with storytelling. A game like . . . *Enter the Matrix* . . . may depend heavily on simulated violence, but the object of the game is to make the story tell itself" (52-53).

From the perspective of narrative and reader response theories, this hybridization of active and passive experiences is indeed fascinating, but such experiences are not identical in every game. Different strategies for splicing active and passive narrative forms have emerged, as game designers continue to experiment with the adaptation of film narratives to video games. I present here a brief contrast of two such strategies and offer some speculation about the respective possibilities each strategy offers for the future of interactive storytelling.

The first has been employed by Electronic Arts (EA) in their adaptations of the last two films in Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy; the second has been employed by Lucas Arts in their multiple adaptations of the *Star Wars* films. One finds a sketch of these competing narrative strategies, translated into competing marketing strategies, in the respective television commercials for the games.

During the 2002 holiday shopping season, Lucas Arts released an advertisement for its new game *Star Wars: Bounty Hunter* (2002), which opens with an animated close-up of a snorkel poking from the surface of a swampy, extraterrestrial pool. As nervous breathing hisses from the tube, a gauntleted fist grips the snorkel and plugs the airway with a thumb. A gasping, bug-eyed alien springs to the surface to find that the obstructing thumb belongs to Jango Fett, the most ruthless bounty hunter in the galaxy. Jango seizes his quivering prey and in his gruff, mercenary's voice, grimly jokes, "Did you miss me?"

Though filmed at George Lucas's own Industrial Light and Magic Studios, we don't find this scene in any of the *Star Wars* films. The game's marketability, in fact, derives from its clear departure from the film, *Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (2002), in which Jango, the game's hero, is a significant but nonetheless supporting character who in the end is summarily beheaded by a Jedi lightsaber. The game narrative itself follows this strategy of departure from the film narrative, representing an interactive prequel to *Attack of the Clones* in its story of a secret bargain between Jango and the Sith Lord Count Dooku to create the clone army already in existence at the outset of the film.

A different strategy is visible in an advertisement for Electronic Arts' *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003), released during the 2003 holiday season. As the commercial opens with the New Line Cinema and Wingnut Films logos set to the haunting soundtrack of *The Lord of the Rings* films, we expect to see yet another commercial for the last film in Peter Jackson's trilogy. In fact, as we watch the Nazgul glide above Minas Tirith, the giant Oliphaunt thunder across the plain, and the stalwart fellowship of Gimli, Legolas, Aragorn, and Gandalf in pitched battles with armies of orcs, we see that we are not wrong; these are indeed tantalizing scenes from the upcoming film. But then something strange happens, as the filmed scenes transform fluidly and subtly into the digital animations for Electronic Arts' new game. In contrast to the *Bounty Hunter* commercial, the spot simultaneously advertises the movie *and* the game, which derives marketability from its nearly perfect mimicry of Jackson's film. Like Lucas Arts' game, EA's *The Return of the King* correlates this advertising strategy with an interactive narrative strategy, which offers players the chance to participate in scenes involving environments, characters, and battle sequences reproduced from those seen in the film. The commercial concludes with the invitation, "Be the hero! Live the movie!"

A fundamental difference of storytelling and marketing strategy is visible in these two advertisements. *Bounty Hunter* offers consumers something new, something unavailable in theaters, while *The Return of the King* offers consumers something familiar, a chance to interact with something they have seen or soon will see in theaters. At the 2004 Game Developers Convention, veteran game designer Warren Spector urged fellow designers to use film narrative as a way to "draw in the casual gamer, who's used to having a story told to him in other entertainment mediums, particular-

ly movies" (McNamara). This strategy underlies game companies' exorbitant spending on movie licensing, which represents the acquisition of a built-in, guaranteed audience, and the almost certain success of the game among the same crowds who pack the cineplexes.

While both strategies have proven commercially successful, Lucas Arts' creation of game narratives that extrapolate rather than mimic the film narratives more freely explore the possibilities of interactive adaptations that equally enthrall filmmakers such as Scott, game designers such as Morawiec, and media critics such as Dee. EA's mimetic approach in both *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (2002) and *The Return of the King* yields, on the other hand, missions that tend to replicate action sequences from the films. In the first mission of *The Two Towers*, the player is Isildur in the midst of the ancient battle that first claimed the Ring of Power from a seventeen-foot, mail-clad Sauron; in the second mission the player becomes Aragorn defending the wounded Frodo from the Nazgul on Weathertop Hill. Both scenes are drawn from the first film of the trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001). In the succeeding missions, adapted from the film *The Two Towers*, the player may choose to continue as Aragorn, Gimli, or Legolas, but, with the exception of a minor variance in the bonus missions, the choice of character has no bearing on the unfolding of the game narrative. As in the television commercial, animations and music in both *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King* flow almost imperceptibly into and out of sequences from the films, which are spliced into the game itself. As in Atari's *Enter the Matrix*, play environments have been designed directly from film sets, and actors from the film have been employed for animations and voiceovers, creating an overall play experience, as the advertisement indeed claims, in which one seems to "live the movie."

In its many adaptations of the *Star Wars* films, Lucas Arts has adopted an elaborative approach in which multiple games, such as *Jedi Starfighter* (2002), *The Clone Wars* (2002), and *Bounty Hunter* do not mimic the film narrative but rather follow independent narratives expanding tangentially from the movie plots. Although familiar movie characters, in some cases, reappear in the Lucas Arts games, the games' animations, soundtracks, play environments, and narratives are original. In contrast to the mimetic *The Lord of the Rings* games, the game narratives situate themselves outside the established chronology of the *Star Wars* films, becoming, in effect, interactive prequels and sequels to *Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999) and *Attack of the Clones*.

At the same time, the games reinterpret scenes from the films in ways that are recognizable to the built-in Star Wars audience but are, nonetheless, new. For instance, in *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003), a role-playing game set four millennia before events depicted in the films, the player-character liberates a comrade from slavery by winning a swoop bike race, a sequence that recalls *The Phantom Menace*, in which the young Anakin Skywalker must win his own emancipation in a pod race. In the

same game, the central plot twist reveals that the player-character, plagued by amnesia through more than half the game, finally discovers that he is a powerful Sith Lord thought to be dead and now psychologically reprogrammed by the Jedi Council to do good. The revelatory animation echoes *Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), in which Luke Skywalker, undergoing Jedi training with Yoda, beheads an apparition of Darth Vader only to discover his own face behind Vader's mask. The conflict of identity driving *Knights of the Old Republic* also recalls Luke's continuing struggle in *Episode VI: The Return of the Jedi* (1983) to understand Vader's infamous revelation: "Luke, *I* am you father!" Finally, one of the closing animations of *Knights of the Old Republic*, in which an evil, celestial-sized superweapon is spectacularly destroyed and a battle-weary but joyous crowd celebrates the motley band of heroes, echoes the familiar ending of the original *Star Wars* film, *Episode IV: A New Hope* (1977), in which the Death Star is annihilated, and Luke, Han, Chewbacca, and the faithful droids are given medals before a happy assembly of rebels.

During the past decade, Lucas Arts has developed this strategy of adaptation in its Kyle Katarn series: *Dark Forces* (1995), *Jedi Knight* (1997), *Jedi Outcast* (2002), and *Jedi Academy* (2003). Each of these games represents a narrative sequel of the original *Star Wars* trilogy in which central characters from the films such as Luke Skywalker, Boba Fett, and Lando Calrissian recede to supporting roles in the animations and new characters, unseen in the films, take center stage. The upcoming Lucas Arts game *Rebel Commando* (projected 2005) is set during the Clone Wars of Episodes II and III, but abandons the perspective of the elite Jedi heroes in favor of that of the faceless grunts, who appear in the films only as laser fodder.

For those who do not come to the games secondarily by way of a primary interest in the films, Lucas Arts' strategy represents a means of exploring the evolving possibilities of the hybrid active-passive narrative engendered by the film-based video game. While EA has created a game narrative more tailored to the massive built-in audience of the *Lord of the Rings*, a sort of interactive advertisement for the films, Lucas Arts has evolved a film-game hyper-narrative that allows game companies to adapt multiple game titles from a single film and expands the imagined universe of the player-viewer.

In a March 2004 interview, Peter Morawiec spoke to *Game Developer* magazine about adapting genre fiction and film narratives to game design. He says:

> As the videogame market matures, I believe it's natural for the story-driven games to be crafted within established narrative genres. With the age of today's average gamer pegged at something like 29, the audience welcomes greater thematic variety, as well as deeper and more mature storylines. I believe that people will instinctively want to play the same types of genres they like to watch or read. (12)

Morawiec describes his own game designs as interactive narratives that move forward

> no matter how badly the player does, allowing even a total newbie to fumble his or her way through an entire storyline, without repeating missions or getting stuck. In a passive medium such as a movie, whenever the hero hits a low point mid-film, the story doesn't restart; rather, the hero recovers or finds another way to go on. (12)

In terms of the interrelated strategies of designing and marketing video game adaptations of films, Morawiec's proposed script-imperative game narratives coax a player-character along a relatively linear narrative path, limiting the "hybrid active-passive experience" in favor of replicating the traditional narrative structures of film. Lucas Arts has instead increased the potential of the player to participate actively within the mythic film-game universe, while sacrificing, perhaps, a measure of identification among the built-in film audiences.

EA has abandoned its mimetic approach in *Everything or Nothing*, a game that has gained critical favor as the first Bond game to offer a narrative independent of the Bond films. EA's elaboration of the Bond franchise compared to its replication of The *Lord of the Rings* suggests that their strategy with *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King* has been determined, at least in part, by the pre-existing mythology first created by Tolkein's novels. Because *The Lord of the Rings* games are third-tier adaptations—games based on films based on novels—and the *Star Wars* games are second-tier adaptations—games based on films—their respective designers have been bound by two different sets of rules. In a sense, Tolkein's novels have been canonized as a kind of immutable sacred text, and fans of the novels undoubtedly represent a built-in audience for the films who must, on some level, be acknowledged. As Peter Jackson has often spoken of his faithful intentions toward Tolkein and Tolkein's devotees, EA, whether bound by their contract or by their own creative prerogative, similarly defers to Jackson's films in order to avoid the risk of alienating the massive built-in audiences who purchase the games based on their love for the films or the books.

A student once proposed to me a series of video game adaptations of classic literature, an interactive version of *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance, like *Run Lola Run*, in which a player might actively effect a happy ending to Shakespeare's play that sees the two doomed lovers live happily ever after. Her idea was received by the class with laughter. For them, as for many readers still unwilling to accept wholeheartedly Roland Barthes' notion of the death of the author, it's simply too absurd to consider such a gross violation of the literary canon, such an impudent betrayal of William Shakespeare.

Tolkein's novels have a similar stature with audiences. One could not imagine Tolkein's *The Return of the King* ending with Frodo and

Sam impaled on the ramparts of the Black Gate and Sauron's forces annihilating Gandalf and Aragorn and spreading eternal darkness over the World of Men. In *The Lord of the Rings* games, bound to some extent by the fixed narratives of Tolkein's novels and Jackson's films, such evil endings mean that the player, like Lola, has failed and must try again. *Star Wars*, on the other hand, is a more malleable mythology, and fans of Lucas's films, who sustain a cottage industry of derivative serial novels and online fan fiction, seem more receptive to manipulations of their canon. In *Knights of the Old Republic*, for instance, the player may choose to reject the good counsel of the Jedi, slaughter loyal friends, and claim the galaxy in the name of Dark Side. The player, in a sense, may choose to fail according to the ethical standards established by the films and yet succeed in the game. *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King* offer the player no such choice. Lucas Arts seems to have evaded criticism by *Star Wars* purists by disengaging from the film narratives, by letting the movies stand as they are and creating instead alternate stories partially unbound by the expectations of their built-in audience.

In a review of Jackson's *The Return of the King*, film critic Anthony Lane writes:

> As I watched the film, an eager victim of its boundless will to astound, I found my loyal memories to the book beginning to fade. It may be time to halt the endless comparisons between page and screen, and to confess that the two are very different beasts. (91)

As the fusion of the film and game industries continues and hybrid narrative forms such as active-passive plots and film-game hypernarratives emerge, designers of film-based games must similarly acknowledge that games and films, despite their convergence, are also two very different beasts. Though some, like Moraweic, may try to make games that play like films or, like Tykwer, may try to make films that play like games, we will likely find that the narrative forms governing one genre do not quite fit the other, that the film-game, a new sort of beast, requires new narrative forms. In their varying experiments in bringing interactivity to Middle Earth and that long-ago, far, far away galaxy, EA and Lucas Arts have begun to create and to test these new modes of storytelling.

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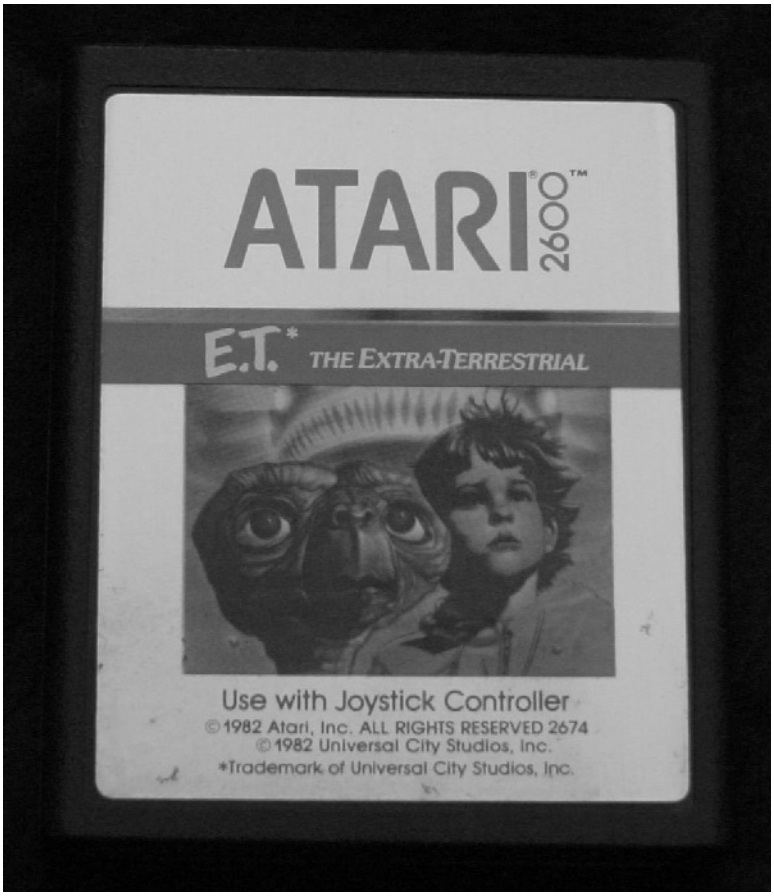
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