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Tolkien: Scholar and Modern Game Pioneer

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Introduction

History can be a necessity, or necessary evil for some people when we want to comprehend real-time issues or trends. Gaming is a trend that applies to this since we often seem to be drawn in by the excitement of the graphics, music, and storylines, yet it seems like people seldomly try to uncover their origins. At the same time, though, a game's historic foundation is essential to understand since it can help us gain a greater appreciation for these experiences. Role play games are an exceptional example of this since many renowned ones have external influences. J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings" series is notable since it adopted themes, such as journey, fantasy, and the struggle between good and evil, all which had a historical context and became foundational- for the books and these games.

The origins and influence of journey

Journey is one of the primary themes in "The Lord of the Rings" and the entirety of the series is based on the quest to destroy the ring. Nonetheless, many people may not know the origins of this major force that drives the storyline of the three books. by Marjorie Burn's article, "J.R.R Tolkien and the Journey North," implies that much of the inspiration for this theme was drawn from Nordic literature, and it is reflected through Frodo's journey (Burn 5). Burn, too, illustrates the conditions of the North, stating that, "The North (like mountain terrain) is an easy symbol: cold, hostile, barren and as dark as death, during the wintertime (7)." Another book, "Perilous Realms: Celtic and Norse in Tolkien's Middle Earth," implies that the idea of the Northern setting for the journey was inspired by the writings of William Morris, whom he shared a fondness with for the Northern, Icelandic area (Burns 77). A few things can be assumed about Tolkien, based on these inspirations. One thing we can say, for instance, is that Tolkien had many thoughtful approaches when writing these books. Therefore, it makes sense that these thoughtful approaches were also the roots of role-playing games' characteristics.

The theme of journey was well-received by the role-play game community since most of these characteristics were adopted by these various games. Stuart Lee's, "A Companion to J. R. R. Tolkien," for, instance, suggests that Land of Legend's *Quest of the Magic Ring* re-enacted the experience of journey in its gameplay, in which the characters could choose their own path to the crack of Doom—at which the ring is destroyed. Lee further illustrates this game, by saying the following: "The gameboard is remarkable because it is comprised of interlocking roads and loops, so players can choose their path on the gameboard to victory (Lee 534)." Some may think that this does not exemplify the theme of journey, yet they probably don't realize that it incorporated some of the same elements—such as creating your own journey and overcoming hardship to reach victory. Thus, Tolkien's careful and thoughtful approaches continue to impact this industry.

The origins and influences of fantasy

      Tolkien incorporated the theme of fantasy into his novels, through the creation of mythical creatures and concepts—such as dragons, elves, dwarves, trolls, giants, and magical rings. Some may assume that many of these ideas were solely based on Tolkien's imagination which is mostly accurate, but the reality was that these ideas were adopted from various texts. Articles, such as Susan Robbin's "Old English, Old Norse, Gothic: Sources of Inspiration and Creativity for J. R. R. Tolkien's The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings," suggest that many of these mythical creatures and concepts were inspired by Northern European Literature, and Tolkien modified them for his own narrative (Robbins 68). Additionally, Robbins implies that many of Tolkien's fictional motifs reflect inspiration from, or correspond with the Middle Ages and states the following as an example: "One of them includes parallels between Jordanes account of the Battle of the Catalaunian Fields between the Hums and the Goths, recounted in the Getica, and the Battle of the Pelennor Fields in LOTR (73)." Overall, many of Tolkien's creations reflect a sense of original creativity. Moreover, the fact that he merely adopted his themes, concepts, and creatures from external sources suggests that there is a reason why Tolkien is so renowned—amongst scholars and those who incorporate his mythical ideas into their own games.

      Tolkien's theme of fantasy was also well received, as implied by the development of role playing games that adopted the concepts—surrounding this theme. As implied by Stef Auper's "'Better than the real world': On the Reality and Meaning of Online Computer Games" game programmer Richard Garriott was inspired by Tolkien to create a world that reflected the enchantment of Tolkien's world. Therefore, he created a game called *Akalabeth* which had a name adapted from one of Tolkien's languages and was one of the first role-playing games that had graphics (Auper 255). Since the game was so successful, Tolkien can be considered a thoughtful trailblazer.

The origins and influences of the struggle between good and evil

      Tolkien strategically incorporated the theme of the struggle between good and evil into the novels, a success correlated to Biblical texts as sources of inspiration. Rutledge's "The Battle for Middle Earth: Tolkien's Divine Design in THE LORD OF THE RINGS" implies that Sauron and the ring are two things that reflect Biblical allegories, and allude to spiritual oppression and demonic forces (Rutledge 55-56). Many people who have seen the movies or read the books likely envision Sauron as a fiery, demonic eye. This is mostly accurate, but they might not realize that it's also a motif for the hardship faced by Paul the apostle (55-56). Rutledge implies that Paul the apostle was enslaved by the power of Sin and Death, so his only chance for true freedom was divine intervention (55-56). The ring is another object that likely connotes malevolence since the movies imply that it can possess the person who wears it, yet Rutledge implies it's a motif that relates to Paul the apostle's story (56). Moreover, he (Rutledge) explains this phenomenon as, "Active powers working in and through nature itself (56)." The incorporation of these motifs signifies a few things about the struggle between good

and evil. Firstly, the notion that Sauron represents Paul the apostle's oppressive, slave-like situation suggests that situational entrapment was likely prevalent in the series. Additionally, the notion that the ring represented demonic, possessive forces suggests that even the prized ring could consume a character in darkness. Therefore, both of these incorporated motifs suggest that there isn't a simple way to conquer powerful, malevolent forces. At the same time, though, the sense of challenge it created had a resounding effect since it was a source of inspiration for tabletop role-playing games that incorporated a similar theme.

Many years have passed since the time of the books' initial release, but the themes of corruption and challenge continue to impact various role-playing games. Stuart Lee's "A Companion to Tolkien", for instance, suggests that these themes played a major role in the development of Reiner Knizia's (2000) award-winning *Lord of the Rings* (Kosmos/Fantasy Flight Games). When describing the gameplay, Lee implies that two to five players play the role of Hobbits for a re-enactment of the journey, but face the challenge of resisting corruption when Sauron descends on the board and approaches them—with the intention of sabotaging their quest. He also states, "The master game-board is the stage where the corruption of the Hobbits and Sauron's progress is represented; players must collect tokens during the scenarios in order to avoid corruption. The cooperative element comes to the fore in these scenarios, as players try to pass the Ring on to the least corrupted Hobbit by collecting Ring tokens (Lee 535)." Lee's description of this gameplay suggests that Tolkien's themes have a significant impact on various role-playing games' content and objectives. Therefore we can conclude that both motifs had a legacy, even if they were incorporated into the game in ways that were slightly different than the books.

Conclusion

All of these themes, journey, fantasy and the struggle between good and evil, make it evident that Tolkien had a significant impact on role-playing games—whether or not this was his intention. Moreover, his philosophies were extremely thoughtful, which makes it not all that surprising that he was so successful—as a scholar and a trailblazer for later ideas in the industry. It's an expected fact that games will continue to develop as the future continues to unfold and people continue to conjure up new ideas. Nonetheless, Tolkien will likely have a legacy that will continue for centuries.

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