

The influence of J. R. R. Tolkien on the D&D[®] and AD&D[®] games

Why Middle Earth is not part of the game world

by Gary Gygax

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A frequently asked question — or assertion, in the case of those who don't bother to ask — deals with the amount of influence of J. R. R. Tolkien on the creation of the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS[®] and ADVANCED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS[®] role-playing games. The answer to the inquiry is complex, for there are two parts. The popularity of Professor Tolkien's fantasy works did encourage me to develop my own. But while there are bits and pieces of his works reflected hazily in mine, I believe that his influence, as a whole, is quite minimal.

As a child I was regaled nightly by fantasy stories created, on the spot, by my father. My mother read fairy tales to me from *Jack & Jill* magazine. I soon began reading the noted collection of the Brothers

Grimm, and others (I dimly recall) from a set called "Book Trails." Having read through Poe by age ten, I somehow gravitated into the realms of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. By the tender age of twelve, I was an avid fan of the "pulp" (magazines of those genres), and I ranged afieled to assimilate whatever I could find which even vaguely related to these exciting yarns. Meanwhile, I was devouring ancient and medieval history, tales of the American frontier, historical novels of all sorts, and the "Hornblower" stories in the old *Saturday Evening Post*. Somewhere I came across a story by Robert E. Howard, an early taste of the elixir of fantasy to which I rapidly became addicted. Even now I vividly recall my first perusal of *Conan the Conqueror*, Howard's only full-length

novel. After I finished reading that piece of sword & sorcery literature for the first time, my concepts of adventure were never quite the same again.

From these literary fruits came the seeds which grew into today's most popular role-playing games. The concepts bloomed, producing their current forms, when fertilized by my early desire to play games of all sorts, my interest in devising my own, and my active participation in military simulation games. The last employed either miniature figures and models, or boards and counters, or combinations of all those. As a matter of observable fact, both game systems are still growing, ever changing, and I do not expect them to slow — let alone wither — for many years to come!

A careful examination of the games will quickly reveal that the major influences are Robert E. Howard, L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt, Fritz Leiber, Poul Anderson, A. Merritt, and H. P. Lovecraft. Only slightly lesser influence came from Roger Zelazny, E. R. Burroughs, Michael Moorcock, Philip Jose Farmer, and many others. Though I thoroughly enjoyed *The Hobbit*, I found the "Ring Trilogy" . . . well, tedious. The action dragged, and it smacked of an allegory of the struggle of the little common working folk of England against the threat of Hitler's Nazi evil. At the risk of incurring the wrath of the Professor's dedicated readers, I must say that I was so bored with his tomes that I took nearly three weeks to finish them.

Considered in the light of fantasy action adventure, Tolkien is not dynamic. Gandalf is quite ineffectual, plying a sword at times and casting spells which are quite low-powered (in terms of the D&D[®] game). Obviously, neither he nor his magic had any influence on the games. The Professor drops Tom Bombadil, my personal favorite, like the proverbial hot potato; had he been allowed to enter the action of the books, no fuzzy-footed manling would have been needed to undergo the trials and tribulations of the quest to destroy the Ring. Unfortunately, no character of Bombadil's power can enter the games, either — for the selfsame reasons! The wicked Sauron is poorly developed, virtually depersonalized, and at the end blows away in a cloud of evil smoke . . . poof! Nothing usable there. The mighty ring is nothing more than a stan-

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dard ring of invisibility, found in the myths and legends of most cultures (albeit with a nasty curse upon it). No influence here, either. . . .

"Ent" is interesting; Tolkien took the name from an old Anglo-Saxon word for "giant," and his treatment of them as sentient trees is inspired. This sort of creature appears in both game systems. "Orc" (from Orcus) is another term for an ogre or ogre-like creature. Being useful fodder for the ranks of bad guys, monsters similar to Tolkien's orcs are also in both games. Trolls, however, are not identified well by the Professor; these game monsters are taken from myth, influenced somewhat by Poul Anderson.

"Hobbit" is another folkword borrowed from legends, but Tolkien personified and developed these diminutive stalwarts extensively. They, and the name, are virtually unique to his works, and the halflings of both game systems draw substantial inspiration from them. Dwarves, on the other hand, are well known in Teutonic and Scandinavian myths; here, the Professor and I build upon the same foundation. Elves are likewise creatures of lore, and perhaps the most extensively treated of them all. In legend they are small or tall, good, evil, uncaring, silly, bright, and so on. Tolkien had them taller, more intelligent, more beautiful, and older than humans; in fact, he made them quite similar to the fair-folk, the fairies. The elves of the AD&D® game

system borrow two names (gray and wood) from the Professor's writings, and that is nearly all. They are shorter than humans, and not generally as powerful. There are various ethical alignments amongst them, though most are neutral-good in outlook with strong tendencies of individuality (chaos, in game terms).

The seeming parallels and inspirations are actually the results of a studied effort to capitalize on the then-current "craze" for Tolkien's literature. Frankly, to attract those readers — and often at the urging of persons who were playing prototypical forms of D&D games — I used certain names and attributes in a superficial manner, merely to get their attention! I knew full well that the

facade would be dispelled by the actualities of play. I relied on the power of the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS game to overcome the objections which would naturally occur when diehard Tolkien enthusiasts discovered the dissimilarity. This proved to be the case far more often than not. Tolkien fans entered the D&D game fold, and became a part of its eager audience, despite the fact that only a minute trace of the Professor's work can be found in the games. As anyone familiar with both D&D games and Tolkien works can affirm, there is no resemblance between the two, and it is well nigh impossible to recreate any Tolkien-based fantasy while remaining within the boundaries of the game system.

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