THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE CARD GAME

A Machine That Generates Possible Worlds

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> Welcome to Middle-earth, a land of Hobbits, Elves, Dwarves, Wizards, and Men. From the bright towns and fields of the Shire, to the wilds of Mirkwood Forest and Rhovanion, and to the powerful kingdoms of Gondor and Rohan, the various peoples of this land struggle against the foul minions and the ancient, evil threat of the Dark Lord, Sauron. (French, 2011, p. 2)

These words open the instructions to *Lord of the Rings: The Card Game* (Fantasy Flight Games, 2011). It is interesting that the rulebook begins not with the definition of the game but with the description of the storyworld based on J. R. R. Tolkien's work. This correlation is further emphasized in the text, which presents the product as "a game of heroes, perilous journeys, and adventure set in the lands described in the epic fantasy masterpiece created by J.R.R. Tolkien, The Lord of the Rings (sic)" (French, 2011, p. 2). The manual reveals that the game was specifically designed to recreate the world from Tolkien's books. But how does one adapt a literary work into a card game medium?

The Lord of The Rings: The Card Game was published by Fantasy Flight Games in 2011. The core package holds 226 cards, but the game can be expanded with add-ons. The rules are written for cooperative play that can be enjoyed by up to 4 players. The game

can be played in a single-player mode as well. In both cases, the users compete against the procedures of the game.

Figure 1. One of the scenarios in progress.

All sessions transpire in accordance with the chosen scenario (see Figure 1), which is directed by the rules that are set down by the game's system. The core set comes with three scenarios: *Passage Through Mirkwood, Journey Down the Anduin, Escape from Dol Guldur*. Each scenario consists of the card pool that is randomly revealed during the gameplay. Those cards contain instructions, illustrations, literary descriptions, names and attributes. The players have decks at their disposal with which they try to overcome scenario cards that establish specific challenges, enemies and encounters. During the gameplay, the cards controlled by the players and the game interact with each other and create a progression of the plot. The main goal for the players is to take part in a so-called "quest," successfully completing a scenario inspired by Tolkien's works.

The literary inspiration governs the whole system of the game. Even the basic design choices are deeply influenced by the ideas presented in *The Lord of the Rings* books. The concept of two opposite card pools corresponds with the black and white reality of Middle-earth. The player's deck represents the forces of good, while the cards in the encounter deck represent the forces of Sauron. The decision to deny the players the ability to control the dark army stays true to the ethical vision in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Forcing one player to identify with the evil side would go against that vision. The fact that each player controls not one but three adventurers is also consistent with the books. The game transports such values as companionship, group effort and cooperation from the literary work onto the gameplay system.

The same can be said about the questing mechanism, in which the players amass supplies, gather allies, explore locations, fight enemies, and deal with adversities. The gameplay framework is shaped after the fantasy tropes formulated in Tolkien's work. The adventuring in *The Lord of the Rings: The Card Game* is not only intellectual, but also a tactile experience. During the gameplay the players gather small, cardboard tokens that symbolize resources and then spend them to bring ally, item or event cards into play. Another category of tokens represents the journey of the group. These discs are decorated with an illustration of hobbit footprints in the ground. Successfully committing the characters to the quest allows the players to put the progress tokens on the current scenario card. It's not easy though, since each scenario requires different amount of tokens to be collected and creates different, scenario specific obstacles. This solution prevents quests from being too similar, and it also supports a representation of diverse themes inspired by the books. In one scenario, the progress tokens stand for information gathered during a search for Gollum, in another they embody a military assault on a city of Osgiliath.

The questing system is connected with a player's threat level. To

resolve the quest, the player chooses which characters are going to attempt it, compares their willpower with a threat strength of all the unengaged encounter cards in play, and depending on the result, either advances the quest or raises the threat level. The lower the level, the better. A higher value can cause foes and obstacles to become more difficult. What is more, the level raises slowly each turn, putting more and more pressure on the players. When the level reaches fifty, the player is eliminated. Every turn the players have to choose: do they commit their heroes to a quest or engage them with certain encounter cards in play? Ignoring enemies and other obstacles often ends with a defeat. Neglecting the quest prolongs the play, allowing the system to reveal more encounter cards with each turn. The threat mechanism not only creates most of the tactical decisions during the gameplay, it also echoes the description of Eye of Sauron in the books. This literary influence seeps to the analog dimension of the game. The core box comes with a special device assembled from two numeric dials attached to a cardboard faceplate. The accessory is operated by the player during the session and is used to track the threat level of the adventuring party. The act of manipulating the tracker not only stimulates the feeling of danger, but also recreates Sauron's surveillance over the forces of good in Middle-Earth. The red eye pictured on the faceplate stares at the player during the whole session.

The card game demonstrates a far-reaching transformation of the source material, while still remaining dependent on it. The literary source is evoked through the textuality of the game (illustrations and verbal description), through the gameplay systems, and even through the design of material components. This strong relation that develops between the game's and literary work's storyworlds is the paper's main focus. I examine how the design of the game evokes its literary source: what kind of alterations were involved in transforming literary material into a game and how does the card game evoke its predecessor?

Is *The Lord of the Rings: The Card Game* a "well played" adaptation? To answer these questions, I use tools from literary studies to survey different modes of narration and world building in the game.

A METHODOLOGICAL STARTING POINT

Gérard Genette's category of hypertextuality provides a methodological starting point for the analysis. His concepts allow me to define the relation between the game and the literary work as a special kind of evocation – an act in which one text refers to and transforms another text. Genette refers with this category to every relation that connects a text B (hypertext) with a preceding text A (hypotext). He notices that a text B could not exist without a text A: a text B is a derivative of a text A and expresses it by transformation (Genette, 1997).

Genette's terminology explains the process of change that took place between two distinct texts. Moreover, it strictly defines this transformation as a means of reference, where the change itself is a way in which one text recalls another. This in turn, makes understanding the relation between the card game and the literary work much easier. Genette's theory helps us realize that certain design choices are dictated by the source material. The transfer from a book to a different medium shapes the gameplay. This change is based on two form of intermedia relations: a medial transposition or/and intermedial references.

Irina O. Rajewsky (2005) distinguishes these two concepts as subcategories of intermediality. They both expose different manifestations of media configurations and hybridizations. The medial transposition applies to a transformation of one media product (e.g. a literary text, a movie) into another medium. This transposition has "genetic" quality in which the original product "is the <<source>> of the newly formed media product, whose transformation is based on a media-specific and obligatory intermedial transformation process" (Rajewsky, p. 51). The

intermedial references imitate or allude to certain techniques that are not obtainable by a referencing medium. The given medium uses its own characteristics and poetics to reference structures or components of another, dissimilar medium. This referenced medium is not materially present, but only evoked. The medial differences constitute meanings and poetics of the referencing medium in relation to the referenced product (Rajewsky, p. 52-53, 59). Rajewsky's perspective on intermediality provides additional tools to understand the scope of hypertextuality in *The Lord of the Rings: The Card Game*. I am going to probe the game with intermediality in mind, looking for instances of medial transposition and intermedial references, especially those that are used in a worldbuilding process. The intermedial relation between a hypo- and a hypertext constitutes the relation between *The Lord of the Rings'* and the card game's worlds. Nevertheless, as we are going to see, distinguishing those worlds as completely separate may be difficult.

A TRANSFORMATION

The card game's hypotext incorporates the literary works that constitute the universe of Middle-earth. This corpus of texts includes*: The Hobbit*, the novel cycle *The Lord of the Rings*, the poetry anthology *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*, and (published after the author's death) *The Silmarillion*. The correspondence between the literary source and the card game is complicated. The hypotext was changed by far-reaching transformations that took place not during the transposition from one literary text to another, but between two dissimilar media. A close study of one of the cards reveals methods of intermedial transposition and reference that appear in the game.

Figure 2. Bilbo Baggins.

Bilbo Baggins (see Figure 2) is one of the numerous cards available in the core set. In the game terminology it is branded as a "hero" card; therefore it openly associates itself with its precursor. After all, Mr. Baggins is the main protagonist of *The Hobbit,* and also

the main element of *The Lord of the Rings'* plot. But the ways he is represented in the card game and in the books differ. What in the literary original was accomplished by the use of narration and descriptions, in the game is reduced to the numerical characteristics: willpower strength, attack strength, defense strength. These numbers are far from being random statistics. They establish Bilbo as a mechanical component. Willpower is referenced when the card is committed to a quest or an unexplored location in play. Strength and defense matter during battle encounters. The first one denotes potential damage done to an enemy, the second one acts as a buffer, reducing the attacker's strength by a certain number of points. This mechanical aspect of the card also evokes Bilbo's characterization in Tolkien's work. The low numbers in attack and willpower (both start at 1) correspond to his physical weakness and cowardice, his defense is a little bit higher (it starts at 2), probably thanks to his nimbleness. What is more, Bilbo Baggins is described by the game with one "trait": he is "the hobbit." This classification acts in two ways: it places the card in the Middle-earth diegesis, while at the same time it conforms to game rules. Certain cards can have instructions that affect other cards with a specific keyword printed on them. For instance, *Boots from Erebor* can be only used on "hobbit" or "dwarf" characters. This ruling is hypertextual: a quote on the card in question explains that the boots fit only the small humanoid races of Middle-earth.

Bilbo Baggins also contains the excerpt that links the game mechanism with the books. A quote from *The Fellowship of the Ring* is placed at the bottom of the card: "'Well, my dear fellow,' said Bilbo, 'now you've heard the news, can't you spare me a moment? I want your help in something urgent.'" When taken out of its original context, the excerpt appears to be coincidental. It creates a link between the hypotext and the hypertext and suggests that some kind of propping up on the literary ancestor

is taking place here. The indicated statement is continued in the source text: "Elrond says this song of mine is to be finished before the ends of the evening, and I am stuck. Let's go off into the corner and polish it up!" (Tolkien, 1982, p. 281). This passage is a part of the scene in which Bilbo proposes to Strider a collaboration on the writing of songs for the celebration party. Thus, the act of text creation represented in the book is mirrored by the game. According to the rules, in each turn the player can draw one card from her deck. Thanks to *Bilbo Baggins*, this limit is raised by one more card. Thereby, the scene from the book is represented by the game mechanics. The additional draw made possible by *Bilbo Baggins* corresponds with the narration about the protagonists writing a song. The act of drawing cards is associated with the discovery and generation of new texts. A similar case can be found in another card: *Campfire Tales* (see Figure 3). The card allows the users one additional draw. This rule is accompanied by an extract from *The Fellowship of the Ring*: "It is a fair tale, though it is sad, as are all the tales of Middle-earth, and yet it may lift your hearts." The image depicted on the card presents the group of characters sharing stories by the fire. Once again the motion of drawing cards from the deck is tied to a storytelling practice.

Figure 3. Campfire Tales.

Figure 4. Flies and Spiders (both sides of the scenario card).

The Lord of the Rings: The Card Game is a system designed to smoothly generate content. On the level of the game's mechanics this content emerges thanks to the interactions and the rules that develop among the cards. Such phenomena can be examined in the example of the *Passage through Mirkwood* scenario that even in its name builds on Tolkien's world's geography. The *Passage* is composed of four quest cards: *Flies and Spiders* (see Figure 4)*, A Fork in the Road, A Chosen Path: "Don't Leave the Path!"* and *A Chosen Path: Beorn's Path*. They are revealed sequentially during the play, forming the structure of the scenario. The first one sets a beginning stage of the adventure, the second is made active if the players complete the first one, and the last two create alternative ending conditions. The name *Flies and Spiders* copies the chapter title from *The Hobbit*. It is also *The Hobbit* from which the excerpt that is placed on one side of this card is taken:

> The nastiest things they saw were the cobwebs; dark dense cobwebs with threads extraordinarily thick, often stretched from tree to tree, or tangled in the lower branches on either side of them. There were none stretched across the path, but whether because some magic kept it clear, or for what other reason they could not guess.

The referenced text creates the correspondence between the game world and the storyworld in the books. However, it is not a simple transposition that takes place here. The indicated quote

evokes a vast story arc about the journey through Mirkwood, which in the original version occupies many book pages. Therefore the goal of the quote is to invoke a reminiscence, a reproduction that takes place in the users' memories and initiates a recollection of a specific storyline, as well as its themes, images and protagonists.

The process in question can be defined as a particular kind of deliberate dissemination. The quote expresses something that physically could not be contained on a tiny card. Seeing that only a bare minimum can be transcribed on the surface of the card, the original text was reduced to a short excerpt. Paradoxically this miniaturization initiates the opening and expansion of the text that is being referenced. The source can manifest itself in its completeness, but this time only thanks to the evocation in the players' minds.

Another thing found on the card is the narration that was written only for the purpose of the game. It reads as follows: "You are traveling through Mirkwood Forest, carrying an urgent message from King Thranduil to the Lady Galadriel of Lorien. As you move along the dark trial, the spiders gather around you…" While this short account is not a quote in itself, it is still filled with keywords derived from the hypotext, such as "Mirkwood Forest," "King Thranduil," and "Lady Galadriel." The passage is focalized from the perspective of participants. Its goal is to immerse the players in the gameworld. Still, the game itself does not explain who Thranduil and Galadriel are. Only the source text (and the users' acquaintance with it) can clarify those things. Without the proper knowledge of the storyworld from the books, the players' understanding of the descriptions on the card can be limited. The textual coherence depends on the users' familiarity with the source material, for without it the text loses its context and becomes riddled with unexplained information.

Flies and Spiders is also an assembly of instructions. It sets

directives that must be followed if one wants to prepare the cards to play this part of the scenario. The card reads: "Setup: Search the encounter deck for 1 copy of the Forest Spider and 1 copy of the Old Forest Road, and add them to the staging area. Then Shuffle the encounter deck." These instructions are obligatory for the proper performance of the scenario. Under their guidelines the players must mechanically – directed by the procedures – lay down specific cards in the game space. Among them is the *Old Forest Road*. This card's presence connotes motifs from Tolkien's works: "the journey," "the adventure," that what is "unknown" and "mysterious." On one hand, the *Old Forest Road* is a location "excised" from the literary foundation and transported onto the language of the game; on the other, it animates the play. It introduces rules to be followed by the players and influences the way the gameplay will proceed.

The cards from the player's deck act in a similar fashion. A green icon in the left corner of *Bilbo Baggins* indicates that the hero belongs to the sphere of lore, one of the four spheres of influence distinguished in the game system. Each sphere represents certain traits and ideas. The domain of lore denotes intellectual prowess and wisdom; it is no surprise that Bilbo was placed in this category. The resources generated by *Bilbo Baggins* can only be used to play cards that correspond with his sphere or cards that are neutral. Because of that design, the initial composition of the party dictates the deck building options. Choosing one sphere over another impacts the strategies and the themes that will predominate the player's deck. The sphere of lore focuses on cunningness and planning, that is why most of the lore cards emphasize such actions as drawing new cards, manipulating the player and the encounter decks, healing, and recovering discarded cards. The motives that comprise the lore deck reflect its mechanical side. *Forest Snare* is an attachment card that allows the player to trap an enemy, stopping it from attacking the party. *Daughter of the Nimrodel*, an ally card, is not a great asset in a

physical confrontation, but the player can choose her special ability to heal one heroe. This trait is connected with the healing powers of the Nimrodel stream mentioned in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. The quote on the card very clearly reminds the player of this moment from the novel. *Erebor Hammersmith* alludes to high skills possessed by Dwarven smiths in Middle-earth. When he enters the play he returns the topmost attachment card from the discard pile to the player's hand. The juxtaposition of these cards can create a strong sense of narrative in the game. The player can use *Forest Snare* to catch a spider enemy encountered during the *Flies and Spiders* scenario, heal sustained damage with the help from *Daughter of the Nimrodel*, and, after defeating the foe, call for *Erebor Hammersmith* so he immediately "repairs" the broken snare. Thanks to the logical rules, illustrations and contextual quotes on the cards, all of these actions make sense not only from a mechanical standpoint, but also from a narrative perspective.

These examples show that in *The Lord of the Rings: The Card Game*, each card works in linkage with others. They are interlocked. They respond to other cards, start specific procedures, activate chosen elements and eventually force the players to act. The users' performance also drives the game to generate additional activities. During the play, more and more cards will appear in the game space, additional elements taken from Tolkien's books will be evoked, and a sequence of operations and rules to consider will be formed. All of that must occur for the game to constantly generate new texts, till the criteria of the scenario are fulfilled.

Because of that, it is possible to categorize the analyzed product as an example of a cybertext. Espen Aarseth explains that the "cyber" prefix indicates that "the text is seen as a machine – (…) a mechanical device for the production and consumption of verbal-signs" (Aarseth, 1997, p. 21). Of course, in the case of the card game, the signs are not limited to being only verbal. What is important though is the fact that this machine is activated during

the interaction among the operator of the text (the player), the material medium (the cards themselves), and signs produced by the interaction. The game has a performative aspect. It is a device that manipulates itself and the player. A system that develops and processes signs and codes. In the case of *The Lord of the Rings: The Card Game,* the process in question includes rules and references that imply motifs and details from the world represented in Tolkien's writings.

The game works on the basis of defined processes that activate certain actions. It is a logical and predictable device, since the users must be able to understand it. But one more principle appears among the other factors: the primacy of randomness. The game was designed in such a way that it can be replayed many times, each time taking (even if only slightly) a different course and leading to different results. That is why an act of card shuffling was placed at the heart of the play. Even before the game begins, every deck must be carefully mixed, so any intentional setup is eliminated. As a consequence, the randomness plays a tremendous role in the experience.

The distribution model of *The Lord of the Rings: The Card Game* takes advantage of this trait. The game is marketed as a "living card game" that grows with regular publication of add-ons. While such a distribution model may sound similar to that of *Magic the Gathering* (Wizards of the Coast, 1993), the game in question is actually quite different. It does not rely on the purchase of random sets of cards. When buying the expansion package, the players know what assortment of cards they are getting. Cards are not sold randomly in booster packs, but constitute a full set. The game is constantly bolstered by expansion of the available card pool, and introduction of new scenarios and game mechanics. This makes the game highly replayable. Each pack contains at least one new scenario that is usually part of a bigger story cycle. For example, the expansion *Khazad-dum* comes with three adventures. The themes from this

set are later continued in a cycle of smaller packs. Most of the expansions add a new pool of player cards that can be used to play recent and old scenario. This distribution model opens new ways to re-experience the old content. What is more, Fantasy Flight Games has introduced a concept of game difficulty into the mix. The company releases special add-ons with cards that make existing scenarios even harder. These "nightmare decks" feature stronger challenges for the player to tackle. Some of the cards replace older ones, some develop harder game mechanics. As of 2017, Fantasy Flight Games has published 16 big box expansions, 42 small expansions that form 8 narrative cycles, 7 standalone scenario packs, and 47 nightmare decks. Such growth of the product establishes a highly variable structure, in which no gameplay session repeats itself. An optional scoring point system was inserted into the rules to induce even more replay value, to allow the players to evaluate their skills, and to motivate them to experiment with the deck building options.

Another transformation of the source material is created as a result of this quality. Tolkien's works were written in prose and published as novels (with the exception of poetry found in *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*). The narration of *The Lord of the Rings* follows a linear path determined by the order of the chapters. The readers are not advised to play with this order, nor are they allowed to choose what kind of elements from the storyworld are going to be written into the narrative. We can imagine different readings of Tolkien's storyworld, different interpretations of it in the readers' minds, yet the narration that is written on the pages of the books remains the same. On the contrary, with each playing of the card game, a different chain of cards is going to appear, and a different progression of events is going to take place. As such it is impossible for the game to keep a total coherence with the narrative in Tolkien's books. Those stories cannot be faithfully replicated in the contingent medium; contingent in both senses: being suspect to change and occurring

based on certain circumstances. Instead, the card game generates a modified version of familiar events, actions, and protagonists. The game allows the users to experience the familiar world in a new configuration.

The phenomenon in question is especially visible in scenarios that not only evoke the Middle-earth diegesis, but also recreate narrative threads from the books. One such scenario is included in the expansion *The Battle of Lake-Town* that adapts the climax of *The Hobbit* – Smaug's attack on Lake-Town. The scenario establishes many mechanics that bring the event to life. Firstly, Lake-Town itself is represented by a special card revealed at the beginning of each session. Whenever the dragon successfully burns some parts of the city, the players put tokens on the card to indicate the damage. When there is fifty or more tokens on the card, the Lake-Town is completely ruined and the battle is lost. Secondly, by introducing a new keyword *burn* and rules related to it, the game creates a simulation of a burning city. The encounter deck is full of location cards that contain this keyword (with a certain value attached to it). The cards show specific areas of the city (a port, a district, a manor) and their presence in play indicates which places are currently under Smaug's attack. Whenever the encounter card instructs the players to resolve all burn damage from locations, they are obliged to assign a specific amount of tokens to the Lake-Town card. Every unexplored location in play raises the speed in which the fire spreads through the streets. Thirdly, Smaug the dragon is represented not by a singular card, but by a separate deck created at the start of the session. This small deck includes three copies of three unique cards – each one depicting different behavior of the creature. *Smaug the Mighty* initiates the dragon's immediate attack on the party of heroes, while *Smaug the Terrible* presents the creature's aerial assault on the city. The first card forces the players to fight the dragon in the moment he is revealed from the deck, the second one asks them to apply the burn damage to the Lake-

Town card. The players draw one card from the Smaug deck each turn, making the dragon more unpredictable than most enemies in the game.

The mechanical backbone of *The Battle of Lake-Town* not only creates a challenge for the players, it strongly evokes a very important part of *The Hobbit*. The event that was verbally narrated in the book is transformed into a set of procedures. While illustrations and quotes on the cards represent certain elements of that event (the places and protagonists described by the narrator), the rules put the event in motion. The procedures of the game imitate a fire spreading through the town, a flight of the dragon and the party's attempts at minimizing the damage. It is no surprise then, that this simulation creates different outcomes. The dragon can burn the whole town, but he can also be defeated. The high variability of the player's deck composition contributes to this narrative irregularity. The game rules do not restrict the thematic contents of the players' decks in any way. The decks can be composed of any combination of heroes, allies, items and events, even if some of those elements were not part of the story that the scenario is based on.

This design creates an experience that closely follows the books and diverges from them at the same time. The phenomenon in question is taken even further in the saga expansions. In 2012 Fantasy Flight Games started to release products that were meant to "give players the opportunity to directly participate in, or even recreate, the narrative events described in the classic novels written by J.R.R. Tolkien" (Grace, 2013, p. 1). Each novel was adapted into six scenarios. *The Fellowship of the Ring* for example was transformed into sets *The Black Riders* and *The Road Darkens*. The saga expansions add new cards inspired by the protagonists (e.g. the enemy cards representing the black riders) and events (e.g. a new *hide* test that simulates the party's effort to avoid the riders) depicted in *The lord of the Rings* trilogy. The most important addition though comes in the form of a campaign play.

A new and optional set of rules allows the players to tackle all quests based on the trilogy as one big narrative. Each session in the campaign mode can have far-reaching consequences. Defeated heroes cannot be recovered between the scenarios, but those who survive the adventure can gain permanent abilities, allies or defects that will stay with them after the scenario is over. New *boon* and *burden* cards represent the consequences (both good and bad) that the players have to accept as part of the long journey. Burdens earned by the party are usually shuffled into the encounter deck at the beginning of play. They can appear during the scenario, causing unpleasant effects. One of such cards, *Panicked*, raises the threat level. Boons on the other hand, can be usually included in the player's deck before each scenario or are permanently attached to a hero, creating new strategies of play. One of the heroes can learn healing skills by obtaining the card *Skilled Healer,* or can gain *Mithril Shirt,* which gives + 1 to defense. The designers provided the players with sheets that help them track the changing state of the campaign. They can record information about fallen heroes and cards earned during completed scenarios. This mode of play strengthens attachment to the characters that take part in the adventures. Moreover, many tactical decisions become even more meaningful, because their outcome can be felt many sessions later.

The saga expansions are designed to be as close to the books as possible, and yet the campaign mode introduced in them highlights the fact that storyworlds created during the gameplay differ from those represented in the novels. The building blocks seem to be the same, but the way they fit together changes with each gameplay. The concept of boons and burdens only builds on the already high variability of the game, adding another layer of hypertextual transformation to the experience.

A POSSIBLE WORLD

The Lord of the Rings: The Card Game was not designed as a

retelling of Tolkien's books. It is a bold attempt at rewriting his work. This idea is brought to life by the most unique aspect of the game – it's counterfactuality. The game regularly creates situations that were not narrated in Tolkien's works. The hypertext transforms the hypotext so radically that it either goes beyond or contradicts the original. The card *Beravor* (see Figure 5) exemplifies such counterfactuality. It represents a protagonist who did not exist in any previous narration about Middle-earth. Is it a supplementation of the hypotext; an addition that extends the world described in *The Lord of the Rings*? Or is it a fabrication that was quietly smuggled among other (faithful to the hypotext) components? I would like to argue that it is both.

Figure 5. Beravor.

Beravor is accompanied by the quote from *The Fellowship of the Ring*: "But in the wild lands beyond Bree there were mysterious wanderers, The Bree-folk called them Rangers, and know

nothing of their origin." The citation does not allude to any specific character from the books but grounds Beravor in the diegesis of Middle-earth. Moreover, the card is indicated with keywords that recall the hypotext (Dúnedain, Ranger). They provide reasons for Beravor's presence in the game. The game text suggests that she could exist in this world, she could be a part of *The Lord of the Rings* cycle. Her absence from the pages of the books does not mean that their narrative precludes the possibility of her existence within them. She, at the same time, both "belongs" and "does not belong" to the source texts. In regard to them, she can only be described as a potential being, one that is not fulfilled in the hypotext, but can be actualized in the hypertext.

This elaboration seems surprising, but makes a lot of sense from a storyworld perspective. The game design problem (a need for additional hero) could be solved not only with an adaptation of a certain character from the books, but also with an invention of a new protagonist who adheres to the worldbuilding rules set by Tolkien. The game is based upon an intermedial transformation that produces an expansion and addendum of the source material. The card in question emphasizes these qualities.

To describe this matter, a term "possible world" from logic and philosophy seems ideal. A possible world is counterfactual in regard to a certain primary world. It is a probable state or a situation contrary to facts from that primary world, and can be described with such sentences as "it is possible that…" or "it could be that…" Philosopher Saul Kripke (1980) presumes that possible worlds are abstract beings. They are established in an act of hypothesis creation, during which phenomena that are alternative to a given state of things are described. As he reports, possible worlds are based on descriptive conditions that we bestow upon them. They do not create new, analogous worlds, but introduce some kind of modality to the way we describe certain things. Thus they are discursive in nature.

Ruth Ronen makes a clear distinction between possible worlds and the ontology of fictional worlds. She argues:

> Possible worlds are based on a logic of ramification determining the range of possibilities that emerge from an actual state of affairs; fictional worlds are based on a logic of parallelism that guarantees their autonomy in relation to the actual world. (Ronen, 1994, p. 8)

There is a big difference between ramification and parallelism. Greek "para allelon" means "alongside one another," while Medieval "ramificare" indicates "to form branches" (Hoad, 2003, parallel, ramify). The first one implies an independent being, the former conveys a connection to something.

The idea of ramification applies to *The Lord of the Rings: The Card Game* as well. The game does not operate as an autonomous creation. It is not a parallel representation of the Middle-earth, but a derivation achieved thanks to the intermedial references. No self-contained world is created during the game session. The scope of information about the diegesis represented by the cards is quite limited. The rest of the necessary data must be presupposed from the books.

The possible world theory can be used for the description of transtextual occurrences that happen in the game. A possible world can be interpreted as a hypertext that is built upon a hypotext. A possible world's counterfactual property means that without a point of departure it will lack its essence. In the same way, a hypertext without a hypotext loses its transtextual character. Genette's theory assumes that a new text is always a consequence of a previous one. Viewed from this perspective, this new text is never autonomous. When talking about counterfactual states, we must remember that possible worlds are not some slightly modified duplicates of another world. These possible worlds are limited only to certain attributes that are being considered in terms of their "possibility." Kripke even explains a "counterfactual state" as a mini-world or a mini-state

which is reduced to currently considered traits (Kripke, 1980, p. 18). A possible world is always examined in the context of an actual world. In our case, the card game is played in the context of other texts that describe the fictional world of Middle-earth.

Marie-Laure Ryan uses the notion of possible world to describe a textual universe as a narrative creation that consists of plural worlds: an actual one (called by her a factual domain) and all the possible states that surround it. This view means that a fictional world encompasses both an actual state and that which "could be" but is not actualized (Ryan, 1992, p. 22-23, 112-113). Following this idea one can understand the distinct link that connects Beravor to *The Lord of the Rings*. It is as if she was not created by the designers of the game, but rather was hidden (as a potential being) in the hypotext itself. Her being in the game is a simple ramification of the possibilities produced by the hypotext.

Another aspect of the game is becoming noticeable here. In some way the game tests the boundaries of Tolkien's world. Each game session could be regarded as an experiment in which the limit of the potential hidden in the source text is inspected. One last example – the *Gandalf* cards – should justify this hypothesis.

There are actually three cards in the game which represent the Istari wizard (one is available in the base set (see Figure 6), the two others are included in the expansions *The Hobbit: Over Hill and Under Hill* and *The Road Darkens*). Two are classified as "allies", and one is a "hero." All of them are among some of the most helpful and powerful cards in the game. They also represent different characteristics of Gandalf. The first card is based on his tendency to aid the group in dangerous situations and then disappear without a word. This *Gandalf* must be discarded at the end of the round. The second one explores how the wizard's power is a threat to the group, because his actions and presence bring the attention of the dark forces. Each turn the players have to decide if they want to discard this *Gandalf* or let him stay in

the party, because at the end of the turn he increases the threat level. The third card – Gandalf as a "hero" – focuses on his vast knowledge and immense magical abilities. He has an ability to act as a character who belongs to all spheres of influence.

Figure 6. Gandalf from the core set of the game.

The cards explore different aspects of this protagonist, but it is impossible to tell, which one shows the "true" Gandalf. What is more, during the gameplay he can take part in events that were never recounted in the books. After all, the story in the game is created procedurally without following a prescribed narrative from the books. For example, in one session he can slay Smaug the dragon, while in another this opportunity can be ignored altogether. If we can have both Gandalf the slayer of Smaug, and Gandalf who did not kill the beast (and maybe even perished under its flames), then it can be acknowledged that his properties in the game are just possibilities explaining how Gandalf could be, if the books narrated other events.

Despite the differences among the cards, the name printed on them seems to still refer to the same person. One of the cards reads, "I am Gandalf, and Gandalf means me!", indicating that Gandalf is identified based on a discursive practice. How is it that certain properties tied to the wizard change with each game session, but we can still recognize the protagonist? Gandalf from the card game possesses a transworld identity. He is not a completely different character, but a variant created by a means of ramification. He is the same protagonist, but also one whose properties or circumstances have changed. Despite this change, he can still be recognized as *himself*.

In his considerations of possible world logic, Kripke has deduced that properties of any object are not essential to its identity, since "an object could have had properties very different from its most striking actual properties, or from the properties we use to identify it" (1980, p. 77). Rather, it is the name that remains the designator of a given identity. How do names become designators then? Kripke argues that it happens by a process of reference – similarly to the hypertextual process. Counterfactual situations are represented with signs (verbal or not) that carry certain meanings and references. These two remain the same, even if used in the context of different possible worlds (Kripke,

1980, p. 77-78). Kripke's thesis explains how one can recognize Gandalf in all of the counterfactual situations possible within the game. The sentence "I am Gandalf, and Gandalf means me!" does not refer to Gandalf as a character from the game but points to Gandalf from *The Lord of the Rings* books. Thus Gandalf in the game does not have separate ontological properties; all of them are connected to the source material.

A MACHINE THAT GENERATES POSSIBLE WORLDS

Using Aarseth's definition of cybertext, the game can be classified as a machine, which aims to generate possible worlds that draw upon *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and its accompanying texts. The diegesis is constantly shuffled. As a result of the game procedures each gameplay generates a new string of sequentially organized texts. Something that in the literary version was a part of a stable structure, here is transformed and placed in a new sequence. A story (a succession of events) that is created during the game session is always random, never planned. The shuffled deck determines a set of potential elements, and the game session is a space in which possible worlds are shaped from those elements. Given this contingency, *The Lord of the Rings'* characters take part in the events that did not happen in the books. Certain events proceed and end differently, characters from the background are put in the spotlight, and other characters do not appear at all. The users of the game can check "what would happen if…": Frodo did not take part in Bilbo's journey, Gollum did not lose his ring, Gandalf had never arrived.

The variability of the game influences the way the players interpret the gameplay as well. The introduction from the booklet encourages a very specific mode of reading: it invites the players to "embark upon new adventures and share new experiences with the beloved The Lord of the Rings characters and settings…" (French, 2011, p. 2). The game urges the players to constantly recentralize their focus. Recentralization (a term

taken from the possible world theory) is a cognitive operation in which the readers move from one textual actuality to another, constantly refocusing their view on what should be regarded as actual, and what as just a possibility (Ryan, 1992, p. 21-22). The game asks the users to alternate between the events depicted in the books, the events created during the gameplay session, and all the other possible outcomes. In consequence, the game challenges the Tolkien's works, the players' vision of what those works are, and, above all else, the very idea of what a faithful adaptation is supposed to be. To truly enjoy *The Lord of the Rings. The Card Game* the players must allow the gameplay to carry them through Tolkien's world anew. The game relays on the players' interpretative skills, their familiarity with the original work and their tolerance for change. A dogmatic vision of Middle-Earth is only going to hold the users back. The players are going to see the game as a (de)generation in which the structure of the first work is deformed. Yet the game does everything it can to prevent such reception. Each layer of the experience reminds the players about the special relation between the game and its predecessor. The textual side of the experience asks the players to reminiscence about certain elements from the books, while the gameplay systems create simulations inspired by these elements and invite the players to play with them. Both of these aspects work in tandem. The game's textuality establishes a close connection with the hypotext, the procedures build on that connection, reshaping the content with new ideas.

This exploratory aspect makes *The Lord of the Rings. The Card Game* a brave adaptation of the source material. The game does not traverse the same ground, but rather constructs a machine that (re)generates the texts that it is based upon. It brings a new life into them, transports them into the new medium, reinterprets them and causes the diegesis to be reborn in new configurations. The randomness of the game removes the

original elements that were initially constituted by the hypotext, and creates new ones in their place. The game constantly oscillates between different possibilities of its progression. It is full of potentials, from which only some (depending on the factors of randomness, rules and the players' involvement) get to manifest themselves. Despite the fact that the game creates counterfactual states of Middle-earth, every element of the design proves the creators' admiration of the setting. Even the contradictions are deeply embedded in the storyworld rules laid down by Tolkien.

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