

Restricted Play:  
Synergy and the Limits of Interactivity in  
The Lord of the Rings/Return of the King Videogame

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## Abstract

Although recent critical studies have begun to acknowledge the aesthetic connections that films and games share, too often these studies neglect to extend an analysis to consumer culture. As videogames now make up an important segment of the film industry's market, this critical engagement is sorely needed extend the scholarship on videogames. Specifically, this essay critically engages the concept of interactivity as an important theoretical construction in the study of videogames. Through an analysis of *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King* videogame, the authors discover that interactivity can be limited in a way that augments the synergistic connections between films and videogames.

When he stood on stage at the 76<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards, Peter Jackson was clearly a happy man. Not only had he won honors for Best Director, but his film *The Return of the King*, the last in *The Lord of the Rings* (LOTR) trilogy, had also won Best Picture. New Line Cinema, the studio that produced the trilogy, had to have been happy as well: the combined box office revenue of the three films exceeded 1 billion dollars.<sup>1</sup> The three films that make up the LOTR trilogy are themselves an economic force of some magnitude, and the films' location in a global political economy makes them part of an immense media franchise. Although the films had, as their source, the popularity of the J. R. R. Tolkien books, the other media and ancillary products helped spread the trilogy globally. These products included videogames, action figures, books about the production of the film, soundtracks and even repackaged books of the original trilogy with covers taken from stills of the film. What is interesting, however, is how throughout the stages of the films' production, its very existence is posited as a *local* endeavor.

Ruth Zanker and Geoff Lealand observed that New Zealand, the location for the filming of the trilogy, was “the center of global attention” of LOTR, and Peter Jackson, himself a New Zealand native, was heralded as a “national hero” (2003, p. 66). New Zealand itself had become synonymous with “Middle Earth.” In the “Design Team” commentary track on the DVD for *The Fellowship of the Ring: Extended Edition*, one of the lead artists for the film, John Howe, even remarked that “the New Zealand landscape is one of the principle factors in this story, it is such an unusual, otherworldly landscape” (Commentary, 2001). At the same time, however, the global interests of the films' economics eclipsed the local interests of the oceanic island. As Hilary Radner argues, the LOTR films “were self-consciously conceived with the goal of creating a work within a specific reading formation that would, along with its associated promotional materials, guarantee an international blockbuster audience, rather than to promote”

the best of high brow local culture (2005, p. 8). In other words, the economic impetus of the film, far from producing a more intensive and productive view of the local community of New Zealand, was initially prepared as a media franchise that would necessarily overshadow that community. Or more to the point, although New Zealand was used to portray Middle Earth, the LOTR franchise focused on "reading formations" that connected audiences to the mythos of the latter, rather than the reality of the former.

Indeed, one of the more noted aspects of the LOTR film trilogy was its initial classification as franchise. When Jackson first approached New Line Cinema with the idea of bringing the trilogy to the big screen, they rewarded him with an unprecedented deal: contracted to film all three books at the same time, he was able to release each as separate films. Therefore, the LOTR project was from its inception conceived as a franchise in the corporate boardroom. Like most media franchises, videogames were part of the ancillary package developed for the LOTR films, with three games released in tandem with each film. These games also generated significant revenue; in fact, Electronic Arts (EA), the company that produced the videogame for the final film *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King* (LR/RK), registered a significant gain in profits during the quarter in which the game was released (EA Reports, 2004).<sup>ii</sup>

LR/RK was released for all major game systems on November 2, 2003, more than a month before the film hit theaters on December 14, 2003. Although releasing the game before the film may seem backwards, the strategy assured that the game was readily available for the Christmas buying season. Therefore, many of those who attended the film on the 14<sup>th</sup> could expect to find the game under the Christmas tree in a matter of days. This temporal association between the game and the film was augmented by a campaign that connected game play with the experience of Middle Earth, and invited potential players to "play the movie; be the hero."<sup>iii</sup>

Indeed, the LR/RK videogame often mirrors the action and plot of the film, and uses many aspects of the film in its game play, thereby providing a text that connected the game player to the LOTR franchise.

This use of videogames as a cross promotional strategy has a long and checkered history; for example, the spectacular failure of Atrari's *ET* game has become a cautionary tale in the industry (Kent, 2001). However, the practice of reproducing the cinematic experience in videogame play has taken a much more prominent role in both the production of films and videogames. Videogames draw heavily from the aesthetics of cinema, and several feature films and franchises have been spun-off into videogames: *Enter the Matrix*, *Chronicles of Riddick*, and *James Bond 007: Everything or Nothing*, are but a few highly visible examples (King & Krzywinska, 2002). This cinematic/videogame synthesis works both ways, and live action blockbusters like *Tomb Raider* (2001) and animated films like *Final Fantasy* (2001) have demonstrated that movies can just as easily be spun-off of videogames. In addition, after selling off his floundering Dreamworks studio, Steve Spielberg signed a deal with EA games, a deal which reflects the alignment of the film and videogame industries. In a recent *Chicago Tribune* article, Eric Gwinn details how the production industry surrounding videogames has started to mirror the structure of Hollywood productions. In the videogame industry, production times are lengthened, but “the [Hollywood] producer model of doing business” holds fast (2004, p. 4). Instead of relying on developers and programmers to incept new ideas and run the financial risk of a game’s failure, Hollywood producers take a more central role in the aesthetic development of the game.

The connections between film and videogames have not escaped the attention of scholars in the emerging study of videogames. To point, the anthology *ScreenPlay* was devoted to essays

that explored the various relationships between these two media, and these essays engage a variety of issues related to film aesthetics (Grieb, 2002), spectatorship (Howells, 2002) and narrative (Mactavish, 2002). While some of the essays in this anthology acknowledge the synergistic practices that repurpose film content into videogame spin-offs, these practices are not critically engaged. Although Toby Miller (2006) argues in the inaugural issue of this journal that videogame studies needs to address issues of political economy, and analyze how games target audiences, these essays do not provide this type of sustained critical engagement. We contend that in order for that critical engagement to happen, the construct of “interactivity” must be re-theorized in order to comprehend how videogames connect players to the economic interests of production. We begin by reviewing the literature on interactivity in videogames, and we question the tendency of videogame scholars to associate interactivity with agency and ideological resistance. We then provide an analysis of LR/RK which demonstrates that the structure of the game is such that interactivity actually exposes game players to messages that link them to the LOTR experience.

#### Interactivity and the Game Player

In both the study of new media generally and videogames specifically, the concept of interactivity figures prominently. Although definitions of interactivity vary, where videogames are concerned the concept is commonly used to refer to the game players’ agency. As Matt Garite notes, “This emphasis on the active role of game players is a common trope that appears repeatedly in discourses on interactivity . . . Game players are thus seemingly granted a degree of agency and choice” (2003, p. 2).<sup>iv</sup> Ben Sawyer, Alex Dunne and Tor Berg claim that “the notion of interactivity means that the decision and skills of the player will move the story in a certain direction” (1998, p. 112), thereby allowing the player to actually change the game as it is played.

These changes are brought about by the player's use of the avatar, and as Miroslaw Filiciak observes, some on-line role-playing games allow players to create their own avatars, and form their own identities through interactive game play (2003). In fact, the concept of agency is one deeply rooted in the mystique of the videogame avatar: some of the earliest videogames, according to Bob Rehak, demonstrate that with the combination of agency and avatar, "part of what users seek from computers is continual response to their own actions – a *reflection* of personal agency made available onscreen as surplus pleasure" (2003, p. 111). In other words, the pleasure of playing videogames is the sense of acting to create or change your avatar, and thereby change your experience and the progression of the game.

The association of agency with interactivity is heightened when scholars attempt to theorize the different relationships that viewers have with films, and that players have with games. Wee Liang Ton and Marcus Cheng Chye Tan suggest "[p]laying the game resembles watching a film ... [the] difference lies in the levels of interactivity offered by the game, between the gamer and the game-environment" (2002, p. 99). Interactivity, then, is not just a means of character control: it is a way for the game player to construct his/her own environment and narrative spectacle. Accordingly, Jo Bryce and Jason Rutter contend that this interactivity places the player in a powerful role, one distinct from more passive forms of film reception:

Film audiences have a history of being viewed as gatherings of passive individuals who sit, in a darkened cinema, as the light and sound of the cinema projection pours over them. In this environment audience members are 'passive' recipients on the narrative of the film . . . As the previous discussion has shown, game players or audiences are more actively engaged than film viewers in both the narrative and the other events within the game environment. The ability to modify both of these aspects of a computer-based

game shows a level of interaction with the text that is not provided by traditional cinema or Hollywood blockbuster movies. (2002, p. 76-77)

When Bryce and Rutter conceptually link interactivity with player agency, and juxtapose this agency with the passive cinema viewer, they are suggesting that the videogame player is similar to the active viewer theorized in some cultural studies and television scholarship (Fiske, 1987, Morley, 1980). In these studies, television viewers were found to actively bring meaning to the programs that they viewed, often negotiating and even resisting the ideological messages contained in television programming. This association is understandable to the degree that videogames are often enjoyed through the television, and even games played on PCs were (and in many cases, still are) played on CRT monitors. Yet, equating the videogame player with the actively resistant television viewer is problematic for several reasons.

First, the agency attributed to the active audience discussed in television studies stemmed from ideologically resistant, interpretive practices that occurred when viewers actively brought meaning to texts. The agency attributed to the interactive game player, however, has little to do with interpretation, and everything to do with game-play. Although a player may be able to change a character in the game or change the direction of the story, these actions do not necessarily denote ideological resistance. As Mark Wolf has noted, while videogames are interactive, the interaction is directed toward some goal or motive that makes the game worth playing and winning (2003). Interactive videogames are still games, and they have a prescribed set of rules that regulate how the game is played. The player who resists the rules of the game, or ignores or reinterprets them, is most likely to lose the game. In other words, videogames reward compliance, not resistance. Or more to the point, successful interaction in the context of



game play (winning the game), is not a practice that brings meaning to the text, but rather one in which the player follows the text very closely.

Second, the videogame player is subject to the limitations of a game's structure – limitations that are predetermined and proscribed by the people that design and produce the game. In addition, rarely do the choices in videogames significantly change the structure of the game; rather, they might shift the specific details of a character's attributes or the scenic features. Granted, some forms of videogames allow the player a great deal of latitude in the designed game play. Yet, in the case of produced and manufactured games, the ones that make up and drive the videogame industry, the player is not given the agency to change the game's structure and design. In fact, such agency would undermine the purpose of mass producing and marketing a uniform product; game manufacturers have a vested interest in creating a specific game experience and marketing that experience. Limitations must be imposed on the choices a player makes, and these limitations do not always allow for the kinds of changes that could be equated with ideological resistance. Granted, a player can resist the content of a game, perhaps question the way women are portrayed in a game, but that is a reading practice that extends across a variety of media and is not necessarily a product of videogame interactivity. The recent controversy over *GTA: San Andreas* is a case in point. If players activated a particular cheat, they could unlock a hidden scene in which a woman performs oral sex on their avatar. The scene is produced by interacting with the game, but this interactivity does not signify a political response bemoaning the sexual degradation of women (Rockstar in hot coffee, 2005).

Third, some of the most important elements of many games are, simply put, not interactive. The levels of many videogames are often punctuated with cut-scenes, cinematic video clips over which the player has no control. After a level is played, the player experiences a

scene in which there is no interactivity, and the player assumes the passive posture associated with the cinema viewers, as described by Bryce and Rutter (2002). Many cut scenes are familiarly cinematic in appearance, and provide the player with information that helps advance the game and move the narrative forward. Consequently, at the points in the game where the narrative is advanced, the player is also rendered passive, and has no agency in changing the game's narrative. As Crawford has noted, truly interactive narratives are an ideal seldom if ever realized in videogames (2002). In fact, given that the reward for completing a level is a cut scene with a predetermined message, the interactive aspects of many videos games do not necessarily empower players to resist the messages that are woven into a game's structure. More to the point, those elements of a game that can convey ideological messages are also the elements in which the player enjoys the least agency.

Rather than associate interactive with agency and resistance, we propose a different theoretical approach that can critically engage the economics of the LOTR franchise. For example, P. David Marshall (2002) observes that while interactivity can refer to active consumer practices, it also can signify the industrial strategies that are used to attract audiences in a media rich environment. He specifically identifies videogames as part of these practices and he goes on to argue that videogames serve as a metaphor for the way the cultural industry connects with audiences and keeps them "within the system of entertainment choices" (2002, p. 73).<sup>y</sup>

Reasoning from Marshall, the interactivity found in videogames functions as a means of what Ien Ang has described as "incorporation." Ang claims that the plethora of media now available to the consumer allows for many more choices, and this freedom of choice is often portrayed as agency, but as she notes the representation of "choice" as agency legitimates the expansion of new media technologies, and obfuscates the interests of the industries behind these technologies:

“Seen this way, the figure of the ‘active audience’ has nothing to do with ‘resistance,’ but everything to do with incorporation” (1996, p.12). Therefore, we propose that interactivity be theorized as a form of incorporation, and that the structure of a videogame creates an interactive experience that connects players to the interests of production. More specifically, we will maintain that the structure of LR/RK connects players to the LOTR franchise and the mythic experience of Middle Earth. This approach, while acknowledging that the game player is not passive, recognizes what Lawrence Grossberg has noted: “people live their subordination actively; that means, in one sense, that they are often complicity in their own subordination, that they accede to it” (1995, p. 75). We maintain that videogame play, with its system of rewards and messages, creates a structure in which players literally accede to their investment in the game. In fact, the LR/RK game and its relation to the LOTR franchise reveals how games players would accede to this particular investment.

For many of the players, the LR/RK game was probably an easy choice to make, because the film franchise had a built-in fan base. In his book *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins describes how fan culture has become a mainstream demographic for cult texts, and how fan culture creates a mythos around texts that reside slightly outside the more conventional media output. These cultish texts are treated by fans “as if they merited the same degree of attention and appreciation as canonical texts,” and are given the type of close reading usually one reserved for what are normally considered “high culture” texts (1992, p. 17). Fans represent an important demographic for makers of these cult narratives, not only because fans enjoy and purchase materials surrounding the main text (books, ancillary products, etc.), but also because fans disseminate these texts to other fans.

Taking his analysis of fan culture one step further, Jenkins determines that fans not only enjoy the texts, but also become themselves co-creators of those texts. Fans, he claims, “raid mass culture, claiming its materials for their own use, reworking them as the basis for their own cultural creations and social interactions” (1992, p. 18). Jenkins examines the classic example of *Star Trek* and how fan culture not only digests the stories and disseminates the materials, but also how it encourages fans themselves to create new texts. Fans interact with the materials of cult text and “integrate media representations into their own social experience” (1992, p. 18).

The LOTR narrative itself is a cultish text, one that has garnered its own fan culture. According to one of the documentaries on the DVD of the Extended Edition of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, “it is the second most-read book of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after the Bible” and that its fan base is unusually persistent in memorizing details and errata of the Tolkien world (Documentary 1, 2001). This careful attention to the text of LOTR makes members of this fan culture a virtual built-in audience for the film, and prime candidates to purchase a videogame adaptation of the film. In addition, the fan culture surrounding LOTR provides an important point of comparison that illustrates why interactivity needs to be re-theorized to explain videogame play. These fans have actively produced new texts, new intertextual relationships, and reappropriated the cultish texts of the trilogy, but all of these active practices are in sharp contrast to the interactivity of the LR/RT game play. We will demonstrate that the interactivity of LR/RK is structured in such a way as to augment the synergistic relationships of the LOTR franchise. More specifically, we will argue that the player’s interaction with the game is rewarded with messages that link the game with the film. Therefore, the interactivity of the game draws in players, while constantly relating the experience of the game play to the experience of the theatrical film, allowing the fan of the LOTR to become more closely connected with the film franchise. In our criticism of the

game, we demonstrate how the game introduces the player to the juxtaposition of interactive game play and promotional reward in the tutorial. We then show how the player is rewarded for beating levels with more of these promotional message that are not created by the player, but are activated by playing the game thereby turning interaction into incorporation.

### Playing the Game, Playing the Movie

As we have mentioned, there were three games issued to correspond to the three films of the LOTR trilogy. The first game, based on *The Fellowship of the Rings* was released by Universal Interactive, and is a fully animated game that draws on the book rather than the movie for its narrative structure. The second game, based on *The Two Towers*, is an EA production, and draws heavily on the film, incorporating many cut-scenes that include footage from the film. In addition to this game and LR/RK, EA has released two more games for the LOTR franchise: *The Third Age*, a role-playing game, and *The Battle for Middle-Earth*, a real-time strategy game. We have chosen to critique LR/RK, not because it is unique, but because it reflects the synergistic practices that are reflected in several of the other games. For example, the seamless transitions between actual film footage and game play that can be found in LR/RK, can also be found in *The Two Towers* game. Cinematic cut-scenes that punctuate LR/RK, permeate *The Third Age*; in fact, the later game includes 102 different scenes from the three films. A critical engagement of all five games is beyond the scope of this article, so we have chosen to focus our attention on the one that we feel represents the synergist practices of the franchise.

Although videogames purport to support and condone interactivity, it is interesting to note the LR/RK begins by rewarding passivity. Once the game disc is inserted in the consol, the game's interface comes on the screen. If the player does not respond to the interface, a trailer for the videogame will automatically play.<sup>vi</sup> Scenes from the game flash on the screen: Frodo

Baggins escaping yet another harrowing situation; Samwise Gamgee running through mountains and caverns, Gandalf the White obliterating evil Orcs and Goblins by the hundreds. All these scenes are, or at least will be, familiar to the user after the game is complete, as some of the footage is taken directly from the cut-scenes of the game, while others are based on actual game play scenarios. Yet, the music is not from the game; instead it is taken from the trailer for one of the LOTR films<sup>vii</sup>, and not from any moment in the film itself, so the trailer for the videogame shares important elements with the trailer for the film. Admittedly, the practice of using a trailer to introduce a game is not new, nor is it unique to LR/RK; *Final Fantasy X*, *XenoSaga*, and *Star Ocean*, all use trailers in their introductions. Unlike these three examples, however, LR/RK enjoys a direct relationship with a major theatrical release, and the trailer certainly exploits that relationship. For example, the end of the trailer displays the title “*The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*,” while the character Gollum (Andy Serkis) from the film rants “We swears to kill master; we swears on the precious...” To this end, then, the *LR/RK* trailer is not only a conglomeration of elements from the film and the game, but also a microcosm for the complex intertextual relationship between the two as well. The trailer not only introduces the game, it introduces the type of synergistic messages that will punctuate the game play. After the user presses “start,” LR/RK opens with swirling blue mist and a caption reading “WingNut Films Presents...” – written in the same typeface and emerging with the same appearance as the titles of the film *The Return of the King*. The connection to the film version is also apparent when the logo for New Line Cinema, the production company for all three LOTR films, fades onto the screen as it does in movie theaters.

With the mist continuing to eddy around the video screen, the voice over of Galadriel (Cate Blanchett) narrates “the story so far.” As *LR/RK* is the third part of a trilogy, re-telling the

back-story becomes necessary in order to make the plot understandable. Galadriel would, in fact, only be known to users of the game who knew the structure of the trilogy of films. In this instance, however, the narration at the beginning of the videogame is a bit of an oddity. Galadriel as a character is not present anywhere in the game, nor does she appear in the narrative of the game's plot. Yet, her role in the narrative of the film is one of utmost importance: her character is immortal and exists outside of time, and thus serves as the omnipresent narrator of the film. Therefore, her appearance in the game reflects this omnipresence, and serves the function of connecting the videogame's narrative to the film's narrative for those who have seen the film. In fact, her narration is used to orally fuse visible elements that have been culled from both the film and the videogame; otherwise her character is absent from the game. Within the game, Galadriel is not really omnipresent; her presence is limited to her synergistic function.

#### Active Discipline

After Galadriel's introduction, she disappears completely from the game and the character of Gandalf the Wizard takes over the narration. This shift in narration papers over an important difference between the film and game versions of LR/RK. In the film version, Gandalf the Wizard is simply a character involved in the events of the plot, albeit an immortal and magical character who can exist both in the narrative and slightly outside of it. In the videogame, however, Gandalf is posited as the central, key figure to the narrative. It is Gandalf who organizes the characters and uses them almost like pawns to wage war against evil. He refers to "*my plan*," in reference to the plot of the story. In fact, the player is introduced to the game through Gandalf, as he serves as the avatar for the tutorial sequence.

After Gandalf's narration ends, another abrupt shift occurs: that between the live action scenes from the film and the computer generated images (CGI) of the videogame cut-scenes. As

we have mentioned, these cut-scenes punctuate the game play in LR/RK: The player is shown the destruction of Saruman's stronghold after beating the third level of the game; the player is shown footage of the Orcs' battle after level ten, and so on. Often times, these cut-scenes seamlessly blend the action from the film into the playable action of the game. The LR/RK tutorial is actually conveyed in a cut-scene culled from the second film *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* film. At the end of that film, the Battle of Helm's Deep is a climactic and intense struggle for the heroes to maintain their stronghold in one last defense of the kingdom of man against their enemy: Saruman and his minions. The defeat of Saruman at Helm's Deep signals the turning point of the series, when all the elements are in place to begin the offensive against Sauron, which sets up the narrative of the third and final film. In the videogame, however, the Battle of Helm's Deep has a specific, concrete purpose: as a tutorial. Unlike the other levels of the game, the user cannot choose which character to use in the tutorial: all other characters are locked and only Gandalf is available to use. Given the complexity of videogames, part of the challenge of a game is learning out how to control the avatars. To this end, as the user begins the actual game play, the system uses built in controls to instruct the player as to which buttons to press. In addition, the training exercise actual restrains the player's interactivity; she is limited to one character, and even prompted to make specific moves.

When the game begins its "training" mode, another of the film's characters, Gimli (John Rhys-Davies), yells instructions to the user. Interestingly, Gimli's dialogue is most distinct from the rest of the dialogue in the game, as it is only related to the game play and not to the film itself. For the rest of the game's dialogue, recorded by the actors specifically for the game itself, the lines are either taken directly from the film ("Run, Mr. Frodo!") or close approximations of the film's dialogue. When Gimli yells instructions at Gandalf, however, he uses terms from the



videogame world: “Use fierce attack!” “Don’t forget to block!” “Speed attack works best!” Although Gimli is supposed to be shouting at Gandalf, he is actually shouting instructions to the player. After Gimli trains the player in various attack moves, a new cut-scene appears, taking the action up to the walls of Helm’s Deep. The game introduces new types of enemies, new types of fighting, and more training. Again, the dialogue is more instructional than plot-driven, and functions to discipline the player. While this discipline will supposedly yield results for the player in improved performance, this tutorial hardly represents the free agency often associated with interactivity. The game is structured so that the player interacts through a character from the film (Gandalf) and with another character from the film (Gimli). In addition, the player must attend to the messages spoken by Gimli if they are to play the game successfully. The subsequent successful game play, however, is often rewarded with more forms of promotion, as we shall demonstrate.

### Beating the Levels

Once the player-as-Gandalf has beaten the tutorial, the character upgrade screen is revealed. Depending on how many “combination” moves the player uses during game play, and how many enemies have been vanquished during the level, various amounts of points are awarded at the end of the level. When these have been tallied, the avatar’s “special abilities” become available – each character has ten levels of special characteristics that can be “bought” by using the points made available during the levels. Thus, the better one plays, the more complex characters one can create, earning special moves, more power or more strength. This serves to make the game much more involved than simply “beating a level.” The ability to manipulate, however minutely, a character’s attributes gives the player a much more interactive feel to the game. In addition, after beating certain levels, the player is given a reward: special

features, or “Easter Eggs,” are unlocked that give the player access to interviews with actors from the LOTR films, and other promotional materials.<sup>viii</sup>

For example, after beating the tutorial, the player is rewarded with a feature entitled “Film Concept Art.” This is a short animated sequence that shows artwork that was eventually incorporated into the film’s art design – drawings and paintings imagined from the book that evolved into the film. The titles of other similar features that can be unlocked during the game include “Game Concept Art” and “Film Production Stills.” Some of the concept art shown does not actually appear to be from the game at all, and most of the film production stills do not represent scenes depicted in the videogame. At the end of the “Film Concept Art” gallery, however, the viewer is presented with an ad for the HarperCollins’ book *The Art of The Return of the King*. In other words, part of the reward for playing the tutorial is information about another ancillary product from the LOTR franchise.

In addition to the “Film Concept Art” gallery, the player who beats the tutorial is also given access to the “Hobbits on Gaming” feature, a brief interview with three of the actors who played Hobbits in the films, and who talk about playing LR/RK. Dominic Monaghan, Elijah Wood and Billy Boyd are all shown playing the game, and they all comment on each other’s gaming abilities; Elijah is supposedly the best. Although the short refers to them as Hobbits, the actors appear as themselves, so the audience must rely on an intertextual knowledge of the LOTR films in order to recognize the actors as Hobbits. In addition, the visual representation of actors playing the videogame of a film in which they have appeared serves to relate the experience of the game to the experience of the film. Therefore the second reward for successfully completing the tutorial is the suggestion that playing a character in the film is similar to playing the same character in the videogame. Indeed, although the various still

galleries provide opportunities to pitch other products, it is these interviews that seem to invite the player into the experience of the franchise, with the offer to “play the movie.”

This offer is made more overtly, when the second level, “Escape from Osgiliath,” is won. After a cut-scene plays, using live action scenes from both *The Return of the King* as well as *The Two Towers*, the game unlocks the extra feature “Sean Astin Interview,” during which the actor, who plays Sam in the film, reveals that “the game is sort of an action/war game [and] the aspect of Sam’s character that comes through is the heroic/fighting side.” The connection between the film and the game is further enhanced when Astin states that the character is “a realistic version of myself” – note, not of the character – and that the game play looked “just like what we were filming on the set.” In this way the player is again rewarded with a message that folds the experience of playing in the film into the act of playing the game.

Even the villains get in the game. “The Road to Isengard” level follows closely some of the plot elements of the second film, *The Two Towers*, including the destruction of Saruman’s fortress and the helpfulness of the tree-like creatures, the Ents. After winning this level, the player unlocks an interview with Christopher Lee, who plays Saruman. Lee is shown recording voice-overs for the game, and he remarks that as far as his character is concerned, “The power of Saruman lies in his voice.” Lee’s comment is interesting because it suggests the actors’ connection with the characters in their game, which are merely digital renderings, are almost as strong as their connection to their characters in the film. While Lee may not be physically present in the game (in the way that he is in the film), the player is told that the presence of Lee’s voice is what really matters. Given that Saruman’s power is one of the elements that propel the plot of LOTR, and his voice is the conduit of his power, then the presence of Lee’s voice is more important than his physical presence. In a feature that is unlocked at the end of the game,

Andrew Serkis, who plays the role of Gollum, is also interviewed. Like the characters in the videogame, the character of Gollum is fully digitalized in the film. In fact, this segment shows Serkis performing in a motion capture suit, and this method of motion capture is often used in game production. In this manner, this feature functions to blend the elements of film and game production, showing how similar production methods were used to generate the character of Gollum for both the game and the film. Serkis highlights this blending in the interview when he mentions that he did the voice-over work for the videogame before he did the voice-overs for the film, suggesting that his work on the videogame was not that much different than his work on the film.

The connection between the game and film is further enhanced as the player progresses through the game. The “Minas Tirith: Top of the Wall” level is introduced with footage from the film showing Gandalf riding to the city, accompanied by Gandalf’s voice over narration. After this level is beaten, the game unlocks an interview with Ian McKellen, the actor who plays Gandalf in the films. McKellen claims to be “reporting” from the offices of EA Games about the production of the game. During this interview he observes that “it’s a curiosity of Gandalf that there are many of us.” He refers to himself as an actor playing Gandalf, the stuntmen playing Gandalf, the digitized Gandalf of the film, and now, “Gandalf in the game.” This, of course, implies that just as McKellen played Gandalf in the film, the player can also “play” Gandalf in the game, and thereby step into the role. In other words, of the multitudes of Gandalfs that exist, the player now can be counted among them. McKellen makes the comparison even clearer by the end of the interview: “if you can’t be in the movie, you might as well play the game; it’s the next best thing.”

After the next level, “Shelob’s Lair,” is completed, the player can unlock an interview with Wood, who takes McKellen’s comments a step further, suggesting that his character is actually enhanced in the game. “Shelob’s Lair” is a level that begins with footage from a scene in the film in which Sam must rescue Frodo by battling a giant spider. In the interview that follows, Wood bemoans the fact that in the film “Frodo never gets to join in the battle,” and rejoices that in the game “I’m a playable character now.” He goes on to talk about the enjoyment he experiences in the game, “It is cool to take my character from the film and be able to implement it in the game; it is pretty awesome.” Like many of the other features, this interview is labeled with the character’s name – this particular feature is labeled “Frodo” – but shows the actor, Wood, talking about his character. The line between character and actor is blurred when actors, such as Wood, refer to the character as “themselves” and then claim that they get to “play themselves” in the game. In this case, Wood seems to suggest that he found playing the character of Frodo in the game more enjoyable than playing the character in the movie. In other words, for winning this level, the player is rewarded with the suggestion that playing the game is not just as good as being in the film, it is better.

The final level of the game, “The Crack of Doom,” features Frodo as the main character, in a battle with Gollum over the Ring. In this respect, it mirrors the climactic scene in the film, during which Frodo and Gollum fight for the power of the Ring over the top of a volcano. When the level has been completed, the voiceover by Gandalf tells of the end of this age of Middle Earth while the video displays live action scenes from the end of the film. Once the cut-scenes are finished, the game unlocks two new levels as well as four additional interviews and three new characters with which to play the game. In other words, the player is invited to play the game again, only with new avatars, which are based, again, on characters from the film.<sup>ix</sup> Two of

the new characters that are unlocked are Pippin and Merry played by Boyd and Monaghan, both of whom are interviewed and talk about the joy of playing as their characters in the videogame. Monaghan even addresses the player directly, offering up the persona of his character as a reward for beating the game: “this is now our treat to you as a gamer.” This treat, and the reward for winning, is to play the game again. Another interview with David Wenham, who plays Faramir, perhaps most succinctly articulates the synergistic purpose of the game: “The game itself has captured in all its aspects the excitement of the film *The Return of the King*.”

### Conclusion

In the LR/RK game, the player's interactivity is structured around a variety of promotional messages and synergistic practices that punctuate the game. Elements from the LOTR films are woven into the game, including design elements, sound and music, and most important, actual footage from the films. The tutorial for the game disciplines the player in relation to the game's reward structure, a structure that allows the player to access special features upon beating the various levels. These features, as our analysis reveals, often contain messages that attempt to blend the distinctions between experience of the film and the experience of the game. Consequently, the interactivity the player enjoys in LR/RK is strategically limited, and the strategy that informs these limitations serves to incorporate the player into the LOTR franchise. It is possible for a player to reject the synergistic force of these messages, and to dismiss the “treat” of playing the game all over again. But such resistance would not be a product of the interaction of game play; on the contrary, it would be a rejection of the products of interactivity. Therefore, interaction does not remove the player from industrial influence, and in the case of LR/RK, the more interactive the player, the more she is subjected to synergistic practices.

While it is clear that the game player is neither the passive subject of cinema spectatorship, nor the ideological resistant active television viewer, it should be noted that both of these approaches to reception practices were developed in contexts very different from the contemporary media environment. As we have noted, the contemporary media consumer has a multitude of choices available from a variety of sources. In order to capture these consumers' attention, media producers must develop content that addresses a subject who is consuming products across a variety of media and delivery platforms. The LOTR franchise reveals how media conglomerates try to develop content that attracts audiences and motivates consumers. Our analysis reveals that the videogame is not just a metaphor for the media industry's strategies, as Marshall suggests; videogame interactivity is a media industry strategy. It is clear that LR/RK is inherently intertextual in relation to the LOTR franchise, and seems to hail a subject who is not merely interested in playing the game, but is part of the fan culture that surrounds the franchise. As Brian Ott and Cameron Walter note, "The intertextual allusions found in postmodern texts allow viewers to exercise specialized knowledge and to mark their membership in particular cultures" (2000, p. 440). If our analysis reveals anything, it is that LR/RK not only invites the player into the film, but it also identifies a subject who is a part of a culture that is created by the LOTR franchise.

This incorporation reveals a paradox about the structure of LR/RK, while the game continually invites the player into the immersive experience of "playing the movie," the introduction of the messages that offer this immersion actually interrupt and preclude any immersive game playing experience. For example, in LR/RK (as in most games) the cut scene serves to forward the momentum of the plot, but "[o]nce the cut-scene commences, the player loses control of the character and therefore control of the camera ... [and] thus interrupts the

degree of immersion that most ... games seek to create” (Tong & Tan, 2002, p. 103). In other words, the cut-scene is a point at which the player is drawn *out* of the game, and thus reminded that they are, indeed, playing a game. At first glance this might appear a negative aspect of playing the game: for Tong and Tan it is a necessary evil of the current videogame industry (2002). However, for the franchise of LOTR, it may not be counterproductive at all. It is not in the interests of the game manufacture or the film producer to have any one product offer a completely immersive experience. For the cross-promotional and synergistic practices of a franchise to work, the consumer (and player) must be reminded that there are other products to be consumed. We believe that the function of the franchise is to continually suggest that immersion is the aggregate experience of consuming all the products of the franchise.

What at first appears as paradoxical actually makes sense from the perspective of the media franchise. If the consumer desires to be part of the LOTR fan culture, then the intertextual relationship of the media products serves to remind the consumer of the other products in the franchise. For example, the cut-scene intros and exits from *The Return of the King* serve a promotional function that subtly influences the player to re-examine their own status as a participant in LOTR franchise in relation to the products available. While the game invites the player to “play the movie,” those that benefit from the franchise want to remind the player that there is, indeed, a movie, as well as a DVD, a book, and other ancillaries. Therefore, the game experience cannot be complete, and needs interruption, to remind the player that there are other products to be bought to extend the LOTR experience. More to the point, to experience Middle Earth, one does not go to New Zealand; one goes to *Best Buy* instead.

Consequently, in the case of the LOTR franchise, incorporation is not a practice of immersion, but rather the continued consumption of a variety of media products. Given that



videogames figures prominently in this franchise, we believe that the interactivity associated with videogame play needs to be reconsidered. Ideological resistance is not obtained in mere game play, particularly when that play stays within the parameters of the manufactured game. We believe that this is an important distinction to make, because recent attempts to value popular culture often dismiss questions of ideology. For example, in his book *Everything Bad is Good For You*, Steven Johnson (2005) argues that contemporary forms of media, including videogames, actually expand our cognitive complexity. He also argues that this value can be abstracted from the content of the media; in other words, ideology just does not matter. We believe that it does.

We do not want to suggest that resistance is impossible in game play, or that videogames are a monolithic medium, but resistance must be realized in ways other than mere interactivity. For example, digital media does allow for very important forms of resistance, and scholars who have studied the practice of hacking have noted this. As Gunkel points out, the term *hacking* “suggests an alternative mode of examination that learns how to enter, explore, and rework the basic systems and programs that have informed and regulated investigations of cyberspace” (2001, p. 2). In other words, the act of hacking a game demonstrates the capacity to infiltrate authoritative systems and (re-)examine them. The supposed hacking of *GTA: San Andreas*, would be an example if game players had modified the action so that it challenged the sexual politics of the game. Perhaps have the women in the game meet sexual violence with violent resistance, something along the lines of *Thelma and Louise* or a digital Lorraine Bobbit, maybe?

Sometimes, however, the best forms of resistance are obtained when new media is used to facilitate older forms of social protest. For example, slate.com recently posted a blog containing an article from a self-titled “EA spouse” who complained about the onerous work

schedule imposed on her fiancé who was employed at EA games, the producer of LR/RK. The posting generated a firestorm of response from other videogame employees who were also disgruntled about 80 and 100-hour work weeks. Out of this response emerged both a class action lawsuit, and an industry watchdog organization (Gameswatch.org) to monitor the employment practices of videogame designers and manufactures. We would argue that, as opposed to leveling up, this is real resistance.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Revenue figures for these films can be found at the *Internet Movie Database* (<http://www.imdb.com/>).

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this paper we will use LOTR to refer to the title Lord of the Rings franchise, and LR/RK to refer to the Lord of the Rings: Return of the King videogame.

<sup>3</sup> This tag line appeared in the television and print ads for the game, on the EA webpage, and even on the packaging for the game.

<sup>4</sup> Garite does not agree with this concept of interactivity. In fact, he offers a materialist critique of game play in which he argues that game play is work. His analysis, however, indicts game play generally, and it not specific to the synergistic connects between games and films.

<sup>5</sup> Like films, videogames also have trailers that are used to promote the games. These trailers are shown at tradeshow, appear on web pages, and are often re-cut into television commercials.

<sup>6</sup> In fact, the music originally was written for Darren Aronofsky's 2000 film *Requiem for a Dream* and was composed by Clint Mansell. It was co-opted by the producers of the trailer for *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* trailer, mainly because it fit the film's action sequences so well.

<sup>7</sup> These Easter eggs are hidden features and have been a part of videogame reward systems for sometime. Easter eggs have been incorporated into DVD interfaces as well.

<sup>8</sup> Oddly, however, the game fails to completely respect the new characters when they are unlocked. If levels are played again with different avatars controlling the action on the screen, the cut scenes, so essential to integrating the intertextual elements of the film and the game, will not display a character at all. In fact, in at least once case – “Shelob's Lair” – if the player uses a

character *other* than Sam to beat the level, the cut scene will depict the giant spider being slain without a slayer present. Although the game often fails to fully integrate the new characters into the cut scenes, for the player the reward of new elements is a highly addictive goal.

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<sup>iii</sup> This tag-line appeared in the television and print ads for the game, on the EA webpage, and even on the packaging for the game.

<sup>iv</sup> Garite does not agree with this concept of interactivity. In fact, he offers a materialist critique of game play in which he argues that game play is work. His analysis, however, indicts game play generally, and it not specific to the synergistic connects between games and films.

<sup>v</sup> In this chapter, Marshall illustrates his point by drawing examples from the films of Lara Croft: Tomb Raider and Final Fantasy. He does not actually critique the videogames.

<sup>vi</sup> Like films, videogames also have trailers that are used to promote the games. These trailers are shown at tradeshow, appear on web pages, and are often re-cut into television commercials.

<sup>vii</sup> In fact, the music originally was written for Darren Aronofsky's 2000 film *Requiem for a Dream* and was composed by Clint Mansell. It was co-opted by the producers of the trailer for *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* trailer, mainly because it fit the film's action sequences so well.

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