"I'M A FULLY REALIZED CREATION!": BODIES OF WORK AND CREATIVE PROCESSES IN *THE ADVENTURE ZONE* AND *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

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"I'm a fully realized creation!": Bodies of Work and Creative Processes in *The Adventure Zone* and *The Lord of the Rings*

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Podcasts have been given relatively little scholarly attention, as the medium is so new very little framework exists to discuss it. This thesis seeks to provide an example by comparing a podcast to a more commonly discussed work. It focuses on *The Adventure Zone*, a popular "actual-play" podcast by the McElroy family of podcasters that tells a fantasy fiction narrative through the medium of the role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*. The narrative of *The Adventure Zone*'s *Balance* storyline is compared to that of *The Lord of the Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkien's foundational fantasy text, particularly as it pertains to how they were created. Both stories were developed to follow on from narratives more conventional and popular but less personal and complex, and used pre-existing non-narrative material made by the creators: *Lord of the Rings* used Tolkien's unpublished "legendarium" to create a sequel to *The Hobbit*, and *The Adventure Zone* used the style and content of the McElroys' other podcasts to complicate and subvert a simple pre-written *Dungeons & Dragons* adventure that became the starting point of the story. Comparing the two works' creation, narrative and impact provides a rich example of the relationship podcast narratives have with more conventional literary ones.

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1.0   INTRODUCTION

The Lord of the Rings speaks for itself. Not everything does.

J.R.R. Tolkien's momentous novel, published in three volumes over 60 years ago, has left a legacy far more profound than just a popular story or an imaginative setting, it changed the way people imagine. The elaborately conceived history and culture of Middle-Earth is closely tied to the book's narrative, but it's written to extend far beyond the confines of the events of that narrative. It set the standard for the fantasy genre, which wouldn't exist in the form we know today without the depth that Tolkien brought to his fiction.

Lord of the Rings isn't the "fully realized creation" referred to in the title, though. The quotation comes from Taako, an elf wizard, a character in one of the many fantasy stories inspired by Tolkien. The inspiration may seem removed and obscure, though, considering the context for the quotation: Taako is discussing a disguise he will wear to participate in an illegal auto race where the prize will be a priceless magical artifact. The character—as well as Justin McElroy, who's portraying him—is defending the decision to put serious thought into his disguise, despite the fact that he had been joking about the idea: "You know, not everything has to be a joke . . . I have a beating heart! I'm multi-dimensional! I'm a fully realized creation!" (*The Adventure Zone* 23).

This mode of storytelling is quite a bit removed from Tolkien's style, but it's quite a different kind of a fantasy story from *Lord of the Rings:* Taako is one of the heroes of a narrative serialized fiction podcast called *The Adventure Zone*, where the story being told is actually a game of *Dungeons & Dragons* played by the McElroy family—brothers Justin, Travis and Griffin McElroy and their father Clint. The McElroys are successful and renowned podcasters, best known for their irreverent advice podcast *My Brother, My Brother and Me*. Originally, *The Adventure Zone* was a fill-in episode of *My Brother, My Brother and Me*, made in advance for one brother's paternity leave. The episode in its original form was a more structured episode of their podcast, featuring a similar style of humor and collaboration. In keeping with that style, the episode was jokingly referred to as the start of "a new—and hopefully very very lucrative— fantasy fiction franchise." (*TAZ* 1) The joke would ring far more true than anyone could have imagined, as the podcast grew from a relatively unambitious and primarily comedic podcast into a complex and emotional story, one that has already shown its own effect on fantasy storytelling.

Lord of the Rings didn't appear out of nowhere as a "fully realized creation" either. The book is a sequel to Tolkien's best-selling 1937 children's book *The Hobbit*. Tolkien wasn't usually a children's author, since most of his writing consisted of very technical invented versions of the translated ancient mythology and history that he dealt with in his capacity as a linguist and historian. *The Hobbit*'s success demanded a sequel, but Tolkien was more interested in his personal work, as a letter to his publisher shows:

> I think it is plain that . . . a sequel or successor to *The Hobbit* is called for. I
> promise to give this thought and attention. But I am sure you will sympathize
> when I say that the construction of elaborate and consistent mythology (and two

languages) rather occupies the mind . . . So goodness knows what will happen.

(*Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Letter 19)

Tolkien hit upon the solution of putting one effort towards the other. Tolkien had been developing his "elaborate and consistent mythology" for decades as a hobby. His attempts to go back to more conventional children's literature were simple and aimless, until he started integrating elements from this mythology. The combination paid enormous dividends for the eventual result of *Lord of the Rings*, allowing a deeper, more complex, and larger adventure for his *Hobbit* sequel, and a more popular and emotionally compelling anchor for his mythology.

The McElroy Brothers took a similar approach for similar reasons. Once it emerged that their *Dungeons & Dragons* games drew a regular audience, they were faced with the task of actually having to write that "fantasy fiction franchise". As with Tolkien, they drew upon their professional and personal work, creating a fantasy world with the same sensibility and frame of reference as their podcasts and journalism work. They made *The Adventure Zone*, a podcast which has been the platform for several different pieces of serialized fiction. The first, most successful and most notable of these works, *The Adventure Zone: Balance*, will be the primary focus when discussing the podcast and its creation.

The Adventure Zone also became a foundational work in a new genre, "actual-play podcasts," which present people playing a cooperative role-playing game in a way that blends traditional storytelling with a more improvisatory approach to narrative. The format had existed for years before *TAZ*, but it blossomed in popularity in the McElroys' wake. The innumerable podcasts that followed have used the same form to tell a wide range of stories, but few have been able to replicate the way *TAZ* engaged with the expectations of *Dungeons & Dragons*, and the

notion of fantasy worlds as a whole. From a literary view, the show was in constant dialogue with the "normal" version of fantasy storytelling—and therefore, with *Lord of the Rings*.

Despite the strange way it was conceived and told, *The Adventure Zone* is still a work of fantasy fiction, so it follows traditions far older than Tolkien. It features powerful magical artifacts, magical friends and foes, battles and puzzles, and many of the other hallmarks of the genre. All these elements exist in unusual permutations, and have been shaped by the McElroys to deliberately flout these conventions in much the same way that their other work flouts the conventions of journalism for the sake of audio-based comedy.

In fact, to create their fantasy world, the McElroys used the same method that Tolkien did so many years before: They used the non-narrative creative work they had already done, both professionally and for their personal enjoyment, and applied it in a narrative context. This meant that even though both Tolkien and the McElroys were creating their worlds within a larger tradition, their work stood out as both radical and personal.

The clearest commonality between the two is the genres each inspired. Neither story was the first of its kind, but both started out as relatively conventional stories and became more specific and unusual as they each continued, in a way that made the conventional narrative deeper and the specific elements more accessible This combination gave other creators a blueprint for how to create their own work in a similarly personal way, and gave audiences an expectation for this kind of personal storymaking.

This essay will examine the way this commonality deepens each of the two works, as well as how unusual the relationship between them is. Starting from an examination of the unique space fantasy occupies in the creative sphere, it will track their respective creative processes to highlight the similarity between how the two fantasy stories came to be. Since *Lord*

of The Rings is such an influential work, and *The Adventure Zone: Balance* is so engaged with its influences, the essay will track the two works' dialogue between each other, and how both the influence and reaction are ultimately an expression of the creators' perspective.

Analyzing these two works comparatively accomplishes much at once. To begin with, Tolkien's work has been exhaustively catalogued and discussed, but virtually no academic analysis exists that examines actual-play podcasts in a literary context, let alone podcasts as a medium. The strategies that have been in use to chart Tolkien's creative journey can be applied to the McElroys, who have been very transparent with their process of writing, recording and editing.

Following from this, podcasts are hard to talk about because they're hard to categorize. The form is still new and difficult to place in context. Comparing a popular example of this new form of storytelling to the traditional backbone of modern fantasy fiction will properly contextualized actual-play podcasts as a new genre of storytelling in its own right. The effect works just as well in the other direction, since it can be tempting to think of Tolkien's "legendarium" as the product of actual history akin to the actual folklore he was emulating, rather than an ordinary (if expansive) work of fiction. Following Tolkien's creative process, in comparison with one for a contemporary work, will demystify the way such a legendary work came to exist, and examine the way genres and forms emerge thanks to the influence of particularly well-known unusual work.

2.0   FANTASY: DEFINING THE INDEFINITE

The most obvious similarity between *Lord of the Rings* and *The Adventure Zone* is that they both belong to the fantasy genre: The former is one of the best-known and most influential fantasy works, and the latter features the recurring joke of items modern elements being referred to as "fantasy versions" of that item, culminating in the main characters making regular shopping trips to "Fantasy Costco". Defining the fantasy genre is beyond the scope of this essay, but the origins of the genre need to be discussed, given the way both creators applied their own perspectives to it, and especially to the idea of creating a fantasy world.

All stories implicitly have a setting that stretches far beyond the confines of the story, but usually this setting isn't defined beyond the elements that directly concern the narrative. There is a fair amount of classical fiction that takes place in an elaborately considered social and historical setting, from Plato's *Republic* to Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, but a "world" is a setting that exists independently of the story, which leads to question of paratextuality and hypertextuality more common in modern literary culture. Look at the forerunners of fantasy stories: myths, legends, folktales and fairytales. These stories tend to avoid the question of a setting altogether, taking place in "a faraway land" or "once upon a time," as a way to justify the supernatural and fanciful nature of the stories.[1]

Fantasy stories, though, allow for this transcendent kind of world easier than most other forms of fiction. Any story with supernatural or fantastical elements requires logic to how these

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[1] Before the age of globalization, foreign lands were thought of as not just strange but magical, and several works that would be considered fantasy were considered genuine travelogues because they described journeys to fictional lands (Wolf ch. 2).

elements fit into the world the reader knows. This logic can be applied to distinct stories in similar ways, meaning stories from a common tradition can share common elements of a setting. These elements tend to be supernatural in nature, as in the intervention of the same god or magical being, or the same magic used to different ends by different people (Wolf, 6-8).

Tolkien's primary academic field of study was linked stories like these, especially ones that were identified closely with a particular culture or language: Most notably, The Old Norse Eddas, the Finnish *Kalevala*, the German *Nibelungenleid*, *Beowulf,* and the Arthurian stories of England. These national "matters" were themes he would often return to, as both a writer and an academic. He made no secret that most of his writing was "derived from (previously digested) epic, mythology and fairy-story" (Letter 25).

Meanwhile, his academic perspective on these forms was more nuanced. Tolkien was a linguist, and he held that studying a culture through its language was incomplete without also studying the stories told in that language (McIlwaine 16). He devoted extensive study to this dynamic, especially with regards to the way a story that divorced itself from the real world with fantastical elements could end up having a closer connection to reality than a more grounded story.

Scholars of myth and folklore have used the term "Faerie" to describe the timeless and placeless setting for these pre-modern fantasy stories, for the same reason that they're called "fairytales". Tolkien wrote extensively on the nature of this kind of storytelling, most memorably in his 1939 lecture "On Fairy-Stories," where he refused to give a formal definition of what Faerie is: "Faerie cannot be caught in a net of words; for it is one of its qualities to be indescribable, though not imperceptible" (32). Faerie isn't a formalized world, it's a world with a lack of form. In Faerie, anything can happen, because there are no rules, no limits...

...and no belief. Fairy-tales are closely related to fantasy stories, but they're presented at a clear remove from the real world, and the reader is not meant to believe in them (Nikolajeva 152-3). Fantasy stories are not meant to be believed, per se, but they're meant to be *credible*, and that requires both consistency and definition. George MacDonald says it clearly in his 1893 essay "The Fantastic Imagination," one of the earliest scholarly works on fantasy: "Nothing lawless can show the least reason why it should exist, or could at best have more than an appearance of life."

Fantasy stories are replete with rules, that frequently become central to the story: Frodo must not put on the Ring or the forces of darkness will discover him. The Grand Relics must be secured and destroyed or the world will be at risk. Since none of these rules are taken from the real world, they have to be invented by the storyteller. Tolkien explains why in "On Fairy-Stories":

> Anyone inheriting the fantastic device of human language can say the green sun. Many can then imagine or picture it. But that is not enough . . . To make a Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible, commanding Secondary Belief, will probably require labour and thought . . . But when [it is] accomplished then we have a rare achievement of Art: indeed narrative art, storymaking in its primary and most potent mode. (61)

This act of "storymaking"[2] is the central appeal of fantasy storytelling for both its creators and its readers. MacDonald understood this: "Man may, if he pleases, invent a little world of his own, with its own laws; for there is that in him which delights in calling up new

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[2] "Storymaking" is used here instead of "worldbuilding" because the latter term has a host of contemporary associations and expectations associated with it, outside the scope of this paper. (Michel)

forms—which is the nearest, perhaps, he can come to creation" ("The Fantastic Imagination").

Narrative writing always has a creative element to it, but narrative fantasy, where both the

situation and setting have been invented single-handedly by the author, is often seen as requiring

so much creative energy that it transcends the normal act of making art. From this view, creating

a believable fictional world needs to be considered in loftier and more elemental terms, less like

ordinary writing and more like creating reality itself. Tolkien's term for this was "sub-creation"

(*OFS*, 42); with the primary creation being the real world.

2.1   TOLKIEN THE DEFINER

"Sub-creation" has gone on to become the accepted term for this particular style of

creative writing, but it is only creative writing, not some kind of transcendent, cosmogonical act.

Fantasy authors are still authors, and a fictional world will still exist entirely within the sphere of

its creator. Viewed as an act of shaping reality, it falls short, but viewed as a form of writing, it

can be an advancement, according to Michael Wolf: "The sub-creator of a world has more

strategies available for the embedding of worldviews into a work than does the author of a

traditional story" (32). A fantasy world will not be as detailed as reality, but it will be a world

that turns on the axis of its creator's perspective.

Tolkien's world, as well-known and influential as it was, wasn't the first of its kind.

George MacDonald, as mentioned previously, had already written original work in the style of

British fairy-tales in the late 19th century. MacDonald was a minister by trade, who was deeply

concerned with Victorian moral and social issues, and the moral dimension of his stories are

frequently literalized and clarified by the nature of their fantastical elements (Kocher 3). Later writers of early fantasy would form the worlds they created in the same way, such as William Morris, who took inspiration from medieval British sources in his textile design and illustration as much as in his fantastical romances. Pulp author Robert E. Howard was a student of myth and history, creating fictional maps and histories for his Cimmeria stories decades before Middle-Earth, but his tales of roving, brutal barbarian heroes exists in stark contrasts to stories of elves and hobbits (Murphy). These authors' diverse works were linked, since were all telling personal stories within a common space, and their individual stamp is made even deeper by the higher order of creativity that fantasy fiction entails.

So what was Tolkien's stamp? What set his creation apart? The most obvious difference is that, as mentioned previously, he was a scholar of fantasy fiction long before he wrote it. His creative work was an outgrowth of the philosophy and study that dominated his professional career, and consisted primarily of a host of fictional lands, each with a history that recalled legends, that developed the way real legends do. He added fictional languages of this realm, each of which had a fictional development based on the real linguistic development he studied. The interest he brought to *The Lord of the Rings* was metatextual—an interest in the nature of fantasy worlds, how they come to be, and the difference they make for the real world. Writing about his own work, he would say "It is, I suppose, fundamentally concerned with the problem of the relation of Art (and sub-creation) and Primary Reality" (Letter 131). It's little wonder that the most popular act of sub-creation would be made by the man who coined the term.

Lord of the Rings was so popular, in fact, that its success led to fantasy becoming economically viable. The book inspired so many imitators and followers that there was enough supply and demand to market other books set in magical worlds to Tolkien fans directly. These

books were the beginning of the fantasy genre as we know it today, which has been defined by Brian Atterberry as a "fuzzy set" (quoted in Cecire 33) with Tolkien at its center, with older writers like Howard or MacDonald being affected by the newer categorization, thanks to "Tolkien readers cast[ing] about for something to satisfy their quickened taste for imagined worlds" (Rosebury 202-203).

Considering Tolkien's influence, and the depth and breadth of his created worlds, it has been argued that fantasy worlds made in his wake have been less creative in general, since they have such well-known and comprehensive sources to draw from. There are certainly a number of books that reduce the entire process of creating a world to "The maps, the magic, the monsters, the races, the talismans, the names ending in *-ath* and *-eth* and *-or*" (Rosebury 203), but dismissing everything after *Lord of the Rings* as a Tolkien knockoff would be as wrong as calling Tolkien himself a William Morris knockoff. Instead, Tolkien's perspective of "creation and sub-creation" has been shifted, with the latter being so influential it grows to resemble the former.

Tolkien's writing was inspired by his personal and professional interests, and conceived from the beginning as a complete cycle of mythology for his own time and place: "I have never stopped building it . . . But once upon a time (my crest has long since fallen) I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend . . . which I could dedicate simply: to England; to my country" (Letter 131). If his was the sub-creation, then the higher, prototypical *Creation* was his homeland and the history that so fascinated him—not nearly as general as might be expected from the religious air of the capital C.

And if Creation does not have to encompass all creation, then it can be confined to his own work. Fantasy that deals with the world as filtered through Tolkien is sub-creation in its own right, and is no shallower or less meaningful for that foundation.

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3.0   THE *ADVENTURE* BEGINS

3.1   THE MCELROY FAMILY

The Adventure Zone is a clear example of the way sub-creation of a sub-creation can have literary value. The McElroys' non-narrative work has been inspired by their own mix of classical storytelling, contemporary fantasy literature and their careers in the humanities and arts. Unlike Tolkien, whose work on the nature and practice of creativity stimulated his own creativity, the McElroys' work has a more collaborative and engaged focus, which translates to a much less authorial kind of (sub-)creation.

Clint McElroy worked in radio and broadcasting in the area of Huntington, West Virginia, for over forty years, beginning at his college's radio station—following in his own father's footsteps. He worked primarily on the sports and news beat, but he tended towards comedy regardless of his actual remit. He would frequently create humorous recurring characters on his shows, improvising complicated skits and interactions. He would also stage elaborate events for charitable and social causes, which he broadcasted live on the air (Mayne).

His creative output was altered significantly, though, by that of his three sons. Justin, Griffin and Travis McElroy worked in theater, journalism and broadcasting from an early age. The family remained close collaborators on many of their efforts: Clint began acting in local theater productions to support Justin and Travis' interest. Griffin became a regular fixture of Clint's local television efforts. Justin and Griffin worked together as journalists in the video game industry for over a decade (Enlow; Fires; Green).

This last effort was a crucial change, as it gave the family an online audience, one that spread far beyond their hometown. The collaborative style of creation that had served them for

so long now had to include thousands of people around the world. The entire family began to work in the myriad new forms becoming popular thanks to the rise of Internet communities in the mid-late 2000s. Thanks to Justin and Griffin's jobs, their work often involved novel forms surrounding video games, such as Let's Plays and news podcasts (Fires).

The family's following allowed them to mount more personal creative projects, that used these new forms in less usual ways. Most notably, in 2010, the three brothers started a weekly podcast that was "really . . . an excuse for us to stay in touch with each other," as Travis said in an interview with Jaime Green. The show's title, *My Brother, My Brother and Me*, reflected this personal aim, but the show's actual format was—rather arbitrarily—a show where Griffin, Travis and Justin answered anonymous questions asking for advice. The format was intended to be comedic, considering the advice would be given by "three people who don't know *anything*. Like, what if Dear Abby was a goober?" (Green). The show was primarily using it to give a structure to freeform jokes involving niche cultural references and scenes between characters with silly voices, following the decades-old family tradition rather than trying to give any actual counsel.

However, the format ended up taking precedent: When the comedy was at the expense of the people asking for advice, there was a negative response from the listeners that the McElroys agreed with. On occasions when the brothers were thoughtless or abusive, they would quickly apologize and change their behavior for the better. This social consciousness became woven into the nature of the show, and the family's larger online image became associated with a staunchly progressive attitude of open-mindedness and acceptance that feeds into comedy, rather than rendering it off-limits—"it dovetails with basic improv rules," Justin said to Green.

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3.2   DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: CHOOSE YOUR OWN *ADVENTURE*

The McElroys' practice of applying the sensibilities of improvisational comedy and the spirit of intimate collaboration to other forms of content is a clear reason why the family started a narrative *Dungeons & Dragon*s podcast in the first place (Yeates 3). Role-playing games like D&D have been fertile ground for collaborative storytelling since their inception, and the nature of the resulting stories have frequently been compared to "improvisational theater," "a personal myth"[3] (Padol), or "a musician's jam session" (Henry). Stories in these games develop collaboratively between all the participants, but the division of labor is unequal: In these role-playing games, a single player takes the role of DM ("Dungeon Master," as in *Dungeons & Dragons*, sometimes generalized to "GM" for "Game Master"), who creates the setting, circumstances and interactions of the story, while the other players create characters who play by interacting with the world the DM has created.

According to Liz Henry's 2003 essay "Group Narration," this kind of storytelling creates "complex questions of authorship, narrative, and performative experience . . . Within the collaborative narrative of a game, who has authority to decide what happens or what is 'true'?" The DM, the players, and the creators of the game itself all have an effect on the story, leaving the notion of authority over the nature of the story in doubt. This suits the McElroys well, since the social goals they have for their work have resulted in a rejection of any authority at all, especially their own. Despite the fact that they finish every response to a question asked in person with "Did that help?," each episode of *My Brother, My Brother and Me* begins with a

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[3] Note the similarity to "sub-creation"

reminder that *The McElroy Brothers are not experts, and their advice should never be followed"* (*MBMBAM*).

The Adventure Zone is therefore fantasy story without a clear creator, which can be read as a reaction to the idea of sub-creation. The idea of creation and sub-creation as a hierarchy is complicated when multiple creators are responsible for shaping the work in different respects and in different directions[4]. This is true of any game of *Dungeons & Dragons*, but the game has a complicated relationship with fantasy literature in general and Tolkien in specific, but according to Michael Tresca, the form the game took—and therefore, the form of all RPGs that followed it—was shaped by *Lord of the Rings*, and everyone involved in creating the narrative of gameplay will be performing an act of sub-creation as Tolkien defined it, working within the wide parameters of the game to achieve their own aims (ch. 4).

TAZ isn't a game, though, it's a narrative, non-interactive podcast. The players of a D&D game are usually the story's audience, in addition to its creators (Quiogue), but in the new genre of actual-play podcasts, the DM and characters are all playing with an audience's narrative enjoyment in mind, leading every element of play to be created with dramatic intent. This is well within the parameters of role-playing games, which have been characterized as "like jazz improvisation . . . with written drama being like classical music" (Henry).

Creating a radio drama with the storytelling tools of D&D becomes, therefore, the same kind of sub-creation as Tolkien creating a complex fictional world with the storytelling tools of legend and fantastical literature. These two creators are being discussed in divergent ways because they've led divergent lives. No creator can make a world beyond the boundaries of their

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[4] Griffin was the DM of *TAZ*'s *Balance* campaign and came up with most of the major elements of the narrative and world, but this essay will not name him the sole or primary author of the story, given the process was so collaborative.

own frame of reference, but creators like Tolkien and the McElroys both create worlds that are primarily expressed through the areas of their expertise, and are built on the sturdy foundation of their non-fiction work and creative philosophies.

This may seem to be a weak comparison, since the scholarly, linguistically developed world of Middle-Earth seems far removed from the same creative forces that shaped the unusually contemporary and running-joke-heavy world of *The Adventure Zone*. But like most fantasy works created since 1956, the McElroys' world exists in dialogue with Tolkien's, playing on the expectations and conventions that form the outline of the shadow *Lord of the Rings* still casts over the fantasy genre. This is part of a larger dialogue the McElroys have with traditional forms of culture, which can be seen in the way *The Adventure Zone* contains so many elements carried over from their previous work, particularly in the *Balance* story. The narrative of the podcast is informed by their other work, in the same way that Tolkien's theories on language and myth informed his fantasy world.

4.0 FROM POPULAR TO PERSONAL: TOLKIEN'S PROCESS

This isn't always the case, though: All writing will reflect the perspective of its writer, but it doesn't always need to be personal, or indulge the writer's interests. Not every word a writer produces will come from such a passionate and individual place—particularly writers like the McElroys, who wrote in corporate-dominated sectors of journalism before ever attempting fiction, or Tolkien, who began as a researcher and copywriter for the Oxford English Dictionary. Tolkien had no great attachment to much of what he wrote, even applying to his creative work. In his letters, he says his short story *Farmer Giles of Ham* "was, I fear, written very lightheartedly" (Letter 122), and that *Lord of the Rings*, which he took a break from plotting to write the story, was "so much better" and far more worth his time (Letter 106).

The Hobbit was Tolkien's first published work of fiction, and though it was undeniably a personal and singular work, it was far more conventional than most of the enormous legendarium of fictional myth, history and linguistics that he had already spent years creating. The vaguely post-industrial Shire, with its roots in the English countryside of Tolkien's youth, is quite contemporary and specific, when contrasted the mythical shores of Valinor or the proud and ancient city of Gondolin—in fact, early editions of the book make passing reference to real-world concepts like policemen on bicycles or China, making the setting so specific that the references were removed in later editions (Rateliff 40). Similarly, Bilbo Baggins is quite a modern conception of a hero, an unlikely underdog who undergoes a psychological journey over the course of the story, ignoring his "Tookish" thirst for adventure until it's brought out when he's forced into one by Gandalf until his life becomes so filled with adventure that it becomes

sated, and he accepts it as a part of himself. More generally, *The Hobbit*'s prose is far more modern than that of his other work, which frequently recalled archaic English translations of myths in other languages, as part of his efforts to imitate real literary history. An internal memo from Tolkien's publishers candidly asks "Would there be any market for a long, involved, romantic verse tale of Celtic elves and mortals? I think not" (quoted in McIlwaine, 218-219).

In fact, Tolkien specifically wanted to distance *The Hobbit* from this more specific and unusual work. When the book was first published, he wrote to his publishers to complain about how they were advertising it as "a professor of [ancient languages and mythology] at play," saying that he specifically used his invented languages and mythology in the book as a way of avoiding how esoteric and complicated his actual field of study could be (Letter 15). In those days, he didn't seem to regard *The Hobbit* as having any serious connection to his interconnected legendarium beyond these brief references, any more than his other fiction was connected.

When the book was published, though, it became a resounding success, and Tolkien was faced with this disconnected work becoming the only work anyone wanted from him. As mentioned back at the beginning, he understood that people wanted more *Hobbit*, but the work he had been doing was only inspiring him to be more ambitious with his personal work. "The sequel to *The Hobbit* has remained where it stopped," he wrote in a letter a few months after the book was released. "My mind on the 'story' side is really preoccupied with the 'pure' fairy stories or mythologies of the *Silmarillion*, into which even Mr. Baggins got dragged against my original will, and I do not think I shall be able to move much outside it" (Letter 31). This last note showed that a change had already occured, in his inventory of his own work: Bilbo, his world and his adventures were now officially a part of his legendarium, even though, by his own admission, he hadn't planned it that way.

A problem with this, especially for someone as scrupulous as Tolkien, was that it would be hard to figure out any space for hobbits to fit in—or, depending on the perspective, for the legendarium to fit into the world of the hobbits. The latter view gives a clearer picture of his process, since despite all his protestations about not being able to think of any sequel for *The Hobbit*, he started writing it anyway, with the provisional title *The Magic Ring* (McIlwaine 331). The story began as a light adventure in the same vein as the original, with Bilbo abruptly disappearing into thin air at his own birthday party, because "after he had blowed *[sic]* his last fifty ducats on the party he had not got *any money or jewelry left*, except the ring, and the gold buttons on his waistcoat" (*Return of the Shadow* 13-16).

Bilbo's magic ring, claimed from Gollum in *The Hobbit*, was meant to be the driver of the plot from the very beginning, as the story's original title shows. Tolkien's son Christopher notes that "It is indeed remarkable that already at this stage, when my father was still working on the opening chapter, so much of the Ring's nature was already present in embryo" (*Return* 42). The idea of the largely functional trinket from the first adventure having a complicated history and subtle, malicious effects that exacerbate the second was present from the very start of the story, and it represented a strategy Tolkien would apply over and over again as he iterated the story: Taking his earlier work and interpolating it to fit with *The Hobbit.*

The comprehensive publication of Tolkien's unpublished work offers an unusually clear view of how much of his work developed, but much is evident within the text itself: The heroic narrative of Aragorn and Arwen is self-consciously modelled after the earlier story of Beren and Lúthien (Bowman 279). The city of Minas Tirith is meant to have a similar weight in the story as Númenor, the home of its ancestral kings—and the same is true of its opposite number, Sauron's Barad-dûr, which is built in imitation of Morgoth's mountain-sized Thangorodrim (Drout 176-

177). The inspiration for these elements are reflected in the text, strengthening the connection between the newer story and Tolkien's older work, but the most important one of these influences goes unremarked: The Ring itself.

As Tolkien said in the letter quoted in the introduction, he was captivated by the dramatic heft of his concept of the Silmarils. In his legendarium, the Silmarils were magical jewels that had no power in and of themselves, but were so beautiful that they became an object of obsession and a symbol of ultimate conquest to everyone in the realm of Arda, and left a trail of bloody war behind them as they changed hands. They were so central to the fictional myths that Tolkien planned to publish them in a collected volume called *The Silmarillion*. Meanwhile, in *The Lord of the Rings,* the One Ring that serves to drive the story after being a relatively unimportant tool in *The Hobbit*, is eventually shown to have an essentially identical history. Tolkien was finally able to tear himself away from the *Silmarillion* by retconning[5] something close to a Silmaril into *The Hobbit* and placing it at the center of the sequel. The sequel would quickly be retitled, from *The Magic Ring* to *Lord of the Rings*, once the focus of the story had shifted to the fight against the Dark Lord Sauron—who, of course, Tolkien had already invented for "The Fall of Númenor," a separate cycle of myth that he would later integrate with *The Silmarillion*[6] (quoted in *Return* 218)

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[5] The idea of Bilbo's ring being a creation of Sauron, or the "One Ring to rule them all," was not conceived until long after *The Hobbit*'s publication. Early drafts of *Lord of the Rings* established its connection to Sauron, but only as one of many rings, and not any special beyond being the last remaining one (*Return* 78).

[6] Sauron was actually one of the few concrete elements of Tolkien's mythos to have a presence in *The Hobbit*—at least in Tolkien's mind. He mentions to his publisher that "Even Sauron the terrible peeped over the edge" of *The Silmarillion* into *The Hobbit* (Letter 19), referring to the Necromancer that, in the original text, exist largely as an excuse for Gandalf to leave Bilbo and the Dwarves (Rateliff, 81-84).

4.1   THE RING (RE)CYCLE

The mix of the ancient lore of the *Silmarillion* with the more grounded and exciting story of the hobbits was beneficial for both narratives. Tolkien would create his mythologies whether or not anyone read them, but he had an obvious interest in publishing. Nothing other than *The Hobbit* had reached print before *Lord of the Rings*, though, beyond a few individual poems or stories in academic journals (Bertenstam). He resigned himself to *The Silmarillion* as being one of "the great unpublishables," and feared the same of the half-finished *Lord of the Rings*: "There is still the great 'Hobbit' sequel—I use 'great', I fear, only in the quantitative sense . . . But it cannot be docked or abbreviated. I cannot do better than I have done in this" (Letter 98). It was too long, complicated and dry, with too many made-up names—and not in the fun way like the dwarves in *The Hobbit*.

Reconciling the modern adventure with the myth gives more context to readers than *The Silmarillion* could have, since the hobbits know little of their world's history and discover it along with the reader (Drout 188-189). The context is emotional and dramatic, as well; *The Hobbit*'s legacy provides heroes who are more grounded and relatable, with a more central viewpoint than the largely detached storytelling style of the legendarium. The allure of the Silmarils, and the great wars they cause, are far more esoteric than the way the magical pull of the Ring upsets the lives of the hobbits, and the humble, contemporary world of the Shire gives the reader a similar emotional context for the desolation of Mordor or the majesty of Minas Tirith.

The Shire itself benefits just as much from this contrast, as do the hobbits who inhabit (inhobbit?) it, since it becomes a comfortable grounding element for the audience, more so than a

setting in its own right. In his review of *Lord of the Rings*, W.H. Auden—a student and friend of Tolkien's, as well as one of his earliest proponents —warns readers they "must not let themselves be put off" by the book's prologue, that describes the Shire in minute detail ("The Hero is a Hobbit") saying by way of excuse "This is light comedy and light comedy is not Mr. Tolkien's forte" ("At The End Of The Quest"). Tolkien admitted his oddity in a letter to his publisher: "I am personally immensely amused by hobbits as such, and can contemplate them eating and making their rather fatuous jokes indefinitely; but I find that is not the case with even my most devoted 'fans', such as Mr. [C.S.] Lewis, [who] says hobbits are only amusing when in unhobbitlike situations" (Letter 31). By combining *The Hobbit*'s sequel with the more complicated, serious and mythical elements of *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien created just about the most "unhobbitlike" situation possible for his main characters.

Tolkien probably didn't think of his early work on *Lord of the Rings* in these terms, but he was quite aware of how distinct it was from what readers of *The Hobbit* would expect from a sequel. His letters at the time show that the story was becoming much longer and more complicated than he had anticipated, once he started adding the flavor of his legendarium (Letters 33, 35, 37). As his own introduction to *Lord of the Rings* famously puts it,

> This tale grew in the telling, until it became a history of the Great War of the Ring and included many glimpses of the yet more ancient history that preceded it. It was begun soon after *The Hobbit* was written and before its publication in 1937; but I did not go on with this sequel, for I wished to first complete and set in order the mythology and legends of the Elder Days, which had then been taking shape for some years. (xxii)

Not only had the mythology "been taking shape" before its integration into *Lord of the Rings*, but many elements of the story were already fully realized in his earlier work before he began writing, and were directly transferred into the story, rather than just providing inspiration the same way the Silmarils inspired the Ring. These elements tended to be from his more self-contained and less narrative work, rather than the myths he wanted to compile and publish in *The Silmarillion*, but the fictional boundaries between his various efforts were quite permeable—remember that *The Hobbit* originally referred to China and Gondolin in similar contexts.

The most obvious thing transferred from Tolkien's pre-existing writing into *Lord of the Rings* comes relatively early in the story. The first stopping point for the hobbits after they set off to destroy the Ring is the house of Tom Bombadil. The character makes an odd impression before disappearing from the narrative completely, plotted closer to the episodic form of the original *Hobbit* than the more contiguous *Lord of the Rings*. Bombadil does not fit in cleanly with Tolkien's world because he was not written with that belonging in mind. In 1934, Tolkien published a poem called "The Adventures of Tom Bombadil," featuring an identical character in a fanciful, sing-song world that seems a far more natural fit for him than Middle-Earth (*Return* 115-116). Tolkien explained his decision in a letter to a reader: "Many have found him an odd or indeed discordant ingredient. In historical fact I put him in because I had already 'invented' him independently and wanted an 'adventure' on the way" (Letter 153).

"The Adventures of Tom Bombadil" was one of many poems Tolkien had published before writing *Lord of the Rings*, and he would frequently use the poems themselves in his work, not just the characters in those poems (Bertenstam). The original intentions for these poems varied: Some, like "Errantry" (appearing in *LOTR* as "Eärendil was a mariner"), were inspiration for aspects of *The Silmarillion* that informed the later versions that appeared in the books. Some,

like "Light as Leaf on Lindentree" (which evolved into the later poem "The Lay of Leithian") were written within the legendarium, while others, like "The Man in the Moon Stayed Up Too Late," were completely disconnected until their inclusion in *LOTR* (Bertenstam).

The range of Tolkien's sources, within his own writing, demonstrate how his process when making *Lord of the Rings* was primarily iteration on his pre-existing work rather than creating new work. Combining his personal writing with the largely unconnected world of *The Hobbit* was never planned, but it allowed him to go even further into his personal work, more personal than even his legendarium, while still keeping the story easily accessible and comprehensible. A letter to a fan of *LOTR* shows how it changed Tolkien's attitude towards his own previous work:

> There are, I fear, no hobbits in *The Silmarillion* (or the history of the Three
>
> Jewels), little fun or earthiness but mostly grief and disaster. Those critics who
>
> scoffed at *The Lord* because 'all the good boys came home safe and everyone was
>
> happy ever after' (quite untrue) ought to be satisfied. (Letter 227)

Tolkien's unplanned strategy, done out of a sense of obligation to expectations, confounded all expectations. In fact, *Lord of the Rings* was so popular that it left completely new expectations for the very process of storymaking in its wake.

5.0   FROM GAME TO NARRATIVE: THE MCELROYS' PROCESS

The Adventure Zone: Balance is a completely distinct work with a completely distinct creative process, but examining that process reveals a fundamental similarity: Both evolved from relatively unambitious and impersonal beginnings into a vast, emotional, contemporary narrative containing many elements of the creators' previous work. The McElroy Brothers' work hasn't been studied or catalogued to the same extent as Tolkien's[7], but since their podcasts and other work has all been on the Internet, and they have given a host of interviews on the development of *TAZ*, the journey the story has taken is easy to track.

Tolkien didn't intend for his sequel to *The Hobbit* to grow in the way it did, but the McElroys didn't intend to tell a story of their own at all. The first episode was always intended as a possible pilot for a show of its own, but little thought was given to establishing a setting or any ongoing narrative other than the new characters (Tito & Mazzanoble). Most of the family had little or no experience with *Dungeons & Dragons*, and there were no expectations from the audience for a work of original fiction (*TAZ* 1). Instead, the first six episodes of the show follows the family playing a story written entirely by the creators of the game, called *The Lost Mine of Phandelver*, taking place in the expansive setting of the Forgotten Realms.

Phandelver was created in 2014 to introduce new players to the game[8]: A copy is included in each version of the *Dungeons & Dragons* starter set (Tito), and the narrative is designed to be as easy as possible to play. As mentioned previously, the players of a role-playing

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[7] At least, it hasn't in academic circles, since fan projects like translations, transcriptions and wikis have created exhaustive databases of the family's work.

[8] Specifically, *Phandelver* was written to introduce the newly-formulated Fifth Edition rule set for the game, although it was also designed with players new to *D&D* or RPGs in general.

game will take an authorial position when telling the story, but they will frequently rely on pre-written material, whether that means a player playing a character from their own original fiction (à la Tolkien?), or a Dungeon Master setting the entire game in the same world as a movie or TV show. *Phandelver* is written for the DM running the adventure, giving them as much pre-written material as possible—detailed environments, a pre-plotted journey with notes for possible motivations for the player characters, allies and enemies with elaborate backstories and stats for every possible situation within the game—but it invites the DM to break from it to whatever extent they feel comfortable: "When in doubt, make it up! It's better to keep the game moving than to get bogged down in the rules" (*Lost Mine of Phandelver* 2).

The pre-written story of *Phandelver* was far less personal to the McElroys than *The Hobbit* was to Tolkien—for a start, they didn't write it[9]—but it gave them a similar narrative and emotional spine when creating the rest of the story, that allowed them to repurpose their previous work in other areas to create the larger narrative that would become *The Adventure Zone*'s *Balance* storyline. In addition, *Phandelver* and the Forgotten Realms in which the story takes place are both influenced in many respects by Tolkien, making the McElroys' departures from the pre-written material an indirect commentary on Tolkien and his influence.

Lost Mine of Phandelver is designed for a variable number of players, who can create any character to go through the story as long as it fits within the setting, so "the players" become a single vague unit in narrative terms. The players have been hired by the dwarf Gundren Rockseeker to carry a shipment of mining supplies to the city of Phandalin, fighting off bandits

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[9] All work done by the company that owns and creates *D&D*, Wizards of the Coast (or simply "Wizards"), is officially uncredited. However, according to David Hartlage, *Phandelver* was written and designed by Chris Perkins and Richard Baker. Meanwhile, the larger world of the Forgotten Realms was first created by Ed Greenwood, but had been the setting for hundreds of works by dozens of creators, for almost three decades before *Phandelver* (Hartlage).

and goblins along the way. Once they arrive at the city, they learn that Gundren and his brothers have discovered the location of the ancient magical mine known as Wave Echo Cave, which has been lost for centuries but turns out to be near Phandalin. Gundren's escort, Sildar Hallwinter, tells the players that Gundren has been kidnapped by goblin agents of a mysterious magician known as the Black Spider, who wants the treasure of the mine for himself. After investigating the town of Phandalin and its environs, the players find the entrance to the cave and defeat the Black Spider. (*Phandelver*)

This basic overview of the story shows how strong Tolkien's influence on *Dungeons & Dragons* is: A familial group of dwarves recruit the heroes to help them gain access to a magical mine that has been lost for hundreds of years, dealing with goblins on their way, only to find that a powerful enemy has taken over the mine, and the nearby town has fallen into corruption and decay. The story does not mirror *The Hobbit* in every respect—the Rockseeker family doesn't have the same ancestral claim to the mine as Tolkien's dwarves, for example—but the parallels are clear enough to be obviously intentional. The cover of the *Lost Mine of Phandelver* book even features the heroes fighting a dragon amidst a hoard of gold, another commonality with *The Hobbit*, even though this is a relatively minor diversion in the story that the players may not encounter at all.

This highlights the true difference between the two narratives: Unlike *The Hobbit, Phandelver* is an interactive work. The pre-written narrative is meant to be a foundation for the players to tell their own story with their own characters. The well-worn elements of the story are expressly there to give new players a level of comfort with navigating the world, since they can use the conventions and expectations of the fantasy genre to inform the way they play in their own right.

5.1   NOW LEAVING *PHANDELVER*

The Adventure Zone is not an interactive narrative, though, and the McElroys bring their own conventions and expectations to the work as storytellers. They use the narrative of *Phandelver* as a foundation for their own story, but they rebuild, disregard, and even destroy that foundation as necessary. Analyzing the final product of *TAZ* needs the context of *Phandelver* the same way *Lord of the Rings* needs the context of *The Hobbit*, but *TAZ* is still an original narrative work, to a far greater extent than is usual for a pre-written *Dungeons & Dragons* game.

As with the earliest drafts of *LOTR*, the first changes the McElroys made to *Phandelver* came out of a desire to tell a story that was more in line with their interests. Gundren Rockseeker is pivotal to *Phandelver*, and his name is evidently chosen for both its practicality—reminding players of their objective every time he's named—and for following the same pattern of heroic epithets as his literary forerunner Thorin Oakenshield. The McElroys' style tends away from giving their characters this kind of name, preferring more mundane and contemporary names, such as "Steven," "Derek" or "Vicky," to fit their everyday stye of humor (MBMBAM 430). Griffin, the DM of the campaign, admits as much on the podcast's first episode: "I'm not psyched about saying things like 'Neverwinter' and 'Gundren Rockseeker'." When the name is introduced in a story context, he editorializes, "Gundren Rockseeker, who I assume is just named so you know from the start, here: We are *now playing Dungeons & Dragons*" (*TAZ* 1). The assumption is completely correct, but Travis immediately jokes, "His name is Steve Smith!" Later on, when Sildar Hallwinter is first mentioned, the entire family voices their disgust at the name, leading Griffin to make a decision on behalf of the players: "This is our game, we can do

whatever we want: I can start calling these creeps Barry Bluejeans. That's his name now" (*TAZ* 1).

The new, more appropriate name sticks. Once Barry Bluejeans has been designated as a character in his own right, the McElroys are only too excited to define him as a character, in their own idiom: They debate whether he should look like John Goodman or John Stamos, before deciding on "Tom Arnold; the exact median between John Stamos and John Goodman," leading everyone to describe him exclusively as "Tom Arnold" for a brief period after this decision (*TAZ* 2). As a character, he becomes an irritated and impatient straight man to the irreverent characters played by the McElroys (*TAZ* 3), giving him far more characterization than *Phandelver* ever gives to Sildar Hallwinter, more in line with classical comedy dynamics than adventure stories. The character quickly became a fan favorite, leading him to get a much more central role in the larger story, which culminated in a completely original conception of his character with deep emotional ties to the heroes (*TAZ* 57).

Discussing the storytelling process on a later episode, Travis comments "I think Barry Bluejeans, for me, represents the moment where we kind of all collectively broke from *D&D* proper" (*TAZ* special 1). Griffin clarifies the name was originally conceived by a friend for a project to increase awareness of the public library of Barboursville, West Virginia (*TAZ* special 1). The improvised name that sparked such a major authorial decision is a product of the McElroys' local, municipal, collaborative identity, which informed every decision they made with the character.

Barry Bluejeans' introduction as a character comes under the same circumstances as Sildar Hallwinter's in *Phandelver*, informing the players that Gundren Rockseeker has been captured by goblin agents of the Black Spider. Two details of the information are different: First,

that the capture is done by the Black Spider himself to streamline the adventure and eliminate the redundancy of Gundren's siblings, and second, the beings in question are known as "gerblins" or "gorblins" as often as they are "goblins". The first change reflects the shift away from the gauntlet of obstacles and challenges that are a focus of the interactive gameplay-oriented narrative of *Phandelver* to the less participatory audio story of *The Adventure Zone.* The second change is done for the audio in particular, comically mispronouncing a word for a vague fictional concept common within the fantasy genre. The mispronunciation being replicated to the point of being codified—the title of the first sequence would later be chosen as "Here There Be Gerblins"—is an example of the McElroys' eagerness to subvert, ignore or mock the conventions of the fantasy genre, especially when they're as pervasive as in *Phandelver*.

The attitude of changing the focus of the narrative from challenge to audio comedy informs many of the alterations to *Phandelver*'s story. Originally, one of the obstacles in *Phandelver* is "Dense carpets of weird fungi" growing in a tunnel, which "release poisonous gas in the air . . . whenever a creature attempts to cross" (45). On the podcast, the fungi can be stepped on with no ill effects, but release the gas whenever a character speaks, leading to a running gag of characters telling each other to stop talking only to get poisoned themselves (*TAZ* 3). The dramatic climax of *Phandelver*'s story is also the greatest point of divergence in *The Adventure Zone*: Originally, the villainous Black Spider is revealed to be a dark elf named Nezznar, who has disguised one of his shapeshifting minions as one of the previously unseen Rockseeker brothers. The final challenge is a test of wisdom as well as strength, as the players need to uncover their great enemy's deception as well as fighting him (49-51). Meanwhile, *TAZ*'s rendition of the Black Spider is named "Brian"—modern names being the rule at this point rather than the exception. Brian has a high voice and polite, obliging manner, meant to

emulate Justin McElroy's player character Taako, the source of this paper's title. Brian disguises himself as Gundren Rockseeker rather than a minion disguising himself as one of the brothers, eliminating two minor and unnecessary characters. The disguise has no effect on the character's audio performance, since it does not change his voice or personality at all, turning the entire challenge into another joke (*TAZ* 4). Most crucially, though, Brian has little interest in the heroes, since he is more concerned with looking for a mysterious magical artifact. Once he has been defeated, the heroes continue the search for the same artifact, which becomes the driving force of the rest of the narrative.

6.0   EXPERIMENTAL NARRATIVES IN EXPERIMENTAL FORMS

That narrative grew from *Phandelver* in a similar fashion to the way *Lord of the Rings'* narrative grew from *The Hobbit*, shaped by the interplay between less accessible pre-existing work and the more conventional starting point that created the demand for a follow-up. The narrative was initially a plan for the main characters to collect seven magical items, called the Grand Relics. Each Grand Relic would require its own relatively self-contained story arc to locate, allowing for a more episodic structure, as well as a clean break with the narrative of *Phandelver* (Tito). The inspiration for this came from their careers as video game journalists, the years of experience critiquing the way narratives are shaped around challenges. In an interview, Griffin said of his decision-making process, "I needed an idea that would be a structure for the arc, and of course it would be 'they have to collect the seven special things' . . . and that's the video game-iest thing ever" (Tito).

Specific elements of the narrative have been inspired in a more direct way by the McElroys' previous work. For example, the characters in *The Adventure Zone*'s world celebrate "Candlenights," a non-specific winter holiday created for *My Brother, My Brother and Me*. The holiday was conceived as a way to frame winter celebrations without tying them to a specific religion (*MBMBAM* 36), and the idea suits the vast and complex pre-existing world of the Forgotten Realms, which contains dozens of organized religions[10] (*Phandelver* 4). Candlenights as an actual social practice makes more sense in a world that "is about as pan-religious as it gets," (*TAZ* 29) enriching both the fiction of *TAZ* and the original concept.

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[10] One of the many examples of Tolkien's influence on the Forgotten Realms and *Phandelver*.

This enrichment also occurs with characters, who were integrated from the McElroys' outside work in a very similar process to Tolkien's. This is most evident with Garfield the Deals Warlock, a character who originated in an episode of *My Brother, My Brother and Me* and was transplanted to the more defined fictional narrative of *The Adventure Zone* (*MBMBAM* 255). The character has a similarly ambiguous place in the larger world as Tom Bombadil: Since he originated as a momentary joke, his appearance, nature and intentions are never specified (*TAZ* 17). This ambiguity allowed the character to play a crucial role in the plot, as well as to present the characters with items created by fans, making the story more collaborative with the listeners, a crucial element for the McElroys (Yeates 6-9). Justin described Garfield as "a character who was a punchline, and then, just by necessity, we started to hang other things on" (*TAZ* special 2). This process of storymaking parallels Tolkien's, but it was working with pre-written material heavily inspired by Tolkien, and as the narrative of *TAZ* continued, it began to comment on the elements of the fantasy genre that Tolkien inspired.

The first full section of *The Adventure Zone*'s story fully conceived by the McElroys, rather than working off pre-written material, takes a radical departure from *Phandelver* and the Forgotten Realms. The primary inspiration for the story arc, titled "Murder on the Rockport Limited," is Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*, set mainly on an early 20th century-style steam train where the magical mechanics of *Dungeons & Dragons* work in tandem with explicitly industrial technology (*TAZ* 11). The nature of the fantasy described here is radically different from the *Phandelver*-based section of the story, which largely adheres to the description of the Forgotten Realms given in *Phandelver*:

> On the roads and rivers of the Realms travel minstrels and peddlers, merchants
>
> and guards, soldiers, sailors, and steel-hearted adventurers carrying tales of

strange, glorious, faraway places. Good maps and clear trails can take even an

inexperienced youth with dreams of glory far across the world. Thousands of

restless would-be heroes from backcountry farmsteads and sleepy villages arrive

in Neverwinter and the other great cities every year in search of wealth and

renown. (4)

This description focuses on the power and potential available to individuals within the

setting, which is appropriate to the collaborative narrative process of *D&D*, where the players

determine the story through the actions of their characters as much as the DM does in their role

as the more traditional storyteller. From a literary perspective, this falls under the tradition of

heroic fantasy, which Tymn et al. describe as distinct from Tolkien's mythic fantasy, but

frequently blended with that style by later works in the fantasy genre (ch. 1).

This classification of fantasy subgenres was made in 1979. "Murder on the Rockport

Limited" doesn't fit into any of them, because it belongs to a subgenre that developed later: A

type of fantasy fiction that rejects a detailed,self-consistent, academically described fantasy

world in favor of "embrac[ing] the possibility inherent to the impossible" (Robertson 77).

Works in this genre, notably by authors such as China Miéville and Jasper Fforde, deliberately

present the reader with a more fluid understanding of the nature of their fantasy world,

introducing new rules and elements that seem initially incongruous, but work towards a broader

and more metatextual view of the narrative (Robertson 77-79). Giving the Forgotten Realms a

railway system and accompanying social elements—attendants, engineers, different classes of

accommodation (*TAZ* 12)—is certainly incongruous enough to fit in this subgenre, and as the

story goes on it takes a similar approach to the notion of a fantasy world as these other authors.

The Adventure Zone progresses through a series of subdivided and largely non-contiguous settings, since the heroes have magical (and technological) means of traveling to wherever the Grand Relics are hidden. This storytelling strategy is informed by the structure of video games that introduce new locations with more complexity and difficulty to scale with the player's increasing abilities, since there is still an interactive element to the story (Tito; *TAZ* special 3). From a narrative perspective, a more complex and difficult location for the players to navigate will also have a more complex and difficult construction. This ties into the successively more elaborate, surprising and "manifold reality" described by Robertson: After the steam train, the main characters take part in an illegal auto race inspired by the *Fast and Furious* films, then have to search an elaborate futuristic laboratory where the combination of magic and technology has broken down, with challenges inspired by the *Alien* series (*TAZ* special 3). Each successive story arc not only introduces new obstacles but radically divergent genre elements that shift the audience's understanding of the rules and boundaries of magic, and how the world of the story relates to our own (Yeates 5).

6.1 "FORGOTTEN" MEMORIES

These narrative goals are achieved with the same audio comedy techniques as the rest of the podcast. As an example, the reason the heroes must collect the Grand Relics is that they tempt anyone who touches them into using their enormous destructive power (*TAZ* 8)—a concept with clear roots in Tolkien's Ring and Silmarils. Unlike *Lord of the Rings*, though, the temptation manifests as a convivial voice that speaks in dialogue with the person holding the

Relic, attempting to convince them conversationally rather than magically, with humorous

results (*TAZ* 27). The heroes are the only one who have been able to resist so easily, much like

the hobbits are the only ones who can resist the Ring, but the only reason given is their own

obliviousness, following on from the McElroys' frequent descriptions of themselves, personally,

as too ignorant to be harmful (Green).

Ultimately, the truth is more complicated, and more in line with the subversive,

metatextual form of fantasy fiction that *The Adventure Zone* evolved into. In a surprise revelation

elaborated on throughout the penultimate arc of the *Balance* storyline, the heroes can resist the

Relics because they made them: They are actually ancient and powerful wizards from another

universe, who have travelled across a hundred different realities fighting an all-consuming force

called the Hunger, and whose memories were erased to prevent them from interfering further.[11]

The main focus of this revelation is the many universes they travelled to before encountering the

Forgotten Realms, each one an unusual and elaborate fantasy world, each one ultimately

consumed by the Hunger.[12] These worlds are complete, brimming with narrative possibility, and

are all destroyed within minutes of being introduced.

Narratively, the loss of these worlds—collectively referred to as the Stolen Century—is a

profound weight on the heroes, imbuing all of them with guilt and regret that contrasts their

usual lighthearted behavior. Thematically, it represents the clearest moment of opposition to

Tolkien's perspective, presenting a traditional, easy-to-understand, *Hobbit*-inspired fantasy

world as one of a hundred wildly different possibilities, that became the assumed default by

sheer happenstance. The world of *Lost Mine of Phandelver* and the Forgotten Realms, the simple

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[11] None of this was in the original plan for the story; it was conceived by Griffin, the DM, at
roughly the halfway point of the *Balance* campaign's run (*TAZ* special 3).
[12] When the Hunger is personified, it takes the form of a man simply named "John"—
coincidentally, Tolkien's first name.

Tolkien-inspired story meant to acclimate new players to *Dungeons & Dragons*, is presented as a loss of potential rather than a breeding ground for potential, the way it originated.

Richard West characterizes the roots of this fantasy subgenre as an effort to "deny [Tolkien] and trying to throw off his influence" (26). Given the nature of the two works, though, the relationship has to be considered in a more complex way than a simple subversion. For a start, the Stolen Century is still primarily a fantasy story told within the McElroys' usual means. The hundred worlds are introduced and left behind so quickly that they resemble comedy skits in their presentation and elaboration, and multiple worlds contain fantasy concepts or characters from the family's previous podcasts. The end of the story primarily focuses on the emotional connections between the characters, including the introduction of a novel system of "bonds" that gives literal magical power to those connections.

The story of *The Adventure Zone* exists as a story within the narrative, in multiple instances, and this clearly parallels the McElroys' style of humor. The notion of the Stolen Century, an entire lost section of the characters' lives revealed to them at a crucial moment, which was actually conceived at the time it was revealed, has a similarity to a recurring joke among the McElroys, where they discuss a certain topic and retroactively claim they've discussed it on every single previous episode, but it's always been edited out before then (*MBMBAM* 497). On one occasion they released a bonus episode, very much of a piece with the first one-off episode of *TAZ*, that presented itself as the 36th episode of a podcast that had already amassed a reputation and fan base, continuing conversations from previous episodes that didn't exist (*MBMBAM* special).

Discussing the way the podcast's story plays with the audience's understanding, Griffin has clarified that the family is attracted to "This idea of metanarrative . . . in basically all forms

of media: The things that you are experiencing in whatever it is—the game, the movie, the book, whatever—is part of a character inside of the work transmitting it" (*TAZ* special 3). Within the show's final episode, he parenthetically mentions that "I sound like I'm doing a winky, self-referential [thing]; like, '*Oh, isn't* The Adventure Zone *great?*'" (*TAZ* 69), when describing one of the more directly metatextual aspects of the story.

This comment shows an even larger way the McElroys' perspective informs the creative process and themes of the story: The way it has been shaped by their engagement with their listeners, and their desire for both equitable representation and collaboration. Robert Yeates, in the only published article on *The Adventure Zone* at time of writing, calls the podcast an exemplar of how

> a participatory culture facilitated by online fan communities on social media and a receptive creative team can lead to highly constructive producer-fan relationships, and works which can be representative of a diverse audience which includes voices typically underrepresented in popular culture. (17)

Yeates cites examples of story elements in the podcast that were shaped by input from the listeners, both positive, as in the case of a trans character who was written and developed with extensive feedback from the trans community (10), and negative, as in the case of a lesbian couple who died from the effects of a Grand Relic, a story element which was later rewritten to have them survive and become magical creatures, after fans bristled at killing the only two queer characters in the story up to that point (14-15). In general, the McElroys have always avoided an authorial perspective on their own work, as befits a story told through a *D&D* game. One element of this collaborative approach to creation comes out of *TAZ* being an audio story: The question of visual representations of the characters and events.

6.2   "AUTHORIAL" COLLABORATIONS

The McElroys have always supported fan paratexts of their own work, especially visual art. A characters' appearance in a narrative, though, calls for greater definition and specificity than the illustration or animation of a passing joke. Many artists have had their own interpretations of how the characters, objects, locations and events of *The Adventure Zone* appear, and the actual creators have deliberately avoided presenting any one appearance as definitive (Yeates 12). When the podcast was adapted into a graphic novel, Griffin posted an explanation of the long and difficult process of deciding how the characters should appear, particularly as it pertains to their skin color and the associated ethnicities they would identify with, despite being from two separate degrees of fantasy world. Even then, he stressed "we still don't consider any visual representations of these characters to be canon, and never will" ("On...Representation").

It can be instructive to compare this firm attitude to Tolkien's more complicated perspective on visual art. Tolkien gives elaborate and detailed visual descriptions in his writing, and *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* both provide far more visual accompaniment than most novels, most notably maps and invented scripts. This approach is consistent with his academic work, as demonstrated by Tolkien's famous comment that "I wisely started with a map, and made the story fit" (Letter 144) reflects a more analytical perspective towards the process of storymaking than a dramatic one. Tolkien's main barrier to visualizing his text was his own ability: He was unhappy with his abilities as both a mapmaker (Letter 141) and an illustrator (Letter 27), but understood how vital both were to the understanding of his text—especially *The*

Hobbit, a children's book. He welcomed the idea of illustrators adding their own interpretations to the text, but only up to a point, as can be seen in letter regarding an American publication of *The Hobbit* reading, "I have seen American illustrations that suggest that excellent things might be produced . . . It might be advisable . . . to let the Americans do what seems good to them—as long as it was possible to veto anything from or influenced by the Disney studios (for all whose works I have a heartfelt loathing)" (Letter 13).

Tolkien's attitude towards visual representation was both similar to the McElroys and utterly opposite to it: Like the McElroys, he placed great value on a collaborative interpretation of his work, but he had quite a clear idea of the correct—or "canon"—nature of what he had written, and would not accept any alteration. When one of his short stories, *Farmer Giles of Ham*, was to be published as an illustrated children's book, he was quite unhappy with the work of Milein Cosman, his publishers' first choice, calling the art "wholly out of keeping with the style or manner of the text . . . The giant is passable—though the artist is a poor drawer of trees. The dragon is absurd. Ridiculously coy. . . " (Letter 116) When Cosman was taken off the book and replaced with Pauline Baynes, though, Tolkien was overjoyed, saying "They are more than illustrations, they are a collateral theme . . . they reduced my text to a commentary on the drawings" (Letter 120).

The relationship between the two creators' views on visual art shows how the relationship between Tolkien and the McElroys can't be reduced to a simple matter of influence or subversion. A"conversation" or an "engagement" would be a fairer way to describe how *The Adventure Zone* exists in relation to *The Lord of the Rings*: Two works created in similar ways by different people with different priorities, that have many points of connection for different

reasons, where none of these elements in the later work can be discussed without mentioning the effects of the earlier one.

6.3   "REVEALED" SECRETS

Unlike *The Adventure Zone*, *Lord of the Rings* was written as a single narrative, a vast manuscript where every part was edited for consistency until publication. The story has no equivalent revelation that recontextualizes the entire narrative as a metatext, the way the Stolen Century does. Despite this, there are two major elements of *LOTR* that alter the story in a similar direction, albeit to a lesser degree. The first comes in "The Shadow of the Past," the second chapter of the story, which does the bulk of the work connecting the story to its predecessor *The Hobbit*. Gandalf discusses how the circumstances surrounding origins of Bilbo's magic ring in *The Hobbit* gave clues that it was the One Ring:

> I often wondered how Gollum came by a Great Ring, as plainly it was—that at least was clear from the first. Then I heard Bilbo's strange story of how he had 'won' it, and I could not believe it. When at last I got the truth out of him, I saw at once that he had been trying to put his claim to the ring beyond doubt. Much like Gollum with his 'birthday-present'. The lies were too much alike for my comfort. Clearly the ring had an unwholesome power that set to work on its keeper at once.
> (*LOTR* 48)

As discussed above, this was not only a process of recontextualizing elements of *The Hobbit*, it was an active change to the story. In the original edition of *The Hobbit*, Bilbo won the

ring from Gollum[13] fairly, even though he had already taken it. Tolkien rewrote the book in 1950

as he was writing *Lord of the Rings*, to make fitting the two books together "a simpler task"

(Letter 128). The revised version made Bilbo a liar who cheated to get the Ring and lied that he

got it fairly, to show its corrupting influence. The lie is meant to be the version published in the

original story, and current editions of *The Hobbit* begin with an explanatory note that "the true

story [of finding the ring] is now given according to the Red Book, in place of the version Bilbo

first gave to his friends, and actually set down in his diary" (*Hobbit* front matter).

This change has elements in common with the way the Forgotten Realms setting gives

way to the Stolen Century: It gives a more morally and practically complicated version of events,

fitting the more personal, specific and elaborate version of the story that grew out of the simple

and more conventional one. In addition, it positions the original version of the story as a

deliberate falsehood told by the characters themselves about their own lives, giving a metatextual

reason for the original version to still matter to the story.

The metatextual element of *Lord of the Rings* comes to the forefront in the other part of

the book that recalls the Stolen Century: The appendices that finish the book. The "Red Book"

mentioned in the previous quote is the Red Book of Westmarch, which is presented as an actual

historical text that has been translated into English and published as *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of

the Rings*, which can be considered an authority because it was written by Bilbo, Frodo and the

other hobbits about their own adventures. The end of the narrative briefly shows the book in a

nearly-complete state, and that Bilbo's writing about his adventure has been used as a starting

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[13] Another change from the original version of *The Hobbit* to a version more in line with *Lord of the Rings* was changing the nature of Gollum. Originally, the narration says "I don't know where he came from, nor who or what he was" (*Hobbit* 71), but Tolkien's addition added more specific descriptions of him, to make it clearer he was an ancestor of the hobbits (Rateliff 166). Interestingly, Gollum, like Tom Bombadil, originated in a poem Tolkien wrote before he became part of a narrative (167-168).

point—both bringing *The Hobbit* more in line with *Lord of the Rings* as a single story through the use of metatext (*LOTR* 1027).

Tolkien wrote multiple translations of actual historical texts (Bertenstam), and he uses the familiar form in an unusual way by applying it to narrative fiction. The novel does not end with the end of the story, but with a series of scholarly appendices that give further information on the history and languages of Middle-Earth. They still serve the story, though, giving the reader a much broader context for the events of *Lord of the Rings*, showing the space they occupied in Tolkien's larger legendarium. As with the Stolen Century, this wider view is the final step away from the more conventional story of *The Hobbit*, and it lends the story a greater sense of the "grief and disaster" that balances the "fun and earthiness" that Tolkien himself described as the main distinction between *The Hobbit* and *The Silmarillion*, as well as bringing it closer than the story has ever been to resembling his non-fiction writing.

The influence of Tolkien's perspective, and the unusual approach he took towards fiction, is difficult to overstate: The philological and academic creations of an Oxford professor became a standard mode of creation, the unspoken "normal" way to write fantasy fiction. Auden's contemporary review of the series summed up the reason why by saying, "Mr. Tolkien has succeeded more completely than any previous writer in this genre in using the traditional properties of the Quest, the heroic journey, the Numinous Object, the conflict between Good and Evil while at the same time satisfying our sense of historical and social reality" ("At The End"). The depth and consistency of Tolkien's sub-creation was the element that anyone who picked up a copy of *Lord of the Rings* could appreciate, regardless of how much they understood about linguistics or history, because it slowly progressed from the more conventional starting point of *The Hobbit*. Tolkien, like other fantasy authors before him, was able to use the creative freedom

afforded by fantasy to explore his personal interests through fiction, but the way they developed over the course of a narrative resulted in something more universal, something that gave him "a dual role of educator and storyteller" that resulted in his ideas "tak[ing] root and grow[ing] in English-speaking communities around the globe.," according to Maria Cecire (44).

The Adventure Zone's impact needs to be considered in more nuanced terms. The podcast began less than a decade ago, and does not even approach the level of cultural proliferation The Lord of the Rings had in a similar timeframe (West 24). The specificity that allows creators like the McElroys to make their personal work directly for a relatively small but loyal group of people also means that their work will not have a broader appeal. TAZ was something of an exception to this rule, since the Balance storyline attracted an enormous following far outside the family's other media, leading to an enormous outpouring of appreciation and creation when the story came to an end (Yeates 17). Graphic novel adaptations of the story have debuted at the top of best-seller lists, and a screen adaptation is currently in development.

More specifically, though, the McElroys' unusual form storytelling already seems to have caused a profound impact. Actual-play podcasts featuring recorded role-playing game sessions existed for years before The Adventure Zone, such as Nerd Poker or the regular Dungeons & Dragons segments of Harmontown. TAZ, though, placed a much stronger emphasis than these other podcasts on the developing storyline. Following in the McElroys' wake, actual-play podcasts have become a medium for serialized storytelling, with the success of later programs like Critical Role or Friends at the Table that focus more on narrative than play showing the emergent genre will only become more popular with time.

7.0   CONCLUSION

Podcasts have been used as a form for narratives and storytelling since the emergence of the medium, but in that time there has been virtually no academic literary analysis of podcast narratives at all. Analyzing *The Adventure Zone* as a literary work provides insight into how the nature of podcasts shapes the stories told using the medium. The novel analysis is strengthened by having a comparative element: *The Lord of the Rings* has been analyzed and researched extensively, especially considering its unusual form, and using that analysis as a template for studying *The Adventure Zone* gives valuable context for future analysis of other podcast narratives.

The analysis itself shows that, whether it's a narrative podcast with sixty-nine episodes or a thousand-page novel with appendices, an unusual, complex and personal story can be accessible to a wide audience if it begins in a familiar place. This essay is meant to follow a similar path, beginning with an analysis of Tolkien and applying the same perspective to a similar story in a far less studied medium. This process of using comparative analysis to examine the way expression is shaped by the new medium of podcasts can be applied to other genres of podcasts, but in this case it is especially clear: *The Hobbit* and the McElroys' non-narrative podcasts were both successful on their own terms, but the fantasy fiction follow-ups to both were a purer form of self-expression. The element of a narrative is what allowed both *The Adventure Zone* and *The Lord of the Rings* to become the "fully realized creations" that they are.

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