For Whom is it Faithful? Players, Protagonists, and Game Adaptations

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J.R.R. Tolkien's novel *The Hobbit* begins, oddly enough, with a disclaimer on philology: "This is a story of long ago. At that time, the languages and letters were quite different from ours of today. English is used to represent the languages" (27). This passage hails the reader as an armchair historian learning about this story from an annotated translation of an ancient text, both solidifying the authenticity of Tolkien's world and placing the reader safely outside of it. In contrast, the opening of the user manual for Beam Software's 1982 text adventure game adaptation of *The Hobbit* contains a more explicit but no less complex interpellation of the reader. It begins with a direct address ("Congratulations! You are about to play the most sophisticated game program yet devised for the microcomputer") before going on to tell the user of their role in the fictional storyworld ("In THE HOBBIT program, you take on the role of Bilbo, the hobbit") and finally addressing them as if they were the protagonist himself ("Best of luck Bilbo: may you return with wonderful tales to tell on a cold evening in front of a log fire") (3). While the novel's reader is addressed as an amateur historian investigating a mediated account of a long-lost culture from the safety of their parlors, someone who engages with Beam Software's *Hobbit* is addressed as if this history is yet to be written, and that they (as Bilbo) will be the one to write it.

As opposed to adaptations of *Hobbit* in other media, one of the challenges of this particular game adaptation (and game adaptations in general) stems from the fact that the roles that these respective texts create for their audiences – Tolkien's bookworm and Beam Software's Bilbo – have very different relationships to the world in which the fiction takes place and thus afford very different experiences of the events represented in them. For the bookworm, the story of *The Hobbit* exists as a finite sequence of events over which they have no control. Bilbo will always face the same challenges, always have the same responses, and always

return home safe and laden with riches. Even a first-time reader of Tolkien's novel can draw upon their vast array of knowledge – of Tolkien's later works, the conventions of the fantasy genre, or even just how many pages are left to read – to form expectations about how the story will play out. For Bilbo, however, *The Hobbit* is not a story at all: it is a veritable sea of potential dangers and unpredictable outcomes, most of which require him to make choices and take action. Bilbo does not know what monsters or obstacles await him, nor if he is going to be able to overcome them, and he certainly cannot be sure that he will return home alive. While Bilbo may have some knowledge a first-time reader may not, his limited knowledge as a character internal to Tolkien's storyworld marks his experience of the events of *The Hobbit* as literally a world apart from an external observer's engagement with the narrative. How does a game adaptation reconcile the high knowledge and low agency of the bookworm with the low-knowledge, high-agency experience of the protagonist? In other words, to whose experience of the text is a game adaptation "faithful:" the reader's, the protagonist's, or something in between?

By bringing up the language of "faithfulness" here, I am not attempting to revive fidelity criticism. Instead, I pose this question as a challenge to look at a game like Beam Software's *The Hobbit* – which allows players to abandon Bilbo's companions, insult the elf-king Elrond, and even kill Gollum without losing the game – as being more than just a "bad" adaptation. In fact, by giving players this freedom, one could argue the game can capture parts of Bilbo's experience as a meek adventurer in a dangerous world that adaptations in other media do not. Further, perhaps an approach that takes into account the experiences of certain characters rather than just an audience's experiences can lead to fruitful interpretations of all kinds of adaptations. Are the spectacle-laden elements of Peter Jackson's *Hobbit* trilogy – from the fleshed-out backstories of Bilbo's dwarven companions to the expansion of the book's barely chapter-long battle into an entire film – merely examples of "infidelity," or could they be productively read as a shift in perspective from the bumbling Bilbo to his heroic dwarven companion? Asking questions like these can encourage audiences to re-

examine their own interpretations of adaptations and their sources, perhaps allowing them to experience these texts anew.

Works Cited

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