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# The Influence of J.R.R. Tolkien on Popular Culture

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Western culture, to a large extent, is defined by materialism. If anything becomes popular, be it literature, music, or films, we tend to merchandise or make consumer goods based on what is popular because it will sell. This mass culture has been given the rather derogatory term called kitsch.<sup>1</sup> For example, some people might consider Mozart high art and the Beatles kitsch. However, this contrast is necessarily done by the individual because some people might consider the Beatles to be high art. Another way to put it is that high art is art in its purest form without the influence of capitalism, and materialism and kitsch is what happens after high art becomes popular and merchandised.<sup>2</sup> Whether a person has seen the movies or not, it is safe to say that since the first *Lord of the Rings* film came out in December of 2001 everyone has heard of the story and its famous author J.R.R. Tolkien. Tolkien's work provides a very good example of this process, going from being art and little more, to becoming a popular culture phenomenon, and finally becoming a merchandising juggernaut. This paper will trace the history of the Middle Earth mythology and its popularity. By studying the example of *The Lord of the Rings* I hope to demonstrate how art not only gets pulled into the system of popular and mass culture, but also how art has an influence on the system. An interesting question comes up when studying this topic. Why did Tolkien become popular? The man was a college professor who was described as quiet.<sup>3</sup> Along with discussing Tolkien and his relationship with popular culture I hope to answer this question as well. J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion* have had a tremendous influence on our culture given their long term popularity.

It is appropriate to describe the books briefly before moving on to discussing the popularization and influence of Tolkien on popular culture. Tolkien's books belong to the genre of fantasy. It is difficult to describe this genre other than by saying that it is fiction which does

not deal with the real world. It is totally made up and shares little in common with the real world other than dealing with the concept of the human struggle and the struggle of good over evil. Its primary purpose is to act as an escape from the real world. *The Hobbit* tells the story of Bilbo Baggins who was a hobbit. Hobbits are about half the height of a normal human and have hairy feet. Bilbo was dragged along an adventure with twelve dwarves and a mysterious wizard named Gandalf. Bilbo encountered Trolls, Goblins, Elves, and a terrible Dragon named Smaug who had taken over the dwarve's home of Lonely Mountain.<sup>4</sup> Years after the events of *The Hobbit* take place we see the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings*. During Bilbo's adventures he found a golden ring that made him invisible. It turns out this ring once belonged to the Dark Lord Sauron, who is a Satan like character. If Sauron finds his ring he will take over the world and the world will become an eternal hell. Since Bilbo has aged, his nephew/cousin takes the ring and goes on a quest aided by three other hobbits, two men of whom one is the prophesied king of men and the other a great warrior prince, one elf prince, and a dwarf. The three books of *The Lord of the Rings* tell of the hardships this fellowship go through to destroy the ring in the volcano it was created in to eternally destroy Sauron.<sup>5</sup> *The Silmarillion*, which was published after his death, tells the history of Middle Earth up to the point of *The Hobbit* It is mainly concerned with the creation of the world and the age of the elves.<sup>6</sup>

If there is any doubt that Tolkien was popular in his own country one need only look at the front page of *The Times* on the day after he died September 3, 1973. In the third paragraph the writer states that Tolkien had a transatlantic cult which admits to a European audience.<sup>7</sup> The fact that the *Times* places news of Tolkien's death on front page is truly a testament to his popularity among his own people.<sup>8</sup>

Although the point of this essay is to discuss the effect that Tolkien's work had on consumer and popular culture, it seems appropriate to give at least a brief summation of Tolkien's life up to his writing of *The Hobbit*. Specifically a focus on what may have influenced him seems important if we are to understand how his work has influenced our culture. John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born on January 3, 1891 in the Orange Free State in South Africa.<sup>9</sup> During his school years he studied medieval history and literature under George Brewerton. Tolkien studied Shakespeare and detested it because of his disappointment when, in the play *Macbeth*, a forest is supposed to walk up a hill. When he found out that this was only symbolic, Tolkien was disappointed. However, he enjoyed studying languages but preferred the study of old English, which can be seen in his writings.<sup>10</sup>

Other writings that intrigued Tolkien in his youth were the Anglo Saxon epic *Beowulf* and the Middle English *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. He also showed an interest in the Norse Sagas.<sup>11</sup> Probably one of the most significant events in his childhood that were to influence his writing were early attempts at creating a language. His cousins Mary and Marjorie Incledon had created one that intrigued the young boy. When one of the girls lost interest, Tolkien and the remaining girl created a language based on no existing words called Nevbosh meaning New Nonsense.<sup>12</sup> In adolescence Tolkien desired to create a new language that was functional, as in a language that could be used like English or Spanish.<sup>13</sup>

Later Tolkien attended college at Oxford and became active in the college Essay Club and Dialectical Society.<sup>14</sup> Since his youth, Tolkien had been in love with Edith Bratt and had been separated from her for several years.<sup>15</sup> After he turned twenty one he was able to see her again and they became engaged to marry. However, before this could happen Edith would have to convert to Catholicism.<sup>16</sup> Without a doubt religion is a powerful influence on a person's life

and Tolkien's Catholicism should be considered when studying the influences on his writing. Religious poetry such as the *Crist* of Cynewulf influenced him specifically these two lines:

Hail Earendel, brightest of angels  
Above the middle-earth sent unto men.<sup>17</sup>

This mention of Earendel<sup>18</sup> and Middle Earth<sup>19</sup> will stand out for Tolkien enthusiasts since these names appear in his works. A portion of the Icelandic 'Elder Edda' called *Voluspa*, which are poems written at the introduction of Christianity to the Norse culture resulting in a cultural blend of myth and Christianity, greatly appealed to Tolkien.<sup>20</sup> Keeping this in mind while thinking about the epic of Middle Earth we can see where this enthusiasm may have been applied.

Some of his earliest Middle Earth poems were written before 1914, but one cannot discuss the influences on Tolkien without mentioning his service in World War I.<sup>21</sup> He trained for the military while attending school and after his honeymoon left for the war on June 4, 1916.<sup>22</sup> Rather than discuss Tolkien's individual experiences during the war, let's just say no one could escape the tragedy of World War I without a significant impact on their life. If a person's values and beliefs were not destroyed then they would have been put to the ultimate test. Tolkien retained his faith (as can be inferred from his letters)<sup>23</sup> but there is no doubt that after the war he had to view life through new and less innocent eyes.

Before moving on to the main purpose of this essay, which is to analyze the popularization and influence of Tolkien's work on popular culture, a little about Tolkien's early writing should be discussed. Tolkien's stories about Middle Earth apparently preceded *The Hobbit* as early as 1917, meaning that his early ideas for his stories were beginning to form.<sup>24</sup> After the war he was able to return to Oxford and would eventually become the Professor of Anglo Saxon at Oxford.<sup>25</sup>

*The Hobbit* was accepted for publishing by Allen & Unwin publishers at the beginning of 1937.<sup>26</sup> An American version of *The Hobbit* was apparently in the works at the same time in conjunction with Houghton and Mifflin.<sup>27</sup> Early reactions to *The Hobbit* were rather positive. Tolkien's publishers sent him a letter with another letter by a fellow writer as an attachment. He praises Tolkien writing, "I agree with you (Allen & Unwin) that it is one of the best stories for children I have come across for a very long time."<sup>28</sup> He also states that, "The only snag I can see is that many parents... may be afraid that certain parts of it would be too terrifying for bedside reading."<sup>29</sup> The Times had this simple praise for *The Hobbit*, "sic hobbitur ad astra, which is Latin for thus it is hobbited to the stars."<sup>30</sup> Apparently there was demand for more on hobbits as early as October 15, 1937 because Tolkien states that, "I cannot think of anything more to say about hobbits."<sup>31</sup> But then follows saying that...

If it is true that *The Hobbit* has come to stay and more will be wanted, I will start the process of thought, and try to get some idea of a theme drawn from this material for treatment in a similar style and for a similar audience...one reader wants fuller details about Gandalf and the Necromancer.<sup>32</sup>

This comment seems to be in reference to Tolkien's other works on Middle Earth and seems to be the beginning of the desire for more on hobbits and Middle Earth. This can also be interpreted as Tolkien realizing the demand for such work and deciding to comply with the demand. One might also say that this also reflects Tolkien's desire to profit off of Hobbits, but there is nothing that can justify that claim and it probably isn't so. Tolkien's work seems to have hit a cord with its readers. Whether for academic reasons, artistic reasons, or otherwise it seems that Tolkien's work found a custom fit niche in western culture based on this early commentary.

One measure of this enthusiasm can be shown through letters to Tolkien from fans and his responses to these letters. These letters mark the beginning of what could be considered the

Tolkien phenomenon and the beginning of his popularization. Two correspondents with Tolkien stand out in this earlier period of interest in Tolkien's work. Katherine Farrer, who was a writer of detective novels, had wanted Tolkien to sign her copy of *The Hobbit*. Tolkien responded with a curious postcard that was written in his dwarfish runes.<sup>33</sup> It may be possible that Mrs. Farrer had shown an interest in Tolkien's languages, if not it would make Tolkien's reply quite strange. This was not the only exchange between the two<sup>34</sup> and Farrer was not the only correspondent who stood out. In the same year as the previously discussed letter which was 1947, Tolkien began to exchange letters with a fan and schoolboy named Hugh Brogan. In his first letter, Brogan praises Tolkien's work and asks for more about Middle Earth. Tolkien responds by discussing his current work on *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*.<sup>35</sup> On Christmas of 1948, Tolkien sent Hugh a Christmas greeting written in all of his invented languages.<sup>36</sup> Tolkien would continue to receive and write letters to Hugh Brogan, and in 1955 Brogan apparently gave critique of his works.<sup>37</sup> Rather than searching for hidden meanings, these letters seem to show just plain and pure interest in Tolkien's creation. However, the interest in the languages is an interesting topic in the fact that later when Tolkien had more of a cult following in addition to mainstream fans, the interest in the minute details such as languages would continue.<sup>38</sup> At this point as of 1948 *The Hobbit*, aside from the marketing involved in selling books, was not a "marketable commodity," but merely a work of literature. It cannot yet be said to have become a mainstream part of popular culture, despite the fact that it was popular. Popular culture during the 50's and 60's, at least from the view of this paper, entails the status of being a phenomenon as well as a commodity that can be sold.<sup>39</sup> It seems to be the nature of our culture to be very materialistic, so popular culture entails the mass marketing of practically everything for public

consumption. “Popularity” will mean enthusiasm although sometimes obsessive but not having a mercantile component.

Before discussing what could be considered the birthing process of *The Lord of the Rings* and all the struggles that that would entail and also before discussing the conflict between the artist (Tolkien) and the marketer (the publishers) it seems appropriate to discuss an interesting conflict of cultures that Tolkien would find himself involved in. The era of the Third Reich in Germany is a unique time period in history. The censorship and tyranny of the Nazi government had its tentacles in every aspect of life including publishing. While trying to get his book published in German, Tolkien received a letter from the German publisher Rutten & Loening Verlag in 1938 asking him if his ancestry was “Aryan” in origin.<sup>40</sup> Tolkien rather heatedly replied saying...

I am not of Aryan extraction: that is Indo-Iranian; as far as I am aware none of my ancestors spoke Hindustani, Persian, Gypsy, or any related dialects. But if I am to understand that you are enquiring whether I am of Jewish origin, I can only reply that I regret that I appear to have no ancestors of that gifted people.<sup>41</sup>

This event is significant because it represents the ultimate clash of culture. Any discussion of twentieth century culture in Europe cannot ignore the significance of the Nazi era in Germany. Although Tolkien had said that he dislike allegory and that the *Lord of the Rings* was not an allegory for World War II (it was being written before the war started), one cannot escape the similarity Tolkien’s art had to actual events.<sup>42</sup> War with Germany had not yet broken out but Tolkien’s conflict with the Nazi publishers eerily foreshadows the coming storm. Though different in several aspects, Tolkien’s War of the Ring took on some striking similarities to World War II. Nazi Germany cannot be cited as typical of western culture by any means, an

aberration would be putting it lightly, but it represents the ultimate low that western culture can sink to and Tolkien's clash with them can in a way represent the antithesis of the Nazis.

When considering the influence of Tolkien's work on western culture, one cannot overlook the conflict between high art and the desire of marketers to make it a commodity for selling. Tolkien was making a work of art while the publishers undoubtedly were primarily interested in having a sellable commodity. This conflict between the "high art" nature of the histories of Middle Earth and the desire to make it a popular culture item that can be marketed and sold would continue up to the present day. After the success of *The Hobbit*, Tolkien's publishers wanted a sequel to it.<sup>43</sup> Tolkien submitted a short story called *Farmer Giles of Ham*. It is interesting to notice in the course of several of Tolkien's letters to Allen & Unwin he continually suggests to the publishers that they should publish *Farmer Giles of Ham*.<sup>44</sup> A&U continually seem to ignore his request.<sup>45</sup> Tolkien was saddened by the rejection of *Farmer Giles of Ham* which stands to represent the artists desire to create art and the publishers desire to have something that will sell.<sup>46</sup> *Farmer Giles of Ham* eventually got accepted for publishing in 1947.<sup>47</sup> Why it took A&U so long to decide to publish it is uncertain. Perhaps they wanted something with hobbits, something that they knew had an audience. *The Hobbit's* popularity may have been an indirect cause of the delay in publishing *Farmer Giles of Ham*. One must admit that from a marketing standpoint, it makes sense to stick with what you know will sell.

Difficult as it may now seem, Tolkien's masterpieces *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* had a hard time getting published. A&U had turned down *The Silmarillion* in 1937 and Tolkien wanted it published in conjunction with *The Lord of the Rings* so he decided to try a different publisher. He began to open dialogue with Collins publishers in the hopes that he could get both works published together.<sup>48</sup> He began to push his publisher A&U to publish his

combined work. He received a reply asking if they could be broken into smaller pieces and he replied no.<sup>49</sup> Tolkien sent them an ultimatum to either publish it or drop it, and A&U dropped it, freeing Tolkien to offer it to Collins.<sup>50</sup> Ironically, Tolkien would run into the same difficulty with the Collins publishers. This desire to keep the work whole makes sense from an artistic standpoint. *The Lord of the Rings* is one story and to break a work of art up into smaller pieces seems somewhat heretical. They also seemed to suggest dividing the collective work and Tolkien again stressed that the work needed to remain whole.<sup>51</sup> This seems to show that despite Collins interest, the main interest of all publishers is to turn a profit which is not unusual since they are a business. Once again, Tolkien tells his publisher that it was now or never and again he is turned down.<sup>52</sup> Rayner Unwin, who continued to have communication with Tolkien, and was apparently a friend<sup>53</sup>, asked Tolkien how progress was going on *The Lord of the Rings*.<sup>54</sup> Due to the difficulties Tolkien had had at publishing he seems to have become more willing to make concessions in order to get his work published saying...

But I have rather modified my views. Better something than nothing! Although to me all are one, and the 'L of the Rings' would be better far (and eased) as part of the whole, I would gladly consider the publication of any part of this stuff. Years are becoming precious. And retirement (not far off) will, as far as I can see, bring not leisure but a poverty that will necessitate scraping a living by 'examining' and such like tasks.<sup>55</sup>

Rayner Unwin responds to Tolkien's indirect request to publish his book saying, "We do *want* to publish for you, it is only ways and means that have held us up."<sup>56</sup> It seems then that the artist had to make sacrifices so that his work could see the light of day. In defense of the publishers, it must be brought up that the cost of having a book published was quite high in the 40's and early 50's which is reflected in the statement of Rayner Unwin above and be Tolkien himself in a letter to Stanley Unwin in which he states that to have a professional manuscript of *The Lord of*

*the Rings* typed it would cost him one hundred pounds.<sup>57</sup> A business firm could not chance losing that much money on one book. The point of publishing a book is so that people can buy it to read it. If it cost too much to print then not many copies could be made and fewer people would get to read it. And getting people to read it is also the goal of the author is it not? That being so, the publishers were justified in their desire to make the book cheaper to produce.

After finally being published between the years 1954 through 1955, *The Lord of the Rings* met with mixed criticism. In a radio program, critic W. H. Auden says that, "If someone dislikes it, I shall never trust their literary judgment about anything again."<sup>58</sup> However another critic wrote, "All the characters are boys masquerading as adult heroes...and will never come to puberty...hardly one of them knows anything about women."<sup>59</sup> This pattern of either loving the work or hating it seems to be common. One review stands out in particular. It said,

This is not a work that many adults will read right through more than once; though even a single reading will not be quickly forgotten. In the schoolroom it may be read more avidly, perhaps again and again. If that comes to pass its influence will be immeasurable.<sup>60</sup>

In hindsight, this statement seems prophetic.

Fan response was interesting, we begin to see what could be considered some of the eccentric nature of Tolkien fans. In a letter to Richard Jeffrey who was asking for a translation of a poem in the books, Tolkien refers to the fact that in Richards's letter, he wrote his name in "elvish".<sup>61</sup>

When trying to determine why *The Lord of the Rings* became so popular during the mid-1960's, there are a number of possible explanations. It seems that the popularity of Tolkien's books can be attributed to both marketing techniques and the situation that Anglo-American society found itself in. A pirated paperback edition of the Trilogy was made in 1965<sup>62</sup> and soon

after an authorized edition was out in time to be a best seller.<sup>63</sup> There is no doubt that a paperback edition would help popularize the books. There is another possible reason that could explain the explosion in popularity of *The Lord of the Rings*. The 1960's and early 1970's saw the birth of a counter culture that although seems to have been born in America, also had its branches in Britain. One Tolkien enthusiast from the 1960's reflected on the time period. He describes the 1950's as a time of "utter boredom and gray." Television was a new distraction back then but in the 60's they wanted something new. He then said that's what *The Lord of the Rings* was, something new. The 60's and 70's were a time of experimentation and Tolkien's work complemented this idea along with musical innovations like the Beatles album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967).<sup>64</sup> The interviewee continued saying that another possible attraction to Tolkien may have been that some adults called it "rubbish." The counter culture was definitely about rebelling against the authorities. Tolkien was new in that it was true escapism that didn't have to have a particular meaning. In what was a repressive society that wanted you to do as you were told, Tolkien probably seemed like a proverbial breath of fresh air.<sup>65</sup>

A magazine article from the period sums it up quite well.

No youngster is going to believe in a beautiful knight on a white charger whose strength is as the strength of 10 because his heart is pure. He knows too much history and/or sociology, alas, to find knighthood enchanting in its feudal backgrounds and to dream of Greek heroes and of gods who walked the earth. But give him hobbits and he can escape to a never-never world that satisfies his 20<sup>th</sup> century mind.<sup>66</sup>

It must be noted that not everyone welcomed this popularization of Tolkien. One-time Tolkien enthusiast Charles Elliot wrote an article in which he criticized the popularization of the books. He seems to have a very elitist point of view writing that he preferred it when, "it was

still just between Auden, C.S. Lewis and a few of the rest of us.<sup>67</sup> This sentiment echoes the larger argument against bringing Tolkien into the realm of pop culture. It is true that after the popularization of Tolkien you began to see such things as “Frodo Lives” buttons and even some college students began to study elvish.<sup>68</sup> There was even the formation of fan clubs and the New York Tolkien Society.<sup>69</sup> But the key to understanding this period in the popularity of Tolkien is that although the fan base grew massively it had not yet been put on the mass market.

It seems to be an attribute of mass culture during this time period to obsess about what is or is not popular. People obsess about movie stars and what they wear, eat, and like. How does one obsess about a book? One analyzes it until it can't be analyzed anymore. In the 1960's there were various groups that did this. One group was the Tolkien Society, which published the Tolkien Journal. One very interesting article in a volume of that journal consisted of a genealogical study of the inheritance of the immortality trait in human and elf mixes. Although fascinating, one finds himself thinking how absurd it is to write such an article since the books are fiction and there is nothing to elves and all that. But people did write such articles.<sup>70</sup> Another example of what can be called fan obsession can be found in another periodical journal of the period called Mythlore an article written by Ruth Berman discusses the use of the word orc in literature.<sup>71</sup> Although this is much less absurd to study as elf genealogy, it is still overly pedantic and truly pointless. But maybe it isn't pointless. Articles such as these allow for escapism. There is even a book on the made up languages of Tolkien and how to write, read and pronounce what was made.<sup>72</sup> These examples tell us that Tolkien's work had gained a following that was interested in his book for various reasons.

When learning about the massive explosion in popularity that Tolkien saw, one must ask what Tolkien himself thought about it. In response to a letter by W.H. Auden who tells Tolkien

of the Tolkien Society and that he fears it is populated by lunatics, Tolkien wrote, “Real lunatics don’t join them, I think. But still such things fill me too with alarm and despondency.<sup>73</sup>” Why he felt this way may go back to his quite nature mentioned earlier.<sup>74</sup> However, Tolkien wrote to the society itself and was quite cordial, friendly, and verbose. He does make a request to limit the number of special names given to members.<sup>75</sup> Tolkien also apparently had to have his phone number unlisted due to having too many fans call him.<sup>76</sup> He did in fact refer to his American fans who may have been somewhat more numerous as , “my deplorable cultus.<sup>77</sup>” Tolkien was clearly flattered by the intellectual interest in his works. On the other hand, he may have seen his more devoted and cultish fans as obsessive and scary.

When examining how Tolkien influenced pop-culture in this period very little merchandising is apparent. It seems rather than capitalizing on the books, they influenced other artists to create other works of art. Probably the most significant of these spin off works of art are musical in nature. On August 30, 1964 Tolkien sent a reply to composer Carey Blyton giving him permission to compose a *Hobbit* Overture. Tolkien seemed quite flattered by this saying, “As an author I am honored to hear that I have inspired a composer.<sup>78</sup>” He goes on to say that music gives him great pleasure.<sup>79</sup> A musical treatment such as this is quite respectable and would conform to ideas of high art and would avoid a kitsch like treatment. However, this is not the most famous work of music inspired by Tolkien’s writings. In fact, the most famous Tolkien inspired songs are nothing like this type of music. Before discussing this other musical treatment of Tolkien let us return to the youth, the group of people most fascinated by *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* in the 1960’s. The music of the youth on both sides of the Atlantic at the time was without a doubt rock ‘n roll. So it only makes sense that future rockers who learned their craft in the 60’s and worked it in the 70’s would be influenced by the popular literature of

the time. One very well known group from this time period which seems to have had Tolkienic influences was Led Zeppelin.

In a Led Zeppelin biography, Robert Plant's pre-Zeppelin career is discussed. After failing at an audition he joined a band named Hobbstweedle that got its name from *The Lord of the Rings*. It follows this statement saying, "Which every good hippie had read by then."<sup>80</sup> This seems to imply that Tolkien's influence in the hippie counter culture was widespread. To discover Tolkien's influence on Led Zeppelin one need only listen to some of their songs. In the song Ramble On the lyrics go, "And in the darkest depths of Mordor, I met a girl so fair, but Gollum the evil one, crept up and slipped away with her."<sup>81</sup> The song "Misty Mountain Hop" obviously gets its title from the famous mountain range in Tolkien's Middle Earth.<sup>82</sup> Probably the most Tolkienesk song by Led Zeppelin is "The Battle of Evermore". Although in the biography the author says the song was inspired by Anglo-Saxon battle sagas, one cannot escape the words of the song "The Battle of Evermore" itself, "The drums will shake the castle walls, The Ring Wraiths ride in black."<sup>83</sup>

What is the importance of this influence on rock 'n roll? It is simple, it symbolizes the depth that Tolkien's work had imbedded itself into popular culture. Rock and Roll was the poetry of the day, as mentioned earlier by the interviewed Tolkien enthusiast, and epitomized mass and popular culture.<sup>84</sup> It really is a testament to the popularity of his work to be mentioned in the music of such a prominent group as Led Zeppelin.

Another way in which Tolkien's work inspired another art form is in the unique genre of role playing games. According to John Eric Holmes, a gamer since 1975<sup>85</sup>, not long after the sudden popularity rise in Tolkien, war gamers started putting in orc, dwarf, and goblin armies.<sup>86</sup> Based on my knowledge of how these games work here is a brief summery of how role playing

games work in general. First you create a character which has skills of your choice. Each skill has a certain level attached to it. In the game when you are required to use a skill you role dice and the number you role in conjunction with your skill level determines success or failure. The game or scenario is basically a story created by the GM or Game Master who controls everything in the game except the players and keeps the game moving along (For example see Call of Cthulhu rulebook<sup>87</sup>). It is interesting to note that the world of Dungeons & Dragons is populated by many of the same races as Tolkien's Middle Earth; there were at one time hobbits but because Tolkien Enterprises threatened a lawsuit, Gary Gygax, the creator of the game, had to change the name to Halflings.<sup>88</sup> Another game was made called Empire of the Petal Throne by Professor M. A. R. Barker. He is relevant to this topic because much like Tolkien, he was fascinated by languages and created a very detailed and realistic world.<sup>89</sup> What is important to note here is that it seems that although Tolkien did not necessarily inspire the concept of role playing games, he did influence the creation and perhaps the popularity of them.

Finally, leading into the present day, an investigation in *The Lord of the Rings'* path from novel to film must be made. As far back as 1957, a film version of the books was conceived by an American company. Tolkien originally seemed quite interested in sending a story line to his publishers to give to the American company.<sup>90</sup> Negotiations quickly turned sour, however, as Tolkien did not like the man in charge of creating the film version. Tolkien admitted ignorance of how movies, especially animated ones, are made but describes Zimmerman, the man in charge, as a man who didn't read books.<sup>91</sup> It is odd, however, that in 1969 Tolkien sold the film rights to his books to United Artists for less than 10,000 pounds.<sup>92</sup>

In 1977 an animated version of *the Hobbit* was made by Arthur Rankin Jr. and Jules Bass.<sup>93</sup> Although made for kids, from my own perspective, a reader of the books, the film is a

fair treatment of Tolkien's first published chapter in the stories of Middle Earth. A year later, director Ralph Bakshi made a film that incorporated the first two parts of *The Lord of the Rings* into one film. Instead of fully animating it, live footage was shot and was painted over to look like animation. The attempt to combine the two books into one film and the quick attempt at animating it leaves much to be desired.<sup>94</sup> In 1980 the final installment was made into a movie by the creators of *The Hobbit* movie. The animation looks better but again much of the story is lost.<sup>95</sup>

In terms of literary attempts to capitalize on Tolkien's popularity, many authors attempted to copy his style after his death. *The Sword of Shannara* series, *The Wheel of Time* series, and the *Mithgar* series written by Terry Brooks, Robert Jordan, and Denis L. McKiernan respectively appeal to the same types of readers. Denis L. McKiernan's series specifically was meant to be a follow up to Tolkien's stories. After encountering difficulties in dealing with the Tolkien estate he made changes to avoid a direct connection to Tolkien's world.<sup>96</sup> This response by the Tolkien Estate seems to point towards a conservative mentality in regards to protecting Tolkien's work from making it into a consumable commodity.

Probably the merchandising campaign for *The Lord of the Rings* came as a result of Peter Jackson's very faithful production of the books on film.<sup>97</sup> Though the movies only did marginally well at the academy awards for the first two movies, it ended up winning best picture for the last movie plus enough awards to tie it for the place of most awards won.<sup>98</sup> Not surprisingly, there were cloths, toys, games, video games, cups, calendars, swords, and undoubtedly more. Just a simple walk through a store can tell us this. Without a doubt, millions were made on this merchandise. Oddly enough Tolkien's surviving relatives will see little of it because Tolkien sold the film rights.<sup>99</sup> Consequently, the Tolkien family has had nothing to do

with the movies.<sup>100</sup> The one commodity that is based on Tolkien's work and not affiliated with the movies is a Lord of the Rings Video game by Vivindi games.<sup>101</sup> This final phase in the history of Tolkien's influence on popular culture sees the greatest amount of merchandising of Tolkien's works. Be it good or bad, Tolkien's work went from being practically art and nothing more to a merchandising juggernaut. It seems to be a tendency of western culture to take the things they like and bring them down to a mass culture level and make a lot of merchandise based on it.<sup>102</sup> This is not necessarily bad but it could be considered cheapening.

J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth series has had a great influence on popular culture in Europe and the United States. Beginning as books and little more it has gone through what seems to be three phases, the early phase in which it seems more like high art, a middle phase in which it was a pop culture item that influenced culture more than it was merchandized, and a current phase in which it is no longer just books or movies but a commodity to be merchandized and sold to make a lot of money. This occurrence is nothing new in our culture, but it seems to happen to everything that becomes popular. In a capitalist society the push is to make a lot of money. When something becomes popular, it is obvious that money can be made on it. Whether this pattern is good or bad, it has happened to Tolkien's work and as long as interest in Tolkien remains high, people will continue to think of new ways to make money on Tolkien. As a final note, in an interview with one Tolkien fan I asked if the movies and merchandising would ruin Tolkien, and the interest in his books. He answered that he believes Tolkien will survive. Merchandising will detract from the books but not destroy them.<sup>103</sup> We shall see.

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- <sup>1</sup> For more on kitsch and popular culture see, Dwight McDonald, "A Theory of Mass Culture," in Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White, eds., Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America, (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1957), 59-73.
- David Manning White, "Mass Culture in America: Another Point of View," in ibid., 13-21.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> Henry Resnik, "The Hobbit-Forming World of J.R.R. Tolkien," Saturday Evening Post, July 2, 1966, 90-94.
- <sup>4</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, The Hobbit, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1937).
- <sup>5</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, The Lord of the Rings, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1991).
- <sup>6</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, The Silmarillion, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1977).
- <sup>7</sup> Penny Radford, "Professor Tolkien leaves an unpublished book," The London Times, 3 September, 1973.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> Humphrey Carpenter, J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1977), 18-20.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., 35.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., 43.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., 43-44
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., 60-61.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., 47-51.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., 69-74.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., 72.
- <sup>18</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, The Lord of the Rings, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1991), 210.
- <sup>19</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, The Lord of the Rings, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1991), 28.
- <sup>20</sup> Humphrey Carpenter, J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1977), 73.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., 79-85.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., 80-88.
- <sup>23</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien, comp. Humphrey Carpenter (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1981), 75-77.
- <sup>24</sup> Humphrey Carpenter, J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1977) 100.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., 107, 114-115.
- <sup>26</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien, comp. Humphrey Carpenter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1981), 15.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., 18.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., 23.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., 23.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., 24.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., 24.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid., 24.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., 124-125.
- <sup>34</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien, (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1981), 130, 183-184.
- <sup>35</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1981), 129.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., 132.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., 230.
- <sup>38</sup> Judith Crist, "Why 'Frodo Lives'," Ladies Home Journal, February 1967, 58.
- <sup>39</sup> For more on kitsch and popular culture see, Dwight McDonald, "A Theory of Mass Culture," in Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White, eds., Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America, (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1957), 59-73.
- David Manning White, "Mass Culture in America: Another Point of View," in ibid., 13-21.
- <sup>40</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, The Letters, (Houghton Mifflin), 37.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., 37.
- <sup>42</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, "Letter to Milton Waldman circa 1951," The Silmarillion 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (New York: Ballantine Books, 1977), xv-xvi.
- <sup>43</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, The Letters, (Houghton Mifflin), 38.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid., 38-40, 42-44, 58, 114, 117-119.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid.

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- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 134-135.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 135-139.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 140-161.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 143-161.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 163-164.
- <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.
- <sup>60</sup> "The Saga of Middle Earth," *Times Literary Supplement*, November 25, 1955, 704.
- <sup>61</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters*, (Houghton Mifflin), 223.
- <sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 358.
- <sup>63</sup> Charles Elliot, "Can America Kick the Hobbit," *Life Magazine*, 24 February, 1967, 10.
- <sup>64</sup> The Beatles, *Sgt. Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band*, 1967.
- <sup>65</sup> William Griffiths, "interview by author," 23 February 2004.
- <sup>66</sup> Judith Crist, "Why 'Frodo Lives'," *Ladies Home Journal*, February 1967, 58.
- <sup>67</sup> Charles Elliot, "Can America Kick the Hobbit," *Life Magazine*, 24 February, 1967, 10.
- <sup>68</sup> Judith Crist, "Why 'Frodo Lives'," *Ladies Home Journal*, February 1967, 58.
- <sup>69</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters*, (Houghton Mifflin), 359.
- <sup>70</sup> Tolkien Society, *Tolkien Journal* vol, 1, no. 1 thru vol. 2, no. 4 whole nos 1-6, 1966-1972.
- <sup>71</sup> Ruth Berman, *Mythlore, Here an Orc there and Ork*, pg. 8-10, January 1969
- <sup>72</sup> Ruth S. Noel, *The Languages of Tolkien's Middle Earth*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1980).
- <sup>73</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters*, (Houghton Mifflin), 359.
- <sup>74</sup> Henry Resnik, "The Hobbit-Forming World of J.R.R. Tolkien," *Saturday Evening Post*, July 2, 1966, 90-94.
- <sup>75</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters*, (Houghton Mifflin), 359-362.
- <sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 368-367.
- <sup>77</sup> Lev Grossman, "Feeding on Fantasy," *Time Magazine*, Dec. 2 2002, 90-94.
- <sup>78</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters*, (Houghton Mifflin), 350.
- <sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 350.
- <sup>80</sup> Stephen Davis, *Hammer of the Gods*, (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1985), 59.
- <sup>81</sup> Led Zeppelin, "Ramble On," *Led Zeppelin II*, 1969.  
J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 23, 56.
- <sup>82</sup> Led Zeppelin, "Misty Mountain Hop," *Led Zeppelin IV*, 1971.  
J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 15.
- <sup>83</sup> Davis, *Hammer*, 147.  
Led Zeppelin, "The Battle of Evermore," *Led Zeppelin IV*, 1971.  
J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 64.
- <sup>84</sup> William Griffiths, "interview by author," 23 February 2004.
- <sup>85</sup> John Eric Holmes, *Fantasy Role Playing Games*, (New York: Hippocrene Books, Inc., 1981), 9.
- <sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.
- <sup>87</sup> Sandy Peterson, Lynn Willis, *Call of Cthulhu*, (Oakland: Chaosium Inc., 1999).
- <sup>88</sup> John Eric Holmes, *Fantasy Role Playing Games*, (New York: Hippocrene Books, Inc., 1981), 71.
- <sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.
- <sup>90</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters*, (Houghton Mifflin), 260-261.
- <sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.
- <sup>87</sup> "Tolkien Trilogy to be Filmed," *The London Times*, October 20, 1969.
- <sup>93</sup> Anthony Breznican, "Tolkien's influence, From Led Zeppelin to Rush to Dungeons and Dragons, he's everywhere," *Toronto Star Newspapers Ltd.*, 18 December 2002, sec. D, final edition.
- <sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring, Produced by Robert Shaye and Michael Lynne, Directed by Peter Jackson, Approx. 3 hours, New Line Cinema, 2001, film.

The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King, Produced by Robert Shaye and Michael Lynne, Directed by Peter Jackson, Approx. 4 hours, New Line Cinema, 2003, film.

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<sup>98</sup> "Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences," n.d., <http://www.oscars.org/76academyawards/nomswins.html>, (29 April 2004).

<sup>99</sup> "Tolkien Trilogy to be Filmed," The London Times, October 20, 1969.

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<sup>100</sup> Charlotte Edwards, "JK vs. JRR," pg. 20.

<sup>101</sup> Bloomberg News, "Vivendi will create video games based on Tolkien's books," New York Times, 4 May 2001, sec. C, final edition.

<sup>102</sup> Dwight McDonald, "A Theory of Mass Culture," in Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White, eds., Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America, (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1957), 59-73.

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<sup>103</sup> William Griffiths, "interview by author," 23 February 2004.

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