Fidelity and Glitches

by Becky Anderson

During today's discussion, Darren asked if a customized, changed or altered NES is still an NES subsequent to the completion of various modifications and, importantly, what do these modifications do to gameplay or how do they then effect player experience? Indeed, these questions are at the crux of what I've been thinking about over the last couple of days relative to Turbine's MMORPG computer game adaptation LOTRO; that is, what does transmedial adaptation do to the parent narrative, storyline or world (I'm deliberately refraining from using "original" here) from which it is derived or on which it is based?

Making decisions in the adaption process based on fidelity to the source text is, in my opinion, a waste of time. Instead, I think it's more productive to question not why a developer makes these changes in the first place but rather the results of those changes. We can then inquire whether or not in forgoing a strict authenticity to or relinquishing an unyielding fidelity to the source material a transmedial expansion achieves what Richard A. Bartle would term believability and what Thomas Leitch would term quality.

Put simply, absolute fidelity to the source text is an unattainable fantasy because the moment you choose to transfer a storyworld to an alternate medium, you are by default unable to claim a strict and unyielding reverence to the text in question. Thus, what changing the medium means for adaptation is abandoning the notion of fidelity altogether. What matters, then, in this movement across mediums is the chosen medium's attached affordances; thus, while the spirit of the text in question may be preserved, this logophilic devotion to the parent text needs to be jettisoned in order to open up a space in which to work with the mechanics of the media in question.

For example, Tolkien describes several places in Middle-earth as pitch black (the mines of Moria or the forest of Mirkwood, for instance). Such a quality is impossible to translate into film or game mediums because a pitch black screen with no sound remains far from an engaging interpretation for the viewer and because a theatre or gaming space would never truly be absolutely dark (the lights demarking the stairs in the theatre or the sun that filters through the crack between the blind and window frame), nor totally silent (the movement, whispering etc of other viewers or gamers). As such, it's essential that the story-telling strategies particular to any one form of media are understood because it is these strategies that define an transmedia adaptation as its own work, rather than as a mere derivative of the source text.

A second point brought up during the discussion that really struck me was the notion that there is a culture of play situated around glitches and bugs. In LOTRO it used to be possible to scale the rooftops of Bree; I'm not sure if it was exactly a glitch or perhaps maybe just a simple oversight on Turbine's part but players could often be observed jumping between buildings or simply enjoying the view from a higher vantage point. In a subsequent upgrades, despite the culture of play established around this method of gameplay, Turbine began putting invisible walls up around the known entry points in order to inhibit players from engaging in this type of exploration. Players speculated that Turbine's motivations in constructing these barriers lied in there wish for the LOTRO community to not have too much fun while logged on; others hazarded that there was a more practical reason, which maintained that if you roofjumped, you made your PC vulnerable to either data corruption or to falling into and perpetually through some sort of data limbo in which your PC was forever lost.

Some users have pointed out that getting lost in the game remains impossible because you could simple use the "return to

home” function. Some have reasoned that the game’s database should in theory record your character’s coordinates in the game and so retrieving your character becomes a simple matter of Turbine resetting the data values to relocate the PC back into the world at a specific location (I’m uncertain relative to the amount of manual operation of the database this would require). Some, however, have argued that if your PC falls into a data limbo they are particularly hard to locate in the code because there is no concrete latitude and longitude one could search for in order to locate them in-game and, subsequently, relocate them. Regardless, if roof jumping in Bree allowed the gamer to interact with and experience the world of Middle-earth in interesting and intricate ways, albeit never intended by Turbine, why would they move to eradicate this possibility of gameplay? What’s their motivation?