The Lord of the Rings: The Card Game – **a machine that generates possible worlds**

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Abstract: The article examines how *The Lord of the Rings: The Card Game* transforms its literary source, in this case the Middle Earth universe created by J. R. R. Tolkien. Using Espen Aarseth's terminology the game is recognized to be a cybertext - a semiotic machine that procedurally generates texts when operated by the player. With each game completion a different chain of events and actions is produced. Those stories are counter-factual to Tolkien's works. For example, while most elements from Middle Earth diegesis are repeated in the game, some cards introduce events, scenarios or even characters that were not present in the original work. Those elements do not damage the authenticity of the card game as a game based on *The Lord of the Rings*. They are "possible" extensions of the books. They "could be" parts of *The Lord of the Rings* because they were fashioned with its poetics and diegesis in mind. The author considers how possible world theory can help to investigate the game modalities from the literary science perspective. Whereas such theorists as Thomas Pavel and Marie-Laure Ryan have applied the concept of possible world to examine the status of fiction in literature, the author proposes to approach this theory from a different angle. Following Saul Kripke's and Umberto Eco's definitions, he classifies possible world as a phenomena that is both counter-factual and textual. The author argues that with each game session a new possible world is procedurally generated. As a result the founding text is (re)generated by being expressed in some new forms. Simultaneously it is (de)generated because the new creation is always an alternative version that deforms and challenges its source material.

„Welcome to Middle-earth, a land of Hobbits, Elves, Dwarves, Wizards, and Men. From the bright towns and fields of the Shire, to the wilds of Mirkwood Forest and Rhovanion, and to the powerful kingdoms of Gondor and Rohan, the various peoples of this land struggle against the foul minions and the ancient, evil threat of the Dark Lord, Sauron" (French, 2011: 2). These words open the instruction to *Lord of the Rings: The Card Game.* It is interesting that the textbook – comprising almost thirty pages of rules – begins not with the definition of the game but with the description of the represented world educed from J. R. R. Tolkien's work. This correlation is even more emphasized by the quotation which accompanies the mentioned paragraph and leads to the source of the game's inspiration directly – *The Lord of the Rings* books. And so an important question is raised, the question

about the connection that is being developed between the card game and the literary ancestor it is based upon.

A living card game

The Lord of The Rings: The Card Game is a collectible game published by Fantasy Flight Games in 2001. The main developer of the game was Nate French. The core package holds 226 cards, but *The Lord of the Rings: The Card Game* is also a „living card game". The distribution concept of the game assumes a regular publication of add-ons. Therefore the game is constantly bolstered by expansion of the available card pool, introduction of new scenarios and game mechanics.

As the instruction describes, *The Lord of the Rings: The Card Game* is „(…) a game of heroes, perilous journeys, and adventure set in the lands described in the epic fantasy masterpiece created by J.R.R. Tolkien, The Lord of the Rings. In this game, players take on the role of a party of heroes who are attempting to complete dangerous quests. (…) Instead of directly retelling the classic stories that have previously been narrated, this game provides players with a variety of elements — characters, settings, enemies, events, items, artifacts, scenarios—that allow them to embark upon new adventures and share new experiences with the beloved The Lord of the Rings characters and settings during this period of Middle-earth history" (ibid.: 2).

Each game session takes place in accordance with some scenario, which is running almost on its own, based on rules that are set down by the game. The scenario consist of the card pool that is being randomly revealed during the gameplay. Those cards contain instructions, illustrations, literary descriptions, names and attributes. The players have a similar deck at their disposal with which they try to overcome scenario cards that constitute specific challenges, enemies and encounters. In the course of the game the cards controlled by the players and game mechanics interact with one another and thus create a progression of the plot. The main goal for the players is to take part in a so-called "expedition", successfully completing a scenario inspired by Tolkien's works.

A transtextuality

Without a doubt *The Lord of The Rings: The Card Game* is mixed up in an intensive dialog with books written by Tolkien. Explication of those ties requires adequate methodology which is taken from the theory of transtextuality that was proposed by Gérard Genett. The French scientist has distinguished five categories used to describe diverse

relationships between texts, among them the category of hypertextuality. Genett understands by it every relation that is connecting text B (hypertext) with preceding text A (hypotext). He notices that text B could not exist without text A because it is its derivative and expresses it by transformation. Genette's hypertextuality doesn't have metatextual character. Rather, it is a distinctive type of evocation and reference (no matter if explicitly indicated or hidden). The term of hypertextuality should not be confused with intertextuality, despite them having similar characteristics. Genette's methodology conceptualizes intertextuality as a clear presence of one text in another. It has a much narrower quality and its most popular implementation can be found in the practice of citation. Intertextuality is a textual method that can be a part of hypertextual tactics (then it is just one of many evocation tools), but never vice-versa (Genette, 2014).

The methodology of hypertextuality is used to describe literary works. It is assumed here that this category is broad enough to be implemented for analysis of occurrences that are happening between varied culture texts, including those that happen in the form of certain activities.

In the case of the card game in question the literary universe of Middle-Earth is its hypotext. This corpus of texts consists primarily of: *The Hobbit*, novel cycle *The Lord of the Rings*, poetry anthology *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* and (published after the author's death) *Silmarilion*. The correspondence between the literary source and the card game is complicated. The hypotext was changed by far-reaching transformations that took place not during the transposition from one literary text to another, but in between two dissimilar media. As a result an important question must be asked: what transpositions and alterations were made on *The Lord of the Rings* to forge it into the card game?

Bilbo Baggins is one of numerous cards available in the game. It is branded as a "hero", therefore it openly references its precursor. After all, Mr. Baggins is the main lead from the *Hobbit*, he is also the main component for *The Lord of the Rings'* plot advancement. But the way he is "presented" in the card game and in the books is quite different. What in literary original was accomplished by the use of depiction, actions, dialogues and interactions with other characters, in the card game is reduced to the numerical characteristics: willpower strength, attack strength, defense strength. What is more, Bilbo Baggins is described by the game with one „trait", he is "the hobbit". This classification acts in two ways: it places the card in the Middle-Earth diegesis, while at the same time it becomes a part of specific mechanisms and rules. A quote from *The Fellowship of the Ring* is placed at the bottom of the

card: „Well, my dear fellow,' said Bilbo, 'now you've hears the news, can't spare me a moment? I want your help in something urgent" (Fantasy Flight Games, 2011). When taken out of its original context the excerpt appears to be coincidental. It advocates a link between hypotext and hypertext and suggests that some kind of propping up on the literary ancestor is taking place here.

If one wants to understand the context of this intertext, the source text must be inspected. The indicated statement is continued there: „Elrond says this song of mine is to be finished before the ends of the evening, and I am stuck. Let's go off into the corner and polish it up!" (Tolkien, 281). This passage is a part of the bigger scene in which Bilbo proposes to Strider a collaboration on the writing of songs for the celebration party. This act of text creation is mirrored by the game. According to the rules each turn the players can draw one card from their deck. Thanks to *Bilbo Baggins* this limit can be raised by one more card. Thereby, the scene is interpreted and transported onto the play mechanics. Within the game structure the act of drawing cards is associated with the discovery and generation of new texts. Similar trail can be found in another card: *Campfire Tales*. The card allows the users one additional draw. This rule is accompanied by an extract from *The Fellowship of the Ring*: „It is a fair tale, though it is sad, as are all the tales of Middle-earth, and yet it may lift your hearts" (Fantasy Flight Games, 2011). The image depicted on the card presents the group sharing stories by the fire. Once again the motion of drawing cards from the deck is tied to a storytelling practice.

A textual machine

The Lord of the Rings: The Card Game is a system that smoothly generates content. In the space of the game this content is incarnated in the form of the cards and interactions that develop between them. Such phenomena can be explored in the example of the *Passage through Mirkwood* scenario that even in its name builds on the Tolkien's world geography. The *Passage* is composed of four quest cards: *Flies and Spiders, A Fork in the Road, A Chosen Path: "Don't Leave the Path!"* and *A Chosen Path: Beorn's Path.* They are revealed sequentially during the play, forming the structure of the gameplay. The first one sets a beginning stage of the adventure, the second is made active if the players complete the first one and the last two create two alternative ending conditions for the scenario. The name *Flies and Spiders* copies the chapter title from the *Hobbit.* It is also the *Hobbit* from which the excerpt that is placed on one side of this card is taken from: „The nastiest things they saw were the cobwebs; dark dense cobwebs the treads extraordinarily thick, often stretched from

tree to tree, or tangles in the lower branches on either side of them. There were none stretched across the path, but whether because some magic kept it clear, or for what other reason they could not guess" (ibid.). This text leads the players back to the Middle Earth's diegesis, at the same time creating the correspondence between the game world and the represented world from the books. Yet it is not based on a simple transposition. The indicated quote casts a light on a vast story arc dealing with the journey through Mirkwood; which in the original version occupies dozens of book pages. Thus the goal of the quote is to invoke a reminiscence. A reproduction that takes place not in the game text itself but in the memory of the game users, who are supposed to recollect the specific story arc, as well as its themes, images, events…

This process can be defined as a particular kind of deliberate dysemination. The quote becomes a necessary prosthesis. It is the only way to express something that physically could not be contained on a tiny card. Seeing that only bare minimum can be transcribed on the surface of the card, the original text was reduced and cut back. In spite of this, the miniaturization initiates the opening and expansion of the referenced text. The source can once again manifest itself in its completeness by the evocation in the players' mind.

Another thing we can find on the card is a narration that was written only for the purpose of the game. It reads as follows: „You are travelling through Mirkwood Forest, carrying an urgent message from King Thranduil to the Lady Gladeriel of Lorien. As you move along the dark trial, the spiders gather around you…" (Fantasy Flight Games, 2011). This short account is filled with key-words derived from the hypotext. The passage is written in second-person plural, it can be assumed that the effect of the players' deep immersion was its goal. The key points from Tolkien's work used here encapsulate the felling of "being there" and make it more believable for the players. The game itself does not explain who Thandruil or Galadriel are. Only the source text (and the users' acquaintance with it) can clarify those things. Without the proper knowledge, the card's description can be confusing, therefore the textual pleasure is receded and the text becomes muddled with hollow spots.

Flies and Spiders is above all an assembly of instructions. It sets goals that must be followed if one wants to prepare and start the expedition. Those goals are obligatory for the proper performance of the scenario. Under their guidelines the players must mechanically – directed by the procedures – lay down specified cards into the game space. Among them, the *Old Forest Road*. The card's presence connotes motifs from Tolkien's works: "the journey", "the adventure", that what is "unknown" and "mysterious". On one hand, the *Old Forest Road*

is a location "excised" from the literary foundation and transported onto the language of the game; on the other, it is also a palette of procedures that animate the play.

In *The Lord of the Rings: The Card Game* each card works in linkage with others. They are interlocked. They respond to other card's content, start specific procedures, activate chosen elements and eventually force the players to act. This act also drives the game to pullulate, consequently generating additional activities. During the play more and more cards will appear in the game space, additional elements taken from *the Lord of the Rings* trilogy will be evoked, a sequence of operation and rules to consider will be formed. All of that for the game to constantly generate new text, till the completion of the scenario's criteria.

Because of that, it is worth to categorise analysed subject as an example of a cybertext. Espen Aarseth, who has introduced this highly influential term, explains that "(…) the *cyber* prefix indicates, the text is seen as a machine - not metaphorically but as a mechanical device for the production and consumption of verbal-signs" (Aarseth, 1997: 21). Of course, in the case of the card game the signs are not limited to being only verbal. What is important though is the fact that this machine is activated during the interaction between the operator of the text (the player), the material medium (the card game) and signs produced by an interaction. The game has a performative aspect. It is a device that manipulates itself and the player. A system that develops and processes "semiotic artefacts" – signs, codes, communicates. In the case of *The Lord of the Rings: The Card Game* such artefacts are rules and intertexts that imply motifs, details from represented world or even values – all descendant from Tolkien's writings.

The game in question works on the basis of defined procedures that activate adequate actions. It is a logical and predictable device, since the user must be able to understand it. But one more principle appears among other factors: the primacy of randomness. The game was designed in such a way that it can be replayed many times, each time achieving different proceedings and results. That is why, in the center of the play an act of card shuffling was placed. Even before the game begins, every deck must be carefully mixed so the intentional setup is eliminated. As a consequence, the fate is the main factor that powers the game.

A possible world

So far instances on how the game is getting closer to its prototype were described. However, there is no lack of movement in the opposite direction, when hypertext transforms hypotext so radically that it either goes beyond or contradicts the original. An exemplification

of such occurrence can be found in the *Beravor* card. The heroine presented on this card does not exists in any of Middle Earth's texts. Hence, it is a supplementation of hypotext; an addition that enriches the world described in *The Lord of the Rings*. However, it is also a fake that was quietly smuggled among other components (faithful to hypotext).

Beravor is accompanied by the quote from *The Fellowship of the Ring:* „But in the wild lands beyond Bree there were mysterious wanderers, The Bree-folk called them Rangers, and know nothing of their origin" (Fantasy Flight Games, 2011). It establishes a contract between the game and the players. The presence of Beravor in the game is justified, because it has been written into the Middle Earth's diegesis. This logic is intensified by the fact that the card is indicated with key-words that recall the hypotext. The game text suggests that Berevora could exists in this world, she could be a part of *The Lord of the Rings*. Even if she does not appear on the pages of the books it does not mean that their poetics and content do not create the possibility of her existence within them. She, at the same time, does belong and does not belong to the source text. In regard to it, she can only be described as a potential being, one that is not fulfilled in hypotext, but can be actualized in the hypertext.

Such instantiation makes the nature of the "game – original" relation apparent. An apocryphal text is brought into being. An alternative version is created. This is surprising, because the hypotext seems to be so rich in content that the authors of the game should not need to depend on their own contribution. Still, the game is based upon a transformation that produces an expansion and addendum that are alternative in nature.

The issue of alternativeness connotes the area of likelihoods, possibilities. To describe this matter a term "possible world" from logic and philosophy seems ideal. Ruth Ronen claims that "The basic intuition behind possible worlds states that there are other ways things could have been (…)" (Ronen, 1994: 21). According to her the problem of possible worlds in studies of fiction is mostly preoccupied with the referential relation between fictional and the actual. The idea of a "possible world" is adapted by literary disciplines and transplanted onto the study of a "fictional world". Ronen makes a clear distinction between how philosophical and literary studies understand this theory. "Possible worlds are based on a logic of ramification determining the range of possibilities that emerge from an actual state of affairs; fictional worlds are based on logic of parallelism that guarantees their autonomy in relation to the actual world" (ibid.: 8).

The application of possible world theory in this article omits the topic of fiction, it concentrates on relations between texts instead. Can this theory help us to describe or

understand specific relations that happen between different texts and media? The idea of ramification (not parallelism) is going to be very helpful in answering this question.

Jakub Zajdel defines possible world as an alternative state of being that is described with a set of sentences A possible world is made up from such statements as „it is possible that…" or "it could be…" (Zajdel, 2002). Possible world is counterfactual in regard to certain primary world. It is a probable state or a situation contrary to facts from that primary world. Umberto Eco has ascertained that a possible world is a cultural creation (Eco, 1994: 190-193). Saul Kripke presumes that possible worlds are abstract beings. They are established in an act of hypothesis creation, during which phenomena that are alternative to given state of things are described (Kripke, 1988: 47). As reported by the philosopher the possible worlds are based on descriptive conditions that we bestow upon them. They do not create new, analogous worlds, but introduce some kind of modality to the way we describe certain things. Thus they are discursive in nature.

That is why the possible world theory is applicable to description of transtextual occurrences that happen in the game. Possible world can be interpreted as a hypertext that is built upon hypotext. Its counterfactual propriety means that without the point of departure a possible world will lose its essence. In the same way, a hypertext without hypotext loses its transtextual character. Genette's theory assumes that the new text is always a consequence of the previous text. Viewed from this perspective, this new text is never autonomous in nature.

What is important though, is the fact that no autonomic world is created during the session of *The Lord of the Rings: The Card Game*. Texts produced during the gameplay can be fully understood only in their relation to the Tolkien's books. They are not parallel, since the scope of information about the diegesis presented by cards is quite limited. The rest of the necessary data must be presupposed from the books. When talking about counterfactual states we must remember that possible worlds are not some slightly modified duplicates of other world. They are limited only to those certain attributes that are being considered in terms of their "possibility". Kripke even explains "counterfactual" as a mini-world or a mini-state which is reduced to currently considered traits (Kripke, 1988: 22). That is because the possible world is always examined in the context of an actual world. In our case, the card game is played in the context of other texts that describe Middle-earth.

It was shown how the *Beravor* card can be classified as a possible extension of the Tolkien's universe. Ronen's review of philosophical concepts about possible worlds allows her to describe three basic understandings of this concept, one of which is moderate realism

(Ronen, 1944: 22-23). Followers of this category see possible worlds as creations that exists within the actual world and are part of this actual world. Which means that the actual world encompasses both the actual and that what "could be" but is not actualized. Following this idea one can understand the distinct link that connects Beravor to *The Lord of the Rings*. It is as if she was not created by the designers of the game, but rather was hidden (as a potential being) in the hypotext itself. Her being in the game is a simple ramification of the possibilities produced by the hypotext.

Another aspect of the game is becoming noticeable here. In some way the game tests the boundaries of the Tolkien's world. Each game session becomes an experiment in which the limit of the potential hidden in the source text is inspected, and it is only possible because of the game's transtextuality. One last example, which is *Gandalf,* should be able to prove that.

There are actually three cards in the game which represent the Istari wizard. Two are classified as "allies" and one is a "hero". All of them are some of the most helpful and powerful cards in the game. Yet they represent different characteristics of Gandalf. The first card is designed upon his tendency to aid the group in dangerous situation and then disappear without a word, the other one explores how the power of the wizard is a threat for the group, since his actions and presence bring the attention of the dark forces (something that the players must avoid if they want to succeed in the game), while Gandalf as a "hero" focuses on his knowledge and magical abilities. The cards explore different aspects of this protagonist, but it is impossible to tell, which one shows "the true" Gandalf. What is more, the gameplay puts him in diverse situations, some of which were never accounted in the books. It is as if the game was asking about the essence of Gandalf. When does the name Gandalf stop referring to the hero we know from the Middle-earth and starts pointing to somebody different? In other words, it asks about his trans-world identity.

"(…) trans-world identity raises the question of whatever an entity can preserve its essential identity despite being characterized, located or even named differently in different worlds" (ibid.: 58). In other words, it poses a question about what is necessary for entity to stay itself in different possible states. The theorists who deal with the problem of possible worlds often make a clear distinction between "necessity" and "possibility". According to Ronen "in the context of philosophical logic, "necessity" refers to a state of affairs obtaining in all worlds, while "possibility" refers to a state of affairs obtaining in at least one possible world (…)" (ibid.: 52-53).

The Lord of the Rings: The Card Game experiments on Gandalf's identity. The game creates different situations around him, or to be more exact - around his name. After all, the name Gandalf refers to very specific person from the books. One of *Gandalf* cards reads: "I am Gandalf, and Gandalf means me!" (Fantasy Flight Games, 2012). Indicating that Gandalf is identified based on a discursive practice as certain proprieties tied to Gandalf change with each game. For example, in one session he can slay Smaug the dragon, while in another this opportunity can be ignored altogether. If we can have both: Gandalf - the slayer of Smaug, and Gandalf who did not kill the beast (and maybe even perished under his flames), then it can be acknowledged that those properties are just some possibilities explaining how Gandalf could be, if books traversed other grounds. Despite those differences the name printed on the card seems to be still referring to the same person.

The analyzed card game must be classified as a machine, which aims to generate possible worlds that draw upon *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and its accompanying texts. The Lord of the Rings diegesis is constantly shuffled. As a result of game procedures each gameplay generates a new string of sequentially organized texts. Something that in literary version was a part of a stable structure, here is decollated, mixed and placed in a new sequence. A history (a succession of events and activities) that is created during the game session is always random, never planned. The shuffled deck determines a set of potential elements and the game session is t a space in which possible worlds are shaped from those elements. In such way *The Lord of the Rings* heroes take part in events that did not happen in books. Certain events proceed and end differently, characters from the background are illuminated, other characters do not appear at all. The users of the game can check "what would happen if…": Frodo did not take part in Bilbo's journey, Gollum did not lose his ring, Gandalf did never arrive.

The Lord of the Rings: the card game is a blasphemous reading of the original as well as its rewriting. It (re)generates texts it is based upon. It brings a new life into them, transports them onto a new medium, reinterprets them and causes the diegesis to be reborn in new configurations. Yet this (re)generation is also a (de)generation. The structure of the first work is deformed. The random selection of elements removes original meanings that were initially constituted by hypotext and some absurd situations may occur. What is more, the game constantly oscillates between different possibilities of its progression. It is full of potentials, from which only some (depending on luck and players' involvement) get to manifest themselves.

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