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THEMATIC SECTION

Mapping Middle-earth: Cartographic Representations and Transmedia Storytelling in *The Lord of the Rings Online*

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this article is to examine the cartographic representation of Middle-earth in the massively multiplayer online role-playing game *The Lord of the Rings Online* (*LOTRO*) and assess its resemblance to the literary descriptions in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. By contrasting the video game's map with the geographic and environmental details provided in Tolkien's narrative, this article will explore how the game developers interpreted the detailed world of Middle-earth as an interactive digital landscape. The analysis will focus on key locations in regions such as Eriador and Gondor to assess how closely the terrain and landmarks align with Tolkien's text.

Special attention will be given to the interweaving of world-building and transmedia storytelling that brings a deeper sense of immersion into *LOTRO*, and which demonstrates how the game developers

RESUMO: O objetivo deste artigo é examinar a representação cartográfica da Terra Média no jogo de interpretação de personagens *online* e em massa para multijogadores *The Lord of the Rings Online* (*LOTRO*) e avaliar a sua semelhança com as descrições literárias em *The Lord of the Rings*, de J. R. R. Tolkien. Ao contrastar o mapa do videogame com os detalhes geográficos e ambientais fornecidos na narrativa de Tolkien, este artigo irá explorar a forma como os criadores do jogo interpretaram o mundo detalhado da Terra Média e o transformaram numa paisagem digital interativa. A análise incidirá sobre locais importantes em regiões como Eriador e Gondor, de modo a avaliar até que ponto o terreno e os pontos de referência correspondem ao texto de Tolkien.

Será dada especial atenção ao cruzamento entre a construção de mundos e *transmedia storytelling*, que proporcionam uma sensação



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adapted a fictional world designed for storytelling into a functional game map. In the context of transmedia storytelling, this article aims to assess how *LOTRO* is more than a by-product of a novel by expanding and introducing new aspects, like visual and sound effects, and interactivation, that allow the players to experience Tolkien's world beyond what is conveyed through the text, highlighting areas where *LOTRO* expands upon or deviates from the source material.

By examining Henry Jenkins's ideas on transmedia storytelling and Mark J. P. Wolf's theory of world-building, this article offers insight into the intersection of storytelling, geography, and interactive design, particularly the audiovisual elements that reinforce immersion in the game world.

KEYWORDS: J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings Online*, transmedia storytelling, video game, world-building.

mais profunda imersão no *LOTRO* e demonstram como os criadores do jogo adaptaram um mundo ficcional concebido para a narrativa a um mapa funcional de jogo. No contexto de *transmedia storytelling*, este artigo pretende analisar de que forma o videojogo *LOTRO* é mais do que um simples produto derivado maioritariamente de um romance, ao expandir e introduzir novos aspetos, como efeitos visuais e sonoros e interatividade, que permitem aos jogadores experienciar o mundo de Tolkien para além do que é transmitido no texto, destacando áreas em que o *LOTRO* expande ou se afasta do material de origem.

A partir das ideias de Henry Jenkins sobre *transmedia storytelling* e da teoria da construção de mundos de Mark J. P. Wolf, este artigo pretende oferecer uma perspetiva sobre a interseção entre narrativa, geografia e design interativo, em particular, os elementos audiovisuais que reforçam a imersão no mundo do jogo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings Online*, transmedia storytelling, videojogo, construção de mundos.



The world of Middle-earth, created by English fantasy author J. R. R. Tolkien and featured in his seminal work *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55), has been the subject of many interpretations since its publication in the 1950s. From films, television series, and video games, Middle-earth has expanded beyond the novel, creating new horizons for readers, viewers, and players.

One case in which the world of Middle-earth has been explored in detail is the 2007 MMORPG *The Lord of the Rings Online* (*LOTRO*), which gave players an immersive gaming experience of Tolkien's world. Maintaining a high degree of faithfulness to the source material, *LOTRO* delves into the many regions that make up Middle-earth while expanding the horizons of this large map, going beyond the scope of the novel and turning *LOTRO* into an important case of transmedia storytelling.

This article aims to explore the connections between the novel and the video game and to establish common points between the descriptions provided in Tolkien's text and the game's visual landscape, where, in some cases, the terrain was adjusted to suit the gaming experience. Landmarks from the regions of Eriador and Gondor will be analyzed, demonstrating how the game reinterprets certain features of the novels by giving them images and sound.

One of the main goals of the video game is to provide an immersive experience for the player. Immersion plays an important role in media and has been a central feature of world-building. This concept was addressed by Tolkien in his essay "On Fairy Stories", where he stated that it was a fundamental part of the act of subcreating, as will be demonstrated in the analysis. The concept of immersion was later taken up by Mark J. P. Wolf in *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (2012).

The article will first provide an overview of *LOTRO*'s history and gameplay, shedding light on the video game's evolution over the years. Secondly, it will be important to understand how world-building and the principles of transmedia storytelling are fundamental to *The Lord of the Rings Online*. Finally, the article will include a discussion of various landscapes within the video game to understand how they were adapted from the novel into a different medium, namely, that of the video game.

By analyzing and comparing Tolkien's novel and the *LOTRO* video game through the lens of transmedia storytelling, this article aims to contribute to the existing Tolkien scholarship by exploring the continuously expanding world of Middle-earth.

1. *THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE*: HISTORY AND GAMEPLAY

LOTRO is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game originally developed by Turbine, now known as Warner Bros. Games Boston, and is set in the world of Middle-earth from J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* (1937). It was released in 2007 with the title *The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar* and, in 2016,¹ development of the game was transferred to Standing Stone Games. The first package of *LOTRO*, as the video game is commonly called, included the wider region of Eriador, in the north and east of Middle-earth, and contained eleven regional maps: Ered Luin, Shire, Bree-land, Lone Lands, Trollshaws, Evendim, North Downs, Forochel, Angmar, Misty Mountains, and Eregion. Additional maps included Ettenmoors for Monster Play and Frostbluff, accessible during the Yule Festival in the winter.

In 2008, the first expansion pack, *Mines of Moria*, was released, earning the game much praise from critics who stated that this extension is “a wonderful marriage of content and art design that further strengthens the developer's knack for storytelling” (VanOrd 2009). *Eurogamer* argued that “Turbine has created a harmonious, tight and seamless addition to the *LOTRO* game-world” (Zitron 2008), while *WarCry Network* called it “the best fantasy MMORPG yet created” (Moreno 2008). *Mines of Moria* allows the player to explore nine distinct maps within Moria itself, following the passage of the Fellowship of the Ring. The expansion also includes the map of Lothlórien and the legendary weapons feature.

Ever since its initial release, *LOTRO* has expanded into other regions of Middle-earth. Additional expansion packs include *Siege of Mirkwood* (2009), *Rise of Isengard* (2011), *Riders of Rohan* (2012), *Helm's Deep* (2013), *Mordor* (2017), *Minas Morgul* (2019), *War of Three Peaks* (2020), *Fate of Gundabad* (2021), *Before the Shadow* (2022), *Corsairs of Umbar* (2023), and *Legacy of Morgoth* (2024). Each of these expansions added new regions of Middle-earth to explore, unique features, like the mounted combat option

in *Riders of Rohan*, new factions and crafting tiers, a new level cap that, as of *Legacy of Morgoth*, goes up to level 150, and a set of epic quests to be played in these maps. 93

By 2017, the standard edition of the game included only four entirely free regions of Eriador (Ered Luin, Shire, Bree-land, Lone Lands), and the player could either purchase other regions or expansions through the official website or acquire them through the *LOTRO* store by using *LOTRO* points, acquired during the gameplay. In celebration of the game's fifteenth anniversary in 2022, all expansions prior to *Helm's Deep* were permanently made available for free.

LOTRO's gameplay features numerous elements that enable thorough exploration of Middle-earth, enriching the gaming experience. In order to create an avatar, the player must choose a race and class, combinations that range from Elf Hunter to Dwarf Champion to Hobbit Lore-master, and others, each with a unique skill set. The player gains experience by completing quests and earns rewards from killing and completing both quests and deeds. Added features include owning a house and mounts, working in up to three crafting professions, performing quests and instances with other players by engaging in the fellowship mode, and playing the epic storyline that begins in Bree shortly after Frodo leaves the Shire. Following the main storyline means closely following the protagonists of *The Lord of the Rings*, interacting with them on multiple occasions, and playing various side quests that contribute, directly or indirectly, to the success of the Fellowship of the Ring.

2. FROM NOVEL TO VIDEO GAME: WORLD-BUILDING AND TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING

LOTRO takes Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* as its primary source of material. This gives the video game developers plenty of space to expand the world of Middle-earth, even beyond the main storyline of *The Lord of the Rings*. The appendix section in the third part of the novel, *The Return of the King*, contains much information that gives insight into Middle-earth's past, explored in detail in *Shadows of Angmar*, as well as the events from after the War of the Ring, featured in *Mordor* and subsequent expansions. The development of the game falls under Middle-earth Enterprises, which

94 owns the rights to *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* but not to any other source material created by Tolkien and his heirs.¹ As such, this article aims to focus exclusively on the material provided by *The Lord of the Rings* novel in order to analyze and compare the maps and geographic features of both novel and video game.

The video game engages with what American media scholar Henry Jenkins considers “transmedia storytelling”, a term he coined in 2003 that addresses the potential each medium has in expanding a work in any form. Jenkins states that:

[i]n the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best—so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics, and its world might be explored and experienced through game play. (Jenkins 2003)

Furthermore, he argues that transmedia storytelling is “the art of world-making” and it consists of a “process of designing a fictional universe that will sustain franchise development, one that is sufficiently detailed to enable many different stories to emerge but coherent enough so that each story feels like it fits with the others” (Jenkins 2017).

Applied to *The Lord of the Rings Online*, Jenkins’s idea suggests that the game serves as an expansion of Tolkien’s imagined world, one with which the player can interact closely by controlling a character and exploring Middle-earth. Moreover, it serves as an expansion of Tolkien’s ideas about fantasy and immersion, in particular the belief that both author and reader engage with the secondary world by entering it, “to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside” (Tolkien 2006, 143). In addition, it complements other mediums in which Tolkien’s world appears, like Peter Jackson’s film adaptations (released between 2001 and 2003), additional video games in the franchise, and the novels themselves.

In world-building theory, following Mark J. P. Wolf’s principles developed in *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*, the construction of an imaginary world happens through invention and aims for completeness and consistency to make the world believable to the audience (2012, 33). Wolf’s ideas are grounded in Tolkien’s notions about subcreation, a concept that appears in his essay “On Fairy Stories” and about which he argues that a secondary world must maintain the “inner consistency of reality” (*idem*, 138). About the transmedial expansion of an imaginary world, Wolf argues

that it can occur through growth (*idem*, 245). Wolf states that “transmediality also suggests the potential for the continuance of a world, in multiple instances and registers” (*idem*, 247), which is seen in *LOTRO* with the multiple expansions released over the years and that extend beyond the main storyline. An example is the continuation of the epic quest following Sauron’s defeat; it requires the *Mordor* expansion pack, and the quests take place in various locations of Middle-earth. One particular quest involves destroying the fortress of Dol Guldur immediately after Sauron’s fall. In Appendix B of *The Lord of the Rings* novel, it is stated that “when the Shadow passed, Celeborn came forth and led the host of Lórien over Anduin in many boats. They took Dol Guldur, and Galadriel threw down its walls and laid bare its pits, and the forest was cleansed” (2002, 1069). The game invites the player to witness and play out this moment, participating in the fortress’s invasion and interacting with the characters leading the attack. In the end, the player talks to Galadriel to conclude the quest objective, and she says: “At last the fortress has been cast down. Its dark walls can no longer hide the works of Sauron. Rejoice with the Golden Host, . . . for a time of trouble and woe has come to its ending, and you played your part in it with grace and with skill” (*LOTRO*). This is merely one of the many examples in which *LOTRO* extends beyond the main storyline of the novel while maintaining, at the same time, a faithful portrayal of the world of Middle-earth by capturing, for example, the style of Tolkien’s writing in the game’s dialogues.

About *LOTRO*, and in the context of transmedia, Susana Tosca and Lisbeth Klastrup assessed the potential the video game had in offering new interactive features to the players so they could be fully immersed in the world of Middle-earth:

Our previous work about the online multi-player game *Lord of the Rings Online* shows how players tried to make sense of the new instantiation by comparing it with the books or the films in terms of affordances: what new experience could the game offer them? The most valued affordances were the fleshing out of the topos into an actual 3D space that they could navigate and explore with their virtual bodies, and the possibility of acting within the world and not just be a spectator, as they had been with the books and the movies. Having to take decisions and participate in some epic battles knowing that their contribution helped the cause of Frodo was extremely motivating for them. (2020, 143)



96 As Klasturp and Tosca argue, transmedial worlds are experienced differently depending on the media in which they appear. This article thus examines several geographical spaces in Middle-earth and compares how they have been adapted from the book to the game. By contrasting the map's features with the geographic and environmental details in Tolkien's narrative, the goal is to explore how the game developers interpreted the detailed world of Middle-earth as an interactive digital landscape. This occurred by expanding the world beyond descriptions in the novel and including forms of visualization, auralization, and interactivation, all of which are part of the gameplay experience.

Wolf describes each of these three essential aspects of transmedial expansion in detail. He states that visualization adapts words "into still images, moving images, or three-dimensional objects [providing] scenes of rich detail, visuals which suggest much" (2012, 253). Within Middle-earth, this form of expansion can be found, for example, in the illustrations of artists such as Alan Lee and John Howe, which, in turn, served as inspiration for Peter Jackson's film versions of *The Lord of the Rings*. Auralization, on the other hand, involves the addition of sound to the imaginary world, which may include "turning words or imagery into sounds, or translating story material into voices, sound effects, music, and ambiance" (Wolf 2012, 258). This aspect contributes to the video game's immersive quality, which relies on music to convey specific sensations to the player, as explained in more detail in the next section. To visualization and auralization, Wolf adds interactivation as a fundamental feature of transmedial expansion, arguing that "a model of the world . . . must be constructed which can be interacted with by the user, which usually includes the exploration of the world's spaces, the witnessing of events in the world, and interaction with other characters in the world" (*idem*, 260).

About *LOTRO*, Neil Randall and Kathleen Murphy describe the process of transmediality by focusing on the importance of added material as an improvement to the player experience, emphasizing the expansion of the source material. They describe it thus:

Players need to be able to step into the world of the adapted story and spend a significant amount of time in that world, exploring its many locations and engaging with the characters and objects drawn from or even simply suggested by the source text. In addition, to meet the same requirement of long-term immersive player involvement, videogame adaptations must expand the scope of the original story, allowing players to meet added characters performing added tasks and fitting into

added plots and subplots. They must allow players to explore what is happening in that world beyond the scope of the storyline presented in the source. (2012, 121)

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The game is not simply an adaptation, but, once again, an expansion of an existing imaginary world. This idea is corroborated by Wolf, who affirms that worlds like that of *LOTRO* “are designed after their respective worlds from other media, but exist alongside them as separate worlds with their own separate histories that accrue as players play them” (2012, 262). Beyond the borders of the novel’s world, the additional regions of Middle-earth in the video game enhance *LOTRO*’s immersive quality and believability through links with the main storyline.

In the instances where the video game extends beyond the source material, Wolf finds that the aforementioned visualization, auralization, and interactivation are important for immersive experience. Wolf argues that “[d]uring the move from one medium to another, forms of mediation may be lost or gained, causing the material of a story or world to be changed” (*idem*, 250). In short, each of these transformation processes consists of adding elements to change the source and adapt it to a different medium, in this case, from novel to video game. Adding the visualization component means transforming the written word found in the novel’s descriptions into images (*idem*, 253). Similarly, the addition of sound (auralization) becomes an equally important step, as “[s]ound is naturally immersive, surrounding the listener in space, providing atmosphere and evoking emotional responses” (*idem*, 257). This quality resonates very strongly with Tolkien’s works, as the world of Arda was created by the music of the Ainur. According to Fanfan Chen, harmonism “contributes to the creation of an imaginary world that echoes Nature’s music” (2014, 73). Together with harmonism, the onomatopoeia, alliteration, and assonance in Tolkien’s novels, “feed readers’ imagination and enlighten comprehension” (*idem*, 74). Sound is also important because it contributes to the identity of each place in the video game, adding qualities to each region that match their atmosphere, such as, for example, the baleful music that plays in the map of Angmar, an especially threatening place, which contrasts with the jolly songs played in the Shire map, relaying feelings of peacefulness and happiness. The Shire is described in the novel as a “pleasant corner of the world” with mild weather and whose inhabitants were used to peace and plenty (Tolkien 2002, 5). On the other hand, the land of the Witch King is called, at one point, “the dread realm of Angmar” (826), and mentions of the place are often accompanied by words that convey

98 negativity, such as “shadow” or “evil”. This feature is an important component of the sense of place, which will be discussed later in the analysis of the video game landscapes. The feature of interactivity may be a result of the previous features, as sound and image are required for interactivation to take place.

Despite the many changes and additions to the source material that make the video game a unique experience, which can be seen as a “separate world” with “separate history” (Wolf 2012, 262), *LOTRO* relies heavily on the descriptions of Tolkien’s novel to make the landscapes more appealing to those who are already familiar with the world of Middle-earth. It is the inclusion of the features described before that gives shape to the interactive world of the video game and marks it as an extension of a world that exists in other media.

3. MAPPING LANDSCAPES IN *THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE*

Diving into the world of Middle-earth in *LOTRO*, the main goal is to examine several examples of how the game developers expanded the descriptions offered by Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings*. Through the many maps and regions of the game, it is possible to follow the journey of the characters in the novel very closely and precisely, tracing their every step. In addition, the type of fantasy written by Tolkien, commonly called epic fantasy,² pays special attention to the landscape, which is described in detail in the narrative. In parallel, the video game gives the player a detailed scenery in each of the playable regions, from the Green Hills of the Shire to the desolation of the plains of Gorgoroth in Mordor. This section aims, therefore, to comparatively analyze multiple landscapes in both novel and game, looking at similarities and differences that contribute to a deeper immersion in the video game, enhancing the player experience.

One example that is worth exploring is the Stone of Erech. This landmark appears in the third part of the novel, *The Return of the King*, and is located in Gondor. It consists of a black stone shaped like a globe on top of a hill. According to the novel, it had been set there by Isildur, who had brought it from Númenor, to be a meeting place and to establish an alliance between Gondor and the Men of the Mountain. Here, the Men of the Mountain swore fealty to Isildur, but failed to keep their oaths. So, during the War of the

Ring, Aragorn travels the Paths of the Dead and summons the Men of the Mountain to meet him at the Hill of Erech so they may fulfill their oath. In the novel, it is described as a place of dread and of memory:

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[L]ong had the terror of the Dead lain upon that hill and upon the empty fields about it. For upon the top stood a black stone, round as a great globe, the height of a man, though its half was buried in the ground. Unearthly it looked, as though it had fallen from the sky, as some believed; but those who remembered still the lore of Westemnesse told that it had been brought out of the ruin of Númenor and there set by Isildur at his landing. None of the people of the valley dared to approach it, nor would they dwell near; for they said that it was a trysting-place of the Shadow-men and there they would gather in times of fear, thronging round the Stone and whispering. (Tolkien 2002, 771-772)

The video game seems to capture this landmark accurately. The Stone of Erech is as described in the novel except for its size, which has been enlarged in the game to be more than “the height of a man” (*idem*, 772). A series of epic quests that are part of “Vol. IV. Book 1: The Road to Gondor” leads to this event, in which Aragorn summons the oathbreakers. As the player leaves the Paths of the Dead, following Aragorn and the Grey Company, they enter the Blackroot Vale and the region of West Gondor. In the map of the Blackroot Vale, the Hill of Erech, with its Black Stone, is the area’s most relevant landmark, being faithful to the book description, not only physically, but also by the other characteristics attributed to it. As the novel states, people in the region referred to it as a “trysting-place of the Shadow-men” (*ibidem*), and no one dared approach it. This is also referred to in the game in the quest “Book 1, Chapter 4: Atop Erech”, in which Celegdal tells the player the following:

You may think me a fool, but I feel certain that some great evil came out of the mountains and sped with unnatural haste through the Vale. On moonless nights, some claim to have seen the Dead dancing atop the Hill of Erech, east of here. Is it true? I cannot speak to that, but I will tell you that no one in Morlad leaves his door unbarred when the time comes to blow out his candles. (*LOTRO*)



Figure 1: Stone of Erech (*LOTRO*, Blackroot Vale, 7 April 2025)

To convey this sense of fear in the game, approaching the Stone of Erech causes Dread, an effect that reduces the amount of morale, which consists of the player's health bar, and it compares to the fear the population of the area feels. Furthermore, there are several oathbreakers circling the Hill, one of which is seen going around the stone itself, as Figure 1 shows. The game includes a Session Play instance ("Those Who Are Dead"), which allows the player to witness past events, in this case, replaying the moment Isildur makes the alliance with the Men of the Mountain, which is a case of transmedia storytelling that expands from what the readers find in the text. Players are allowed to visualize the interaction between Isildur and the inhabitants of the region closely, providing new insight into Aragorn's summoning during the Third Age of Middle-earth. This process enhances immersion by adding image, sound, and interaction in this area of the game, extending beyond the imagination of reading the novel, as Wolf proposes in *Building Imaginary Worlds*.

Some of the landmarks that appear in *LOTRO* are only very briefly described in Tolkien's novel, but the video game manages to capture these seemingly less important places in detail, offering a deeper immersion into the world of Middle-earth. One such example is the Last Bridge, located on the border between the Lone Lands and the

Trollshaws. Despite seeming unimportant in the narrative, the appendices give more information on the area where it is located, stating that the realms of Cardolan and Rhudaur were separated by the River Hoarwell, or Mitheithel (Tolkien 1015), making the Bridge a crossing point within the older Kingdom of Arnor.

In *LOTRO*, the Last Bridge, seen in Figure 2 below, is a part of several quests and one deed, marking this as a point of interest on the map. The deed, “The Road to Rivendell”, adds some information about the Bridge:

[b]eyond this bridge the domain of Men ends. While the Lone-lands have long been left desolate and rarely-travelled, the lands beyond are altogether wild and untamed. Only the well-seasoned wanderer or skilled adventurer would brave the Trollshaws alone. (*LOTRO*)



Figure 2: *The Last Bridge (LOTRO, The Lone Lands, 7 April 2025)*

In *The Lord of the Rings*, the Last Bridge is crossed by Aragorn, Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin after Frodo is stabbed by the Nazgûl. As Aragorn explores the Bridge, he finds an object that determines his choice to go forward safely, interpreting it as a sign of hope:

Before long [Strider] came hurrying back. ‘I can see no sign of the enemy,’ he said, ‘and I wonder very much what that means. But I have found something very strange.’

He held out his hand, and showed a single pale-green jewel. 'I found it in the mud in the middle of the Bridge,' he said. 'It is a beryl, an elf-stone. Whether it was set there, or let fall by chance, I cannot say; but it brings hope to me. I will take it as a sign that we may pass the Bridge; but beyond that I dare not keep to the Road, without some clearer token.' At once they went on again. They crossed the Bridge in safety, hearing no sound but the water swirling against its three great arches. (Tolkien 2002, 196)

The beryl found by Aragorn is also of importance in the game, and it is referred to as Glorfindel's beryl. As Aragorn feels hope in the novel by the presence of the beryl in the Bridge, the player can use the stone in the quest "Chapter 5: Hiding in the Dark" as a buff of inspiration.

Concerning the Last Bridge, the game offers a form of interactivation in which the player must cross the Bridge to start the deed "The Road to Rivendell", simultaneously completing its first objective. Additionally, the process of transmediality gives the player a clear illustration of the place described in the novel by providing the image of the bridge in the game, which is very close in description to that given in the novel, with the three arches that characterize this structure. Another element of importance in the game is the inclusion of the sound aspect, the auralization, which is reflected in the sound of the river, mixed with the map's music in the background, providing an enlarged experience of the place (Wolf 2012, 257-258).

Another landmark worth analyzing is the statue of the King of Gondor, found in the place called the Cross-roads. In both the novel and the video game, the Cross-roads is an important location on the map, where two roads intersect. From the east, the road comes from Minas Morgul and goes west to Osgiliath, and from north to south, it crosses the land of Ithilien and continues to the lands of Harad. The statue of the king, facing Osgiliath and Minas Tirith, is the most emblematic landmark in the area. It appears in the novel when Frodo, Sam, and Gollum are on their way to the Morgul Vale, and it is described thus:

The brief glow fell upon a huge sitting figure, still and solemn as the great stone kings of Argonath. The years had gnawed it, and violent hands had maimed it. Its head was gone, and in its place was set in mockery a round rough-hewn stone, rudely painted by savage hands in the likeness of a grinning face with one large red eye in the midst



of its forehead. Upon its knees and mighty chair, and all about the pedestal, were idle scrawls mixed with the foul symbols that the maggot-folk of Mordor used. Suddenly, caught by the level beams, Frodo saw the old king's head: it was lying rolled away by the roadside. (Tolkien 2002, 687)

During the player's first passage through the Cross-roads, the statue is visibly weathered by time, and the head has been replaced by a stone painted by the servants of Sauron. The scenery around the statue and the atmosphere of the area are gloomy, reflecting the feeling the reader gets from the novel during Frodo's passage.

The novel demonstrates a very strong sense of place in this area. The concept of sense of place is a fundamental part of spatiality studies, and it is particularly relevant to discussions of space in imaginary worlds, whether in literature or in transmedia. Sense of place "is used to describe unique or distinctive qualities that give an identity to particular areas or regions" (Ryan 2016, 7). In other words, it is the *genius loci*, the "essence" of the place, which is used when referring to "positive bonds of comfort, safety [or] fears, disorientation, and dislike" (*ibidem*). During Frodo's journey at the Cross-roads, the narrative repeatedly shows these feelings associated with place. First, it is described through the lack of light: "[b]ut no day came, only a dead brown twilight. In the East there was a dull red glare under the lowering cloud: it was not the red of dawn" (Tolkien 2002, 683). Furthermore, "[t]he afternoon, as Sam supposed it must be called, wore on. Looking out from the covert, he could see only a dun, shadowless world, fading slowly into a featureless, colourless gloom. It felt stifling but not warm" (*idem*, 685). These descriptions generate feelings of unease: "[s]tanding there for a moment filled with dread Frodo became aware that a light was shining: he saw it glowing on Sam's face beside him" (*idem*, 686). The light, which in the following moment brings the crown to the king's head lying on the ground, symbolizes hope for healing the world,³ which is a healing of the land that is, in turn, related to the sense of place and to what Yi-Fu Tuan calls topophilia, described later by Eric Prieto as a "bond between a person and a locale [that] emphasizes the importance of creating a strong 'sense of place', i.e. a sense of that place's uniqueness and value" (2017, 60). In both the novel and the video game, the sense of place is a strong part of the world-building and the immersive quality that keeps the reader/player engaged with the storyworld. Bo Kampmann Walther adds the "[t]ension within the text is fashioned so as to mimic the gloomy prospects of Frodo's continuous journey, and in building this

104 tension an image of both similarity and contradiction, or sameness and difference, arises” (2020, 125). This notion comes from the contrast between the land of Mordor to the east and the realm of Gondor to the west. The novel and video game depict this difference in the landscape at that moment and later, adding to the spatiotemporal dimension of both stories.

The second interaction with the statue occurs later, and in the video game the player has more agency than in the first interaction. After the battle in Minas Tirith, when Aragorn leads an army through Ithilien to the Black Gate of Mordor, the Cross-roads is a stopping point. The quest chain that takes place in Osgiliath (After Battle) includes two quests related to the statue’s restoration: “The Fallen King in Ruin” and “The Fallen King Renewed”. The bestowal dialogue in the first quest mentions the dilapidated state of the monument, and the player is asked to repair it:

‘Yes, I am Arandol. As you can see, the repairs are behind schedule. Orcs have defiled the statue, removed the head, and scrawled unintelligible markings all over it. First those Orkish poles will need to be removed, then that vile head must come down. If you are able, the statue’s original head should be retrieved and placed back atop its shoulders.’ (*LOTRO*)

Thus, the player is actively engaged with the healing, which completely changes the atmosphere of the area. With the destruction of the Dark Tower in Mordor, the influence of Sauron’s realm ends, affecting the surrounding areas. When the player ventures into Osgiliath (After Battle), the contrast in the Cross-roads is clearly visible, as displayed in Figures 3 and 4, since the skies are now clear and the statue appears clean and in better detail. The sense of place in this renewed area contributes to positive feelings, giving it a new identity altogether.



Figure 3: Statue at Cross-roads before the battle (*LOTRO*, South Ithilien, 7 April 2025)



Figure 4: Statue at Cross-roads after the battle (*LOTRO*, South Ithilien, 7 April 2025)

The quests in the game closely follow what is seen in the novel during Aragorn's passage in the area, when the men repaired the statue by replacing the head:

The hideous orc-head that was set upon the carved figure was cast down and broken in pieces, and the old king's head was raised and set in its place once more, still crowned with white and golden flowers; and men laboured to wash and pare away all the foul scrawls that orcs had put upon the stone. (Tolkien 2002, 866)

At this intersection of storytelling, geography, and game design, the player is encouraged to pay close attention to the details conveyed in the novel, which are then transformed into playable situations set in landscapes that capture the essence of Tolkien's work. Once again, this adds an immersive quality to the player's experience, with natural sounds and visual elements that provide a more complete experience of space in the world of Middle-earth, where players can contribute to the success of the multiple characters that appear in the novel. Again, this seems to expand on Tolkien's ideas about fantasy and the reader's imagination, and, in the case of the video game, the player's interaction.

One of the greatest challenges in developing this video game is capturing every minute detail of the novel, which seems to be, in part, the aim of the game creators, and the game appears to be very faithful in bringing the world of Middle-earth into a new medium. Furthermore, integrating all components of image and sound and having players interact with these spaces is also part of the creative process required in transmediality. For players who are very acquainted with *LOTRO*, the experience of playing may demonstrate that the Middle-earth of *LOTRO* is rendered in very close proximity to the material in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. In addition, the game may influence one's reading of it. So, these experiences complement one another in order to make this world as rich as possible, offering multiple opportunities to explore it. This experience is the aim of transmedia storytelling, as Henry Jenkins argues: "[t]he narrative extensions are read as legitimate in so far as they fit into the world as previously constructed and as meaningful in so far as they encourage us to look at that world through new eyes" (Jenkins 2017).

Despite offering a new perspective on the world of Middle-earth, which it does in many aspects, others are as close to the novel as possible, and the new additions are in the form of visualization, auralization, and interactivation. One such case is the entire map of the Shire, which is probably one of the most symbolic spaces in *The Lord of the Rings*

Online. Playing the game may change one's reading experience regarding, for example, Frodo's flight from the Shire very early in the novel. It may become easier to picture Frodo's journey with Sam and Pippin, their meeting with Gildor and their trek in the Marish, where Farmer Maggot lives, thus making *LOTRO* a main reference of Middle-earth. In the video game, it is also possible to trace the vestiges of this journey between Bag End and Buckland, and locate the mentioned towns of Woodhall and Stock, as well as the Golden Perch Inn, which is mentioned briefly by Pippin in the novel. This back-and-forth between novel and video game contributes to a deep dive into Middle-earth.

Furthermore, the video game maintains the sense of place associated with certain areas of the map, such as Scary, a small settlement on the edge of the Shire map next to an old quarry. In the game, the quarry has been overtaken by spiders, which makes the name a fitting one. However, the name originates from the word "scar", which comes from the Old Norse *sker* and means "high cliff" or "rocky cliff" (Hammond and Scull 2005, 775). In both cases, the name confers identity on the place, and both the novel and the video game use it playfully.

CONCLUSION

Going beyond the scope of the novel, the developers of *The Lord of the Rings Online* have expanded the world outside the borders of the main storyline of the book, bringing into the fold some regions outside the main area of Middle-earth, creating links between the story and threads that are continuations, but were relegated to the appendix sections of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. This is in accordance with the process of transmediality defined by Randall and Murphy, mentioned earlier, which they state requires the video game to go beyond the source material (2012, 121). Fulfilling this task, *LOTRO* is undoubtedly a game worth exploring if one is looking for an immersive experience of the world of Middle-earth.

The aim of this article was to provide insight into the transmedia adaptation of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* for video games. By contrasting the landscapes described in the novel with the imagery and sound provided in *LOTRO*, this study proposed to demonstrate the intricacies of world-building and transmedia storytelling and how they are

108 woven into the video game, expanding the existing world into a new interactive landscape that can be explored by the players.

By placing various studies of Tolkien's work into dialogue, it is hoped that this article will make a positive contribution to the current scholarship on this author. Similarly, studies of world-building and transmedia provide a relevant theoretical framework for the study of *The Lord of the Rings* novel and *LOTRO*, making this contribution even more valuable to the study of literature and media.

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END NOTES

¹ Tolkien sold the rights to both novels to United Artists in 1969, which were eventually sold to what would later be Tolkien Enterprises, now called Middle-earth Enterprises (Dotinga 2012). In addition to *LOTRO*, the company holds licenses for video games such as *The Hobbit* (2003), *The Lord of the Rings: Gollum* (2023), and *The Lord of the Rings: Return to Moria* (2023).

² Epic fantasy is described as a narrative that "deals with the founding or definitive and lasting defence of a Land" (Clute 1997).

³ As they pass the statue, Frodo and Sam notice a shift in the atmosphere of the place, as the crown reappears in the king's head: "Look, Sam!" he cried, startled into speech. 'Look! The king has got a crown again!' The eyes were hollow and the carven beard was broken, but about the high stern forehead there was a coronal of silver and gold. A trailing plant with flowers like small white stars had bound itself across the brows as if in reverence for the fallen king, and in the crevices of his stony hair yellow stonecrop gleamed" (Tolkien 2002, 687).

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