

---

# Restricted Play

## Synergy and the Limits of Interactivity in *The Lord of the Rings*: The Return of the King Video Game

Robert Alan Brookey

*Northern Illinois University*

Paul Booth

*Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute*

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

**Keywords:** *agency, fan culture, incorporation, political economy, Tolkien*

When he stood on stage at the 76th 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 popular J.R.R. Tolkien books, the other media and ancillary products helped spread the trilogy globally. These products included video games, 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 was posited as a local endeavor.

---

**Authors' Note:** The authors would like to thank Mark Perez for his assistance in conducting this study.

Ruth Zanker and Geoff Lealand (2003) 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” (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” (Jackson, 2001a). At the same time, however, the global economic interests of the film eclipsed the local interests of the oceanic island. As Hilary Radner (2005) 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” (p. 8) the best of the local culture. In other words, the economic impetus of the films, far from producing a more intensive and productive view 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 a 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, video games 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 video game for the final film, *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*, registered a significant gain in profits during the quarter in which the game was released (“EA Reports,” 2004).<sup>2</sup>

*The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (ROTK) 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 backward, the strategy assured that the game was readily available for the Christmas buying season. Therefore, many of those who attended the film on the 14th 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>3</sup> Indeed, the ROTK video game 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 video games as a cross-promotional strategy has a long and checkered history; for example, the spectacular failure of Atari’s ET game has become a cautionary

tale in the industry (Kent, 2001). However, the practice of reproducing the cinematic experience in video game play has taken a much more prominent role in the production of both films and video games. Video games draw heavily from the aesthetics of cinema, and several feature films and franchises have been spun-off into video games: *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/video game 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 video games. In addition, after selling off his foundering DreamWorks studio, Steven Spielberg signed a deal with EA, a deal that reflects the alignment of the film and video game industries (D. Jenkins & Carless, 2005). In a recent *Chicago Tribune* article, Eric Gwinn (2004) details how the production industry surrounding video games has started to mirror the structure of Hollywood productions. In the video game industry, production times are lengthened, but “the [Hollywood] producer model of doing business” holds fast (p. 4). Instead of relying on developers and programmers to inception 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 video games have not escaped the attention of scholars in the emerging study of video games. For example, 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). Although some of the essays in this anthology acknowledge the synergistic practices that repurpose film content into video game spin-offs, these practices are not critically engaged. Although Toby Miller (2006) argues in the inaugural issue of this journal that video game studies need 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 for that critical engagement to happen, the construct of “interactivity” must be reconsidered to comprehend how video games connect players to the economic interests of production. We begin by reviewing the literature on interactivity in video games, and we question the tendency of video game scholars to associate interactivity with agency and ideological resistance. We then provide an analysis of ROTK, demonstrating 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 video games, specifically, the concept of interactivity figures prominently. Although definitions of interactivity vary, where video games are concerned, the concept is commonly used to refer to

the game players' agency. As Matt Garite (2003) 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" (p. 2).<sup>4</sup> Ben Sawyer, Tor Berg, and Alex Dunne (1998) claim that "the notion of interactivity means that the decisions and skills of the player will move the story in a certain direction" (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 (2003) observes, some online role-playing games allow players to create their own avatars and form their own identities through interactive game play. In fact, the concept of agency is one deeply rooted in the mystique of the video game avatar: Some of the earliest video games, according to Bob Rehak (2003), 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" (p. 111). In other words, the pleasure of playing video games 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 Tong and Marcus Cheng Chye Tan (2002) suggest that "playing 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" (p. 99). Interactivity, then, is not just a means of character control: It is a way for the game player to construct his or her own environment and narrative spectacle. Accordingly, Jo Bryce and Jason Rutter (2002) 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 [*sic*] over them. In this environment audience members are "passive" recipients of 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. (pp. 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 video game 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 video games 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 video game 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 (2003) has noted, although video games are interactive, the interaction is directed toward some goal or motive that makes the game worth playing and winning. Interactive video games 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, video games 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 video game player is subject to the limitations of a game's structure—limitations that are predetermined and proscribed by the people who design and produce the game. In addition, rarely do the choices in video games 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 video games 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 video game 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 video game 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 hardly signifies a political response challenging 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 video games 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. As a consequence, 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 Chris Crawford (2003) has noted, truly interactive narratives are an ideal seldom if ever realized in video games. In fact, given that the reward for completing a level is a cut-scene with a predetermined message, the interactive aspects of many video 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 associating interactivity 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 whereas 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. Marshall specifically identifies video games as part of these practices and goes on to argue that video games serve as a metaphor for the way the cultural industry connects with audiences and keeps them "within the system of entertainment choices" (p. 73).<sup>5</sup> Reasoning from Marshall, the interactivity found in video games functions as a means of what Len Ang has described as "incorporation." Ang (1996) 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" (p. 12). Therefore, we propose that interactivity be theorized as a form of incorporation and that the structure of a video game creates an interactive experience that connects players to the interests of production and attracts them to a particular media choice. More specifically, we will maintain that the structure of ROTK connects players to the LOTR franchise and the mythic experience of Middle Earth. This approach, although acknowledging that the game player is not passive, recognizes what Lawrence Grossberg (1995) has noted: "People live their subordination actively; that means, in one sense, that they are often complicit in their own subordination, that they accede to it" (p. 75). We maintain that video game 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 ROTK game and its relation to the LOTR franchise reveals how game players would accede to this particular investment.

For many of the players, the ROTK 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 (1992) describes how fan culture has become a mainstream demographic for cult texts and 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 reserved for what are normally considered “high culture” texts (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 cocreators 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” (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 encourages fans themselves to create new texts. Fans interact with the materials of cult text and “integrate media representations into their own social experience” (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 20th century, after the Bible” and its fan base is unusually persistent in memorizing details and errata of the Tolkien world (Jackson, 2001b). 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 video game adaptation of the film. In addition, the fan culture surrounding LOTR provides an important point of comparison that illustrates why interactivity needs to be reconsidered to explain game play. These fans have actively produced new texts, new intertextual relationships, and appropriated the cultish texts of the trilogy, but all of these active practices are in sharp contrast to the interactivity of the ROTK game play. We will demonstrate that the interactivity of ROTK 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 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 messages 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 with the three films of the LOTR trilogy. The first game, based on *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 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 ROTK, 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 ROTK, 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 ROTK can also be found in *The Two Towers* game. Cinematic cut-scenes that punctuate ROTK permeate *The Third Age* game, which 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 synergistic practices of the franchise.

Although video games purport to support and condone interactivity, it is interesting to note that ROTK begins by rewarding passivity. Once the game disc is inserted in the console, the game's interface comes on the screen. If the player does not respond to the interface, a trailer for the video game will automatically play.<sup>6</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, whereas 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>7</sup> and not from any moment in the film itself, so the trailer for the video game 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 ROTK; *Final Fantasy X*, *Xenosaga*, and *Star Ocean* all use trailers in their introductions. Unlike these three examples, however, ROTK 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 ROTK 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, but it introduces the type of synergistic messages that will punctuate the game play. After the user presses "start," ROTK 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 title 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 ROTK is the third part of a trilogy, retelling the backstory becomes necessary 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 video game 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 video game’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 video game; 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 ROTK. 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 video game, 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 video game cut-scenes. As we have mentioned, these cut-scenes punctuate the game play in ROTK: 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 10, and so on. Often, these cut-scenes seamlessly blend the action from the film into the playable action of the game. The ROTK tutorial is actually conveyed in a cut-scene culled from the second film, *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*. 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

video game, 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 video games, part of the challenge of a game is learning 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 actually restrains the player's interactivity; the player 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. It is interesting that 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, 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 video game 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. Although 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 he or she is 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 10 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>8</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 video game. 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 ROTK. 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 to recognize the actors as Hobbits. In addition, the visual representation of actors playing the video game 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 video game. 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 that the actors’ connections with the characters in the game, which are merely digital renderings, are almost as strong as their connections with their characters in the film. Although 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, Andy Serkis, who plays the role of Gollum, is also interviewed. Like the characters in the video game, the character of Gollum is fully digitized 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 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 video game before he did the voice-overs for the film, suggesting that his work on the video game was not that much different from 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 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 voice-over 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>9</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 video game. 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 ROTK 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 the experience of the film and the experience of the game. As a consequence, the interactivity that the player enjoys in ROTK 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, in the case of ROTK,

interaction serves to incorporate the player into the media franchise. The successful players are rewarded with messages that suggest that the game play connects them with the experience of Middle Earth as it is created in the film and assures them that they have made a wise media choice.

Although 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. 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 video game is not just a metaphor for the media industry's strategies, as Marshall suggests; video game interactivity *is* a media industry strategy. It is clear that ROTK 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 (2000) note, "The intertextual allusions found in postmodern texts allow viewers to exercise specialized knowledge and to mark their membership in particular cultures" (p. 440). If our analysis reveals anything, it is that ROTK not only invites the player into the film but 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 ROTK: Whereas the game continually invites the player into the immersive experience of "playing the movie," the introduction of the messages that offer this immersion actually interrupts and precludes any immersive game playing experience. For example, in ROTK (as in most games), the cut-scene serves to forward the momentum of the plot, but "once 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 he or she is, 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 video game industry. However, for the franchise of LOTR, it may not be counterproductive at all. It is not in the interests of the game manufacturer 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 ROTK serve a promotional function that subtly influences the player to reexamine his or her own status as a participant in the LOTR franchise in relation to the products available. Whereas the game invites the player to “play the movie,” those who 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 and other choices to be made 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.

As a consequence, in the case of the LOTR franchise, incorporation is not a practice of immersion but rather the continued choice and consumption of a variety of media products. Given that video games figure prominently in this franchise, we believe that the interactivity associated with game 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 video games, 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 video games are a monolithic medium, but resistance must be realized in ways other than mere interactivity. For example, digital media do allow for very important forms of resistance, and scholars who have studied the practice of hacking have noted this. As Gunkel (2001) 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” (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 are 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 ROTK. The posting generated a firestorm of response from other video game 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 video game designers and manufacturers. We would argue that, as opposed to leveling up, this is real resistance.

## Notes

1. Revenue figures for these films can be found at the Internet Movie Database (<http://www.imdb.com/>).
2. Throughout this article, we will use LOTR to refer to *The Lord of the Rings* franchise, and ROTK to refer to *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King* video game.
3. This tagline appeared in the television and print ads for the game, on the Electronic Arts Web page, and even on the packaging for the game.
4. 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 is not specific to the synergistic connections between games and films.
5. In this chapter, Marshall illustrates his point by drawing examples from the films *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* and *Final Fantasy*. He does not actually critique the video games.
6. Like films, video games also have trailers that are used to promote the games. These trailers are shown at tradeshows, appear on Web pages, and are often recut into television commercials.
7. In fact, the music originally was composed by Clint Mansell for Darren Aronofsky's 2000 film *Requiem for a Dream*. It was coopted by the producers of the trailer for *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, mainly because it fit the film's action sequences so well.
8. These Easter eggs are hidden features and have been a part of video game reward systems for some-time. Easter eggs have been incorporated into DVD interfaces as well.
9. It is odd, however, that 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, then 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 one 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.

## References

- Ang, I. (1996). *Living room wars: Rethinking media audiences for a postmodern world*. New York: Routledge.
- Bryce, J., & Rutter, J. (2002). Spectacle of the deathmatch: Character and narrative in first-person shooters. In G. King & T. Krzywinska (Eds.), *Screenplay: Cinema/video games/interfaces* (pp. 66-80). London: Wallflower Press.
- Crawford, C. (2003). Interactive storytelling. In M. Wolf & B. Perron (Eds.), *The videogame theory reader* (pp. 259-273). New York: Routledge.
- EA reports record third quarter. (2004, January 27). Retrieved October 30, 2004, from <http://investor.ea.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=88189&p=irol-newsArticle&t=Regular&id=488654&>
- Filiciak, M. (2003). Hyperidentities: Postmodern identity patterns in massively multiplayer online role-playing games. In M. Wolf & B. Perron (Eds.), *The videogame theory reader* (pp. 87-102). New York: Routledge.
- Fiske, J. (1987). *Television culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Garite, M. (2003). *The ideology of interactivity (or, videogames and the Taylorization of leisure)*. Paper presented at the Level Up Games Conference, Utrecht, the Netherlands.



- Grieb, M. (2002). Run Lara run. In G. King & T. Krzywinska (Eds.), *Screenplay: Cinema/videogames/interfaces* (pp. 157-170). London: Wallflower Press.
- Grossberg, L. (1995). Cultural studies vs. political economy: Is anybody else bored with this debate? *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 12, 72-81.
- Gunkel, D. (2001). *Hacking cyberspace*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Gwinn, E. (2004, August 3). More videogames being made the Hollywood way. *Chicago Tribune*, Tempo Section, pp. 1, 4.
- Howells, S. (2002). Watching a game, playing a movie: When media collide. In G. King & T. Krzywinska (Eds.), *Screenplay: Cinema/videogames/interfaces* (pp. 110-121). London: Wallflower Press.
- Jackson, P. (Director). (2001a). Commentary 2. In *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring: Extended edition* [DVD]. Los Angeles: New Line Home Entertainment.
- Jackson, P. (Director). (2001b). Documentary 1. In *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring: Extended edition* [DVD]. Los Angeles: New Line Home Entertainment.
- Jenkins, D., & Carless, S. (2005, October 14). Electronic Arts partners with Spielberg. *Gamasutra*. Retrieved March 24, 2006, from [http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news\\_index.php?story=6840](http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news_index.php?story=6840)
- Jenkins, H. (1992). *Textual poachers*. New York: Routledge.
- Johnson, S. (2005). *Everything bad is good for you*. New York: Riverhead.
- Kent, S. (2001). *The ultimate history of videogames*. New York: Three Rivers Press.
- King, G., & Krzywinska, T. (Eds.). (2002). *Screenplay: Cinema/videogames/interfaces*. London: Wallflower Press.
- Mactavish, A. (2002). Technological pleasure: The performance and narrative of technology in *Half-Life* and other high-tech computer games. In G. King & T. Krzywinska (Eds.), *Screenplay: Cinema/videogames/interfaces* (pp. 33-49). London: Wallflower Press.
- Marshall, P. D. (2002). The new intertextual commodity. In D. Harries (Ed.), *The new media book* (pp. 69-81). London: British Film Institute.
- Miller, T. (2006). Gaming for beginners. *Games and Culture*, 1, 5-12.
- Morley, D. (1980). *The nationwide audience: Structure and decoding*. London: British Film Institute.
- Ott, B., & Walter, C. (2000). Intertextuality: Interpretive practice and textual strategy. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 17, 429-446.
- Radner, H. (2005). In search of authenticity: The "global popular" and "quality" culture—The case of *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy* and *Pavement*. *Portal Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, 2(2). Retrieved February 10, 2006, from <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.ac/journals/portal/include/gedoc.php?>
- Rehak, B. (2003). Playing at being: Psychoanalysis and the avatar. In M. Wolf & B. Perron (Eds.), *The video game theory reader* (pp. 103-127). New York: Routledge.
- Rockstar in hot coffee over mod. (2005, September). *Game Informer*, p. 30.
- Sawyer, B., Berg, T., & Dunne, A. (1998). *Game developers marketplace*. Albany, NY: Coriolis Group Books.
- Tong, W. L., & Tan, M.C.C. (2002). Vision and virtuality: The construction of narrative space in film and computer games. In G. King & T. Krzywinska (Eds.), *Screenplay: Cinema/videogames/interfaces* (pp. 98-109). London: Wallflower Press.
- Wolf, M. (2003). Abstraction in videogames. In M. Wolf & B. Perron (Eds.), *The video game theory reader* (pp. 47-65). New York: Routledge.
- Zanker, R., & Lealand, G. (2003). New Zealand as Middle Earth: Local and global popular communication in a small nation. *Popular Communication*, 1, 65-72.

**Robert Alan Brookey** is an associate professor of communication and codirector of the Laboratory for Interaction, Networking and Communications at Northern Illinois University.

**Paul Booth** is a doctoral student at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.