Rom Hacking and Experiential Spatiality

By Becky Anderson

Through the duration of today's rom-hacking Super Mario Bros. workshop I kept asking myself, would this investigation into and inevitable alterations of the binary source code happen to a Tolkien-based game adaptation? I'm assuming that at some point somebody has tried. I think you could certainly modify an early heroic adventure game to reflect the epic quest line of Frodo and friends. Or, while it would take some…or perhaps a lot of work, I imagine you could even code-bend or apply a series of transformations to the Super Mario Bros. source code to reflect a Middle-earth inspired backdrop with the Super Mario Bros. game characters modified to fit those within Tolkien's Secondary World. Perhaps I'll consider that for a future project. But I'd like to think about the reception and attached implication(s) of these alterations relative to the larger community of fans and their experience of the game world.

I recently presented a paper on sub-creation and *LOTRO* at the NY Tolkien Conference. During the question and discussion period, one of the audience members remarked that it was ridiculous that I argue *LOTRO* could ever be considered as an iteration of and, in fact, experienced as Middle-earth; it's not Middle-earth as Tolkien likely intended, but I was baffled by why the audience member so easily and quite fervently discounted this form, iteration or interpretation of place. It constructs and grants the participant access to the Secondary World in such a way that Tolkien could never have possibly envisioned. Granted, some argue that precisely because Tolkien never envisioned such a 3D and participatory version of the *LOTR* epic quest storyline, let alone various realms in Middle-earth, we should, therefore, not accept these forms, of what I

suppose could be considered text-bending (i.e. mining the analogue storyline for plot points and creating some sort of game narrative out of this data), as valid transformations, adaptations or investigations of the Secondary World as it exists in its "original" form.

Such a line of argumentation however, relies on the (supposed) axiomatic superiority, to borrow Robert Stam's phrasing, of literary texts over their visual adaptations…to which I would point out that the Tolkien calendars received much less criticism over the last almost fifty years in their depiction of Middle-earth and its various creatures, characters, and places than do contemporary film and game adaptations of Middle-earth – perhaps there's something at play here regarding iconophobia, but there's certainly something to be pursued here regarding a hierarchy of art forms…but that's a tangent for another time.

So while I could never legally (I don't think) code-bend a Middle-earth video game adaptation or build one from scratch without some sort of approval from the appropriate parties (and even then if I was successful at securing the right permissions I image my vision would have to work within and under certain constraints), what I initially wondered was: does code-bending function as a method by which to either enhance or detract from a player experience of a Secondary World's game space? I think it's easy to default to discussion that privileges the negative impacts associated with code bending. But such a possibility presents the fans of Tolkien's universe to, at the minimum, construct and share their vision of the world as they interpret it from the parent text (assuming that Tolkien's written works are the medium by which a player first encountered Middle-earth). Another possibility that code bending presents to the player would be the potential to establish their stake in the story and, in so doing, interact with the narrative in new and unexpected ways.

This ties into one of the research questions I posed in my

first blog post; while I originally considered tracking the effect of a game's upgrades on player experience, I think it's equally valid to explore how code-bending, as an intentional dismantling of the existing infrastructure of the game, impacts the game's playability and, importantly, how that playability influences player experience. The difficulty lies, however, in implementing and, subsequently, tracking these differences over the wider *LOTRO* community in order to fashion and arrive at some sort of concrete conclusion about experiential spatiality. Perhaps, however, it is enough for my research practice to make discovers about the understanding of place in a Secondary World through a personal practice of (re)making particular game play mechanics…