

Narrative Structures and Literary Adaptations in Video Games and Literature

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine how emerging technologies in game development have influenced narrative form, reader/player engagement, and the evolution of storytelling across media. Furthermore, it will also analyze how video games were adopted from literary storytelling. The research was conducted to analyze and determine how The Lord of the Rings book series has influenced the rise of video games that included the plot development, literary adaptation, characters, and world adaptation that the developers took from the books.

Background: The rise of interactive media and game technologies has fundamentally changed the way narratives are constructed and experienced. Once viewed purely as entertainment, video games now serve as complex storytelling platforms that challenge established literary structures. Furthermore, Games are increasingly drawing on literary sources and using advanced narrative techniques, so their narrative design should be examined in relation to classic literary storytelling. The methodology used in this research is a comparative qualitative analysis using selected video games (Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor, The Lord of the Rings Online, World of Warcraft, and Skyrim) and literary texts with similar themes or adaptations. The research draws from narratology and ludology to evaluate narrative structure, character development, agency, and world-building. Technological factors such as branching narratives, AI-driven dialogues, and procedural storytelling are also analyzed.

Key findings: In this study, interactivity in video games allows players to co-author the narrative and play an important role in the development of the story. On the other hand, literature provides deep emotional and symbolic experiences through a textual structure. This study examines how game narratives incorporate literary traditions into novel storytelling formats that are enabled by technology while referencing literary traditions. Finally, the outcome of this research is to understand how video games adapted from narrative structures. Furthermore, the research will also show the difference between direct and indirect adaptation.

Keywords: Interactive storytelling, plot development, ludology vs. narratology, literary adaptation, world adaptation

1. Introduction

In the rise of modern literature, media has introduced new forms of storytelling, with video games emerging as the main pillar for narrative experimentation and adaptation. Among those literary works is J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings (Tolkien, 1954–1955); this six-volume novel has found itself making a big impact on literature and contemporary fantasy media, especially in video games. Titles such as The Lord of the Rings Online and Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor directly adapt from the novel. While other games like World of Warcraft and The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim that are deeply inspired by the novels. The interactive nature of these games provides a perfect opportunity to examine how literary narratives can be restructured and reimagined. However, there still remains a gap in understanding how video games adapt and change literary texts into a gameplay-driven experience while maintaining narrative structure. Moreover, there has been a debate between the source text and the creative reinterpretation, especially when it comes to open-world games where the player chooses the direction of the story.



This research will explore how the narrative structure is adapted from The Lord of the Rings books and transformed into an interactive game format. Specifically, how the chosen games took from Tolkien's narrative world through a variety of adaptations, such as the buildings, world, characters, races, and genre.

The objective of this research is to figure out common narrative strategies, asses of player agency in shaping story outcomes, and find types of adaptation across these games. By analyzing these games using comparative narrative analysis and ludo narrative theory, it will evaluate how literary influences affect story mechanics.

The paper is structured in the following sections: Section 2 reviews related work on adaptation and game narrative. Section 3 outlines the methodology used; Section 4 presents the results and key findings; And finally, section 5 offers a discussion of the results, implications, and conclusion.

1.1 Ludology vs. Narratology:

The debate between ludology and narratology lies on the foundational divide in video games. Ludologists believe that games should be mainly studied through rules, mechanics, and actions of the players and their response to the system, with a focus on player agency and decision-making (Veloza, 2023). On the other hand, narratologists assure that video games are focused on how they are centered around the narrative of the story. They believed that the interactive method will allow players to be in a deep immersion with the game (Veloza, 2023). Furthermore, narratology focuses on storytelling, plot development, and character development. By comparing game mechanics and story progression, the study highlights the extent to which narrative structure creates a conflict in adaptations of literary texts.

2. Related Work

Recent academic work has positioned video games as a form of literary and cultural expression. While reading Andrew C. Turley's (2018) study about Exploring Narratives in Video Games as Literary Texts, it has been emphasized that video games can be read similarly to literature. Turley believes that games possess thematic depth, character development, and textual richness. These three factors mirror traditional literary forms. Furthermore, his research also highlights how narrative-based games can be used in educational and analytical contexts, treating the player as a reader who's building a meaning through engagement with the character and the game world. In the same research, scholars such as Henry Jenkins (2006) have studied how storytelling evolves into interactive media. Jenkin's concept of transmedia storytelling is relevant to adaptations such as The Lord of the Rings Online and Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor, which expand Tolkien's universe beyond the original novel. Furthermore, these games don't retell the story but build new narratives that change the canon, allowing new dialogue between the original story and the new media.

In another study by Deswandito Dwi Saptanto (2021) called The Dawn of Literature: Video Games as the New Breed of Modern Popular Literature, he argues that video games are "a new form of literary work created by the accumulation of narrative elements into digital video games." He points out that games are no longer mechanical but more capable of producing a thick dramatic story shaped by the player's decisions and choices. He further supports of "user-driven" storytelling, where the player has the freedom to influence the outcomes of plot development that goes against author-driven narratives in the novel.

To frame these classifications within established scholarship, this study draws on Linda Hutcheon's A Theory of Adaptation (2013), which defines adaptations as deliberate reinterpretations that redefine a work through changes in method, audience, and creative purpose. Hutcheon emphasizes that adaptations are not passive duplications of an "original," but transformative acts that involve both repetition and variation. Within this framework, direct adaptations maintain close narrative fidelity to the source material, often preserving the story structure; expansive adaptations extend or modify the narrative by introducing new storylines, and characters, while remaining within the same fictional world; and thematic adaptations borrow selected motifs, archetypes, or worldbuilding elements, integrating them into entirely new narratives. By situating the analysis within Hutcheon's model, this research links its game classifications to a widely recognized theoretical foundation, strengthening its relevance within adaptation studies and media scholarship.

These researchers contribute an important perspective to the understanding of video games as literary forms. Truly (2018) focuses on the important role of the player and positions video games as texts to be crucially read. While Saptanto (2021) explores the narratives and player agency that make games both adapt to previous media and standalone literary works. Within Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation (2013), games can be understood as transformative works—whether maintaining fidelity to their sources, expanding established worlds, or reimagining selected elements in new contexts. This research investigates how narrative structure, worldbuilding, and interactivity are used to create new experiences from familiar literary worlds, offering insight into the creative processes behind digital adaptation.

3. Methodology

A comparative qualitative approach is used to examine how narrative structures and literary adaptation are expressed in selected video games inspired by or adapted from *The Lord of the Rings*. The study focuses on four titles: *Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor*, *The Lord of the Rings Online*, *World of Warcraft*, and *Skyrim*. The games selected were chosen for their diverse approaches to adaptation, ranging from narrative integration, expensive adaptation, mythological (such as races) and thematic influence. The classification into direct, expensive, and thematic draws from the theory of adaptation by Linda Hutcheon (2013), which frames it as an active reinterpretation shaped by changes in audience and creative intent. Moreover, narrative structures in each video game were analyzed according to story progression, structure, narrative control, player role, and ending.

3.1 Figure 1:

Direct adaptation from *The Lord of the Rings Online*:

One of the clearest examples of direct adaptation can be seen in *The Lord of the Rings Online* (Sledge, 2022). The game faithfully remakes the environments directly from the book, ensuring that the player's navigable world closely mirrors the landscapes described in the novels. For example, the Hobbiton hill is reproduced almost exactly the same as from Tolkien's illustrations. This type of environmental loyalty helps maintain narrative immersion by allowing the player to experience familiar literary space as an exportable location. Furthermore, both the book and the video game have a different narrative structure. For instance, the book has a fixed structure, while in the video game it can be changed according to the player's decisions.

This figure presents this adaptation, comparing an in-game screenshot of Hobbiton hill across the water to its source material. The likeness demonstrates how narrative authenticity in game design can be achieved through visual adaptation, supporting a linear and faithful story structure.



Figure 1: Environmental fidelity in *The Lord of the Rings Online*. (Sledge, 2022)

3.2 Figure 2:

Expensive adaptation from Middle Earth: Shadow of Mordor:

Unlike the first example, expensive adaptation builds on the original text by introducing new characters, conflicts, and subplots. Moreover, conflicts are extended beyond the original canon. In *Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor*, the protagonist Talion is a Gondorian ranger who is resurrected through a bond with the spirit of the elf-smith Celebrimbor. However, while Celebrimbor originates from Tolkien's lore, Talion is an original creation, enabling new narrative arcs within a familiar universe.

The difference between the two characters in figure 2 highlights the difference between rigorous fidelity and interpretive expansion. By combining the original storytelling with the established lore, the game balances between the freedom to create narrative mechanics and respecting Tolkien's world.



Figure 2: Expansive *adaptation* in Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor-- original protagonist Talion interacts with canonical character Celebrimbor (McNulty, 2023)

3.3 Figure 3:

Thematic Inspiration: World of Warcraft & Skyrim

Some games adapt Tolkien's influence without directly replicating his plot or characters. This thematic inspiration approach takes races, mythologies, and worldbuilding tropes from Tolkien's works into new narratives. For example, *World of Warcraft* features dwarves with visual and cultural elements reminiscent of Tolkien's creations, while *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* reimagines orcs traditionally antagonistic in Tolkien's world into a playable race with their own complex society.

Figure 3 takes these reinterpretations with their Tolkien-inspired counterparts, illustrating how thematic borrowing can shape a game's identity while enabling complete narrative originality.

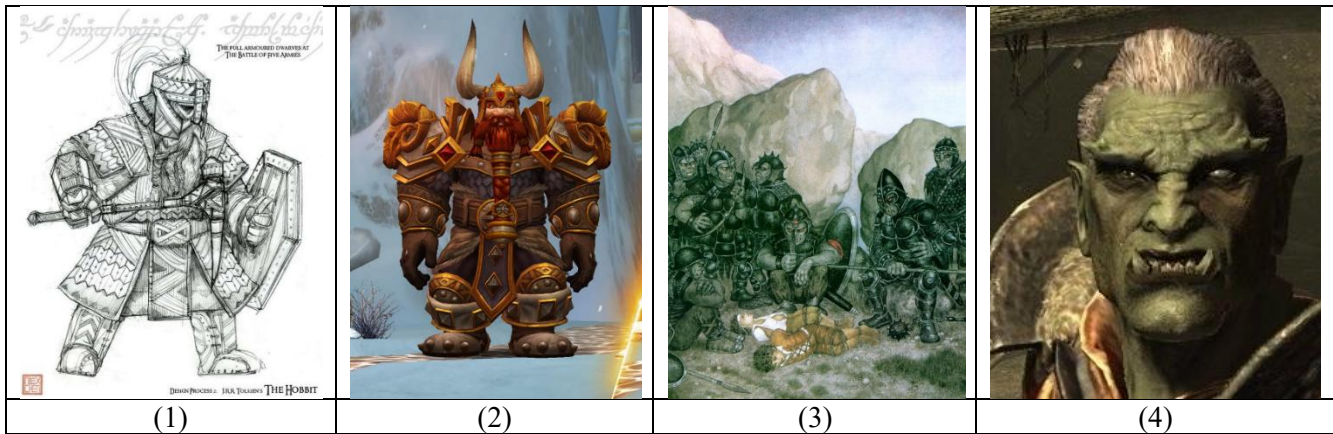


Figure 3: Thematic adaptation of Tolkien-inspired races: dwarves in World of Warcraft and orcs in Skyrim.

Source: 1- (T, 2024), 2- (*Dwarf - WoW*, n.d) ,3- (Tolkien Gateway, 2024),4- (Scrolls, n.d)

4. Result Discussion

4.1 Summary of the main findings

This study finds out that the selected games that are adapted from the *Lord of the Rings* series take various approaches to adaptation and narrative structure. The analysis revealed three main strategies:

1. **Direct Adaptation:** Retains strong faithfulness to Tolkien's character, location, and plotlines. An example of this type came from *Lord of the Rings Online*. Moreover, the game also had fixed narrative fidelity, directly adapting from Tolkien's world, dialogue, and questlines. Furthermore, the game became successful in preserving canon and makes it valuable for educational literary exploration.
2. **Expensive Adaptation:** Extends Tolkien's novels by inventing new conflicts, protagonists, and narrative arcs. *Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor* holds that as an example of this type. This game has demonstrated emergent narrative systems, mainly through the Nemesis system, which customizes the player's experience and introduces reactive storytelling. This shifts from passive to interactive engagement with adapted narratives.
3. **Thematic Inspiration:** Adapts Tolkien's themes, races and mythic structures into an original world narrative. Both games, *World of Warcraft* and *Skyrim*, illustrated genre inheritance, such as orcs, elves, dwarfs and mythic structures, without plot adaptation. This reflects how Tolkien's influence extends to genre aesthetics and worldbuilding conventions.

4.2 Comparative Analysis with Related Work

These findings are aligned with Turley's (2018) view of video games as texts that require interpretive reading with Saptanto's (2021) conclusion that video games function as standalone literary forms. The three adaptation types identified in this study--direct, expansive, and thematic--can be situated within Hutcheon's (2013) theory of adaptation as both a product and a process that goes back to the original material as a new type of media form. Direct adaptations, such as *The Lord of the Rings Online*, emphasize what Hutcheon terms "fidelity discourse," aiming to replicate narrative and aesthetic elements from the source text. Expansive adaptations, like *Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor*, reflect Sanders' (2006) notion of "appropriation," where creative freedom extends the canonical world, often in line with Jenkins' (2006) idea of transmedia storytelling, where new stories inhabit the same narrative universe without simply retelling the original. Thematic inspirations, as seen in *World of Warcraft* and *Skyrim*, resonate with Sander's description of "genre migration," where motifs, races, and mythic structures are transplanted into entirely new fictional settings.

This theoretical framing reinforces the idea that adaptation in video games should be evaluated not only faithfully through the source but also through the mechanics of gameplay, scope of player agency, and the affordances of interactive media. In this way, video games can be read as both literary continuations and creative reinterpretations, expanding the possibilities of narrative engagement in the digital era.

4.3 Tables:

Narrative Structure Comparison: Literature vs. Video Games

The distinctions between direct adaptation, expansive adaptation, and thematic inspiration can be better understood by comparing the broader narrative frameworks of literature and video games. Table 1 explains these differences, focusing on structural design, audience engagement, and narrative control.

Table 1: The difference between Narrative Structure in Video Games and Literature

Aspect	Literature	Video Games
Structure	Fixed (Beginning, Climax, Ending)	Linear, nonlinear, player-driven paths
Reader/Player Role	Passive reader	Active reader, shapes the story through interaction
Narrative Control	The author controls the story	Shared between author and players
Story Progression	Determined by the author's structure	Can be influenced by the players' choices and gameplay outcomes
Ending	One fixed ending	Multiple endings or consequences based on the player's choices.

4.4 Limitations and Contributions

When it comes to limitations, this study only analyzed four games, which may not represent all types of literary adaptation in gaming. Moreover, narrative experience in games is subjective and will depend on the players' choices and playstyle. On the other hand, this study contributes to the understanding of digital adaptation and interactive narrative structure. It shows that video games are not a copy of literature but offer new ways of experiencing and expanding legitimate texts. Moreover, it suggests that adaptation in games should be studied not only in terms of faithfulness but also in terms of mechanics, and interactivity.

5. Conclusion

This study identifies three adaptation strategies in video games inspired by *The Lord of the Rings*: direct adaptation, expansive adaptation, and thematic inspiration. Each aligns with established adaptation theory: direct adaptation with fidelity-focused models (Hutcheon, 2013), expansive adaptation with transformative and appropriative approaches (Sanders, 2006) that often operate as transmedia extensions (Jenkins, 2006), and thematic inspiration with genre migration, where motifs and worldbuilding elements are transplanted into new narratives. By framing these categories through theoretical lenses, the analysis advances adaptation studies beyond static faithfulness debates, highlighting the role of interactivity, gameplay mechanics, and player agency in shaping adapted narratives.

Beyond theoretical implications, the findings underscore the distinctive position of video games within contemporary storytelling. Unlike literature, where narrative control resides with the author, games distribute this power between developer and player, enabling nonlinear progression, emergent plots, and personalized outcomes. This quality transforms adaptation from a process of replication into one of co-creation, expanding the possibilities

for narrative engagement in the digital age. Therefore, video games are not merely vessels for literary stories but active sites where those stories can evolve and gain new cultural relevance.

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