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What are we playing with? Role-taking, role-play, and story-play with Tolkien's Legendarium

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Through examples of role-taking, role-play, and story-play with various artworks that draw against Tolkien's legendarium, a distinctive perspective on imaginative play is developed. While 'playing with' usually refers to the specific objects used as toys and 'playing at' to the roles assumed in such play, examining play situations from the perspective of the make-believe theory of representation (prop theory) suggests a specific relationship between these two aspects of playing. By examining which props are taking part in any given play situation, and comparing their metaphorical position in the foreground or background of the imaginary game being played, parallels and distinctions between different kinds of play can be explored and contrasted. The paper thus offers a phenomenology of imaginative play that helps to clarify exactly what we are playing with when we engage in any kind of imaginings, whether with toys, games, or stories.

Keywords: play; make-believe theory; prop theory; megatext, Tolkien, role-playing games

One Game To Rule Them All

Two tweens play at elves and dwarves in the woods, using sticks as swords. Four teenagers play a tabletop role-playing game based around Tolkien's Middle Earth. A young lady reads Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954) then watches Peter Jackson's adaptation of it (2001). A middle-aged man watches the first part of Peter Jackson's adaptation of *The Hobbit* (2012) having already read the book and seen the previous film trilogy. In each case, what is it that the individuals in question are playing with?

In the case of the tweens in the woods, the usual way of describing this situation is that they are *playing with* sticks, or that they are *playing at* elves and dwarves. The former stresses the toys they are using to facilitate their play, while the latter places emphasis on the roles that they are assuming, what can be called *role-taking* (Currie and

Ravenscroft, 2002), a terminology which helpfully avoids the confusing multiple sense of the alternative term 'role-play'. Similarly, when a toddler engages in playful activities that include a Wendy House, we can say that he is playing *with* the playhouse, or we might say that he is playing at 'House', or 'Cooking', or whatever role-taking activity is appropriate.

However, in the case of the young lady reading the first part of Tolkien's trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, we would not normally say she is playing with *The Fellowship of the Ring* nor that she is playing at fantasy quest stories. Neither would we usually discuss the middle-aged man's activity by saying he is playing with *The Hobbit*. Yet the imaginative activities these people engage in are not entirely dissimilar to the activities of the tweens or the toddler. There is a parallel that can be made, even if the engagement with the book and the film are more sophisticated experiences that are more explicitly guided by the 'toys' in question.

The teenagers playing a tabletop role-playing game based around Tolkien's work, such as *Middle-earth Role Playing* (Charlton, 1984) – known colloquially as MERP – occupy a middle ground between the children and the adults. For convenience, I will reserve the term 'role-playing' in this paper to mean 'playing a (tabletop) role-playing game'. Such games, initiated and still typified by *Dungeons and Dragons* (1974), lie between board games and children's games of make-believe, possessing rules (and usually dice) for resolving the outcomes of actions taken within the fictional world of the game, but otherwise not restricting the play in any significant manner. One player, the Games Master (or Dungeon Master) is 'in charge', and adjudicates outcomes as well as usually guiding the story forward (sometimes using a pre-set scenario to provide the details), but otherwise the imaginative activity implied by such games is much closer to that of the tweens in the woods than it is the person reading a novel or

watching a movie. Here, we might be tempted to say the teenagers are playing *with* dice and playing *at* fantasy quests – in direct parallel to the tweens playing with sticks and playing *at* elves and dwarves.

The purpose of this paper is to draw out the connectivity between all of these activities by examining them in the context of an influential model from philosophy of art, the *make-believe theory of representation* (Walton, 1990), also known as *prop theory* (Bateman, 2011). Without undermining the utility of the concepts of ‘playing with’ and ‘playing at’, an additional perspective is developed whereby ‘playing with’ and ‘playing at’ are clarified as different ways of describing the same situation, and the question of what is being ‘played with’ in the case of the young lady reading the novel and the middle-aged man watching the movie can be explored. What is offered is thus a phenomenology of imaginative play that helps to clarify exactly what we are playing with when we engage in any kind of imaginings.

Prop Theory for Beginners

The philosopher of art Kendall L. Walton began expounding the make-believe theory of representation in the 1970s (e.g. Walton, 1978) but laid out the definitive description of the approach in his magnum opus *Mimesis as make-believe: on the foundations of the representative arts* (Walton, 1990). Although the details of the theory become quite complex in its corners, the basic version is easy to understand. Walton suggests that representative artworks such as paintings, sculpture, novels, theatrical plays, and movies are experienced by their participants via an experience that is parallel to (but more sophisticated than) the experience of a child playing a game of make-believe. Just as hobby horses, Wendy Houses, and toy guns serve as props in children’s imaginary games, so paintings, sculptures, books, stage performances, and feature films serve as props in imaginary experiences, prescribing specific details of to be imagined.

Although it is expressly discussed in terms of representative *art*, the principal interest of the make-believe theory is not art as such but rather *fiction*. Fiction in Walton's terms concerns what is true in the imaginary world implied by any given prop. So it is fictional in the tween's game of elves and dwarves that the sticks are swords, and this is equivalent to saying that it is true in the fictional world of the game of elves and dwarves that sticks are (or represent) swords. Similarly, it is fictional in *The Hobbit* that a ring can make you invisible, which means it is true in the fictional world of *The Hobbit* that certain rings can do this. As such, Walton's prop theory is not a theory of art as such, but a theory of fiction and it can thus be applied to any situation in which fiction (in this sense) applies.

Note that although Walton's approach describes our involvement with representative art as expressly involving an experience parallel to a child's game of make-believe, it is not necessary to consider the experience of representational art as *play*, per se. While Walton does indeed suggest that the way we enter the fictional world of (say) a painting or a movie is by playing a game of make-believe with it (albeit one with relatively tight constraints owing to the greater specificity of the objects concerned), whether this kind of imaginative experience constitutes 'play' depends upon the definition of 'play' being considered. It would certainly be valid to exclude the guided imaginative experiences of narrative from constituting 'play' under certain construals of the term.

For the purposes of this paper, however, it is assumed from the outset that imagining for entertainment purposes is indeed a form of play, and thus that novels, plays, and movies are all (relatively restricted) forms of play. Some arguments in support of this assumption are provided later. Those resistant to this interpretation should consider mentally substituting 'play-like activity' (or some such broader phrase)

whenever 'play' is used from hereon, since the terminology is less important than the core idea being developed.

The term 'prop theory' captures the idea that at the core of Walton's theory is the concept of a *prop*. As already indicated, anything that prescribes specific imaginings constitutes a prop – whether we are talking about a toy in a child's game, a novel, a theatrical play, a painting, or a movie. Every prop implies a fictional world (the authorized world or the *work-world* of that prop) and claims concerning truth or otherwise with respect to that specific prop are thus to be judged against the authorized games of make-believe that are played with that specific prop. The authority in question should be considered social in origin – and it is certainly not *wrong* to play unauthorised games. If a child imagines that a teddy bear is a baby, that's perfectly legitimate play – but it is not the authorized game for toy bears, which are those in which it is prescribed to imagine a teddy bear is a bear.

There is an immediate problem with this concept of socially-construed authority, however, because of the inherent ambiguities of make-believe games. For instance, is the authorized game for a teddy bear that it is a flesh-and-blood bear (that it is fictional that stuffed bears represent living bears) or is the authorized game that stuffed animals can act as if they were living beings (that it is fictional that stuffed animals *are alive*)? Walton suggests that the safest course of action is to consider as fictionally true in the work-world of a given prop only what is true in *all authorized games* played with that prop. Following this course of action would mean that there is no fact of the matter when it comes to what is fictionally true of teddy bears as living beings, since *both* the previous scenarios are legitimate, authorized games in their own right. How are problems like these to be resolved?

Contemporary Megatexts

In *Imaginary Games* (Bateman 2011), a different approach to these kinds of problems is offered. Bateman suggests that in considering contemporary media, Walton's approach is effectively too narrow. In a medium such as comics or science fiction television shows, if we take as fictional in the work-world only what is fictionally true in *all* the authorized games, there might transpire to be *nothing at all* that is fictionally true! This is because the number of possible authorized games in long-running genre fiction tends to be very numerous indeed! Consider, as just one example, whether one judges the content of the prequel series *Enterprise* (Berman and Braga, 2001) in terms of classic *Star Trek* (Roddenbury, 1966), or in terms of *all* the *Star Trek*-branded media. The interpretation choices become extremely varied, and following Walton's guideline to only accept as fictional in the work-world what would be true in *all* authorized games will likely lead to almost *nothing* being true in the work-world of *Enterprise* except what had no bearing whatsoever on other *Star Trek* media.

Bateman's solution is to reject Walton's overly conservative approach in favour of a more liberal interpretation that nonetheless remains consistent with the spirit of Walton's theory. Drawing against Charles Segal's concept of a *megatext* (1986), originally used to explain the interconnectivity of the stories of ancient Greek mythology, Bateman suggests that most media franchises today need to be interpreted in terms of their implied megatexts, and indeed that many narrative works may draw against multiple megatexts. It then becomes possible to answer questions such as the above ambiguities surrounding *Enterprise* by asking the clarifying question: which props are in effect? Is it just the individual episode of *Enterprise* to be considered, or is the game in question also being played with specific episodes of *Star Trek* or its sequels, or the *Star Trek* megatext as a whole? This cannot offer the neat solution

provided by Walton's method of considering only when must be universally true for a prop (true in all its authorized games) – but it does get to the heart of the way that Marvel Comics, *Star Trek*, or Tolkien's Middle-earth are experienced, which is precisely as one-prop-among-many, as fragments of a larger megatext.

Tolkien referred to his own mythology as his *legendarium* (1981), and this can be specifically understood as the recognition that his writings form a megatext. But invoking the legendarium as a megatext is not, in itself, enough to adequately answer the question 'what are we playing with?' in cases like the young lady reading then watching *The Fellowship of the Ring*, or the middle-aged man watching *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* after having had prior experience of both the book and the previous trilogy of films. Accepting the prop theory perspective that would treat these cases as examples of playing an imaginary game, we begin to uncover the complexity of the different games that can be played – and the reason why arguments concerning the fictional truths of the implied worlds can become torturous.

It is precisely because the assumption of a megatext is unconsciously 'in play' when we experience contemporary media franchises that it seems like there should be 'an answer' to fictionality questions in respect of *Star Trek* or Middle-earth. Yet it is precisely because these megatexts contain so many differing elements that any such answer can only come from clarifying the question of this paper: what are we playing with?

Foreground and Background Props

To resolve these kinds of problems (or rather, to identify why these kinds of situations become problematic) it is useful to recognise that in the contrast between a prop and a megatext, Bateman begins to develop a relationship between props that needs to be further clarified. The concept of a megatext amounts to a claim that certain props can be

active in the *background* of a particular imaginary game, while other props can be active in the *foreground*. We can call these ‘background props’ and ‘foreground props’ respectively. Furthermore, we can extend this metaphor borrowed from theatrical practices to suggest that the background props are arrayed ‘nearer to’ or ‘further from’ the foreground. There is thus a series of (metaphorical) layers to any game of make-believe being considered – with the foreground props being supported by layer upon layer of background props.

By definition, any given artwork or toy we are playing with is a foreground prop – but it may not be the *only* foreground prop. To capture this idea, let us call whatever it is we are directly interacting with the *primary prop* or primary props. Primary props are those props which are *focal* to the imaginings taking place, and the term is useful for distinguishing between those props working in the foreground as the locus of the imaginings in question and those working in the foreground in other ways. For instance, the young lady watching *The Fellowship of the Ring* after reading the book has the movie as the primary prop – it is the focus of her imaginings - while the book it is adapted from is *also* in the foreground in this case (this idea is developed in greater detail below). Other props can be considered to have a metaphorical focal priority according to how ‘far’ from the primary props they are (how ‘deep’ into the background they are). Let us consider all the previous examples in the context of these newly defined terms.

Role-taking vs. Role-play

Let us make it explicit that the tweens playing at elves and dwarves are doing so with Tolkien’s legendarium as a megatext and not with, say, some other popularized adaptation of the Prose Edda (Sturluson, 1220) or with *Dungeons & Dragons* as inspiration. We could say here that the sticks and the forest are the primary props – they

are what prescribes that the players imagine they are elves and dwarves in a fantasy forest. Meanwhile, Tolkien's legendarium is a background prop to their game: it gives them resources that they apply in their game of make-believe – a specific conception of 'elf' and 'dwarf' in particular. However, the story the tweens are acting out is theirs alone and is not dictated by anything specific in Tolkien's works. Of course, if they were acting out the story of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, this situation would be different – then this book or film would *also* be in the foreground of their game.

It is also worth pointing out that for the tweens playing at elves and dwarves, they are *themselves* primary props in their game, since they are focal to its imaginings – it is their physical presence that prescribes an elf or a dwarf in their imaginary game in this case, which is not true in any of the other examples being used here. While live action role-playing games (LARP) blur the lines somewhat, it is usually the case that we ourselves are not foreground props in the imaginary games associated with artworks. This applies even in cases where it might seem otherwise, such as novels written in the first person and movies or games depicted in what is termed first-person perspective. It becomes ambiguous in the case of novels written in second person (“You open the door...”) but even in such situations the *physical* body of the reader is not presumed to be part of the imaginary games – otherwise if you read such a story while sat in a chair it would be fictional in the imaginary game in question that you were *both* opening a door and sat in a chair. Role-taking, therefore, is a kind of play predicated upon imagining oneself as a primary prop, just as theatre is a kind of artwork in which the actors on stage are taken as primary props (while the audience is – usually – entirely ignored). This distinction alone distinguishes children's games of make-believe from the imaginary games implied by representational artworks in Walton's theory.

The four teenagers playing the Tolkien-inspired tabletop role-playing game MERP are in a different situation. For a start, they themselves are not primary props in the game – at least not physically. Each player has their own corresponding character in the fictional world of the game, but the prescription to imagine this comes from either their character sheet (a piece of paper describing the abilities of their imaginary persona), or a miniature (a figurine representing their persona explicitly or implicitly), or both. It is *these* that form the primary props, along with whatever materials the Games Master uses as a basis for the adventure – whether it is a published scenario or merely some rough ideas in their head. In the latter case, and in general, it may be better to say the primary prop that the Games Master contributes is their oral narration of what transpires in the fictional world of the game.

Also in the foreground, but not primary, are the dice that are used for the resolution of actions in the game world. The dice are not primarily representational, being better considered functional props (see Bateman, 2011: 163-164), but they are still an important part of the imaginary game in question. When a combat scene plays out between the player characters and, say, a troll, the dice prescribe that the players imagine that certain attacks have injured the troll, or that the troll injures their *alter egos*, but the dice are not focal in that whatever values the dice display is interpreted via the rules as prescribing specific imaginings about the *characters* (implied by character sheets and/or miniatures) and the troll (implied by verbal narration and/or miniatures).

Tolkien's legendarium is a background prop to this role-playing game, because the adventures that players undertake with this particular set of rules take place explicitly within Middle-earth. You could also consider any or all of Tolkien's stories as background props, but stating that the legendarium is a background prop is equivalent to saying 'everything Tolkien wrote about Middle-earth is a background prop'. Note,

however, that a specific scenario could bring about the need to refer to other props in the background, but ahead of the legendarium in focal priority. For instance, a scenario set in the Mines of Moria draws more expressly against content from *The Fellowship of the Ring* than from the legendarium in general: in such a case, this specific book (or film) could be considered to be more focal ('closer to the front' of the background) than the legendarium.

These examples of role-taking and role-play seem to fall clearly under a general concept of 'play' in part because we can discuss them in terms of 'playing with' and 'playing at'. But notice that the conventional understanding of 'playing with' is insufficient to adequately describe the phenomenal experience of players in either case – it is not enough to understand the tween's game to say they are playing with sticks, nor the role-players game to say they are playing with dice or miniatures. We also need to know what they are 'playing at'. One advantage of looking at these issues from the perspective of prop theory is that we can then understand 'playing at' in terms of which additional (foreground and background) props are being played *with*. This more general descriptive approach has the additional benefit of extending parallel phenomenology to other experience not generally deemed play – such as engagement with narrative artworks, as the remaining examples emphasise.

The Film of the Book and Other Games

The young lady who reads and then watches *The Fellowship of the Ring* demonstrates the merits of using the notion of props to understand the narrative play of artworks. As she reads the book, this book (and only this book) is a primary prop, there is nothing else in the foreground – nor anything specific in the background. She does not need to have *any* awareness of Tolkien's legendarium to read *The Fellowship of the Ring* and this megatext is *not* in the background of her game. (Of course, the legendarium was in

the play while Tolkien was writing it! But that was a different game...) When she then watches the film, both the film *and the book* are in the foreground, but the film is the primary prop. As she watches scenes, she can say to herself 'I remember this from the book', or 'I don't remember this from the book!', or 'I imagined that very differently when I read the book.' These experiences significantly affect her enjoyment or otherwise of the film, and this kind of prop-focussed description draws attention to the unique aspects of watching a film that is adapted from a book you have read, the aesthetic experience of which is *not equivalent* to watching the same film *without having read the book*. The expanded prop theory offered here elucidates distinctions in aesthetic experiences that are salient but are not usually discussed.

Finally, the middle-aged man who watches *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* having read the book and seen *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy has an aesthetic experience that cannot be adequately described without more details – information, incidentally, than only *he* could provide. He has a *choice* of imaginary games he could play. On the one hand, he could view the first part of *The Hobbit* trilogy as an adaptation of the book and thus play a game parallel to that played by the young lady. But even if he does this, Tolkien's legendarium (or rather, Peter Jackson's interpretation of Tolkien's legendarium) still operates in the background – something that was not a factor for the young lady. Alternatively, he could view the movie he as watching as a prequel to the previous film trilogy – a game that the movies are in fact set up to encourage, by explicitly framing the narrative as a flashback that integrates the two movie trilogies. In this game, the new movie and the previous trilogy are foregrounded (with the new movie primary), and the book becomes a mere background prop.

It is a significant aesthetic fact about *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* that this latter game follows most naturally from its work-world: we are justified, therefore,

in suggesting that rather than an adaptation of *The Hobbit*, the principal authorized game to be played with these movies is as a prequel to *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy (a circumstance further aided by the inclusion of details from the appendix to *The Lord of the Rings* books as source material for the newer film trilogy). Note that while the books of *The Lord of the Rings* are indeed a sequel to *The Hobbit*, a very different game is required to view the latter as a *prequel* to the former – a point not often considered when assessing the relationships between narrative artworks.

It is the nature of prequels as such that they are written *after* the original artworks, despite their content occurring *before* the events of the originals in the chronology of the relevant fictional world; the use of the term ‘prequel’ as the conceptual reverse of sequel obscures distinctions that are particularly important in this and many other instances. *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977) and its sequels and prequels, for instance, make less sense if viewed in the order of their episodic numbers and more sense if viewed in order of production, since the prequel trilogy expressly expects the viewer to have seen the original trilogy in order to understand the significance of key events. Once again, prop theory helps new elements of the phenomenology of representational art to come to the fore that can be helpful in understanding our experiences of contemporary fiction.

Based on these observations, we can even make a prediction: anyone who tries to enjoy the films of *The Hobbit* via a game like the young lady’s – as an adaptation of the book – is quite likely to be disappointed, since the work-world of this movie is radically different from the work-world of the book in numerous significant details (the inclusion of events irrelevant to the book except when re-imagined as prequel; the inclusion and alteration of a background detail from the legendarium – the albino orc Azog – solely for the dramatic purposes of the new trilogy etc.). This indeed was my

experience of the film in question, and a prompt to explore *why* – given the obvious choice of games that could be played with the film – the apparently *less satisfying* game would be chosen. The answer to this question, however, lies beyond the scope of this paper.

Stories as Play

Earlier, I asked that those sceptical of the idea that stories can be understood as play to simply treat ‘play’ in this paper as ‘play-like activities’. Before concluding, however, I should like to further explore the idea that our experience of stories can and should be understood as a kind of play, and highlight why the conception of narrative artworks as essentially static or entirely non-interactive is a misleading way of thinking about how they are experienced.

One important reason why our experiences of narrative artworks should not be prematurely excluded from involving play (or something like it) has already been highlighted: the imaginary game to be played with certain films and books is *not the same for each person*, and such games can gainfully be clarified by understanding which other representational artworks or megatexts (which are nothing more than collections of representational artworks) are forming a part of the relevant experience. The answer to the question of this paper, ‘what are we playing with?’ has specific meaning when we are experiencing stories because we *never* understand such artworks in isolation. Indeed, it is impossible that we should. We must, as Walton observes (1990: 138-173), make use of principles of generation that draw upon our prior knowledge and experiences to fill in the gaps of a story or a painting because otherwise storytelling would be impossibly complex, pernickety, and tedious.

Along related lines, Tamar Szabó Gendler (2000) suggests that the fictional worlds of stories can be gainfully understood as ways of making claims about *our*

world, which relates directly to the way ‘storytelling makes use of standard assumptions about common knowledge and presupposition’ (ibid: 75-76). Gendler talks of the way we *import* elements of our actual knowledge and experience into the stories we read in order to fill out the gaps in the story – no novel ever has to describe gravity, except when it is startlingly different to what we are used to, for instance. Similarly, we feel free to *export* elements of the fictional world that we judge ‘to be not merely truths in the story’ (ibid: 76). Gendler uses this to provide an explanation for the puzzle of imaginative resistance that is traditionally traced to Hume (1757), which strives to explain why we are willing to accept crazy concepts in stories – such as a ring that makes you invisible – but remain resistant to crazy moral claims in stories – such as genocide being morally right.

It is the use of principles of generation or the related concept of import and export that offer a key to understanding why stories, despite being apparently static in their details, are still a play activity: we can never ‘just’ read a novel, or ‘just’ watch a film. We are *always* being challenged to import content from other fictional worlds – including the science megatext (see Bateman, 2012b), or the one that we ourselves live in (see Bateman, 2014). Furthermore, we are constantly invited to import and export between the fictional worlds of stories and the megatexts they form a part of as part of far more elaborate games, such as those of the young lady or the middle-aged man. Far from stories being fixed and static, both their content and their meaning is always up for grabs – the former may not change much, but neither is it inviolable. If it were, the Royal Shakespeare Company would have long since run out of unexpected ways to mount the plays that form their canon.

Virtual vs. Fictional

Another way at getting at the same idea is to approach it from the perspective of

attempts to distinguish ‘fictional’ from ‘virtual’, such as those undertaken by Veli-Matti Karhulahti (2012). Karhulahti mounts his ontology very cleanly, and attempts to make the mark of the virtual (as opposed to fictional) object their explorative and configurative dimensions, following a line of argument originating in Aarseth (1997). He uses an example from the classic text adventure game *Dracula* (Pike and Ellery, 1986) to illustrate his point, but it would be more fitting for this paper to make reference to the text adventure adaptation of *The Hobbit* (Mitchell and Megler, 1982). This game begins with a short description of the Hobbit-hole Bag End from the interior:

You are in a comfortable tunnel like hall. To the east there is the round green door.

As Karhulahti remarks, some ‘outwardly similar objects’ in such games ‘seem equally fictional’ but ‘are actually virtual’ (meaning they are explorable or configurable). In the case of the door, it is possible for the player to type ‘examine door’ and receive the response ‘You examine the round green door. You see the round green door’. Similarly, you can type ‘close door’ and the response ‘You close the round green door’ is given. However, in the case of the ostensibly similar hall, if the player types ‘examine hall’ the error message ‘I do not see the hall here’ is given, and no other verb can be used that will produce anything but an error message.

According to Karhulahti’s account, the door has an explorable (‘examine’) and a configurable (‘close’, ‘open’) aspect that makes it virtual, rather than just fictional. I will not dispute the essentials of these claims here – what is relevant to the arguments of this paper is the idea that the play of a text adventure game such as *The Hobbit* rests on the presence of explorable or configurable objects. To paraphrase Karhulahti’s remarks on *Dracula* using the example above: ‘The tangible difference is, one can play with the door but not with the hall.’ Note, however, that in Karhulahti’s original remarks, the

virtual object that ‘one can play with’ can be examined *but not* interacted with – the threshold of the virtual offered here is comparatively low.

Now consider the case of a teenage geek watching the movie of *The Fellowship of the Ring* with a copy of the alphabetical reference encyclopaedia *The Tolkien Companion* (Tyler and Reilly, 1976) and the atlas *The Journeys of Frodo* (Strachey, 1981) at hand. She is playing a very different game from the young lady watching the movie without these additional props! Now when she sees in the movie that Frodo is inside Bag End, she can look up ‘Bag End’ or ‘Hobbiton’ in *The Tolkien Companion* and read a description of the places concerned. This action is functionally equivalent to typing ‘examine’ in the text adventure, and the content of the game she is playing with the film has now acquired explorable content – objects that were previously ‘just’ fictional are now virtual as well! Similarly, when the hobbits encounter the statues of the trolls in the movie she can find where this happens on Barbara Strachey’s maps and even imagine what is going on nearby, or what has happened between shots of the movie. The content of her imaginary game is now (trivially) configurable because the foreground of her game contains not only the film but the reference books, and when these become primary the fictional content of the film take upon purportedly virtual qualities – they become things that can be played with.

If this seems a contrived example, consider that the teenage geek could achieve much the same effect by watching the movie and using a smartphone to access equivalent information from internet resources. For that matter, many Tolkien geeks will have in memory a significant volume of the information that is present in such reference resources and thus may even be able to imbue the fictional world of *The Fellowship of the Rings* with such virtual possibilities without ever taking their eyes from the screen. The more megatextual information an individual has absorbed, the

greater the variety of games that can be played with the artworks that the megatext relates to. This kind of *story-play* is of course considerable thinner than other kinds of play, but as Bateman (2012a) has argued ‘thin play’ is aesthetically interesting precisely because it allows fictional elements greater focus.

What Are We Playing With?

The claim of this paper is that we gain a valuable perspective on play of many different kinds by applying Walton’s prop theory and asking ‘what are we playing with?’

Identifying the props that are present within any particular imaginary game, and their positions relative to the foreground and background of the individual play experience, can illuminate the nature of the make-believe activities – as well as spotlighting the essential connectivity between role-taking, role-play, and the kind of story-play outlined above. All the example experiences described above are essentially imaginative, they involve make-believe and fictional worlds – and all could be seen as different kinds of play.

Even if the reader is resistant to considering cases such as that of the young lady or the middle-aged man as examples of play (albeit very thin play), hopefully the teenage geek example will at least make the possibility of story-play with artworks conventionally thought of as ‘static’ or ‘non-interactive’ plausible. This is not even a new perspective on the matter: Callois (1958) already suggested that theatre, for instance, should be considered a form of play (as indeed is explicitly referenced in the English word ‘play’ for a theatrical performance!). The arguments developed here from consideration of Walton’s make-believe theory move in a similar direction. Of course, Callois had the advantage that in French the word for ‘play’ and the word for ‘game’ are the same, *jeu*, which invites a wider conception of both. The English distinction

between the two words (mirrored in many other languages) invites distinctions that are often practical, but frequently obscure the extensiveness of the field of playful activities.

A natural objection may occur to some readers, especially those keen to demark either ‘game’ or ‘play’ with clear boundaries: ‘if all things are play, then nothing is play’. This argument has no logical force. Consider the popular belief that all things are made of matter. It is no objection to this perspective to say ‘if all things are matter, then nothing is matter’ – indeed, such an objection would be farcical. When considering everything in existence as made of matter it is the sheer diversity of the kinds and states of matter that make it actually rather trivial to observe that ‘all things are matter’ – iron is nothing like oxygen, water is not hydrogen nor oxygen even though it is ‘made’ of both, ice and hydrogen-oxygen plasma are nothing like water despite being made of identical matter. What matters is *what* is being considered, not that what is considered is made of matter. Similarly, even if a vast volume of human activities could be considered play, what would be interesting would be the *differences* between those many and varied forms of play – the presence of a continuum of play would be a mere background detail facilitating their comparison.

Using the same artworks, many different kinds of play are possible – from the thin story-play that considers the relationships between different narratives, or between those narratives and our experiences of the world around us, through to the more complex imaginative activities of computer games and tabletop role-play, and out into the wild abandon of childhood role-taking. Specific artworks and the megatexts they draw against (and contribute towards) offer us ways to play that are so subtle and innocuous that we do not even think of them as play at all! If the ideas of this paper are taken to heart, we have much to gain by exploring the answers to the question ‘what are we playing with?’ What is more, this question can be taken in a different sense, as an

interrogation of just how diverse the human experience of play might be. What are we playing with? Far more than we ever imagined!

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