

Subcreation of Secondary Game Worlds

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Abstract. In this paper, Tolkien's term subcreation is discussed as a mythical method used to the design of secondary game worlds.

1 Introduction

Faërie is a perilous land, and in it are pitfalls for the unwary and dungeons for the overbold. [1] One should think this quote was referring to the classic pen-and-paper role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) by Ernest Gary Gygax & David Arneson [2] or the latest MMORPG [3]. It was not. It's actually a quote from J. R. R. Tolkien's famous essay *On Fairy-stories* from in which he defines and describes the essence of fairy-stories (or fairytales) and explains how these stories work.

J. R. R. Tolkien is however much more famous for his work on creating the world of Middle Earth used for both *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* [4]. These works have not gone unnoticed by virtual world designers and virtual world researchers. Richard Bartle, working on the design of virtual worlds, says:

“The single most important influence on virtual worlds from fiction is J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Although it would be of huge significance merely for having established the genre of High Fantasy, its ultimate worth lies in its depiction of an imagined world. It's not the particular world it describes that is momentous (although *Middle Earth* is indeed classic source material for people writing new text-based games); rather, it's that creating a fully realized, make-believe world was shown to be actually possible. Prior to *The Lord of the Rings*, worlds of such depth were practically unknown” [5].

The works of J. R. R. Tolkien have inspired geek culture and has turned into a phenomenon [6]. Susana Tosca and Lisbeth Klastrup argues that *the transmedial world of Tolkien's Middle Earth is more than the particular book trilogy called The Lord of the Rings, and it includes the films, the board games, the computer games, the fan fiction, the landscapes painted by graphic artists, etc* [7]. Mark J. P. Wolf notes that the designers of *Myst* and *Riven* were inspired by Tolkien's concept of *subcreation* – a term coined in *On Fairy-Stories* [8]. All of this tells us that there are to be sure reasons why designers of digital experiences ought to look further into Tolkien's essay.

2 Subcreation

For the purpose of this article I will perceive Tolkien's *On Fairy-Stories* as a poetics rather than an attempt to define the characteristics of fairytales. From this perspective the poetics is quite different from Aristotelian poetics. In Aristotelian poetics the focus is on creating narrative tension over time [9]. Tolkien on the other hand centres his attention to the creation of the narrative space. Of course there are some similarities. Like Aristotle, Tolkien wants to create a narrative with a climatic ending namely the *eucatastrophe* that is the sudden joy of an unexpectedly positive culmination [10]. Still, the main focal point in his essay is on creating a believable fantasy world.

The shift from a time-based poetics to a space-based poetics is not trivial as one might think. Henry Jenkins has pointed out we need to understand the narratives in videogames as narrative architecture saying *it makes sense to think of game designers less as storytellers than as narrative architects* [11]. In addition, Henry Jenkins in the essay *The Art of Contested Spaces* co-created with Kurt Squire states: *Effective game design can yield spaces that encourage our exploration, provide resources for our struggles for dominance, evoke powerful emotions and encourage playfulness and sociability* [12].

The spatial poetics must not be seen as an effort to destabilize the narrative time-based poetics. E. g. in order to comprehend movies and comics one cannot just analyze each picture but has to have a narrative approach to at least most movies and comic books. In this sense the movies and comic books became temporal movement of pictures. This does not mean one has to reject the understanding of pictures and images. Similarly the narratives in digital secondary world should be understood not just as a narrative space but also as a world for acting out lots of different narrations. The most important task will be to grasp the secondary world as a spatial form without denying the fact that there are indeed lots of possible narratives maybe even infinite narratives going on within the secondary world. Mark J. P. Wolf grasps narratives in a secondary world as a narrative fabric with multiple storylines, back-stories, histories and simultaneous events, while the traditional narrative is said to follow a thread [13].

The key to this Tolkienist approach to the creation of secondary worlds is *subcreation* [14]. By subcreation Tolkien means the ability to create a world within a creation. This concept is thought of as a Christian belief that our world is a creation made by God. However, using this theory one might as well see the world as created through a Big Bang if one prefers. The designer or *subcreator* just has to accept s/he is living in a primary world created before s/he was born. Subcreation is at the same time a humble and a haughty way of creating secondary worlds. On one hand the approach accepts that the subcreator has to subordinate to the primary world as it is and on the other hand it states that indeed the subcreator is able to create something new and exciting.

This duality gives rise to the acceptance of thoroughness. That is because the subcreator has to make a scrupulous investigation into myths and folklore of the primary world before painstakingly subcreating his own secondary world. Not only does the subcreator create a secondary world of make-believe, s/he also has to believe in the existence of this world in the sense that it should exist on its own terms or

what Tolkien declares as *the power of giving to ideal creations the inner consistency of reality* [15]. By doing so the secondary world comes to life not as an allegory of dead equivalence but as a symbol of living meaning [16]. In the words of H. P. Lovecraft: *A casual style ruins any serious fantasy* [17].

Thus being a subcreator is certainly not about *the willing suspension of disbelief* but on the contrary believing in the secondary world as if it was as real as our own.

Hence, the subcreator is escapist. This has political implications. The fellow inkling C. S. Lewis reports Tolkien's view like this:

"Professor Tolkien asked me this simple question, 'What class of men would you expect to be most preoccupied with and most hostile to, the idea of escape?' and gave the obvious answer: jailers. The charge of Fascism is, to be sure, mere mud-flinging. Fascists, as well as Communists, are jailers; both would assure us that the proper study of prisoners is prison. But there is perhaps this truth behind it: that those who brood much on the remote past or future, or stare long at the night sky, are less likely than others to be ardent or orthodox partisans." [18]

Tolkien stresses the fact that there are two kinds of escapist maneuvers: 1) the deserter who wants to escape his duties, and 2) the prisoners escape from his prison to freedom [19]. The first escapist maneuver is not justified and is a critique of escapism in romanticism and actually postmodernism too – even though it was pointed out before the existence of postmodernism. This is because Tolkien, inspired by G. K. Chesterton [20], disapproved of skepticism in general. It is in effect very cynical of the romanticists and postmodernists to denounce reality, because they want to live in their own private fantasy worlds without responsibilities, leaving the problems of the primary world to others. The second escapist maneuver is certainly justified and is a critique of modernist views on escapism as an illegal act. Yet, there is nothing wrong with fantasizing, delving into a secondary world of imagination, neither socially nor psychologically. Tolkien argues:

"Fantasy is a natural human activity. It certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity. On the contrary. The keener and the clearer is the reason, the better fantasy will it make. If men were ever in a state in which they did not want to know or could not perceive truth (facts or evidence), then Fantasy would languish until they were cured. If they ever get into that state (it would not seem at all impossible), Fantasy will perish, and become Morbid Delusion." [21]

Consequently, the ideology of subcreation is at the same time renouncing romanticism, modernism, and postmodernism too, claiming the subcreator needs to take his subcreations serious as an act of rational thought, not as an irrational behaviour. Just like when Johan Huizinga tells us to play games seriously otherwise they just don't work as games [22].

Note, just because J. R. R. Tolkien was very critical towards romanticism, modernism and scepticism in general, it doesn't mean he was against the modern world as such. He was against *so-called* progress at the expense of human beings, realizing the dangers of modernity but not against *real* progress due to technological

and philosophical inventions that helps humanity and the world to become a better place [23].

3 The Mythical Method

Instead of a narrative method we may now use the mythical method, T. S. Eliot declares and adds: It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible in art [24]. The concept of subcreation is Tolkien's proposal for a mythical method. This mythical method is only suggested in his essay. The subcreator has to look further into his works to get a notion of his techniques and maybe pick up some of his tricks. Reading *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Silmarillion* (the latter work published posthumously) [25] gives a clue to this. The works are very different. *The Hobbit* is a children's book, young adults may read *The Lord of the Rings* but rereading the work as an adult opens the work for much more profound readings, and finally *Silmarillion* is essentially a difficult work to read and understand, requiring insights in mythology, religion, and philosophy. What's more rereading *The Hobbit* after having read *The Lord of the Rings* and rereading *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* after having read *Silmarillion* opens these works even further. This is because *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* refer to *Silmarillion*. By doing so J. R. R. Tolkien conceived internal interreferentiality thereby supporting the inner consistency of reality.

The subcreator following this example must subcreate at three different levels:

Firstly (Philosophical level), the subcreator strategically must construct thoughtful mythologies, religions and philosophies of the world, knowing different cultures might have different worldviews of this subcreated world, knowing these cultures might be influenced by different sources of wisdom and by relating to other cultures. This level may not even be known to the explorers of the secondary world, but only hinted at or to use a term by C. S. Lewis, they experience a *transposition* of something bigger they can't fully comprehend – nevertheless they are still able to grasp the whole in fragments [26]. This gives the explorers of the secondary world an impression of exploring a world, which is bigger than what is immediately present, because there is more to it than what first meets the eye, giving them even more reason to explore.

Secondly (Epic level), the subcreator tactically has to construct a secondary world with geography and items based on the cultures, mythologies, religions, and philosophies, shaping the world historically. This world mapping should encourage narratives of epic proportions, giving rise to legends and heroic acts. Each of these epic narratives ought to inspire new epic narratives, in that way subcreating a world of living history. These narratives must include several layers of moral choices in order for the heroes to show what they are made of. This means the hero may indeed succeed on some moral issues while at the same time failing on some other, thereby building heroes of depth.

And thirdly (Naïve level), the subcreator operationally builds within his subcreation what seem to be simple narratives that are easy to grasp for the explorers

of the secondary world. Nevertheless, these narratives must relate to the narratives of epic proportions and in so doing they of course relate to the cultures, mythologies, religions, and philosophies of the secondary world. This level is what immediately meets the eye of the explorers of the secondary world. From here they may delve deeper into the mysteries of the world. That is why it is important that these simple narratives are compelling. Remember, these simple narratives may in fact turn into narratives of epic proportions and even become part of the world mythology.

Hence there are relations back and forth between these three levels, composing the subcreation into a whole experience. This is done through working with various structural elements in the subcreation of the secondary world. Mark J. P. Wolf points to maps, timelines, genealogies, culture, language, and mythology and narrative as underlying structures [27]. These structural elements must function on all three levels.

Tom Shippey has discovered another side to Tolkien's mythical method as regards to how trace elements were used as building blocks for his subcreation. As a philologist Tolkien worked with the idea of the asterisk word, which means *a word that have never been recorded, but must (surely) have existed, and there is of course enormous room for error in creating *-words, and *-things* [28]. These words are based on the notion that the same word in different languages might have a common origin.

Tolkien did the same thing with his mythology. Based on reading lots of old texts dating back to medieval times he encountered the odd pieces, which either did not make sense or lacked explanation and used these fragments in order to establish his own mythology. An example of this process derives from *The Hobbit* in which the names of the dwarves and Gandalf are taken from the section called *Dvergatal* in the Icelandic poem *Völuspá*. This process is very detailed and cost a lot of effort but in the end gives much more depth to the work than one come across in mainstream fantasy that hasn't dealt seriously with the origins of myth [29].

It is worth mentioning in this context that Tolkien did not originally intend to subcreate this fantasy world by the name of *Arda*. His intention was to create a language in which he could make beautiful poems [30]. But to do so he needed a language with its own culture and mythology, and consequently he did subcreate a fully consistent world in which these languages existed. Thus the most important part of *The Lord of the Rings* may in fact not have been the story itself but the poems written in the unique Elvish tongue.

What is vital to stress here is that when subcreating a secondary world the subcreator must have reasons why the subcreation need to be transpositioned from the subcreators mind into the primary world. There has to be some sort of goal to the endeavour, making the troublesome process worthwhile.

The mythical method of Tolkien is essentially not about putting elves and orcs into a fantasy world. It is about knowing how to subcreate a secondary world with its own inner consistency of reality which functions at all levels and is inspired by trace elements from myths and legends existing in the primary world.

4 Jungian archetypes

One mythical method used in digital games has been that of the Jungian Archetypes. The story goes that George Lucas used *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell based on Jungian archetypes when creating the story of *Star Wars* back in the 1970s. Later this turned into a poetics for Hollywood movies in general by Christopher Vogler [31]. Later again this hero's journey approach has been used as a game design method in videogames [32]. In this process the line of attack has been moved increasingly further and further away from Jungian psychology, ending up as an unquestionable belief unreflected to the point of empty rituals.

In the hero's journey the player usually plays a hero fighting against the shadow aided by his mentor. Female characters are seen as simple anima characters, only shadow-reflections of the male psychology [33]. This Jungian design method creates a secondary world without any Reason. It's merely harmless escapism, not concerned with reality of any sort. The game worlds do not rely on internal consistency but only on superficial psychological manifestations, absorbing the players into abusive consumption. Archetypes are essentially reproductive rather than innovative, which means these archetypical dramas rapidly turn into clichés.

This does not mean, however, that mythology is not worth using. Rather we need to have another approach towards myths. Mythology is more than just these embedded feelings, which can be transferred from one setting to another. The myth is defined by its effect on us [34]. Thus a troll does not have the same qualities as a father, even though they may be mistaken for one another in Jungian psychology. The troll is trollish and these specific qualities ought to be studied as representational constructions, referring to legends and myths of trolls and depending on these characteristics. Otherwise the troll merely becomes a scare or just another end-of-level-boss.

The Jungian archetypes are mostly working on the naïve level as non-conscious mirror images. The hero's journey turns these archetypes into the level of epic adventure, although it's only one kind of epic adventure namely the hero's journey, there might be a lot of other interesting stories to tell apart from this one. At the philosophical level there is of course Jungian psychology. But this theory is not provided within the frame of the game world. It's outside the game world, turning the adventure into a simple allegory of the player's psychology. There is no internal consistency at the philosophical level and consequently the adventure becomes almost meaningless or pointless within the game world.

To avoid the players from having this experience of emptiness, the fantasy game worlds in many computer games are designed with abstract hollow goals of killings and power mongering. These quest fit well into the understanding of the fantasy world gameplay as a hero's journey, but it leaves the player with a fantasy world, which unfortunately primarily are useful to desert from reality.

Working with myths, taking these myths seriously based on their own conditions, there is a chance we may subcreate game worlds that are not simply clichés based on *Dungeons & Dragons* and Jungian psychology. There is so much more to say than what can be said with elves and dwarves, and if one insists on using elves and dwarves, there need to be an internal consistent reason for why these kind of people exist in this game world. This may of course be done, and the game designers behind

e.g. Warhammer Fantasy Role-playing Game have done exactly that. There are lots of worlds out there just waiting to be explored [35].

5 Secondary Game Worlds

What is the difference between subcreating fairytales and fantasy novels versus subcreating secondary game worlds? In one sense there is no difference. As Susana Tosca and Lisbeth Klastrup pointed out the secondary world may assume different kinds of aesthetic forms depending on media and representation from books and pictures to games and music. The secondary world becomes a Neo-Platonist aesthetic ideal that may transcend into dissimilar shapes and copies of the original idea of the world in question [36].

On the other hand the secondary game world exploits the computer as media with its own special advantages. What immediately come to mind are of course 3D virtual worlds that users may engage in, populating these secondary game worlds with virtual avatars. This of course supports the secondary world to become vivid to the users. It's quite possible to make simple narratives and even epic narratives within such a construct.

Even so it's difficult to reach the level of subcreated mythology, religion, and philosophy using only 3D virtual world construction. It makes an amazing special effect but it lacks depth unless this profundity is subcreated through other means and put into the 3D virtual world as internal interreferentiality.

Game worlds such as *Ultima Online*, *EverQuest*, and *World of Warcraft* use Tolkienian fantasy elements like dwarves and elves. But they are in fact only superficial references taken from the *Lord of the Rings*. These game worlds are remnants of Gygaxian *Dungeons & Dragons* – not Tolkien. They never reach out to become more than dull escapism. Even so players may try to invent an internal consistency, making the game world worthwhile to explore. This has been done in numerous traditional non-computer roleplaying games.

Luckily, 3D virtual worlds are only one way of representing subcreations digitally. It's of course possible to use all kinds of multimedia displays. Music, pictures, ordinary texts, and hypertexts are useful other means to subcreate secondary worlds digitally. Especially, hypertext encyclopaedias are a welcome gift to the subcreator. In such an encyclopaedia it's achievable to store sound, images and texts in a hypertext structure, designing narratives and depictions of the subcreation, and reaching out to subcreate mythologies, religions, and philosophies for the cultures of the secondary world in question. This hypertext encyclopaedia develops into the library of all knowledge of the secondary world and may be expanded infinitely.

Secondary game worlds created through wikis, may be the next big thing. It's called *Lexicon RPG* and the idea stems from Neel Krishnaswami [37]. In this game, each player takes the role of a lexicon-writer. They are trying to describe the secondary world from each of these roles perspective referring to one another. Since they have different kind of perspectives on the world, the description of the world becomes culturally interesting and lifelike. By means of the mythical method, the

players of *Lexicon RPG* may grow to be the forward thinkers as regard to the subcreation of ground-breaking secondary game worlds.

Another game world promoting the mythical method of subcreation is Seed Online (2006) by Runestone. Here there is no room for hack 'n' slash; instead they focus on personalized stories, social/political gameplay, and believable NPCs. There are no standard character classes, no standard quest, and as already mentioned no combat. Seed Online points towards a subcreation working a lot harder with subcreating epic adventures beyond the hero's journey and *Dungeons & Dragons*.

The combination of the digital library in conjunction with a 3D virtual world may turn out to be the perfection of secondary game worlds.

On quite another level the programmer may in fact understand each and every program as a subcreation with its own rules and inner consistency of reality [38]. These programmes need to be transferred from the code level into an understandable user interface. In this sense the interface is a transposition of the program code, which again is a transposition of the programmers intended idea.

5 Conclusions

I would like to conclude that in order to subcreate a believable secondary world whether digital or not, one has to make an internal consistent reality. Game worlds are becoming more and more common these years, but it seems as if they lack a poetics, which may turn them into more than purely escapists deserting reality.

In order to subcreate a vivid world, I suggest that the game designers need to focus more on the philosophical, mythological, and religious cultural aspects of their world, rather than focusing on naïve quests. Not neglecting quests though, a believable game world requires naïve and epic adventures as well as philosophical inter-linkage. The game designer as subcreators must want to say something with their world, and these messages are the basis of the philosophical level of the game world. They do not have to be didactic or moralizing, but the content ought to move the players emotionally as well as sensibly or rationally.

In the future, I hope to see far more internally consistent realities and innovative subcreations pushing the limits of world-creation beyond the paradigm of *Dungeon & Dragons* and Jungian psychology, opening worlds that are meaningful to explore, and not just bad excuses for hack 'n' slash.

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