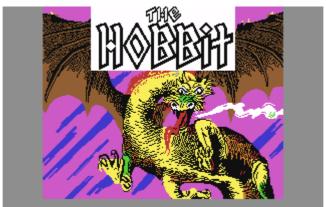**Medieval Fantasy - J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle-Earth in Digital Gaming Culture (summary)**

A growing interest in medieval studies is spreading among the academic circles in Finland. Medieval history and culture are also a popular subject among hobbyists and other enthusiasts; for example, medieval role-playing gaming is a popular subculture among youngsters. In addition, digital technology is constantly providing new types of medieval plays, virtual worlds and games. Fantasy writing is also important in popularizing medieval history and culture. In my article I will analyze the influence of J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-Earth fantasy in digital gaming culture from 1960s to 2000s.

Digital games (video games, computer games, etc.) are not considered to be an important source for research among historians. Interactive games are cast somewhere between entertainment and technology studies. Digital technology is always socially and culturally constructed, and it is a complex and challenging phenomenon. Historians can research, for instance, the subcultures of gamers, aesthetics, technology and the development of digital games. The reality and world image of games are also important. For example, the images of history and historical development in digital games can be a most fertile point of view for historians. This is especially important with regard to games like *Civilization* and games that are clearly situated in real historical events. This is also interesting if you study the relationship between cultural history of the medieval era and digital gaming culture.

One of the most important research concepts is *medieval fantasy*, which is defined by modern fantasy writers, of whom J.R.R. Tolkien is the most important. In the gaming culture almost all of the popular fantasy game worlds are practically identical. They are set in pseudo-historical medieval realms, which exhibit strong similarities with the medieval fantasy world of

Middle-Earth. Many researchers (e.g. Gonzalo Frasca) and members of gaming societies have criticized the almost stereotypical status of Tolkien's fantasy world in digital games. It seems that Tolkien's fantasy writings have become the oldest cliché in fantasy and role playing games. How has this happened? What is the history of Tolkien's medieval fantasy in digital gaming culture?

In my article I have conducted a chronological research of Tolkien-games. The interaction between the early computer gaming culture and Tolkien's fantasy writings began in the late 1960s. Counter-culture and early computer hacker societies formed a starting point for the first Tolkien-related fantasy and adventure games. Games such as *Adventure* or *The Lord* are now considered to be classics of early Tolkien-games. All in all there are only a few hundred games, mostly made by computer hobbyists, which are based on Middle-Earth fantasy. These games were clearly products of a fan culture. The importance of these games, especially in Multi User Dungeon-like multiplayer-games, is clearly seen in the gaming communities and networks formed by the fans of Tolkien. Today the heritage and principles of this activity can still be seen in very popular Massively Multiplayer Online Computer Games like *Everquest*, *Asheron's Call* or *Ultima Online*.

The commercialisation of Tolkien-games started in the early 1980s. But before the production of *The Lord of the Rings* -movie trilogy directed by Peter Jackson, only a few games were published during 1980s and 1990s. There are several reasons for this: firstly, the digital gaming industry was still young; secondly, many game companies clearly didn't want to purchase a game license from Tolkien's estate, and thirdly, Tolkien's medieval fantasy had already created a widespread culture of reformation and recreation in adventure-, fantasy- and role playing games. Most of the reviews of commercial Tolkien-games have been negative. These games can mostly be

classified as part of a product family created mostly during the heyday of the *Lord of the Rings* -movie trilogy.

What lies between the current digital gaming culture and the forms of interactive medieval hobbyist activity have not yet been researched properly. In my article I strongly suggest, along the lines of game researcher Eddo Stern, that the cultural and historical links between modern fantasy and role playing games are in fact a mixture of medieval, Celtic, gothic and Renaissance influence. What is clear is that the world of Middle-Earth has had an indirect but very important influence on the formation of modern medieval fantasy gaming worlds in recent decades.

Petri Saarikoski, PhD, Lecturer
Digital Culture, School of Cultural Production and Landscape Studies
University of Turku, Finland
petsaari @ utu.fi