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# The Power Fantastic: How Genre Expectations Mediate Authority

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The Power Fantastic:  
How Genre Expectations Mediate Authority

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in English

by

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation reconciles academic and popular uses of the term genre, concluding that genre is a transmedial, mutable, associative, recognized system regulated through tacit understandings of prestige and power in a given social space. The study employs a digital humanities method (dependent on digitally facilitated data analysis), conducting descriptive discourse analysis on collected online discussions from fan spaces concerning the fantasy genre and matters related to fantasy. In this way, I construct an image of the fantasy genre, and genre in general, as a multimodal space in which material freely passes between traditional and new media and participants actively negotiate their own authorities.

## **Acknowledgments**

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## 1.0 Why Genre: An Introduction

The word *genre* is problematic; it's a word that most people understand intuitively, but it doesn't seem to measure consistent variables as it is generally used. Many scholars in varying disciplines have attempted to define genre in ways that would resolve the contradictions inherent academic uses of genre. However, scholarly definitions of genre seldom have much basis in popular usages (and vice versa) and tend toward prescriptive rather than descriptive categories. There is, therefore, a need to reconcile the technical and popular uses of *genre*, ideally in a way that derives from analysis of how genre functions in popular discourse as well as from prevailing theories about genre in academic disciplines. This study fills that gap, combining an ethnographically-informed study of discourse concerning one popular genre with a synthesis of available academic definitions of genre to arrive at a descriptivist, utilitarian model of genre.

The goal of this study is in essence what Lillie Chouliariki and Norman Fairclough argue is the motivation for critical discourse analysis, "to contribute to an awareness of what is, how it has come to be, and what it might become," focused on the people involved, and ultimately interested in "questions of power" (4-5). Much recent research in rhetoric and composition has closely examined the relationship between discourse and power; genre, as a key feature of discourse, is no exception to this concern about power distribution. Indeed, the key to understanding genre's function in discourse and society seems to lie in understanding how genre and authority are intrinsically related, and how genre is a generative concept rather than a constricting category. However, although late 20<sup>th</sup> century definitions of genre such as Carolyn Miller's "social action," Thomas Beebee's "use-value," or Thomas Schatz's "contract" (borrowing from Will Wright) rightly locate genre as an interactive system that governs rhetorical situation, there remains little in the way of clarity regarding how authority

relationships and genre limitations function, nor is there a sufficient definition that fully accounts for the use of genre in disparate fields.

This study, through a careful examination of how participants in popular spaces where genre is relevant and synthesis of academic definitions of genre, arrives at a multifaceted definition of genre that comes with a model describing mechanisms for genre change, rhetorical choices concerning genre, and the role of authority in mediating genre's boundaries and the roles and actions of participants in a given genre. In some ways, however, the necessity of examining authority is assumed based on other studies, not emergent from this study itself. We know that the mediation of authority in a given discourse in large part determines the success of any participant in that discourse, and that authority is a feature of literacy. These basic assumptions come from both theoretical discussions of authority in studies of discourse as well as from more concrete studies such as Elizabeth Wardle's 2004 case study of the tensions caused by differences in perceived authority in the workplace.

Ultimately, this study defines genre as a transmedial, mutable, associative, recognized system, a definition in which each of the five parts represents a significant aspect of how genre works. Moreover, this definition should be applicable equally to popular genres (such as fantasy, science fiction, the western, the romance, and so on), to academic genres (literary fiction, the student essay, the research article, the conference paper, and so on), and even to technical or everyday genres (such as the business letter, the political speech, or even the grocery list). Each of these five features will be examined in detail in the following chapters of this study.

For the purposes of this study, I have focused on the popular genre known as "fantasy", especially the subsets of that genre called "high fantasy," "epic fantasy," or "sword and sorcery



fantasy<sup>1</sup>.” As Wright has done for the Western, and as Janice Radway has done for the romance, I am focusing on the social function of fantasy and how the genre and its constituents understand their place in a larger system of genres, as well as how the genre functions for these constituents. The particular selection of fantasy addresses the tensions between the fields of rhetoric, literature, and popular culture, in that author and audience practices in fantasy generate not only the core of narrative texts around which fantasy communities are organized, but also a substantial body of metadiscursive and practical texts, such as world-building artifacts, debates over genre conventions, and research practices and values, etc. Any comprehensive study of fantasy practices must also account for these practices, and thus must be interdisciplinary in scope.

However, fantasy itself is largely overlooked. Although there are spaces in academic culture that recognize fantasy, they are generally dominated by the discussion of a few “literary” fantasy authors, much like how discussions of science fiction in academic work are dominated by a few sub-genres and “literary” authors. Thus, authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, J.K. Rowling, and Madeline L’Engle have been heavily represented in academic research, but generally subject to close reading rather than to a socially situated study, and the result is academic work that seems little different than the fan work available freely in fan communities, with emphasis on teasing out thematic meanings or mapping out the internal consistency of the authors’ larger projects. This is not to say that such studies have little value; rather, it is to say that there are parallel processes happening in academic and popular spaces concerning similar

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<sup>1</sup> Although these genre terms are frequently distinguished from each other and generally recognized as different aspects of the fantasy genre, their definitions are often contentious and overlapping to a sufficient degree to make them indistinguishable for the purposes of this study; these are, however, the most iconic iterations of the fantasy genre, although they are far from the most common at this point in the fantasy genre’s history.

texts, and what is missing to tie them together is an understanding of genre that accounts for how these spaces are kept separate even though the actual people participating in them may overlap.

Furthermore, fantasy itself is having a moment of surging popularity. It is unquestionably persistent and thriving as a genre, and maintains considerable influence on a number of media, but in recent years it has been increasingly popular, owing in part to Peter Jackson's successful adaptation of Tolkien's novels and HBO's *Game of Thrones* adaptation of George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Fire and Ice* series of novels, as well as a number of successful video games such as *Skyrim*, *Dark Souls*, and the *Final Fantasy* and *Legend of Zelda* series. All of these works, despite their distinctly different styles, tones, and subject matters, are instantly recognizable as fantasy, and this study seeks to examine what triggers this recognition in a meaningful, applicable way, and thus to understand exactly what drives the sense of unity in the fantasy genre. Moreover, as with any study of the social aspects of discourse, this study will address also what the fantasy genre means and what power structures it enforces in the real world.

Indeed, Beebe suggests that genre is in essence ideology—a system of thoughts and values that is “never fully identical with itself, nor are texts fully identical with their genres” (19). If this is the case, then it is necessary to understand how genres function in social contexts in order to better understand the ideologies that they represent and how these shape thinking. Moreover, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen argue that “ideology is a useful and necessary mediating term” for describing and understanding discursive practices; that is, participating in discursive practices is often ideologically motivated (34). Thus, the prevalence of the practice of “world building” in fantasy and debates concerning historicity within fantasy genre communities raise the question of what sort of ideological system the fantasy genre expresses, and an analysis of this system will provide a model for further study of ideologies expressed by other genres. In

particular, it is necessary to conduct such studies on genres that exhibit particular control over large sections of the population or over other genres, such as academic genres. Ultimately, however, this genre agrees with Beebee that genres cannot be identical with themselves, because at the core of any genre is what I will call a “generative tension,” an internally paradoxical and contrasting pair of values and functions for the genre that motivates change, the production of new texts in the genre, and varying uptake and remediation of old texts in the genre.

In fact, as my research will show, participants in fantasy communities understand that their genre espouses key values as part of an ideological system, although of course they are not entirely in agreement as to what those values are. However, they do understand the ideological stakes to be high, as these debates concern not only what is expressed by fantasy texts, but also *who* is allowed into the fantasy genre’s social space and how the fantasy genre will change over time. Indeed, among the conversations collected for this study, the longest and most contentious within the communities are concerning exactly this problem, especially as regards race and gender representation. Thus, serious inquiry into the ideology and authority structures in fantasy is welcome not only in academic spaces that are interested in communication, composition, or semiotics, but also in the fantasy communities themselves.

Nevertheless, there exists little unity between academic inquiry and popular inquiry into fantasy, in part because fantasy has largely been overlooked due to the stigmas associated both with genre fiction in general and with magic and unreality in particular. The term “genre fiction” is often met with some derision, even in the communities under study here; the term suggests formulaic writing and a lack of creativity, widely considered an insult in both academic and popular fiction. Irene L. Clark notes that, even in non-fiction, the notion of teaching (and studying) genre is often met with resistance “associated with the issue of creativity and the extent

to which attention to genre could produce formulaic, mechanical texts, all of them alike” despite the fact that there seems to be no real evidence that a focus on genre has such an effect—and indeed may have the opposite effect (251). Indeed, if such an effect exists, it is the product of teaching genre as formula rather than adopting a more generative approach to genre that sees genre as a game-space from which texts can be emergent entities, as this study will do.

With regard to fantasy in particular, the stigma of magic and unreality in fiction seems to owe largely to modernist notions of maturity and realism that linger in the field of literature still, and seem even to be infecting fantasy itself, as the most commonly expressed values in the communities under study were not concerning the fantastic aspect of fantasy but rather the focus on realism and representation that has been largely prevalent in literary criticism in the twentieth century, following the legitimization of the novel as a humanist triumph. However, because fantasy is largely ignored as being too magical and too formulaic, it is a repository of yet-uncriticized ideology, save for the metadiscursive work done in fantasy communities themselves. In fact, as will be discussed in later chapters, the generative tension at the very core of the fantasy genre is that between a need to be responsible for realistic representation and for ideological material expressed in fantasy and the desire for pure escapism and fantasy.

As I have already mentioned, there are significant studies of fan practices already in place, both pre- and post-internet; the most seminal work is Henry Jenkin’s *Textual Poachers* and Ann Elizabeth Jamison’s more recent *Fic* presents a clearer picture of how these fan communities have shifted in response to available technologies and increasing recognition of fan practices as reading strategies, but these studies are limited by regarding fandom as its own genre (which it is, of course) and draw the boundaries of their study not around the genre of the texts as understood by participants in these spaces, but rather around the authority status of the

participants in their roles as fans. Thus, while providing an invaluable insight into the reading tactics<sup>2</sup> of fan communities, these studies fail to describe fully the genre space in which these fans are operating, seeing fandom instead as a transferrable notion from one genre space to another, risking a perception of fan communities as all being essentially alike. While certain fan practices *do* transfer, each genre establishes its own space where the rules are distinct from others. Thus, this study seeks to understand the mechanisms by which genres form that space and how participants negotiate their own roles in those spaces according to perceptions of power and prestige. Indeed, Jenkins cautions that “we must be careful to attend to the particularities of specific instances of critical reception, cultural appropriation, and popular pleasure—their precise historical context, their concrete social and cultural circumstances, for it is the specifics of lived experience and not simply the abstractions of theory which illuminate the process of hegemonic struggle” (35-36). To this end, this study starts with the particular and seeks to move out to the theoretical by extension, but not without recognizing that the practices described in this study may be idiosyncratic to the communities examined in particular.

As a social space, the fantasy genre might be considered what Chouliarki and Fairclough call “a network of practices,” which, in their definition, is “held in place by social relations of power and shifting articulations of practices within and across networks that are linked to the shifting dynamics of power and struggles over power” (25). As Teun Van Dijk notes in discussing how discourse functions at the social level, “[m]uch power in society... is not coercive, but rather *mental*” (17). In Van Dijk’s ideation of power, “[o]ne group has power over another group if it has some form of control over the other group” (17), which suggests that genre itself might, as a generative notion in discourse, be a form of power.

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<sup>2</sup> “Tactics” here in Michel de Certeau’s definition, which distinguishes tactics as practices from positions of less power, while strategies are the hegemonic methods.

## **Kinds of Genre**

Defining genre and how it functions socially, in both specific and general terms, is hardly a new endeavor, and in contemporary criticism the issue has received a slow but steady stream of attention since 1980. Typically, critics recognize two general approaches to genre: traditional definitions see genre as a passive, static classification system, while more recent definitions see genre as an active social construct. However, this dichotomy is too simple and does not accurately indicate the tensions. Alternatively, genre definitions might be placed in three groups: as classification applied by critics according to textual features, as predetermined formula enacted by writers, and as agreement between audience and author. Generally these three kinds of definitions are associated not so much with chronological phases in thinking as they are with disciplinary divisions, but some chronological shifts do occur. And, just as there is inevitably some overlap between disciplines (regardless of how staunchly disciplinary divisions might be enforced), these three are not an exclusive system for definitions, and many definitions exist in some space between categories. For instance, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson describe genre poetically as “a constellation of recognizable forms bound together by an internal dynamic,” which combines the formalist author-centered approach and the agreement between author and audience approach (21).

Traditionally, literature sees genre as a classification applied by critics to organize materials, based largely on the presence or lack of certain textual features, and indeed much popular discourse concerning genre seems to assume that such definitions are generally applicable and can be systematized. There is a long tradition of developing often complex genre systems from the time of classical rhetoric, but generally these are what Janet Giltrow and Dieter Stein have named a “closed set” genre system; that is, genre systems defined by the analysis and

general in nature, with no room for adjustment. This sort of genre definition is pervasive both in and out of academia, but the process of transferring systems out of the academic fields they are developed for tends to make these systems outdated by the time they are implemented, and thus they are not particularly useful models for genre if one is to account for dynamic social structures and authority negotiations in genre.

In the second group, several models define genre as a formula predetermined or selected by the writer, and the effectiveness of the resulting text is then seen as a function of how well the author has enacted the selected formula for the situation. This is a more rhetorical approach to genre, and the most prevalent definition in this group is Miller's notion of genres as "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations," which subsequently rejects the classical notion of genre as taxonomy while still putting most of the agency for genre's effects on the author of the text (159). As a rhetorical definition, though, Miller's model does allow for more interaction of the other aspects of a rhetorical situation, but still the majority of decision-making rests on the author or rhetor, who evaluates the situation and then acts.

The third category of genre definitions encompasses those that see the essential nature of genre as a complex interaction between the author and the audience. Many of these definitions come from popular culture fields such as film studies or linguistic fields such as semiotics, and they are becoming increasingly prevalent in research as more fields become concerned with questions of authority, social context, and subversive uptakes. Several of these models do build on Miller's concept of genre as social action (or similar definitions), but include more consideration of the audience's active participation in the construction and identification of genre, and even of the text itself. One of the earlier models to emphasize a relationship between audience and author is John G. Cawelti's discussion of formula in popular culture; on the

surface, his definition would appear to go in the first category of closed genre systems, or perhaps in the second of genre as formula enacted by audience, but Cawelti ultimately distinguishes between aspects of the genre that are shared between audience and author—conventions—and those that are introduced to the audience by the author uniquely—inventions—and this interplay is sufficient to recognize that the audience is not merely acted upon nor a passive receptor for genre, but an active participant in constructing it. Indeed, such a definition paves the way for the notion of genre as an agreement, which emerges in the 1980s with works such as Schatz's and Heather Dubrow's. For Schatz, genre is a social contract, and for Dubrow it is a social code—that is, for both, genre is a set of expectations and rules that govern the actions of both author and audience in regard to a text once the genre has been established as the governing set of guidelines.

More recently, Amy Devitt and Anis Bawarshi have each conceptualized genre as a post-modern concept that encompasses the emergent interactions of text, author, audience, and context. For Bawarshi, “communicants and their contexts are in part functions of the genres they write,” and what he calls the “genre function” encompasses not only “what Foucault calls the author-function” but also “constitutes all discourse's modes of existence, circulation, and functioning within a society” (335; 338). That is, for Bawarshi, genre is not merely a social code, but the entire social fabric of which the text and its rhetorical situation is made of. For Devitt, genres must be situated in the social contexts of their communities, and must be considered in light of how they “maintain or reinforce power relationships and how they shape world views,” and that the very difference in genre values points to these social values (“Integrating” 707). Additionally, Bawarshi's and Devitt's approaches to genre are united by their goal to unite various disciplines under a reformed use of the term genre. Bawarshi claims that “the genre



function can help us democratize some of the entrenched hierarchies perpetuated by the author-function that privilege literary texts and their ‘authors’ as somehow more significant than nonliterary texts and their writers” (338). Likewise, Devitt argues that a clearer, more comprehensive definition of genre can help break down what she calls “false dichotomies”—those between literary and non-literary texts, between the individual and society, and so forth. In the same vein, a major goal of this research is to decentralize the authority of so-called “literary” texts and introduce popular texts into the same discussions of literary theory, as well as to destabilize the distinction between author, audience and other available roles in the rhetorical situation by providing a more contextualized meaning for genre.

Indeed, the use of fantasy is not an accident where the goal of destabilizing modernist notions of the authority of the author or even the academy is concerned. Fantasy makes as one of its central objects the medieval as a mythologized other—mentions of a “medieval setting” are more frequent in the collected conversations than mentions of a “fantasy setting,” for instance—but in the process it dares to imagine a post-modern approach by returning to a pre-modern approach, a notion that has not been lost in scholarly work on reading practices in the middle ages and on perceptions of the medieval in the modern. Hans Robert Jauss in particular destabilizes what he calls “positivist” modern literary theory, seeking to put the focus on “reception and impact” because “In the triangle of author, work and reading public the latter is no passive part, no chain of mere reactions, but even history-making energy” (“Literary History” 8). For Jauss, it is just as important to situate a text in its historical situation at the moment of reading—which provides many different situations for a given text—as it is at the moment of composition, and moreover genre becomes a necessary part of the construction of meaning in a text because the text, “even if it seems new, does not appear as something absolutely new in an

informational vacuum, but predisposes its readers to a very definite type of reception by textual strategies, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics or implicit allusions” (“Literary History” 12). Jauss’s understanding of shifting reading practices and intertextuality is heavily informed by historical study into medieval reading practices; as such, the focus on the medievalism in fantasy lends fantasy to exactly this sort of study, because the material in fantasy spaces is itself a challenge to modernity, with fantasy’s simultaneous idealization and demonization of the medieval. But for Jauss, the change in genre is a change in “horizon”—a change in the distance between the text and its readers’ reading practices, which accounts in many ways for how popular genres take up older material—how, for instance, fantasy readers read medieval texts (generally edited and in translation)—in ways that are innovative to the texts, but familiar to the readers. In Jauss’s model, the audience is active and holds full agency in regards to the meaning of a text, and genre becomes the way that audiences understand texts, being a set of reading conventions that are temporally and culturally situated, rather than texts creating genre out of their features. Here, genre works independently of the text itself, despite being triggered by the textual features inherent in the text, and thus Jauss’s horizon meshes well with other socially situated concepts of reading and use, such as Michel de Certeau’s ways of operating and tactics or Beebee’s “use-value”.

Just as study of non-modern or non-western reading practices informs socially-conscious definitions of genre, so also have works from folklore, another similarly marginalized academic space whose works are often not included in literary theory to the same degree as those that deal with “literary” texts. The most prominent of these, and probably most often cited and anthologized, is Vladimir Propp’s algorithm-like *Morphology of the Folktale*, which forms part of the basis for my later argument for the ludic nature of genre. Propp’s study is remarkable not

only for its methodical nature, but also for its descriptivist approach, as his algorithm for the form of the folktale is built out of careful taxonomic study of a large corpus of Russian Folktales; however it is also often overlooked in socially-conscious studies of the mechanics of genre, because reducing a genre to an algorithm seems to reduce genre to a formula. In fact, what he does is illustrate the process of both composition and reader expectation; the formula is familiar to all participants in the folktale and thus accessible as a system of rules to anyone involved in the practice of a folktale telling, creating an interactive ludic space around the folktale text—what I will call a “genre space” in later chapters.

What is missing from works such as Propp’s is the consideration of how context and power fit into the formula; this gets filled in by later scholars, such as in Ireneusz Opacki’s theory of dominant (“royal”) and subordinate genres, a concept that is necessary to understanding the way that popular culture genres are organized, conceptualized and consumed. Moreover, a focus on authority and power accounts not only for what choices are available—which Propp’s study illustrates very well for the Russian folktale—but also with what strategies, tactics, and goals participants in the genre might *choose* between those available options. Thus, any comprehensive model of genre that accepts genre as an algorithmic or ludic space, as mine does, will require an understanding of how power and authority motivate people within the genre. Indeed, there has been much interest in the notion of genre systems, in keeping with Opacki’s notion of a genre hierarchy, likely as a result of the tendency in rhetoric and composition and other fields to talk about economies and ecosystems in emerging fields of criticism. Giltrow and Stein, in this way, note that genre function as a sort of semiotic bundle, packaging “contextual information, information cueing processing responses”, and that these genres then work in systems that interact with each other (5). For Giltrow and Stein, this

interaction means that we must consider whole genre systems, and we should consider them on a spectrum ranging from closed, general, prescriptive systems to open, specific, user-defined systems; this study seeks to understand a user-defined system, but also insists that not only do genres interact with each other, genres themselves *are* systems.

## **Study Goals and Approach**

As I have said, the main goal of this study is to establish a revised, hybrid definition of genre that takes into account not only existing academic theorizations of genre, but also popular use and understanding of the term—that is, a descriptive definition of genre for theoretical and practical applications. It is also to disrupt and re-evaluate existing notions of authorship and originality, particularly in academic spaces, in order to revise hegemonic notions of power in creative discourses; that is, to flip the authority relationship between authors and fans, canon and fandom, and literary and popular texts.

The study also seeks to facilitate understanding of exactly what makes fantasy what it is; fantasy is a genre characterized, as already mentioned, by its appropriation of the past as well as its unreality, which seems to serve contradictory functions in society and to the people who interact with fantasy regularly. Yet its popularity suggests that something in these functions is widespread in its appeal, and thus in need of deeper understanding. This study does not seek to supplant the self-criticism that already exists in fantasy and fan spaces, but rather to support it and legitimize it with academic support and understanding.

To this end, what follows is a qualitative, ethnographically-informed discourse analysis of fantasy by collecting conversations concerning fantasy from two differently formatted but well-respected fantasy-oriented internet communities. In the following chapters, I define genre as a transmedial, mutable, associative, recognized system and highlight the major findings of the

original research, which has indicated that tensions and contradictions are actually at the core of how genre functions as a ludic space. To this end, I borrow on game criticism's notion of the "magic circle" and argue for a "genre space" that functions as a socially delineated space in which a specific recognized genre dominates and defines the rules of social interaction in that space, at the core of which is a "generative tension", which is a paradoxical set of values at the center of a genre that drive change and help generate texts and criticism within the genre space.

After laying out the definition of genre and the results of the study, I examine some key theoretical implications of this approach to genre. The first is that prestige and power are not synonymous and must be considered separately in understanding authority in the genre space, as indicated by the contradiction between the prevalence of mentions of traditional fantasy such as Tolkien's fiction, but also the strong influence of less respected works such as the archetypical role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* on the actual behavior and expectations of participants in the genre space. Another key implication, related to the division of power and prestige, is that not only does old media influence new media, as is well observed and clearly evident in film adaptations of novels and the like, but new media influences old and new reading practices shape old reading practices. Following these discussions of authority and influence, I advance the case for understanding genre as a ludic space, functioning like the "magic circle." I examine the role of music in fantasy genre spaces as a case study in the previous mechanics of authority in genre, and finish with a more careful examination of the generative tension in fantasy, which centers on the role of the medieval and medievalism in fantasy spaces.

The penultimate section of this study includes two practical discussions of how my approach to genre might be applied: one addresses how race is understood in fantasy spaces and how participants in the study are actively negotiating constructs of race in the real world through

their negotiations of fantasy races; the other is a clear application of this five-part definition of genre to the classroom, complete with a suggested lesson plan and worksheet for helping students understand generative tensions and genre itself as a way of interacting with texts and ultimately gaining rhetorical agency over their own situations (see Appendix A for lesson plan).

Ultimately, it is my intention to advance a useful definition of genre that will facilitate interdisciplinary work and value traditionally undervalued or marginalized genres and communities. Moreover, this definition should be helpful in understanding the complex networks of authority that govern how texts are produced, understood, remediated, and repurposed in varying social contexts, as well as how genres are recognized and what values might be at stake in any given genre.

## 2.0 A Revised Definition of Genre

As I have already discussed, the word *genre* is problematic; it's a word that most people understand intuitively, but it doesn't seem to measure consistent variables as it's popularly used. On the other hand, scholarly attempts to define *genre* in a number of different disciplines fail to resolve the problem of inconsistent use, since these definitions are prescriptive rather than descriptive, appropriating the word in a highly technical schema (often in tandem with *form*) rather than reflecting common understanding of *genre*. Indeed, although my research on fantasy fandom discussions has illuminated a lot of the processes by which individual genres are established, defined, maintained, and changed, the research fails to point to any single clear definition of genre; rather it confirms that genre is a contested space in the popular sphere as much as it is in the academic, and often via the same mechanisms of debate.

Because genre is such a multifaceted concept, and both academic uses and popular uses of the term have been fraught with complexity, nuance, and inconsistency, it is impossible to arrive at a single simple definition of genre. However, in the interest of bridging work in different disciplines and establishing clear communication between popular discourses and academic discourses, I propose a five-part definition of genre that covers most facets of genre in popular and technical use: genre is a transmedial, mutable, associative, recognized system. In this chapter, I expand on each of these attributes. Each represents a significant facet and must be treated as a technical term; moreover, although the term *genre* can encompass all five aspects at once, it is nearly impossible to treat all the aspects at the same time—a feature of this definition that accounts for the endless and seemingly irresolvable tensions between established definitions across disciplines and discourses.

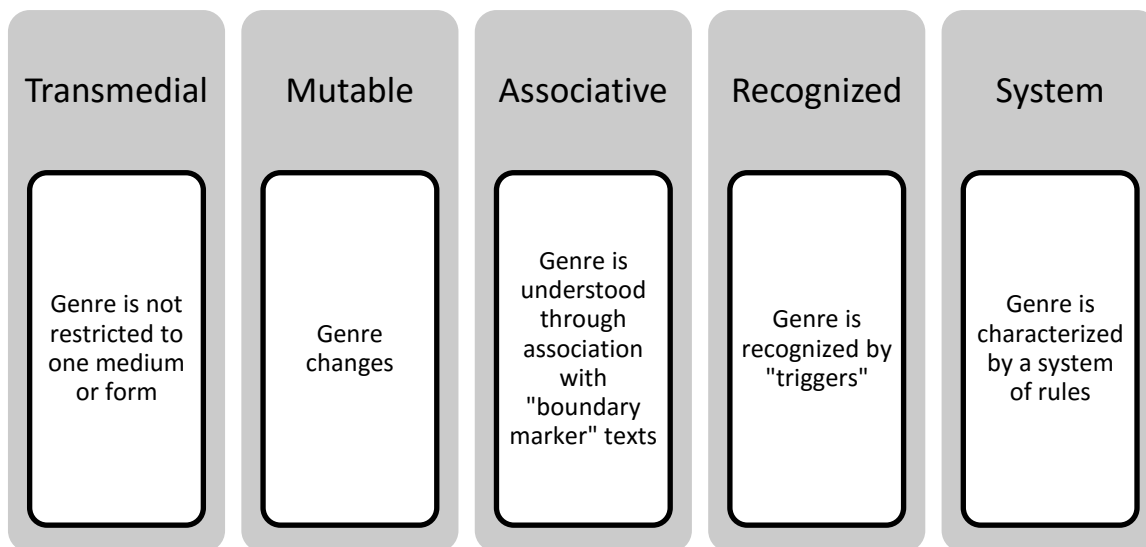


Figure 1 - A Revised Definition of Genre

Defining genre and explaining how it functions socially, in both specific and general terms, are hardly new endeavors, and in contemporary criticism the issues have received a slow but steady stream of attention. Typically, critics recognize two general approaches to genre: either as a passive, static classification system or (more recently) as an active social construct. However, this dichotomy is a little too simple. Instead, we might consider three ways that genre has traditionally been defined: as classification, as category, and as agreement. Classification tends to be according to critics' criteria based on textual features; category would be predetermined by authors and enacted at the moment of composition; agreement includes models that describe an interaction between audience, author, and text. Likewise, these three groups also describe disciplinary divisions in thinking about genre: traditional literary criticism tends to use the classification-type definitions, while writing studies often prefer the category-type definitions, and finally the agreement-type definitions are generally preferred in multimodal/multimedial research fields, such as communications and semiotics.

There is, of course, overlap in these categories, and they are far from perfect groupings and alignments of definitions of genre. Most important, though, is that it *is* possible to unite these



groups under one definition, even if the definition is imperfect. Therefore, what is needed in my definition is an accounting of textual features, composition processes, reading practices, and meaning-making systems. As I will argue in this chapter, my five-part definition of a transmedial, mutable, associative, recognized system does account for the major facets of the rhetorical situations described by any given genre name.

In fact, this definition is proposed with four goals in mind. The first is to unite definitions from literature, rhetoric and composition, semiotics and communications (and other multimodal disciplines), and popular discourse. The second is to be descriptivist—to propose a definition that is useful not only as a critical tool but also incorporates the popular use and understanding of the term *genre*. The third is improve the utility of the term *genre* as a scholarly tool and a teaching tool, largely facilitated by the improved communication that a unified definition would create as in the first two goals. The final goal is to facilitate cross-pollination between academic fields and popular discourse spaces, because there is much rigorous critical debate happening in popular fields that is being missed in academic spaces, and the dissemination of academic work into popular spaces is often slowed and distorted by conflicting understandings of key terms such as *genre*.

### **Genre as Transmedial**

Genre is recognized not by formal features as much as by a collection of conventions<sup>3</sup> that are seen as outside any particular media. This is what Campbell and Hall name the “constellation of recognizable forms bound together by an internal dynamic,” so that genre is

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout this dissertation, the terms “convention” and “trope” will appear nearly interchangeable; in academic discourse, convention is the proper term, as I am referring to a recognized pattern or repeated element, but in popular discourse the word “trope” is generally used in its place, and as my study examines popular usage, it is often necessary to use the popular term.

distinguished by “significant rhetorical similarities” rather than “significant rhetorical differences” (21, 23). Yet these conventions exist in a platonic space, in which they can appear in any medium with almost no changes in the translation. Media is certainly seen as a modifying factor in a genre, and may be named as part of a subgenre in popular spaces and academic discussion (e.g., fantasy film vs. fantasy novel conventions), but the tropes themselves are seen as accessible in any media. Thus, genre is not *formal* but shaped out of a collection of tropes that can be appropriated as the target medium affords.

This is not, of course, to say that media doesn’t matter for genre. Certainly, the material and medial experience of texts affects the recognition of genre in a text. Devitt “reject[s] formalism but accept[s] materialism” (“Re-Fusing” 31). She acknowledges that “Individual texts have a material reality, a physical, formed existence, and their material matters to people’s construction of genre. The material reality of texts is formal, but our approach to it need not be formalistic” (31). That is, we must account for media in our analyses of genre (and texts in general), but that materiality does not in itself define genre. This is why I argue for *transmedial* as a descriptor of genre: whatever genre is, it is capable of translating across media, not *regardless* of medial exigencies and affordances, but rather through the channels available through medial affordances.

Indeed, genre doesn’t exist apart from media, but is constructed of it, as much as it is constructed of authors, audiences, and texts. Miller and Shepherd argue that “Change is initiated materially, and genre change is part of the sociocognitive adaptation to such change,” and they acknowledge Devitt’s discussion of genre change as being flexible and changeable (“Re-Fusing” 265). As I will demonstrate in later chapters, certain media and forms tend to exhibit more hegemonic power and prestige in a given genre space than others; for instance, it is very evident

that the written article-length essay (along with the monograph) is the most prestigious form of academic discourse, even though academic genres can be translated to other media—and indeed often must be in order to be disseminated beyond paywall-protected academic spaces.

Even in a study specifically of popular spaces, we see that authors have trouble distinguishing and separating the threads of any particular media within a genre space in order to isolate one medium for study. For instance, Jamison sets out to specifically study written fanfiction, but “acknowledge[s] that these forms [video and fanart] are increasingly interrelated and integrated with written fanwork” (21). That is, at some integral level, the authors and audiences of fanfic do not see written media as significantly separate *at the genre level* from visual art or video, and indeed multimodal composition in these spaces is normal. But these authors and audiences will tend to see fanwork as a single, unified genre space, just as my study finds that fantasy fans acknowledge “fantasy” as a genre larger than any one medium, and consciously make space for transmedial discussion of and participation in the fantasy genre.

The key is that genre distinctions are not established firmly along medial lines, but rather along some other fault between genre spaces. Beebee argues that “generic differences are grounded in the ‘use-value’ of a discourse rather than its content, formal features, or its rules of production” (7). Beebee’s definition seems to contradict Campbell and Jamieson’s view of genre as a “constellation of recognizable forms” (21), but they definitely agree that what makes a genre is how the audience recognizes it. Moreover, Beebee then defends the use-value by examining single-genre studies (such as this one), and argues that “since the use-values that Radway and Kissinger and Wright and Habermas find lying at the heart of romance, the western, and philosophy are social rather than private... genre theory in their works inevitably becomes a form of ideology” (Beebee 14-15). Ideology, of course, is not bound to any particular medium,

although it may privilege some media over others and define some media as useful only in certain forms. Ideology also allows for a “constellation” of forms, in that ideology need not be a unified system, but rather is itself a “constellation” of recognizable value patterns.

All this is to say that genre should not be considered bound by media, but rather able to translate across media through affordance-specific channels. Genre itself is larger than any particular medium, although any given genre is naturally going to privilege some forms and media over others, according to the genre’s internal mechanisms and dynamics (that is, its underlying ideology, in Beebee’s model).

### **Genre as Mutable**

Since genre is able to traverse medial boundaries, it is by necessity able to change—thus, genre is *mutable*. My study shows that participants in a given genre certainly recognize and understand that the genre *has* changed over time and *will* change over time. Participants actively predict changes, propose innovative and critical ways of describing and accounting for those changes, and document past changes according to the best of their understanding of the genre. These histories of genre are hotly debated, although like most histories, certain key points are taken more or less for granted as required in the chronology. Moreover, participants document changes by dividing the genre into periods and identifying a heritage or lineage (what I will call a *genealogy*) of the genre, and participants value these genealogies as key formations of the genre and hence the participants’ self-identities as participants in the genre.

Many traditional definitions of genre are at best uncomfortable with the notion of genre change. Classical genre sets allowed no change at all; even more recent definitions of genre have struggled with the notion. For Miller and Shepherd, for instance, “there’s something problematic about the very idea of genre change. Genre change problematizes precisely what makes genre

generic. Our understanding of genre as a recurring, typified, reproducible, ‘stabilized enough’ (Schryer 1993:204) symbolic action requires that it resist change” (264). But Devitt argues that “genres are not even stabilized for now, as they live and breathe through individual instances and interactions across and within genres. The stability of genres may be more an illusion of genre theory or genre criticism than a reality of genre action. Genres are destabilized now and forever. Any static description of a genre seems doomed to incompleteness and to contradiction from actual instances” (“Re-Fusing” 39). That is, any description of a genre—even this study—must necessarily be little more than a snapshot, much as any ethnography must necessarily be just a snapshot of the community under study, and it is necessary to account for the way that the study itself may affect the object under study. But, more importantly for the argument at hand, any definition of genre *must*, therefore, acknowledge and incorporate the fact that genres indisputably change, and they change constantly. As Miller and Shepherd note, there are clear mechanisms for *how* genres change. They argue that “Change is initiated materially, and genre change is part of the sociocognitive adaptation to such change” (265). Change, in my model, seems to be more evolutionary, with participants bending the genre and selecting for or against traits as the socio-rhetorical situations require—all of which is suggested by the very existence of genealogies in both academic and popular studies of genre.

Even in genre definitions that use a more traditional approach, there needs to be some accounting for change, whether by a hybrid notion (again, some evolutionary traces) or by some other mechanism. Opacki notes that “genres do not have unchanging, fixed constitutive features. First of all, because of the ‘transformation’ which occurs in the course of evolution. Second – and this is more important in this case – because of the shifts in importance of distinguishing individual features of structure, depending on the literary context of the epoch or literary trend.

In the course of evolution, not only does one genre change, but they all do, constituting as they do a context for that genre” (123). Opacki is describing what for him is a sort of ecosystem of genres, in which some genres take social precedence over others in prestige or utility, but as social needs change, so much these ecosystems of genres that Opacki describes.

But if we move away from genre as a set of reproducible features, and more into an abstracted model of genre, such as Beebee’s genre as ideology, or my genre as system, then change is more easily integrated into the definition of genre. Beebee points out that “The ideological nature of genre explains not only its necessity but also its instability” (15). For Beebee, “as a form of ideology, genre is never fully identical with itself, nor are texts fully identical with their genres” (19). This returns, in certain ways, to the notion of the platonic genre, an ideal form to which other texts are held.

As for an exact mechanism, Cawelti suggests that genres are replete with “inventions” and “conventions.” Conventions, of course, are the aspects of the genre that are familiar to the audience and author alike—the expected portion of any text, which conforms to the genre’s template—while inventions are the “twists” or “original” material that each author contributes to the genre. Naturally, over the course of time, repetition and imitation lead to inventions being sublimed into the convention class, and new inventions are needed to keep the genre alive. This is but one mechanism, though. My study finds that even the act of defining the genre, in a sort of quantum physics-like way, has a tendency to change the genre, and thereby the texts that operate within the genre’s purview. Moreover, owing in part to Beebee’s notion of genre as ideology, I find that there is, at the core of a given genre, what I will call a “generative tension,” an ideologically opposed and paradoxical pair of values that drive the genre’s changes and generate new texts and criticisms in the genre. Regardless of the actual mechanism of change, though,

genre does, by definition, change. Genre must be mutable in order to function; it must accept change and facilitate change, over time and across media.

### **Genre as Associative**

Just as participants identify and document histories and genealogies for any given genre (or sub-genre, in order to distinguish between parts of a single genre), genre itself is identified through associations with exemplary texts as anchor point. That is, the act of creating a genealogy is an act of defining the genre, because it is essentially making a list of texts associated with the genre, not unlike giving a learning artificial intelligence program several items and telling it that these are similar, and letting the program work out what exactly the similarities are. To say that a text is *like Canon Text A* is to say that the text is *in the same genre as Canon Text A* and even to *name the genre that is represented by Canon Text A*, although this comparison act often allows for modifications such as time period or other genre-mixing innovations. The associative definition of genre is anticipated in Bawarshi's concept of the "genre function," which builds on Michel Foucault's "author function," but Bawarshi doesn't go far enough to completely bridge the concepts and acknowledge that author names (or text names) may themselves become genre names—that is, author function *is* genre function, and vice versa; when a text is associated with a given author, it is likewise associated with a genre associated with that author, and vice versa. What Bawarshi is missing, though, is the notion of the *genre space*, a key theoretical contribution of this definition that posits that there is a social space for every genre into which participants in the rhetorical situation of a text enter freely to interact with the text. A single person interacts with any number of genre spaces, and as genre expectations change, so do the genre spaces accessible for a given text; likewise, a text can be placed into any number of genre spaces, but its function and use in each space will be different.

However, as with many things that get conflated together in genre spaces, author function and genre function become easily conflated, so that the associative property of genre makes it possible to use author name as a way to mark genre as easily as any other term. Thus, to label a text as “Tolkien-like” (in a fantasy-associated genre space) is to label it as high fantasy; to label a text “high fantasy” is to associate it and compare it, *inherently*, to a constellation of “high fantasy masters,” such as Tolkien.

This associative nature of genre is fairly obvious in observing the way that participants in genre spaces experience, utilize, and recognize genre. For Devitt, genre “depends heavily on the intertextuality of discourse” (“Generalizing” 89). The very notion of grouping texts together into genres—whether as a mere classification or as something more inherent—assumes intertextuality, as it assumes that part of the meaning of texts exists in their similarities to other texts and, in more reader-focused models of genre, in readers’ abilities to recognize those similarities and act on them. Jauss, in a similar way, argues even more strongly concerning the associative nature of genre and its essential meaning-making function, claiming that, as in medieval readers’ practices, “intertextuality is constitutive,” a concept I will return to in the systematic nature of genre, but a reading method that accounts indeed for the base reputation of popular works because, as he argues, this intertextual pleasure of reading is “an enjoyment of texts which humanistic aesthetics has undervalues if not forbidden” in which “the pleasure is provided by the perception of difference, of an ever-different variation on a basic pattern” (“Alterity” 188-189). This approach would seem to be a genre-as formula approach, but the focus is on reader agency, as Jauss clarifies elsewhere by arguing that “the smaller this distance [between expectations and experience], which means that no demands are made upon the receiving consciousness to make a change on the horizon of unknown experience, the closer the



work comes to the realm of ‘culinary’ or light reading” (“Literary History” 14-15). In this way, genre’s function as the interpretive framework for a text for audiences necessarily depends on the reader’s prior experience and ability to associate the genre with other texts, experiences, and expectations.

Ecological approaches such as Opacki’s (and mine), in which genres interact with each other in networks, hierarchies, and systems, necessitate that genres are associative—not only with texts or with other genres. Thus, the boundaries of a given genre are defined not only through association with specific texts or authors, but also with particular groups of people, cultural institutions, situations, etc. Thus, for instance, we see that fantasy is associated with “nerds” or “geeks” and also with masculinity (despite a large portion of fantasy readers and writers being female); the essay is associated with academic prestige and critical thinking, but the fan theory (a notably similar genre) is associated with the very opposite. Genres function in many ways like gender or any other social marker.

In Laurie McNeill’s study of the relationship between the blog and the diary, she notes that “While I oppose the idea that some genres are gendered, i.e., inherently ‘male’ or ‘female,’ I recognize that assumptions about genre are often informed by assumptions about gender, which genders turn to particular genres, and which functions those genres fittingly perform” (145). I would argue that the word “assumption” could easily be replaced with “association” in her statement here—that rather than being an unfortunate side effect of stereotyping as McNeill would have it, the associations of genres with particular groups of people, practices, and other social divisions is in fact an unavoidable and defining *feature* of the nature of genre itself.

Where the unfortunate stereotypes *do* come into play is how the genres are ranked in hierarchies, and how subgenres within a genre become ranked into a system of power, systems

that very often mirror other power ranking systems in social networks. Opacki argues that “every literary current introduces for its own use a certain hierarchy of literary genres – there are genres which are dominant in it, and ‘secondary’ genres which are less representative of it. This is an important phenomenon” (120). Indeed, Opacki’s “royal genres” account for much rhetorical discrimination, as well as for the ways that genres interact in general. We see these “royal genres” at play constantly in educational settings, for instance; a student may enact a genre that is more familiar to him or her—such as the podcast or the blog—in performing an assignment, and in so doing actually demonstrate mastery of the given subject, but still be punished for not performing the essay genre, which is the “royal genre” of the classroom *because* the other genres are associated with “non-academic” settings.

In more concrete terms, in fantasy the “epic” or “high” fantasy is certainly the “royal genre” (what I will henceforth call the “prestige genre), but it is also problematically associated with an old guard that is recognized as androcentric, white, Christian, etc., and the fantasy fandom *does* value diversity among its ranks, despite the appearance to those outside the fantasy fandom—an appearance no doubt perpetuated by the honoring of high fantasy as the prestige genre. Epic or high fantasy is generally associated with Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings Trilogy* or, more recently, authors such as Brandon Sanderson, and so on. This is the classical adventuring party out to save the world quest, pitting good and evil against each other—the genre on which *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)* is based (although *D&D* arguably moves out of that mode in certain ways)<sup>4</sup>. This prestige causes tension within the fantasy genre space and communities, acknowledging the prestige of the high fantasy but at the same time highly valuing and celebrating texts that break the prestige genre’s tropes or conventions. Nevertheless, the

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<sup>4</sup> The importance of *Dungeons & Dragons* in fantasy will be covered in later chapters.

association with these prestige texts is part of what unifies the genre and makes it coherent; it allows participants in the genre space to easily communicate by having something to compare to, which is particularly important in genre spaces that rely so heavily on imagined spaces and objects to function.

This tension of association inherent in genre is well-noted in popular genre studies. Schatz, for instance, in discussion the implications of genre studies for film studies, notes an emerging “relationship of the genre film to myth” in film studies (94). That is, Schatz and others associate the formulaic nature of the genre film to the formulaic nature of myth—that these prototypes, built through associations with key texts as models—exist in a platonic space created out of the sum of the web of intertextual connections in the mind of the audience. Likewise, also in film studies, Leo Braudy notes that although audiences value novelty, “The audience that appreciates genre films, remakes, and sequels is one that wants to be both shocked and knowing, to be in on the details of repetition and variation within the films as well as all the... material that surround it. Such an audience wants its awareness catered to and confirmed, for the irony generated by its knowledge of films is not savage or satiric but cozy” (2). In short, genre is defined by the network of associations in which it lives; it is not the spider in the web, but rather the web itself—it is the conduit by which intertextuality can connect texts, audiences, authors, and all the other elements of the rhetorical situation.

### **Genre as Recognized**

Association means little, though, without the participants in a genre recognizing that they are participating in the genre (even if the genre goes unnamed, as many genres do while being interacted with). While an academic sense of genre must be taught formally, because academic genre sense tends to rely on formal features, my definition of genre seeks to describe genre *as it*

*is recognized organically by participants*. Participants can and do actively recognize genre, and make rhetorical choices with a full awareness of genre, seemingly acquired like any other linguistic practice without overt instruction to start the process. Participants often engage in debate about the definition of genres, but fundamentally the most significant defining aspect in identifying a genre is *what genre does the audience recognize this text to be*. The recognition process depends on the available set of tropes within a genre, and some aspects are more recognizable and more significant than others. For instance, many people consider *Star Wars* to be science fiction, despite its *formally* having features of many other genres, most notably epic fantasy; what is *recognized* in the text is the space setting, which triggers the science fiction recognition<sup>5</sup>. Since genre is mutable and associative, participants in the genre debate the definition and tolerate the ambiguity; it is acceptable in these communities to debate the recognized genre of a text such as *Star Wars* and to claim other than the mainstream recognition, and it is through these debates that much of the work of defining any given genre is accomplished. Nevertheless, most participants recognize what any given participant is seeing when he says that *Star Wars* is science fiction (or, more recently, fantasy, as will be explained in the next chapter).

What permits this process of recognition is that, as Campbell and Jamieson argue, “A genre is given its character by a fusion of forms not by its individual elements”—that is, genre is larger than any given set of tropes (21). Just as a named constellation has a meaning bigger than just a group of stars, so does genre—and that meaning exists in the fact that it is recognized as a

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<sup>5</sup> Since genre is, of course, hotly debated in popular culture spaces, *Star Wars*'s genre is also hotly debated, but the obvious solution is to mash fantasy and science fiction together, as generally has happened over the past fifty years, so that they are now generally found on the same shelf and mixed together in most libraries and bookstores. See above about the mutability of genre.

genre, just as a constellation is only a constellation when recognized as such (otherwise it's just a bunch of stars in a random pattern).

Genres are dependent on knowledge on all sides of the rhetorical situation—if it is a group of tropes (which is only part of it, but a significant part), then it is necessary to recognize, as Cawelti defines, that “conventions are elements which are known to both the creator and his audience beforehand” (71). That is, what makes a genre effective is that not only does the creator of a text know the forms available, but also that he can trust that his audience will also *recognize* when he enacts those forms. As Devitt argues, “To begin seeing how much more than classification or textual form genre comprehends, consider that we know when, *as readers*, we recognize the genre of a text. Based on our identification of the genre, we make assumptions not only about the form but also about the text’s purposes, its subject matter, its writer, and its expected reader” (87). It is this moment of recognition that is the fundamental moment of interaction, because it is from this recognition that all other meaning will derive—once the audience has decided that a particular genre is in play, then the audience will interpret the text accordingly until another genre has been triggered and recognized (as sometimes happens with a narrative “twist,” and especially happens in parody). But, most importantly, the recognition is immediate, and often in place well before the audience interacts fully with the text. Giltrow and Stein argue that “only in the rarest cases will the participants have to use linguistic cues to work out in which genre they are engaged. Participants know by way of ‘pre-signals’” which genre system to activate for interacting with a particular text (5).

The mechanisms for this recognition are difficult to completely describe, as they are so fundamental to how participants interact, but “when subjects recognize an utterance as belonging to some type, some genre, they know not only the kinds of actors, objects, and actions that are

likely—though never inevitably—involved, but also the time-space setting invoked—the landscape of interaction” (Russell and Fisher 169). Participants may not fully be aware of the mechanisms of recognition, but they are definitely able to describe the choices that the recognition leads them to make as they navigate the genre space. “As Bazerman (2006:221) puts it, ‘genres are ways of seeing what acts are available that are appropriate to the moment as you see it—what you can do, what you might want to do’” (qtd in Russell and Fisher 170).

Since the genre is dependent on the participants’ recognizing that they are participating in the genre, it is the *recognition* of the genre that fundamentally defines the genre; a genre does not exist in a given space *until* it is recognized by a significant portion of the participants to establish that genre’s system as being in place as a code of action.

### **Genre as System**

That genre functions as a social code is no new revelation. Heather Dubrow argues that “One of the closest analogies to the experience of reading... is that of operating within a social code: genre, as many students of the subject have observed, functions much like a code of behavior established between the author and his reader” (2). Likewise, Carolyn Miller in her argument that genre is “social action,” argues that “If rhetorical situation is not material and objective, but a social construct, or semiotic structure... Exigence must be located in the social world, neither in a private perception nor in material circumstance” (157). That is, what makes genre is not any individual author’s ideation or any particular reader’s interpretation, but an agreement—labeled and controlled by the genre as understood by the collective of participants—about what is acceptable rhetorically in that genre space. For Bawarshi, “Genre *is* what it allows us to do,” in that any given genre “constitutes its own social semiotic” (357, 351). That is, every

genre contains within its domain a particular sign-system that must be read according to the semiotic code of that genre. Misreading a genre is misreading the signs in the space.

In fact, Jauss argues that the recognition as genre as a system of rules may be medieval or even older, pointing not only to medieval reading practices but also reading practices in Latin literature of the classical period. In claiming, as I have already drawn on, that “intertextuality is constitutive” in this way of reading, he means “that the reader must negate the character of the individual text as a work in order to enjoy the charm of an already ongoing game with known rules and still unknown surprises” (“Alterity” 189). This *game* aspect accounts for the aesthetic pleasure and also for the way that audiences evaluate texts, according to how well they “play the game,” and it is this ludic dimension of genre on which my sense of “system” rests in this definition. To Jauss’s description of a game I add the term “emergent” from game studies, which is the description for “still unknown surprises”—that is, any system of rules will have these “surprises” as a property of *emergence*—what comes naturally as a result of the interactions of rules and the decisions of participants in the game space (or, in this case, the genre space).

In addition to arguing that genre itself is a system, it is not particularly innovative to suggest that genres and subgenres interact with each other in systems that codify power and prestige, as I do. Giltrow and Stein discuss previous genre systems and label them as either open or closed—closed genre systems being more like those classical genre definitions that are too rigid to accept the mutability of genre, while open systems allow more change. Moreover, Devitt documents the connection between genre systems and intertextuality, noting that “Genres interact with other genres in what has been called genre sets (Devitt 1991) and then genre systems (Bazerman 1995), within the framework of metagenres (Giltrow 2002), activity systems

(Russells 1997), or a variety of relationships dependent on their actions in context (Devitt 2004: 54-59). Just as all texts are intertextual, so too are all genres inter-genre-al” (“Re-Fusing” 44).

These genre systems, of course, function along lines of power and prestige; they are hierarchies, as Opacki suggests in introducing the term “royal genres”. The study of genres is thus the study of power and systems of authority and prestige. Van Dijk defines power by saying that “one group has power over another group if it has some form of control over the other group... Much power in society, however, is not coercive, but rather mental. Instead of controlling the activities of others directly by bodily force, we control the mental basis of all action, as explained above, namely people’s intentions or purposes” (17). Thus, in genre study, as in any study of social phenomenon, “the crucial question is how such forms of hegemonic, discursive power are being implemented. Obviously, we need to know much about the subtleties of discourse structures, as well as about those of the mind, actin, and society, in order to be able to describe and explain how text and talk may thus manipulate people into doing what the powerful group prefers” (Van Dijk 19). This is the purpose of understanding genre systems, to understand how genre establishes, maintains, and challenges hegemonic powers in culture through semiotic systems.

Indeed, for Jamison, the study of fanfiction is exactly that: “fanfiction has demonstrated that many of the values of the literary and commercial establishment—economy, continuity, pacing, ‘show, don’t tell,’ clarity of style and of genre (what shelf in the bookstore it will go on)—can be jettisoned or systematically and purposefully violated as long as other tastes and agreements are being met” (22-23). That is, by studying genres as they are understood outside the hegemonic powers of academia and commercial fiction—by examining how audiences participate in and take up genres rather than focusing on just authorship—we can understand



how the hegemony is not only maintained but also critically challenged in non-prestige discourses. It is almost unavoidable, once the question of power has been broached, to use postcolonial terminology to discuss genre's power, as de Certeau does to some degree in describing the relationships of the sciences and academia with the everyday—with the sciences and academia functioning as a central power, marginalizing the everyday, even though (for Certeau) “Many everyday practices... are tactical in character. And so are, more generally, many ‘ways of operating’: victories of the ‘weak’ over the ‘strong’” (xix).

In this study, we are dealing in particular with genre spaces that are already considered marginalized (both from inside and outside, though for different reasons), and so it will be unavoidable to discuss these power systems. But, for the purposes of this definition, even more important is the way that genre in the abstract functions internally as a semiotic system dictating the actions of every participant involved in the genre once the genre has been recognized (or selected). To understand the semiotic-social system that every genre constitutes, it is necessary to approach genre not as a rhetorical phenomenon but a *ludic* phenomenon. That is, genre isn't about texts or even language, but about rules, actions, agency, and *play*: a genre isn't just a social situation, but a *game*<sup>6</sup>. A game consists of players (participants), rules (conventions), available actions and choices, goals, and rewards or punishments. The genre space, then, is a ludic space analogous to Johann Huizinga's model of the “magic circle.”

Indeed, it is possible, not accounting for the other attributes of genre defined above (especially that of mutability), to create an algorithmic model for a given genre, as Propp has in *The Morphology of the Folktale*, a text that reads best as an ergodic text, much like the if-then statements of an early text-based video game or a choose-your-own-adventure novel. For this

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<sup>6</sup> Although, arguably, every social situation could be modeled as a game.

concept of genre as system to function, it is necessary to conceive of texts not as static objects, but as a series of interacting choices; in that way, every text is ergodic to some degree—that is, nonlinear and defined by choices of the audience as much as choices by the author. As Espen Aarseth argues, “If we see the texts as a kind of machine, a symbiosis of sign, operator, and medium (cf. fig. 1.1), then the cyborg perspective is already implied” (55). In particular, one can see even in this brief excerpt the way that even Aarseth’s argument is itself ergodic, while being perfectly ordinary in its genre (the academic monograph, or extended essay). Here, Aarseth gives his readers commands—“cf.” being an academic sign for the command to compare. The text is mapped out by a mixture of convention and overt commands, in the same way that a game offers its players a series of choices and actions to undertake communicated in a combination of conventions and inventions (in Cawelti’s definition). Likewise, we see that any ordinary academic text is ergodic, offering readers a choice to read nonlinearly with every citation or footnote.

But not only are the texts ergodic, navigated through a series of choices, genres themselves are a game system—a game space, not unlike the “magic circle” so commonly referenced in game studies, a semiotic space within which the “ordinary” rules of society are suspended in favor of the rules of the game. However, since some genre is almost always in effect, the “ordinary” rules of society are actually a complex genre system of overlapping genre spaces, interrupted by clearly defined genres (such as “game” or “fantasy”) that suspend all the other genres. Thus, we can speak of a “genre space” in the same way that we speak of a “game space”—a space in which a particular system of rules is in place, in which participants can anticipate each other’s actions according to given rules, but also in which participants have

agency to make unexpected actions according to their strategies for navigating the space and attaining the goals of the space.

In short, genre spaces function like ludic spaces, and genres themselves like games. There are rules that participants willingly take on as part of participating in the genre (whether explicitly or tacitly). The rules are not treated as restrictive as much as they are playful; participants in the genre combine rules (conventions) in playful patterns (inventions), and are able to produce predictable and pleasing outcomes by doing so. Because genre functions as a set of rules and algorithms that can be manipulated by participants for desired, predictable outcomes, it is a *system*.

## **Conclusion**

For the purposes of this study, each of these attributes will be treated as discrete, just as one might study an individual organ in an organism—but the reality is that the attributes must work together for the understanding of genre to be complete. Genre is, itself, an unfortunately complex concept, being a meta-structure that governs social interactions. Indeed, it seems that the only way to accurately study genre is to study its effects, and this problem accounts for much of the ambiguity in defining genre. To call genre a transmedial, mutable, associative, recognized system is to mash together descriptions of several facets of the phenomenon, but hopefully is inclusive enough to allow for the inherent understandings of genre exhibited in participants as they organically move through genre spaces.

Moreover, the grammar of this definition is significant: *system* is the head of the noun phrase because it is, by far, the most descriptive and significant aspect of the definition.

*Recognized* is closest to the head of the phrase precisely because that is the next most significant

aspect, since the recognition process is the process that actually determines which system is put into play and to what degree that system is effective in the given space.

Although it is far from a perfect definition, and somewhat unwieldy for all its part, it is my sincere desire that defining genre as a transmedial, mutable, associative, recognized system represents a significant step in unifying genre definitions from a variety of fields, disciplines, and periods and in acknowledging the inherent value of popular discourse's understanding of genre relative to the academic understandings available. It is by fusing academic and popular understandings of concepts such as genre that we can arrive at useful and compassionate understandings of media and social spaces themselves.

### **3.0 The Study**

In defining genre as a transmedial, mutable, associative, recognized system, it is necessary to have a clear picture of how this model applies in the case of at least one genre. To that end, this study includes a deep analysis of selected fantasy genre spaces and their participants, in order to better model and map how participants understand and interact with genre and what mechanisms drive these five aspects of genre.

#### **The Problem**

In order to arrive at this definition of *genre*, I conducted a descriptive investigation of the fantasy genre in addition to the previous synthesis of theory and literature on the subject. This investigation is, like many contemporary rhetoric or digital humanities projects, interdisciplinary in scope. The primary goal of this investigation was to descriptively answer two questions: how do self-described participants in a genre (as identified by the participants) identify, modify, and understand the function of *genre*; and what are the boundaries of the fantasy genre in particular as understood by participants in the fantasy genre. The former question is motivated by a need to unite popular and academic definitions of genre in order to facilitate productive discourse on genre, as well as combine multiple disciplines' definitions of genre to account for the transmediality present in popular discourse; the latter question arises particularly out of the peculiarity of the fantasy genre, which apparently (as Cawelti describes of the Western genre) mediates and is mediated by popular perceptions and constructions of particular historical periods and narratives.

Naturally, both these questions carry with them numerous theoretical implications and practical applications, which I will address in sections 4 and 5. Additionally, the corpus of data generated in the pursuit of these two questions is invaluable toward answering other questions

concerning how genre spaces function and how fantasy in particular is constructed. However, for all the applications of this study, it is important to recognize that this corpus is severely limited; the study is, like most studies employing an ethnographic approach, generally not reproducible, as it is bound to a particular moment in a particular cultural context. It is likely that the broader results of this study can be affirmed through other studies, just as the results of this study have affirmed other studies' results, but the specific results cannot be replicated in detail. It is also important to understand that the data presented here only describes the moment that was studied, and as such is already considerably dated, since popular discussion moves far faster than academic analysis.

Having established these significant caveats, it is necessary to describe in detail the method and findings of the field work itself before entering into subsequent sections on implications and applications.

## **The Method**

Since the study's object—a more descriptive perspective on genre—is interdisciplinary, so also must be the method. Although there are several techniques involved in this study, the primary method is ethnographic in nature. Members of fantasy-affiliated communities generate a large volume of metadiscursive material, and much of this activity occurs online in self-archiving formats. Thus, I have collected a year's worth of conversations from two different online fantasy communities in two different formats, and then subjected these conversations to qualitative coding using the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti. As a researcher, I am well-situated to conduct this research, having participated in in the past in similar communities and being fully acquainted with the general conventions and expectations of such a community. When I argue that this study is largely ethnographic in method, I mean that the research has placed primary

emphasis on understanding the culture of these communities *as they understand themselves*, that the data is collected by observation from the researcher, and that much of the material is transmitted and analyzed through thick description, as will be seen in later sections (in particular, section 4.1, which includes three case studies).

Since these conversations were not generated specifically for the study, the anonymity of the participants was crucial; although efforts were taken to notify participants in the communities of the communities' role in the study, significant efforts were also made to protect the anonymity of the participants, especially considering that any internet community may have minors participating without being marked as such. Moreover, the leaders of the larger community requested that certain areas of their community space be left out of the study, and these wishes have been respected, since this request not only represents terms of consent, but also because the request caused no hindrance to the study, as the parts of the community that were left out were largely irrelevant to the study, since they were too personal or idiosyncratic in nature. Collected conversations were screened for relevancy to the study and any conversation with significant personal information in the discussion was removed from the study; any participant who wished to opt out after the notice was posted was erased from the records before the corpus was coded, and all personal information was removed from the documentation except usernames, which were each replaced with unique, uniform code, for the sole purpose of understanding who is speaking to whom in the conversations.

After the conversations were scrubbed of personal information and sorted out for relevance, they were coded in accordance with five features under examination: explicit definitions, attributions of authority, actions taken to gain authority, values concerning what makes a text "good," and conventions assumed to be present in fantasy (although some

conventions of community discourse were noted as well). The criteria for all the code families except *values* was established prior to the beginning of the study, as the study initially set out to examine authority and conventions; thus, it was understood in advance that the data would be coded for actions for authority, attributions of authority, conventions, and explicit definitions, which account for existing and emerging understandings of genre. However, shortly into the coding process, it became clear that it would be necessary to also mark judgments that made an explicit statement about *values*, and thus this final family was added as an emergent category.

In the process of coding, codes were distinguished with a head word at the beginning of each new code that indicated which of the five broad families the code belonged to. Each new reference, key term, genre term, or kind of action was coded separately, and later grouped into families during data processing; redundant or extremely similar codes were collapsed together. Due to confidentiality, technological limitations, and time constraints, coding was not replicated by a second coder; indeed, for the study to work, it was necessary that coding be done by someone familiar with fantasy conventions in order to recognize references to key texts that were not explicitly labeled or allusions to common conventions that were constructed in “insider” terms.

In total, there were 1,655 conversations collected between the two communities. Community A, which was a forum dedicated to discussions by self-identified fantasy authors and fans, accounted for the majority of those conversations at 1,441 collected conversations; Community B, which produced 214 conversations used in the study, is a collaborative blog focused primarily on reviewing fantasy texts, but also engages in games, debates, and general updates, and features an active comments section which was collected in the same way as the



conversations for Community A. Overall, the study included approximately 1,100 participants, with Community B contributing 113 of these and Community A contributing the remainder.

In order to sort out what the significant actions for authority, attributions of authority,

conventions, values, and

definitions *were*, each different

kind of action, attribution,

convention, and definition was

coded separately, resulting in

over 3,000 separate codes; these

were, however, grouped into just

five code families, and

individually all but the most

common (the first 200 or so) can

be dismissed as statistically

irrelevant, included only to

contribute to their respective

families. Given the number of

conversations and participants,

any code with few occurrences

may be regarded as idiosyncrasy,

except as it contributes to the

larger code categories. There was

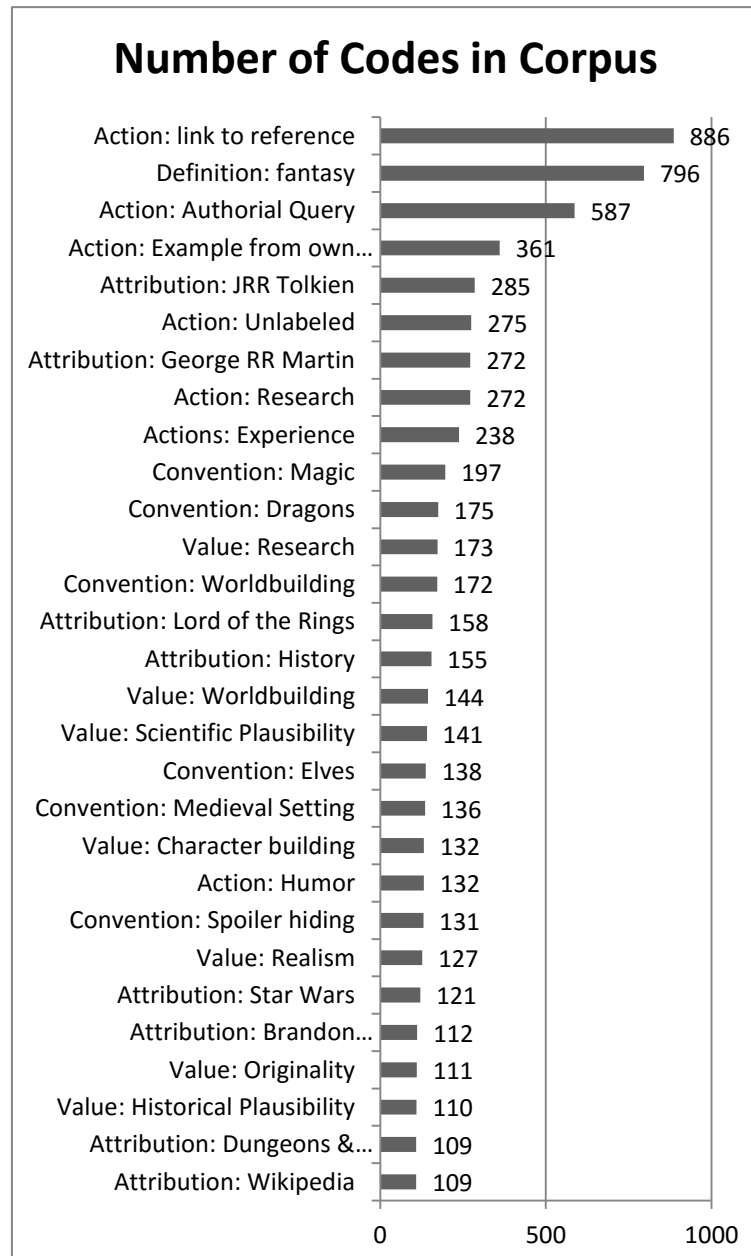


Figure 2 - 30 Most Common Codes

notable drop-off in the number of codes; while the most prevalent code<sup>7</sup> appeared at least 886 times in the study, even the tenth most prevalent code<sup>8</sup> appeared only 197 times, suggesting that beyond the most prevalent individual codes, the rest faded into statistical background noise that is only useful in as much as it forms the larger patterns of the five categories of actions that were coded. The majority of potentially relevant codes appear only between 30 and 100 times, and it might be prudent to consider only those above 90 or 80 references or so. The drop-off, however, makes it abundantly clear which are the *most* significant markers of authority in these communities and, by extension, fantasy in general, since the differences are so significant that they cannot be dismissed as merely a sampling error or individual variation in the communities under study.

It is also important that the coding was done by a researcher not only familiar with the fantasy genre but also trained in discourse analysis. Both these skills are necessary to understand the data accurately and not misinterpret what the participants are discussing. Since this method is largely ethnographic in its nature, it is necessary to understand the community as the members of the community do as well as maintain researcher non-interference. Non-interference was obtained by only collecting conversations that were already finished at the time of collection, so that there was no indication to the participants at the time of composition that the researcher was even observing. Familiarity is, however, required because the participants are members of the fantasy community addressing other members of the fantasy community, and as such tended to use allusions and jargon that would be unclear to anyone outside the community, and would result in miscoding or missing codes; as it is, I acknowledge that the data set likely contains a

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<sup>7</sup> “action for authority: link to reference”, marking where participants gained authority for themselves by linking to a reference to support their claims in a discussion.

<sup>8</sup> “convention: magic”, marking wherever a participant indicated that magic was an expected or defining convention in fantasy media.

number of missed codes and miscoded features, which is another reason that I will treat the data carefully and consider anything within a few instances of another thing to be statistically equivalent.

However, since this study is purely descriptive and not intended to be predictive except as an ambitious example of how *one* genre space behaves, it is important not to extrapolate generalized conclusions from the data presented herein. Moreover, I will not be providing statistical apparatuses such as margins of error, since simple whole numbers are sufficient to describe the occurrences in the data set *as they occurred*, and there is not intended to be any predictive element to this data. All the same, it is necessary to understand that this method is susceptible to human error, so small differences must be considered statistically equivalent. This corpus, ambitious though it may be, represents only one moment for one slice in the ever-changing landscape of the fantasy genre space.

In addition to the codings, the corpus can be used in other ways. For instance, one of the more telling pieces of metadata collected concerning the conversations collected is the length of each conversation (measured in number of posts, rather than in amount of texts) in relationship to its topic. This measurement indicates the level of interest and controversy of a subject, although it does not indicate whether the subject is particularly *important* or merely *controversial*. Nevertheless, it is an indication of what is important in these communities, whether as a marker of disputed territory or as a marker of prestige or power.

Finally, any of the conversations collected may be subjected to critical discourse analysis as a case study to illustrate a larger trend in the data set, a technique I will rely heavily on in the coming chapters when delving into smaller sub-issues within this dissertation. It is partly for this reason that the usernames of participants have been replaced with unique codes, so that in these

discourse analyses the speakers can be identified as individuals without violating their anonymity. In addition, I have included analysis of other documents from fantasy spaces, such as excerpts from powerful authors' blogs, essays by prestigious authors concerning the genre, and so forth. With these multiple methods of analysis in hand, this dissertation seeks to paint a clear picture of a 21<sup>st</sup> century genre space, an active, critical, transmedial space in which participants negotiate the meaning of the genre and thereby maintain their agency and share in the genre space.

## **The Results**

Overall, the results of the study are consistent with what might be expected in such a study, especially in considering the background provided in the previous chapter, in which I defined genre as a transmedial, mutable, associative, recognizable system. Although written media dominates in the fantasy communities under study, that may be because the communities are more explicitly organized around written media (one for readers, the other for writers), but it also seems to indicate the relative prestige of written media in the fantasy genre space, as will be discussed later in this dissertation. Despite written media's dominance, though, other media represents a sizeable amount of the participation in these communities, and indeed represents much of the background chatter, the sort of interactions that might otherwise go unnoticed or be taken for granted by participants. In particular, film, cinema, and television have a large impact on the conceptualization of the fantasy genre; likewise, we see evidence that participants are actively consuming and incorporating visual art, music, and especially video games in their fantasy space activities, even though the contributions of these media are often overlooked and go without being explicitly mentioned, owing to their lesser prestige.

We see also in this corpus evidence of debate and change, not only in explicit acts by participants such as creating genealogies for the genre to trace its change, but also in examining the longest conversations in the corpus. In Community A, three of the five longest threads are concerning the role of women, and of feminism as an ideology or method, in fantasy media. There has been, for some time, concern in fantasy communities about diversity and inclusivity, especially in terms of gender—the 1980s, for instance, saw a strong movement featuring writers such as Mercedes Lackey and Patricia Wrede writing explicitly feminist fantasy in response to the fantasy space being perceived as male-dominated—and this shift in thinking remains a major point of contention in fantasy communities, perhaps as a reflection of the way that gender issues are contentious in general in digitally-mediated spaces (as these two communities are). In addition to the longest threads in Community A concerning changing views of gender in fantasy, the other longest conversations, in both Community A and Community B, concern ranking material, playing with fantasy concepts considered cliché, and the newest things in fantasy (which happen to be largely expressed in terms of large-budget film projects, such as Peter Jackson's adaptations of *The Hobbit* or the HBO *Game of Thrones* adaptation of George RR Martin's *A Song of Fire and Ice* series, as the data was collected largely in 2014). Notably in Community B, the longest threads tend to be ones that invite discussion, rather than the core of the blog, which is reviews of books and audiobooks.

These longest threads also strongly indicate the importance of the transmediality of genre spaces in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is possible that genre has historically been viewed in terms of mediality, but this is clearly no longer the case; although both Community A and Community B are most prominently organized around written media, the most prevalent codes and longest conversations of each belie that organization and demonstrate the participants' readiness to

consider *any* media as reasonable precedent, example, or vessel for the fantasy genre. Moreover, the participants actively discuss the affordances of various media, although not in such technical terminology, and not only debate the value of composing in multimodal and transmedial ways, but also engage each other in these ways, relying heavily on embedded images and videos, links to multimedia sources on the internet, metadiscursive material (such as automatic signatures, avatar images, and usernames), and non-standard written techniques (such as emoticons) to communicate with each other, negotiate social roles, and make arguments concerning the fantasy genre.

Perhaps more clearly seen from a large overview, though, is that the fantasy genre is associative; that is, it is largely defined by intertextual connections that establish a network of boundary markers by which participants are able to identify the fantasy genre space. As one might expect if one of the primary features of genre is its associative nature, the more common

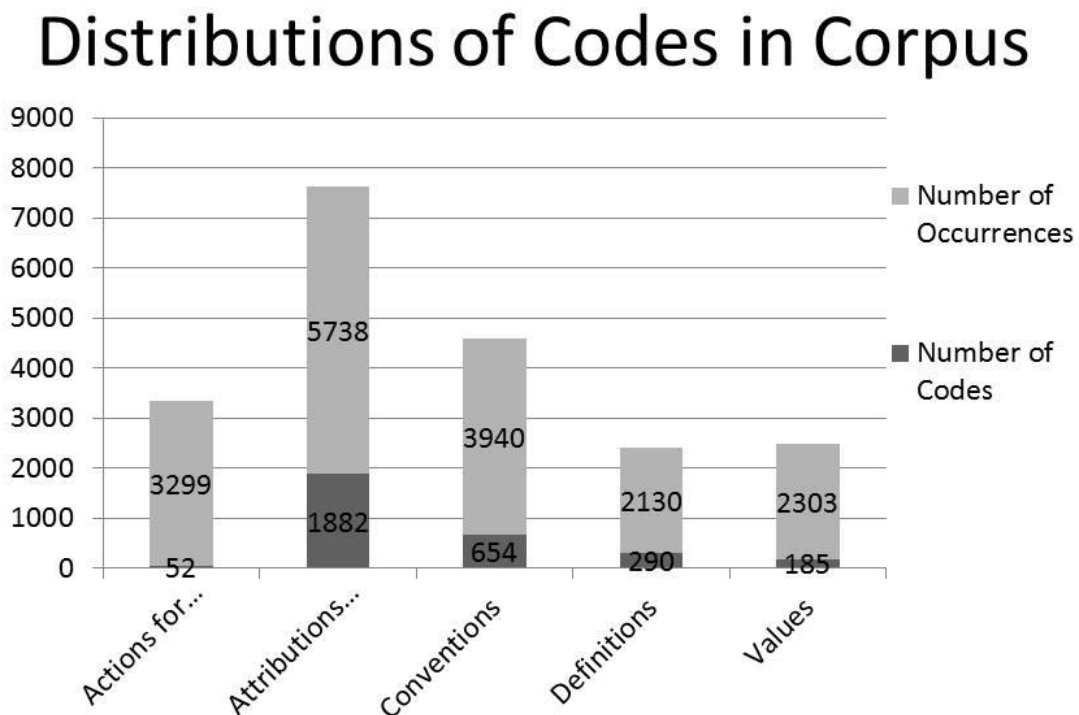


Figure 3 - Distribution of Codes as Occurrences and Discrete Codes

code, both in terms of occurrences and simply the number of different codes in the group, is the attribution of authority. Although, as figure 2 shows, the occurrences of the five classes of codes are distributed more or less as one might expect, with a fairly even spread, the attributions far outpace the other codes. This suggests that it is through these attributions that participants understand their genre's identity and, by extension, their own identities in the genre space. They use these attributions to establish ideal genre texts (including boundary markers of "bad" composition), connect with other participants over appreciation of a text, clarify arguments through examples, and in many other ways. These attributions may be very clear, or they may be very slight; in the case of the former, a very common attribution is also an action for authority in which the participant recommends reading (or watching or otherwise consuming) the text attributed to another participant, either out of expressed interest on the second participant's part or out of a desire to instruct on the first participant's part. In the case of a slight attribution, the attribution may occur as a minor allusion (such as, in a discussion of supernatural creatures, specifying that one does not want vampires to "sparkle"—an oblique but recognizable reference to Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series, a series which is referenced at least 47 times in the corpus, although generally as a negative example).

Overall the most common attributions create a clear picture of how fantasy is generally understood: Tolkien is the most common by far, with Martin following, no doubt owing to the popularity of HBO's *Game of Thrones* series based on his work. What does surprise, from a traditional view of genre, is the heavy attributions to media other than print media. Nevertheless, these attributions are entirely organic to participants in the genre and a major key to the recognition of the genre. These non-print media texts shape the genre boundaries in reflexive ways that define color palettes, appropriate sound environments, shapes, and other multimodal

ways of conveying the genre’s ideologies and identities. And, in the case of *Dungeons & Dragons*, even the systems by which elements in fictional fantasy texts interact, establishing clear and shared rules for these elements.

In any case, these attributions are the most significant way in which members of the community are able to communicate ideas about genre—not through lists of tropes (as community members tend to call conventions), nor through descriptions of form as academics have traditionally done, but through references to these boundary marker texts. As it is at times difficult to identify exactly *which* features of these attributed texts or authors are significant to

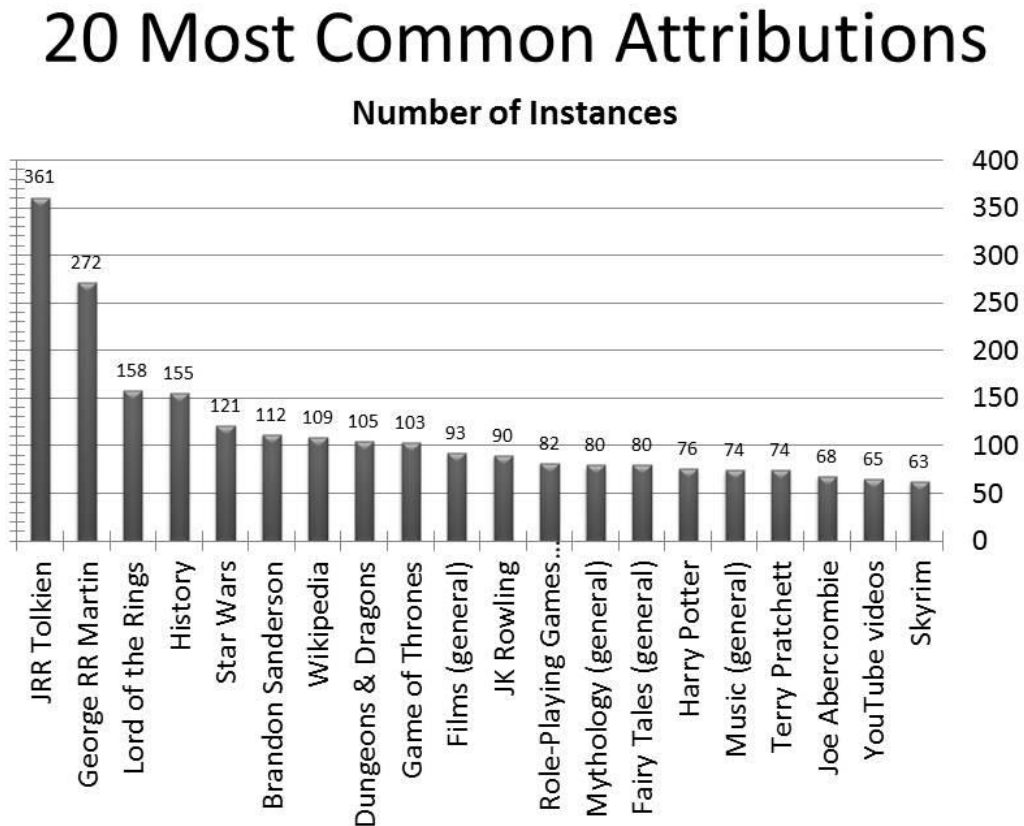


Figure 4 - 20 Most Common Attributions in the Corpus. Note that references to adaptations of significant texts have been listed separately, as attributions are often to the adaptations rather than the originating texts.



the definition, defining genre becomes a messy affair as a result of this associative property. Moreover, through association, like a word association game, there are chains of concepts that lead participants from one idea to the next. It is common, therefore, for a topic to start on one small question and morph, through association, into something larger. Indeed, the longest conversation in the corpus, at 385 posts, does exactly this: the Original Post (OP) is concerned with whether the author's own work should include more female characters, in a very specific and narrow question concerning characters the writer has already planned and developed, and quickly becomes a philosophical debate about the role of feminism in fantasy. Although it is possible to follow these chains of association into values, philosophies, and sub-genres in the fantasy genre space in analysis, the mutability of genre makes these paths difficult to define in any concrete terms.

However, this association is a key feature in the recognizability of the genre space. As already mentioned, a genre does not exist if it is not recognized; it is through these associations that participants identify what is and is not fantasy, and thus what does and does not belong in the delineated fantasy genre space, and also how they establish what sub-genres (as participants call them) texts rightly belong to. However, it is largely through triggering "tropes" that participants recognize these in a given text. Consider, for instance, a provided definition of fantasy: "If it ain't fantastic, it ain't fantasy" (P1613). This definition relies on recognition of the "fantastic"—that is, the impossible and fanciful—as a trigger for the fantasy genre space. In an example of how a participant perceives other people to define fantasy, the participant writes that "they're defining fantasy as 'has magic and/or swords and stuff in it'" (P1207). In this case, the participant is acknowledging that there are certain triggering motifs that will render a text

fantasy: in this case “magic and/or swords and stuff” (and stuff may be read as “other common elements of fantasy”—here again we see the messiness of genre).

It may, however, be more productive here to view this recognizability from the large view of the codings in the corpus. The most commonly appearing convention named in the corpus is magic (197 instances), followed by dragons (175 instances), worldbuilding (172 instances), elves (138 instances), and a medieval setting (136 instances). From these five conventions, apparently the most commonly discussed in these communities, we can build a picture of how fantasy is triggered. Generally, fantasy has been said to be that which is “like Tolkien” (specifically, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and *The Hobbit*); here, we see the elements recognized in Tolkien as “fantasy”: the magic, the dragon (Smaug), the elves, the medievalized setting, and the building of an alternate world<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, one could create a platonic “ideal” fantasy text from these elements: a story in which there are elves in a feudal society fending off a dragon with sorcery, for instance, which would be saturated so fully with fantasy recognition that it could not be told in any other style and be accepted<sup>10</sup>.

Interestingly, the most common 20 convention codes appear more often than the entire remaining 588 codes, which appear an average of 2.8 times each (see Figure 4). This significant drop-off in frequency of these conventions suggests that those conventions listed in Figure 4 as

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<sup>9</sup> Although Tolkien’s Middle Earth is generally understood by critics to represent an mythic period of Earth history, it is not conceived as such by most fans; rather it is seen as “second world” fantasy, in which the author creates a new world from scratch, developing artificial languages (“conlangs”) and cultures and geography to flesh out that world; thus, although Tolkien may not have consciously been worldbuilding, he is perceived as having done so in fantasy spaces. Authorial intent, though often valuable to participants in these communities, holds very little bearing on how texts are perceived in a genre space.

<sup>10</sup> Not, that is, without renaming the elements: a race of lithe aliens in a manorial society fending off an attack by a giant space worm with the use of devices beyond human science’s understanding would function as science fiction. Consider, for instance, the revered place of *Star Wars* in the fantasy genre space, a text whose genre is hotly debated wherever it goes, precisely because of its genre-crossing setting.

significant are, indeed, the ones that shape how participants conceive of the genre space—that is, what markers they use to recognize a text as fantasy and what aspects of fantasy they consider most worth noticing in discussions about fantasy. These results are, however, limited in many ways; it is impossible to tell from this method exactly what is meant by “fantasy setting” when that term occurs (especially as contrasted to the nearly as ambiguous, and more ubiquitous, “medieval setting”). Likewise, this does not offer any insight into what sort of dragons are meant when a participant names dragons as significant, nor elves or otherwise; rather, these data suggest that participants fully expect other participants to recognize what is meant by these terms. There is, therefore, an “ideal form” underneath these data, similar to what Terry Pratchett (one of the authors noted as significant by this study’s findings) has called “the consensus

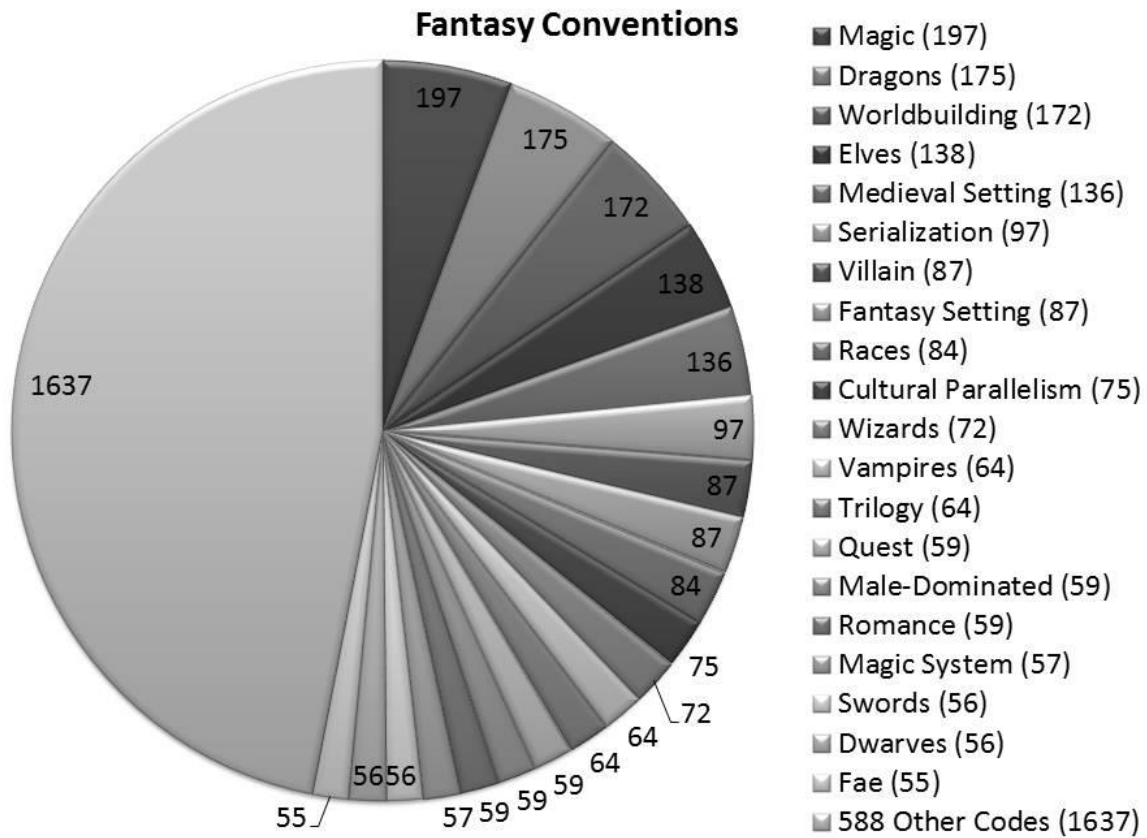


Figure 5 - Distribution of fantasy convention codes. Numbers represent number of instances of each code.

fantasy universe”—one with dragons and elves, apparently. Indeed, here we see a snapshot of Anis Bawarshi’s concept of the “genre function”—this data represents not the occurrences of these conventions in published, recognized fantasy texts, but their occurrences in metadiscursive material *about* the fantasy genre, what it is perceived to be and what it *should* be, as defined by its practitioners, so that these conventions are not only how fantasy is recognized, but also how it is understood and judged.

In addition to negotiating the genre space’s boundaries through references to texts considered markers of those boundaries, participants generally negotiate their own power in the genre space through two primary methods: making these references to other texts (and thus showing familiarity and mastery of the genre) and by highlighting their own roles as participants in the genre space, generally as creators (authors), but occasionally as readers or fans. Part of the prevalence of the self-assertion as creator comes from the way the communities under study are organized, as already mentioned, but also through the prestige of authorship in such communities, whose organization is centered on appreciation of a popular genre. Indeed, the notion of authorship is crucial in these communities, especially in the more interactive space of Community A. This authorship is usually asserted through two ways: either what I am calling the “authorial query” or through an example from the writer’s own work. The latter is fairly straightforward, as the example is offered as a way of providing advice, solidarity, or any other reason a person might bring up a reference to another author or text. However, the authorial query is a complex action in which the writer presents a problem in the writer’s own work (which may be as simple as what to read next, or as complex as how to develop a plot), and in so doing creates the opportunity to explain his or her own work at length and thus show off his or her position as an author in the community. This complex action is the second most common

action for authority in the corpus, with 587 recorded instances in the corpus, although it is likely that there may be more instances than that which were overlooked through accident or deliberately omitted for providing too much personal information.

The third most common action was providing an example from the participant's own work, with 398 references (and the same caveat as before); combined, these actually outnumber the most common action for authority, which was to link to a reference (when attributing to a text outside the conversation) at 886 instances (and again the same caveat). Thus, in these communities, it appears that one's status as *author* is the most important aspect of identity in relating to other members of the community, and this is little surprise; authorship is power, not only to appreciate the fantasy genre space, but also to control it in certain ways. Espen Aarseth, in discussing how texts mediate participation, especially in regard to non-linear texts, defines author in this way, arguing that "to be an 'author' (as opposed to a mere 'writer') means to have configurative power over not merely content but also over a work's genre and form" (164). If, as I have already argued, genre is not an inherent aspect of a text, but rather a reflexive system through which authors and audiences interact with the text, then having configurative power over the work's genre *must* mean to have some configurative power over a work's place among the boundary marker texts and its relationship to other participants and texts in the genre. Thus, it is through these assertions of one's authority and authorship that participants are best able to negotiate their relative positions in the genre space and accrue authority for themselves.

Although technically another action for authority, explicit definitions were coded separately than other actions for authority, in large part because for the purposes of the study definitions were of prime importance, especially definitions of the fantasy genre itself. Not only does this allow the researcher to easily identify and compare these explicit definitions, it also

allows for identifying correlations of other coding families with these definitions in order to find what the most significant markers of fantasy might be. These correlations may be seen in Figure 5, which shows the number of co-occurring codes with three significant definition codes: “Definition: Fantasy”, “Definition: High Fantasy” and Definition: Epic Fantasy”. Although the latter two terms are often seen as interchangeable, many participants do distinguish between high and epic fantasy, as noticeable by the difference in co-occurring codes. The similarity, however, is clear in how often the terms co-occur; however, what this simple correlation cannot show is whether those co-occurrences represent contrasting pairs (epic fantasy is different than high fantasy) or matching pairs (epic fantasy is synonymous with high fantasy). These correlations can only show us that the concepts are closely related in some way, whether oppositional or collaborative. What Figure 5 helps best to illustrate is that, while participants are happy to see fantasy itself as a dynamic, changing space, the prestigious epic and high fantasy sub-genres are generally seen as more static and resistant to change. For instance, although feminism as a value co-occurs often with definitions of fantasy, it never co-occurs with high fantasy or epic fantasy (and therefore was omitted from Figure 5, whose threshold of inclusion requires at least 5 co-occurrences with “definition: fantasy” and at least one co-occurrence with the other two definitions). While Tolkien and magic continue to dominate the image of the genre space in Figure 5, we also see that the comparisons of fantasy to science fiction significantly reduce when the definition is limited to high or epic fantasy, suggesting that these are seen as somehow walled off away from the much-disputed and generally porous boundary between fantasy and science-fiction.

The most subjective of the code families was doubtless the “value” code, which required in most cases an analysis of what values were underlying a participant’s statements. Although

this analysis could be performed on nearly any statement for a productive answer, this code was only used when the participant vocalized a particular value in evaluating a text, defining a genre aspect, providing advice, or otherwise explicitly highlighting that value. Thus, the code was used

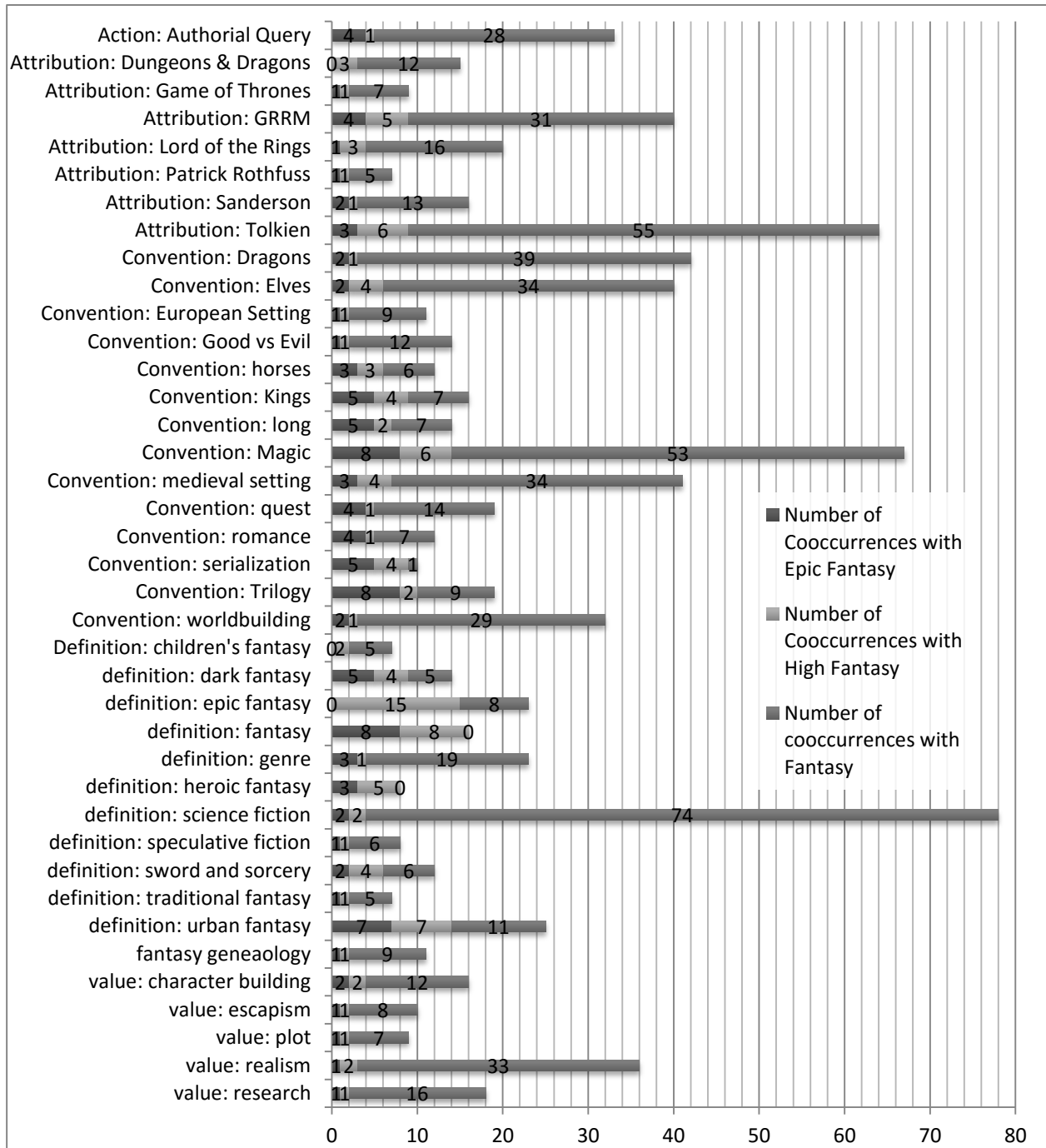


Figure 6 - Codes Cooccurring with Definitions of Fantasy, High Fantasy, and Epic

when participants were, for instance, discussing what they believe qualified a text as “good writing”, and were therefore making claims to the value of a particular textual aspect or practice. In general, the topmost occurring value codes tend to reinforce the most common conventions and, usually, the perceptions the community seems to have of the most common attributions; this consistency seems to indicate a degree of reliability in the study method as well as provide a clearer outline of the fantasy genre space, nebulous as such a thing must, by its nature, be. However, these values actually seem to contradict many of the stated definitions of fantasy, since these values prize research, systematization, and other realist emphases, while many of the definitions of fantasy address the fantastic and unreal nature of the genre.

Relative Frequency of Values by number of instances coded

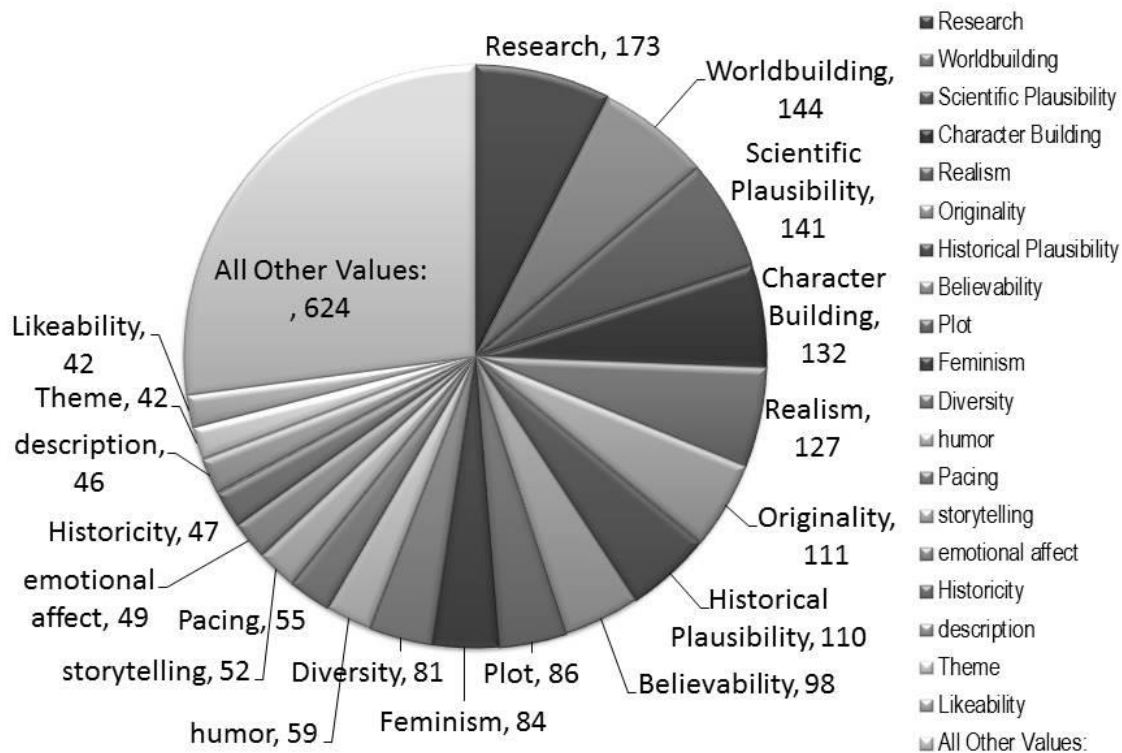


Figure 7 - The 20 Most Common Values in Order of Frequency in the Corpus



There can be no doubt from the results of this study that the most prominent boundary marker of fantasy is the shadow of JRR Tolkien and his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy; likewise, the most significant contemporary boundary marker is without a doubt George RR Martin and the *Game of Thrones* series. However, what is significant here in combining those towering attributions with the values, conventions, and other markers indicated in the study, is how these two authors are perceived; it is not actually these two authors who are shaping the genre, but rather the perception of the value of their work. In this case, it is largely the value of systematization and what is called “worldbuilding” in the genre space—that is, the planning and imaginative construction of a believable, plausible fictional world, often in parallel to real-world cultures and history (as understood by the participants, who are for the most part not versed in more than the most popular of reference materials on these subjects). In part, I argue that this movement toward worldbuilding and away from the “fantastic” in fantasy reflects the fantasy community’s understanding of fantasy as a marginalized genre—in a way, there is a fight for legitimacy here by emphasizing research and systematization. In another, the genre seems to be filling a textual ecological niche once largely filled by science fiction, the combination of research with wonder—in this, it is no surprise then that definitions of science fiction coincide so frequently with definitions of fantasy, since the two often occupy the same shelf in libraries and book stores now and the boundaries between them are so completely blurred by the push for realism in fantasy that they are now primarily distinguished by *setting* (but not entirely, as apparently *Star Wars* is considered acceptable in fantasy spaces, despite being set “in a galaxy far, far away”).

Regardless of Tolkien’s actual intention and method in writing the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and *The Hobbit* (a subject that other scholars have and will cover in detail), the reality

represented by this study is that now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Tolkien is seen by those who would emulate him in writing fantasy as the founder of a genre, the creator of invented languages (conlangs), the builder of a fictional non-earth world (Middle Earth), the maker of maps, and the progenitor of the races used most prominently in 21<sup>st</sup> century fantasy: dragons and elves.

This study provides one map of one genre space, one that is deeply concerned with its own position in the greater ecology of popular media and its own prestige, and one that has very clear and undisputed boundary markers along with all the lesser, debatable markers. It is my intention that this snapshot will help illumine the ways that other genres construct their webs of boundary markers, and how other genres understand their own heritage and purpose. It is also clear from this study how a given author function (here, for instance, Tolkien) is a sub-function of the genre function (here, fantasy). Tolkien in the fantasy genre space is not the same function as Tolkien in the academic fantasy genre space, and indeed the historical Tolkien might not even recognize himself in the fantasy genre space Tolkien; nevertheless, this is this function that serves as the most significant genre marker in fantasy, a point in the genre space from which debates about authority and community values may be launched.

In the forthcoming chapters, I will explore more detailed analysis of certain theoretical implications in genre in general and fantasy in specific, such as how authority is negotiated in a genre space and how an authority system functions as its own set of rules by which participants make decisions; I will then suggest some practical applications of the definitions and understandings developed in this dissertation, such as how to teach genre using the model of an active genre space and the definition of genre as a transmedial, mutable, associative, recognized system and how this concept remediates the role of the author in a genre or what “race” means in a fantasy space thus described.

#### **4.0 Theoretical Implications and Extensions**

The model of genre as a *genre space*, implied in the definition of genre as a transmedial, mutable, associative, recognized system, leads to many possible implications and extensions. It is not practical to explore all possible implications in this study; however, what follows in this section are five of the more significant ones: that prestige is not power, and both are significant in negotiations of authority; that transmediality in a genre space means that new media can influence old media as much as the generally accepted other way around; that the genre space is governed much like a game space and thus should be considered from a ludic, ergodic perspective; that there are background media with significant power but low prestige in a genre space; and that genres, especially those such as fantasy or the Western, control perceptions of time as much as they control perceptions of texts, authors, and audiences.

## 4.1 Prestige Is Not Always Power

Among this study's findings and implications, perhaps the most significant are that genre is transmedial and that prestige is not the same as power. These two findings play out together, as they are intrinsically linked; often prestige is linked to notions about media, and so by looking at the transmediality of the fantasy genre it is possible to see the distinction between prestige and power.

### Definitions

I am defining *prestige* as admiration and perceived desirability in the genre space, while *power* is the real influence a text or participant has over texts or other participants in the genre space. As several scholars have pointed out, studying genre and the communities that form associated with genres requires inquiry into the networks of power that form the structure of these communities and genres. There are, of course, two levels of power and prestige at play in this study's data set: there is the negotiation of power and prestige in the communities themselves, as members relate to each other; and there is the negotiation of power and prestige within the genre, which often involves members taking critical stances and partisan sides in the same ways that academic spaces must negotiate what texts to teach as "canon"—indeed, the question of "canon" is a persistent one in fan discourse, although the term certainly means something different in fan spaces (not a collection of recommended reading, although this is relevant in fan spaces, but rather as a discussion of what texts are relevant in a discussion of a particular fandom).

### Prestige and Power within the Community

Although the study is primarily interested in the status of the fantasy genre itself as a larger entity, the networks of authority at the discourse level are unavoidable and should be

recognized. Van Dijk argues, “Power is a key notion in the study of group relations in society. If any feature of context and society at large impinges on text and talk (and vice versa), it is power” (7). Thus, it is necessary to recognize that the most powerful elements guiding the conversations collected here are twofold: the conventions of the communities themselves (both stated and tacit), and the expressed interest in *fantasy* as the subject area (broadly defined by both communities). Van Dijk then distinguishes between coercive and mental power, and defines power *resources*, the elements that allow authorities to establish their power over others. In these cases, the strongest resource is naturally administrative powers by the moderators and administrators, which allow them exclusively to move, delete, and lock threads or to ban members. In many of the collected conversations, this power comes into play; most of the discussions about gender roles result in the thread being locked, and often one or more member of the conversation is given some sort of official sanction. These particular examples, coded as *Action for Authority: Moderation*, appear about 40 times in Community A<sup>11</sup>. Most of the participants in Community A are fairly self-policing, as these 40 examples show. Typically, these codings represent when a thread is shut down for incivility, when a thread is deemed redundant or improperly sorted, or a reminder about the forum’s posted rules. It is not only moderators who participate in these, although only moderators have the official power to close a thread, delete another user’s words or posts, or move a thread to another space in the forum.

In these ways, users explicitly negotiate power with each other, judging each other’s writing according to explicitly written rules of the space; however, there are also other ways the space is regulated, and that’s largely through concepts of *what fantasy means*. Community A’s

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<sup>11</sup> Owing to the different natures of Community A and Community B, certain actions and community conventions exist only in one or the other. Community A is a tightly moderated but large and interactive community, while Community B often does not involve much interaction at all in any given item.

rules explicitly state, as a moderator points out in one discussion, “that modern politics is a banned subject, except as it relates strictly to fantasy storytelling, and nobody should have any expectations about changing that policy” [P626]. Here, although the moderator is, by reminding the community of the rule, exercising coercive power (in a looser sense, but nevertheless power enforced by obvious, direct means), there is also mental power at play. The assumption underneath the moderator’s reminder is this: *we all know what fantasy is, so I don’t have to define that part of the rule*. And indeed, the community’s structure and self-presentation makes it clear what fantasy means to the community: the graphics of the forum include a dragon and a crystal ball, the colors are in cool blues and purples, the members are given titles according to their participation in the community that are taken from well-known fantasy texts, and in order to join the forum users must prove that they are human not by a typical Captcha style test, but by answering a question about JRR Tolkien that—it is assumed—anyone familiar with fantasy (by the community’s tacit definitions) should be able to answer.

In a similar fashion, the community’s self-structuring also allows for an explicit form of prestige: users’ profile information, much of which is displayed beside every post they make, includes not only their self-representation as an avatar picture, but also a rank based on their number of posts and “thanks” from other users (similar to a “like” on Facebook or a “heart” on Twitter). Thus, users can gain “prestige” by participating more frequently and actively in the community; indeed, many sections of the forum are hidden to users who have not gained significant recognition in this way. But this is a fairly superficial level of prestige, although it likely correlates to more intrinsic ways of acquiring and maintaining prestige in the community for individual users.

Actual prestige is gained through actions such as research, (constructive) criticism, familiarity with other prestigious entities (such as having met a famous author), and publication. Some of these actions are fiercely debated, such as whether self-publishing or traditional publishing is more prestigious, while others are accepted without significant discussion as important, such as research. There is, in fact, an entire board in the forum for “research”, which the forum defines in the board description as “questions about history, mythology, customs and other real world subjects”. There is, in this particular board, a practice of users presenting themselves as “experts” on a subject by posting a thread called “Ask me about [subject].” This is a clear way of establishing prestige by doing service to the community; it is also an indicator of what subjects users anticipate fantasy writers needing “research” on—often ancient cultures and military history and technology.

The most common action for authority, though, is linking to a reference, which occurs at least 886 times in the corpus, or at a rate of over 50% throughout the corpus<sup>12</sup>. In fact, this is the most common individual code of all in the study, indicating that (as with much discourse on the internet) the best way to gain authority in the community is to provide supporting evidence in the form of links to articles, sites, and resources outside of the discussion itself. This is, of course, =not unlike academic practice of using citations to establish authority as a rhetorical move, but the practice of linking allows for a more direct and informal way of doing so, while also allowing for instances of humor and other rhetorical redirections (such as links that appear to direct to a resource, but in fact link to a humorous image as commentary on the conversation).

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<sup>12</sup> I say “at least” because many actions for authority were uncoded beyond “action for authority”, owing to their ambiguous nature or not falling clearly into a pattern at the time of coding. Many of these may, in fact, fit into other categories, so these numbers must be taken as the qualitative and somewhat subjective descriptions that they are.

The next most common actions for authority are those that advertise to other community members that the user is him- or herself a writer, which clearly affords the most prestige in both these communities (more so than being an artist, musician, or other participant in media production). These actions are giving examples from one's own work (398 instances, 24%) and what I am calling the "authorial query" (587 instances, 35%). The "authorial query" is a complicated, but common (not only in these communities), action for authority in which a person effectively displays their work and asserts its value and originality by asking a question about it specifically, which requires a summary and description that effects the display. Consider the following example:

I'm nearing a point in my current WIP ["work in progress"] where I have a decision to make. I can either continue chronologically as characters mature at a natural rate (2 characters are adolescent, 1 is a very young adult... 5 total POVs ["points of view"]) or I can skip ahead, advancing time to a point where those POVs are into adulthood.[...]  
I'm merely curious if you as a reader have a preference for either scenario or if this doesn't matter to you.  
I've read books where both scenarios work & have no preference myself.  
Which, if any, do you prefer? [P249]

The key is that the author is drawing attention to him- or herself in such a move. The question, as above, is usually fairly superficial, although of course to the author it seems like a significant block in the writing process—it may be a question about how to describe a character, about a choice in the plot, or even if something is "interesting enough" to be a novel or short story. The complexity of this rhetorical move is in the simultaneous presentation of the self as a novice and as "stuck" while displaying one's authorial prowess with what one has already achieved or planned. Part of the value of the move is the refusal to consider the problem as part of a larger system of rhetorical decisions, but rather treating the particular query as new and unique to the writer's situation; however, as I will discuss below, the response belies this notion



by typically involving an example from a respondent's own work or references to other media that respondents deem relevant to the author's situation.

I am not saying that the authors of authorial queries are consciously flaunting their work. Rather, they are operating in an accepted way to gain prestige while apparently humbling themselves. Indeed, Community A has created space with a dedicated board to "Writing Questions" in which this rhetorical move is encouraged. The authors in these cases no doubt are genuinely feeling stuck and genuinely want help; but in the process, they are also able to establish their position in the community as not only consumers of the fantasy genre (tacitly indicated by membership, as described above), but as active participants in shaping the genre itself as members of its most prestigious class: authors of fantasy novels.

### **Prestige and Power in the Fantasy Genre**

In fact, it is the *responses* to these authorial queries that often indicate most reliably the power and prestige structures underpinning the genre space. At the most surface level, it is possible to glimpse the authority structures of the genre simply by noting the most common attributions of authority in the corpus, between both communities. It is, of course, no surprise (especially given the entrance exam for Community A!) that the most common attribution is to JRR Tolkien; with 361 references, Tolkien comes up throughout the corpus with a 22% frequency (see Table 1). Likewise, it is little surprise that the next most common attribution is to George RR Martin, the author of the *A Song of Ice and Fire* series on which the HBO television show *Game of Thrones* is based, given the popularity of the show (and consequently the books). Moreover, the next position is by association also occupied by Tolkien, but here *Lord of the Rings* was coded separately from Tolkien in cases where it was clear that the attribution was only to various *adaptations* rather than to Tolkien's

Attribution	#	%
JRR Tolkien	361	22%
George RR Martin	272	16%
<i>Lord of the Rings</i>	158	10%
History (generalized)	155	9%
<i>Star Wars</i>	121	7%
Brandon Sanderson	112	7%
Wikipedia	109	7%
<i>Dungeons &amp; Dragons</i>	105	6%
<i>Game of Thrones</i>	103	6%
Films (generalized)	93	6%

Figure 8 - Most common attributions with number of instances and frequency in corpus (1655 documents).

work itself or to himself as a historical figure in fantasy. In the same way, *Game of Thrones* was coded separately when attributions treated the show as its own entity, separate from Martin’s role as author. However, most interesting is the position of the other frequent attributions: history, *Star Wars*, Wikipedia, *Dungeons & Dragons*, and uncategorized “films”—the last of which was used to code any instance in which participants referenced films in general rather than to any specific film (which would have been coded according to title or series, as with *Star Wars*).

Although these surface-level numbers fail to show any clear distinction between prestige and

power, they do show a clear pattern of authority in the genre space: authority is transmedial, even if the most prestige is generally afforded to the novel and its authors. As the most common attributions (even accounting for possible coding errors, these rank so high that they sit comfortably in their ranks), these are clearly authoritative entities in the fantasy space, whether by power, prestige, or a mix of the two. Likewise, it shows that even though often the adaptations of a written work are more popular than the written work, the attribution generally is afforded to the source material before the adaptation—likely an action on the part of the participants in these communities to show their familiarity with the key texts in the genre space, but also likely a symptom of the communities’ valuing of “originality”. At the very least, the

figures in Table 1 establish that the fantasy genre is firmly transmedial, in contradiction to many academic concepts of genre.

In order to establish where the distinction between power and prestige lies, I classified each attribution of authority into one of six categories by media: literature, films, games, history, music/art/etc, and other. Literature includes attributions to any traditional print media: novels, short stories, and so forth. Films and games are fairly obvious; history are attributions to historical figures, events, or periods; music/art/etc is a catch-all category for media not included in the previous categories that still can be considered “fantasy,” including the frequent references to metal music or cover art as important to the construction of the fantasy community. The final category, other, contains attributions to reference material that does not fit into any traditional definition of “art”, even a transmedial one, nor is exclusive to fantasy. This includes sources such as reference websites such as Wikipedia, TV Tropes, or to dictionaries, news organizations, and

so forth. Having categorized all the attributions into these six broad categories, I then correlated the categories to instances of the formerly discussed “authorial query” or the somewhat less common “advice” action for authority<sup>13</sup>. I only included attributions that appear in the same conversation as the authorial query or advice; as the authorial query and advice codes only appear in Community A, this specific analysis is limited only to that community; Community B’s structure of discourse simply does not allow this form of discussion. However, such a correlation should indicate what texts actually possess *power* in the fantasy space, since these are

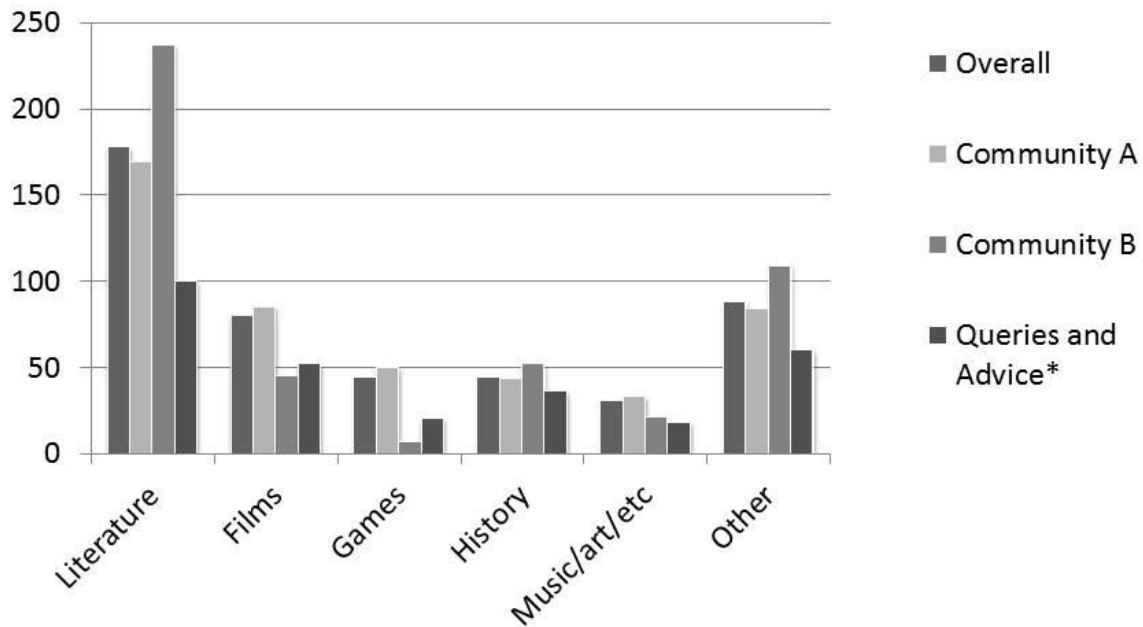
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<sup>13</sup> “advice” was coded when the advice was not clearly prompted by another participant’s question, but rather given in response to a discussion; as such, it is not nearly as common, but still quite significant.

the texts most commonly referred to when participants are attempting to help themselves and each other become *better writers*. That is, these are the media and texts that are most influencing the generation of new fantasy texts, since they are being used as exemplars.

When the codes are thus classified and correlated, the data now show that films are disproportionately referenced in spaces where one would expect almost exclusively literary references (see Figure 1). Indeed, although there is a significant difference in the frequency of references to films (and games) between the two communities (owing largely to the structure of

## Instances of Codings per 100 documents



\*Note that the queries and advice column is calculated per instance of “Authorial Query” or “advice” coding, not per document

Figure 9 - Attributions of Authority classified by media and presented as rate of instances per 100 documents or instances of Authorial Query/Advice

the discussions in Community B, which focus mostly on criticism of written literature), the rates balance out and stabilize when only correlated to authorial queries and advice. Since attributions to films show up about half as often as those to literature in the presence of authorial queries or advice, this data indicates that films are actually quite significant in the formation of written conventions for developing writers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, at the very least in a genre space organized around a popular, commercial genre such as fantasy. This is *power*, not prestige; this is direct influence (at Van Dijk’s “mental” level) over the shaping of the fantasy genre space, wielded by a less prestigious media. Moreover, whatever defines fantasy—and by extension, genre in the popular consciousness—is not limited by media or mode, since the data shows that participants have no trouble translating conventions and methods across modalities and media.

In fact, in this correlation, the rate of attributions to authors and written media actually *decreases*, contrary to what one would expect when advice about writing is given or sought; this relationship is where the distinction between prestige and power becomes most clear. Although in discussion of fantasy, attributions to authors and written media clearly dominate the field, occurring at a rate of 178 times per 100 documents across both communities, when participants in the communities are working out the actual *mechanics* of generating fantasy texts, they turn to film over half as often as they turn to literature: an average of 52 times per 100 queries, as compared to literature’s 100 times.

Additionally, although the epic fantasy trilogy is certainly the most *prestigious* form of fantasy, definitions of epic fantasy (95 instances) are statistically equivalent to attributions to films (93 instances), and only slightly more common than attributions to RPGs (82 instances), which represent only a segment of games (albeit the most significant segment in the fantasy

genre space, as they include *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Skyrim*, both of which are frequently attributed).

The authority network is not limited to proscribing the power of prestigious texts as regards fantasy texts themselves, but also the texts that are attributed outside fantasy as part of the highly valued practice of “research” (as defined by the fantasy community, which is far looser than academia would define it). Research as an action for authority appears no less than 275 times, while indications of research as a value in fantasy (as exhibited in evaluating texts or members of the community) appear at least 173 times, which is the highest occurrence of any statement of value. But the authorities appealed to, the research sources that have the most power, are not academic ones. Although academic texts appear with some regularity, including members of the community using their academic credentials to secure texts through JSTOR and other databases for other members to use in research, the most commonly referenced authorities are actually Wikipedia (for factual or academic matters) and TV Tropes<sup>14</sup> (for literary and narrative matters). Participants in the study attributed to academic training 60 times throughout the corpus, while they referred to Wikipedia 109 times and TV tropes 52 times<sup>15</sup>. This suggests that, although academic training is of some value in the genre space, this is a space that values popular scholarship more than academic scholarship—the prestige of the ivory tower (itself a distinctly fantasy-sounding epithet) is somewhat weaker than the power of the internet’s

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<sup>14</sup> TV Tropes (tvtropes.org) describes itself as “The All-Devouring Pop-Culture Wiki”; it is an extensive repository of crowd-sourced analysis of texts and conventions, just as Wikipedia is a repository of crowd-sourced encyclopedic information.

<sup>15</sup> It is, in fact, possible that there are even *more* references to Wikipedia and TV Tropes, as not every link was followed in the process of coding; many links were broken—since only completed conversations were collected—and links were generally only investigated when they were significant to understanding the meaning of the conversation. It is accepted practice in both communities to use a link to a definition, frequently from one of these two websites, when using a term in a specialized way or that might be unfamiliar to the audience.



crowdsourcing. Likewise, while Joseph Campbell’s work on epics often comes up, it is often understood through Wikipedia links to explain it.

On the other hand, although many users have defined fantasy as being entirely fantastic—they have said “There are no rules for fantasy” (P1613), that fantasy is “exotic, mysterious, enthralling and magical” (P1339), that “Fantasy is an abstraction” (P827), and that “realism is a very hard thing to find in any fantasy book” (P809)—the most commonly coded *value*<sup>16</sup> was that of *research* (173 instances). Moreover, one of the more common actions for authority was a *display of research* (275 instances). Although worldbuilding<sup>17</sup> takes the second most common value (144 instances), scientific plausibility takes a close third at 141 instances, making worldbuilding and scientific plausibility basically equal in importance in fantasy spaces. Thus, what is *privileged* in this space is imagination and originality, but what is actually *valued*, what has real *power*, is research, realism, and believability. This seems contradictory on the surface, but in fact worldbuilding is just one way of establishing that realism and believability. *Research* in these spaces, as already mentioned, is broadly defined, but nevertheless remains a significant way to gain authority in the fantasy space, encompassing as it does a wide knowledge of world cultures, historical minutiae, and any other discipline applicable to worldbuilding or, in the case of urban fantasy especially, establishing believable characters, settings, and scenarios, but it may also include consuming other texts in the genre and mastering gaming systems as inspiration.

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<sup>16</sup> The “value” code was used to indicate any place where participants made explicit or strongly implicit statements of what is *important* in *good* fantasy.

<sup>17</sup> Worldbuilding is the practice, in speculative fiction, of developing details about the fictional world, including creating “conlangs” (created languages), drawing maps, designing magic systems, writing fictional histories, and so forth. There is, in fact, an entire board in Community A dedicated to worldbuilding, and it often comes up in both communities as an important feature of the experience of fantasy texts.

These numbers, which represent a metadiscursive level of analysis of fantasy (indeed, it is an analysis of discussions *about* fantasy), provide a macro view that suggests that what is prestigious is not always what is most powerful in the fantasy space, and by extension in the construction of genres. However, they don't really distinguish between power and prestige as clearly as one might like. To that end, I provide the following case studies.

### **Case #1: Short Stories and Novels (P776)**

The first case concerns a peculiar notion that floats around in the communities that one should “practice” with short stories before even attempting the more prestigious novel or trilogy. While the idea usually comes up as a suggestion in response to another authorial query, in one conversation the OP (Original Post or author of the original post) asks “Wouldn't you want to make a short story to see if you have the right stuff?” The OP acknowledges that novels and short stories are different structurally, but nevertheless has picked up this notion from other interactions in the genre space, and it proves to be a controversial one when submitted for open discussion. Many of the respondents insist that novels and short stories are so different that skill in one does not necessarily contribute to the other: “Short stories aren't necessarily easier the [sic] produce than novels,” one member responds; “Just because a person can write a good short story doesn't mean they can write a good novel,” another answers; and another says, “They're two different skill sets, there's less of a market for short stories, they don't pay (whereas a novel might), and you'd be giving your idea away.” There are a lot of tangled up values in this last response, but it certainly speaks to the higher prestige of the novel—*marketability* is here used as a marker of value, as well as a concern for the sanctity of “ideas” (that is, originality).

However, other participants in the conversation see intrinsic value in the practice: “One thing we're leaving out is that a short story is a precision test of our ability to find and follow an

idea... you can learn much faster—at some things—starting with short stories,” one particularly tempered argument goes; more briefly, another member says “Short stories give you feedback faster, and doesn’t [sic] take as long to finish. It’s also easier to get feedback if the commitment of time isn’t that great.”

Indeed, although most participants in the conversation actually advise that there is only marginal value to the practice, the notion of starting with short stories comes up *repeatedly* in the data set, suggesting that, like Milton starting with pastoral poetry before writing *Paradise Lost*, these aspiring writers want to do things “right”, and feel that they must build up to the prestige of the epic fantasy trilogy.

## **Case #2: Commercial and Literary Fantasy (P19)**

In a clearer illustration of the way prestige is constructed in fantasy spaces, a participant in Community B expresses disdain for “commercial” fantasy, not unlike the disdain for fantasy itself that is often expressed in more realist, “literary” genres. She writes in the first paragraph of her review:

Okay, call me clueless, but I [sic] when I picked up *Ever After High: The Storybook of Legends* I had no idea it was a tie-in to a line of popular dolls, diaries and YouTube Webisodes produced by Mattel. All I knew was that it was a children’s story written by Shannon Hale and I happen to really like Shannon Hale’s children’s stories. I soon found out the truth and was disgruntled that I was sucked into Mattel’s merchandising scheme, but I must admit that Mattel made a brilliant move by asking a Newbery Award winning author to write their stories. Shannon Hale soon appeased me. *The Storybook of Legends* is a cute little tale with endearing characters that are sure to go over well with the target audience. Thinking about it from a mother’s perspective, I’d rather my girls play with fairytale character dolls than Barbies. At least they’re learning real literature!

This paragraph exhibits a complex interplay of varying kinds of prestige: the author gives credence to the Newbery Award as an indicator of quality; she assumes that readers should be aware of the context of what they read (“Call me clueless, but...”); she apparently believes that

material produced for a commercial franchise is sub-par as a mere “merchandising scheme” rather than “real literature”; and finally, she places fairy tales (a common attribution in the corpus) as “real literature”, above commercialized, branded toys. Perhaps most significantly, because of the dissonance between the Newbery Award-winning author’s status and the text’s place in a commercial franchise, the writer here feels *disgruntled*; she actually feels tricked into reading the text by the involvement of a respected author.

Also tellingly, she describes fairy tales as “real literature” here—a claim that most literary scholars might rankle at because of their own assumptions about prestige in their own genre spaces<sup>18</sup>. However, this is a fantasy fan writing for other fantasy fans, and so, in this genre space, fairy tales have high prestige as recognized progenitors of the genre that governs the space. Thus, the writer can be certain that her assertion that fairy tales are educational and worthwhile for children to engage with is a claim that will go unchallenged, accepted as being in accordance with established hierarchies of prestige. It is not the highest prestige, but it is considered decent, in contrast to the popular culture and mass-consumerism that the writer describes in a way that suggests she sees them as degrading and vapid: the “Barbies” (also made by Mattel) and the “merchandising scheme”.

All of these prestige markers are present in the *context* of the text, the metatextual level, at which we know *about* the book but have not read it. The writer of this post then goes on to praise the novel, which apparently bears few enough marks of the qualities she has assigned to mass media, but rather it resembles the Young Adult (hereafter: YA) novels that, while not as prestigious as epic trilogies, nevertheless are gaining in respect in the fantasy genre space. That

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<sup>18</sup> Folklorists would also disagree with this writer’s claim that fairy tales are “real literature”, but as a matter of technical definition rather than of prestige; for them, literature is that which is composed as writing and has clear authorship, while fairy tales are a particular kind of folktale type that typically originates as oral tradition.

is, the novel resembles those novels that are seen as “original” and not commercial. What this demonstrates is that prestige is not an *inherent* quality of the text, nor a marker of actual technical skill or artistry in the creation of the text, but a function of its position in the genre space and associated communities. What is prestigious in one genre space, then, is considered near worthless in another, and consumers of media rely on genre markers to discern which texts to consume based on prestige markers; if the writer of this post had correctly read *all* of those markers, she might not have read the novel at all, but in this case was enticed to read the book on the merits of *other* markers of prestige, i.e. the award-winning status of the author.

### **Case #3: Explicit Negotiation of Power and Prestige (P552)**

While the previous case contains plenty of fairly clear rhetorical moves concerning prestige and the writer’s place in the network relative to the book she is reviewing, the post has no comments attached to it, so it is hard to see how power and prestige are actively negotiated in a case such as that; moreover, the post is not hidden behind a username in a forum, but posted as a polished blog for public consumption, so one can expect that the post is somewhat more rehearsed in form and content than might be desired for analyzing the active negotiation of power and prestige. To this end, I present a third case, this one from Community A, which is one of the longest discussions I collected between both communities (143 posts).

In this thread, the OP writes:

Do you have to be a fantasy reader to be a fantasy writer?  
Another member drop-kicked this new question into my head. The member did not ask the question, but did ask me what books I have read. I have not read a lot of fantasy books lately and wonder if you have to be a fantasy reader to be a fantasy writer? I do read quite a bit but mostly memoirs and other non fiction. This is not to say I have never read fantasy... I have been an avid reader since I could read but although I believe I have a good story, I having [sic] those nasty little doubts against!

The OP is here self-conscious about their reading habits, that they aren't reading enough in the genre to participate fully in the genre space in an authoritative way (as a writer). At stake is their identity and membership in the community, so this necessarily takes a sort of confessional stance, along with a considerably defensive structure—attribution to another member of the community, insistence on having had suitable exposure in the past, and a defense of non-fiction as reading material.

Surprisingly, the length of the discussion is overwhelmingly supportive of the OP—surprising not only to the researcher but also to the participants in the conversation. One participant responds “usually when this question gets asked, the answer is a resounding ‘yes’ and I’m a lone naysayer.” However, this participant is far from alone in this conversation. The first response opens with “there’s no rule that says you do”, and the second response, despite saying that “I think you should always read stuff in your genre,” concludes that “Reading outside your genre is important too.” The third provides, in a typical move for authority, an example in a published writer: “There are exceptions. I’m pretty sure Micheal [sic] Sullivan has mentioned that, when he started writing his books, he hadn’t/wasn’t reading much fantasy.”

The OP is grateful for the support, but then continues to defend their position in the community: “As much as I hate saying this, I got a lot of inspiration from watching television... All the shows I watch are sci-fi fantasy or horror.” Here, we see acute embarrassment at having consumed media that, as previously discussed in this chapter, is *powerful* by merit of having strong influence on how people in the fantasy genre space conceive of fantasy. This power is exhibited in the OP’s plight; the OP self-identifies as a fantasy writer, but not a fantasy reader, but enjoys fantasy media in *other* forms than writing. This, however, the OP feels is not

sufficient to completely bolster one's credentials as a fantasy writer and requires validation from the community.

However, as the thread continues, many other participants emerge as being in a similar situation as the OP, suggesting that the media diet that was suspect for not having enough prestigious texts is actually quite *common*—there is power in texts with low prestige but high popularity and accessibility. One participant responds to the conversation, saying “I read very few fantasy books. Most of my knowledge of fantasy comes from Games and Movies.” Another replies, saying “I’m guilty of this, and I’ve also wondered whether it’s a good or bad thing. I always *mean* to read more fantasy, but other books—non fiction stuff about mythology, folklore, history, sagas, fairy tales etc.—keep piling on top of them and get read first[...] I’m glad I’m not the only one who’s had pangs of guilt over this.”

It seems strange that a participant should have “pangs of guilt” over consuming non-print media and reading what, as discussed above, is prestigious as *research*. Just as the OP felt it necessary to clarify that they were, in fact, *reading*, just not in fantasy, so also does this reply require the same clarification. However, the exchange also exposes that there is strong power in “Games and Movies”—so strong that the media must be capitalized as a proper noun, apparently. Moreover, other participants defend the use of games and movies as sources in the genre space, although most still give authority to the prestige of reading.

This discussion, however, quickly changes into a discussion about the nature and value of *originality*, because one of the participants responds that while they want to read R.A.

Salvatore’s books,

“i [sic] refuse to crack open the first book just yet. My world is still so young and fresh and revolutionary in my mind, i don’t want to corrupt its originality with other (albeit awesome and well constructed) ideas. I read lots of fiction, but very little fantasy fiction, and will not until I’ve explored my world so

thoroughly that ill be able to take an idea in my hands and turn it over before carefully placing wherever i see fit. I don't want images and "easy answers" to take the place of my originality.

This ignites a very long discourse concerning the nature and value of originality, creativity, and genre that is outside the original question of reading fantasy in order to write it, which I will not summarize here. Suffice to say that this notion of reading seemingly contaminating originality is about as common as the notion that an author must start small and build her way to prestigious novel-writing; floating around in the genre space, but not generally approved of by prestigious members.

However, the most striking thing for the purposes of this discussion about the above thread is the confessional tone with which participants admit that their *primary* inspiration to write fantasy comes from texts outside the most prestigious written forms of fantasy, almost as if the participants are afraid for their reputation admitting it in even a relatively safe space (as users choose their usernames and avatars, and can edit their own posts and so forth). Moreover, even the discussion of creativity becomes necessarily transmedial, or perhaps even metamedial, existing outside the exigencies of actual media and concerning a generative thought process that could apply to any type of fantasy text (it is explicitly fantasy, involving a wizard and a cave for an example), although the written media is generally assumed.

## **Conclusions**

In this chapter, I have described, through two levels of analysis of my data set, how prestige and power function as separate concepts in a genre space. In fantasy, the epic trilogy of novels, in imitation of J.R.R. Tolkien, is the height of prestige, to which many members of the communities aspire, but other narrative media occupy stronger places of power in the genre space, especially film. That which is powerful inspires participants in the space and contributes



to their collective notions of what fantasy *means* and where the fantasy genre space's boundaries lie; that which is prestigious is held in awe by participants in the space and given many attributions, even if it is not that which is most popularly consumed nor that which establishes the norms of the genre space.

Or, to put the hypothetical in more vivid terms, Tolkien holds the most prestige in the fantasy space—and indeed, Tolkienesque “races” dominate definitions of fantasy—but most of the participants in the space are familiar with the Tolkienesque motifs not through Tolkien himself, but through films such as Peter Jackson's adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, or through interpretations of Tolkien's style in games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* or the *Elder Scrolls* series of RPGs. Thus, it is not actually Tolkien's concept of an “elf” that participants generally call to mind when they say “elf”, but rather some filtration of elves through another, less prestigious, but more powerful by merit of accessibility, text or texts<sup>19</sup>. That is, while power and prestige *may* intersect, and often do, they are not directly linked. Rather, power and prestige are separate concepts that make the web of authority in a genre space more complicated to map than most rhetorical analysis of power has succeeded in mapping so far.

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<sup>19</sup> The fact that the elves are primarily not actually Tolkien's elves is evidenced by the popularity of the term “drow” for “dark elves”—although many participants are quick to point out that “dark elves” exist in folklore, the term “drow” is almost exclusive to the *Dungeons & Dragons* properties and their derivatives, such as the work of R.A. Salvatore.

## 4.2 New Media Enters Old

Rhetoric and Composition and its related fields have generally accepted that genre is, as Miller and others have argued, a typified response to a rhetorical situation. It is, of course, obvious that genres change over time as well; in discussions of historical genres, such as the Gothic in literature (often seen as a predecessor to both modern fantasy and horror), a genre may be strictly limited to a particular time period, not just a list of attributes or conventions. In these cases, there is an assumption (though these theorists may not be able to articulate such an assumption) that the recurring rhetorical situations that occasioned the genre under scrutiny simply *cannot* recur in any but the cited (and contested) time period, as they are historically bound.

But, as Miller and Shepherd note, "there's something problematic about the very idea of genre change. Genre change problematizes precisely what makes genre generic," because of genre for them is defined "as a recurring, typified, reproducible, 'stabilized enough' (Schryer 1993: 204) symbolic action" that "requires it to resist change" (264). Indeed, this is what makes Campbell and Jamieson's definition of genre as "a constellation of elements" so appealing; such a constellation might be timeless, and therefore require very little context--or it may be entirely time bound, as some of the key elements in the constellation may be restricted to a particular rhetorical moment (21).

Thus, in addition to cataloguing or debating what elements may appear in the constellation of a genre such as fantasy (and along with that, discussing the arrangement of those elements into different subgenres), it is a common move in both academic and popular discussions to create taxonomies or genealogies of genres. In academic world, these often appear as analyses of a given genre, as in McNeill's investigation of the origins of "internet diaries". In

the popular world, these often appear as "listicles," such as *The Telegraph's* 2014 "Best Sci-Fi and Fantasy Novels of All Time", presented as authoritative and with very little debate, but subject to much debate from the audience in the comments section and beyond on the web. What unifies these histories in academic and popular work is that they are a *power move* in both cases.

When I say a "power move", I mean that the author of the history assumes authority to declare not only the history of the genre, but its definition, its membership, and its ownership. But these histories also assume another characteristic of genre: that genre moves linearly along history's flow, like a succession of kings rather than a fluid mass of rhetoric. But, like any succession of kings, the history of any genre is subject to interpretation, debate, validation, and revision. That is, genre change *is not linear*, even though genre histories and genealogies may model it as linear. Rather, genre is a function of a text applied both retroactively and in anticipation, as historical periods may be (consider, for instance, the self-named Enlightenment or the posthumously named Dark Ages). As a consequence, older texts may be drafted into the service of newer genre names, and as a consequence read according to newer genre conventions and values. For instance, Tolkien's Middle Earth may have been written as a neo-mythology of earth, but it has now become the standard-bearer for a number of "epic fantasy" or "second world fantasy"--that is, not a synthesis of early Germanic and Celtic mythology but rather as the development of an entirely new world with magic systems, imagined geography, and fantastic races. Moreover, Tolkien may be the standard bearer, but the popular understanding of Tolkien's work—and thus its meaning and value to its current audience—is shaped not through Tolkien's own writing but through the lens of loosely derivative works such as *Dungeons & Dragons*.

If we conceive of genre change as linear, then the genre of a text is fixed in time and space, assigned as an inherent quality of the text and necessary for the correct interpretation and

study of that text. This is, of course, how genre tends to be taught in educational environments. We teach genre as a precursor to teaching the text; students are introduced to the classical definitions of tragedy and comedy before they are made to read and interpret a play by Sophocles or Shakespeare, although there is obviously considerable shifting in the iterations of these genres by each of these playwrights, owing to their different cultural contexts and a lot of other factors. Thus, if we read Tolkien as "epic fantasy" rather than neomythology or fairy tale or any of other, older concepts of his work, we are reading it "wrong."

But it is not possible (working in a descriptivist framework, as I am) for an audience to read a text "wrong," only for an audience to appropriate a text to its own generic purposes and rhetorical needs. Thus, genre itself must be more flexible, and more in the hands of the entire rhetorical situation--author, audience, subject, and context combined--than in the control of the author. An author certainly decides what genre to enact in the moment of composition, but by the same token the audience certainly decides the genre in the moment of reception. And there are far more moments of reception than there are of conception.

Rather than looking for fossilized "missing links" in endless genealogies of genre to seek legitimacy in the interpretation of texts, we instead adopt a different model of genre that sees genre as a *system* of rules governing the interaction between authors, audiences, and texts. In this model, genres do indeed exhibit a sort of "genetic" drift with each new instance, just as in evolution where each organism participating in the gene pool influences the available traits for evolution—but unlike genetics and Darwinian evolution, the changes in genres retroactively affect texts from the past as well as texts in the present and future is, in fact, a *system* that establishes the rules—so while an author might have anticipated a particular set of rules in penning a historical text (which was likely intended not as historical, but to be used according to

textual practices of the time), those rules become lost with changes in genre practices, and the text will inevitably be received according to the audience's understanding of genre and the systems that different genres impose on interpretation and use.

It is here that my proposed "genre space" concept allows this flexibility. Rather than conceiving of genre along a timeline, as a hereditary trait of texts passed from one progenitor to the next, I suggest conceiving as genre as a four-dimensional "space", occupied and traversed by the participants in the space through their recognition of the genre.

Thus, like any geographical or cultural space, sections can be appropriated, annexed, liberated, redesigned, or otherwise changed as cultural currents require it. This notion of a genre space, for instance, legitimizes McNeill's concern about "genre colonialism"—the notion that it is possible for a privileged group to enter into a genre and appropriate it and thereby erase or subjugate the previous owners of the genre space. In redrawing the boundaries of a genre space, prestige genres can annex or colonize marginalized genres, not entirely unlike the authority of what Opacki calls "royal genres". This politicization of genres, envisioned as intellectual space with qualities similar to geographic space (but with flexible existence temporally) allows us to envision genre with contested margins, a secure and prestigious center, and ever-flowing dynamics of power

Moreover, the genre space is subject to an almost game-like system with predictable if-then statements—a sort of algorithm pattern that audiences and audiences expect a text to conform to within the genre space, not unlike Vladimir Propp's *morphology of the Folk Tale*, which provides a precise flow-chart-like algorithm for understanding the narrative options available in the folk tale genre according to his exhaustive analysis of a large corpus of Russian folk tales. In theory, any genre might be reduced to such an algorithm, but in so doing one would

actually change the genre under study—as, for instance, fantasy writers have taken Joseph Campbell’s description of the hero’s journey as a prescription rather than a description—or, more likely, the study would be too slow to keep up with the rapid pace of genre change and be outdated before it was finished. Defining the genre itself is certainly a challenge, given its amorphous and potent nature, but defining individual genres is aiming at moving phantasms.

This is, obviously, a very important shift in the conceptualization of genre. However, it also is an important shift in moving away from media-bound models of genre. No longer is it necessary to define genre in terms of the media it appears in, but rather as a space with an ecosystem of genres in shifting power relationships as well. Indeed, outside of academic discussion, genre is almost universally understood to easily transcend media, even in as much as it is necessary to specify media when discussing genre characteristics (since media shapes the manifestations of any given genre in certain ways). Neither does transmediality preclude media-bound genres; certainly, the point-and-click adventure game is a media-bound genre, but in the cases of such media-bound genres, each individual text generally intersects another transmedial genre as well—for instance, a science fiction point-and-click adventure (the later *Space Quest* series), a mystery point-and-click adventure (the *Laura Bow* series), or a fantasy point-and-click adventure (e.g., *Simon the Sorcerer*).

What is most surprising here is that genre changes in both directions, temporally. It’s fairly uncontroversial, given Carolyn Miller’s work on genre, to say that genre is changed by authors with each new iteration of the genre (when it is recognized as an iteration of that genre by the audience). However, since genres interact with each other in systems and hierarchies, and since audiences have an integral part in meaning-making of any text, it is not only authors working within the genre in question who can change the genre.

In fantasy, for instance, the "epic fantasy" holds a very high position of prestige, and is almost universally regarded as a long prose fiction (often spanning multiple books, as serialization is a very common attribute of modern fantasy). As a result, the novel as a media form holds immense prestige in fantasy spaces; repeatedly, new writers are advised to "hone their craft" on something "smaller" before tackling the novel or the epic fantasy. However, being something that requires a high level of engagement for the audiences as well as the authors, these novels often don't wield as much power as they might, and much of the actual hegemonic power rests in film, TV, and interactive media.

Thus, genre changes with each shift in critical thinking about the given genre; each time a new element is identified in the "constellation" or each time the genre is redefined by authors or audiences, the genre changes, just like a species changes slightly with each viable mating. In this way, texts composed in the past are susceptible to genre change as much as texts in the present or future.

Arguably one of the most powerful media forms in fantasy is, in fact, the role-playing game—a form that, in fact, occupies multiple physical media, because it easily transverses both digital and analog spaces, taking form as video games, online communities, tabletop games, or dice and paper games. Of these, the *Dungeons & Dragons* franchise no doubt wields the most of both power and prestige, cited 109 times as an authority in their discussions of fantasy (not including derivative works, such as the *Elder Scrolls* game series or the *Forgotten Realms* book series). *Dungeons & Dragons* itself is emblematic of the complexity and messiness that exists in the fantasy genre space (and, by extension, probably in any given genre space). Initially a dice-and-paper role-playing game and an emblem of nerdiness (as fantasy itself has historically been, although it is enjoying a mainstream moment at present), it has expanded into at least five

editions, numerous video games, massively multiplayer online role-playing games, tabletop games, any number of novelizations (both official and in fanfiction spaces), and even a few movies. This is, surely, a "constellation" of its own, and indeed has set the standard for not only role-playing games but also fantasy world-building and even the interpretation of Tolkien's Middle Earth. The appeal, of course, of a game as an authority—especially one as flexible as a dice-and-paper role-playing game—is that it provides a ready-made *system*. If fantasy, as any genre, is a system, then there is certain desirability to modeling the genre itself on a system—as is seen in the repetitive discussion of “magic systems” in fantasy.

It would *seem* that the emphasis on systems is a new fascination, almost entirely a twentieth and twenty-first century obsession, but this is not the case. Jauss argues that the medieval reader is not a “wanderer” but a “codifier”; in this way, at least, fantasy borrows from medieval reading practice, as contemporary fantasy seeks to codify even the most fantastic of elements (“Alterity”). Furthermore, when we look to folklore (as fantasy often does in its genealogies) for a progenitor of genres, we find even more indication of repetition and systematization as a common pattern in fantasy’s source material. Folklore itself is large and nebulous, but researchers have found endless ways to systematize it. Most relevant for this discussion is Vladimir Propp’s morphology of the folktale, a seminal work that treats the folktale as an algorithm, not unlike chord progression diagrams in tonal music theory.

However, while genre scholars generally recognize Propp’s influence in codifying genres as internally coherent systems, fantasy fans and writers seem largely unaware of Propp’s work, perhaps because it is itself somewhat inaccessible for the reader, resembling a computer software program more than a conventional argument and definition. Rather, fantasy communities tend to recognize more easily transported theories such as Joseph Campbell’s notion of the “hero’s



journey,” taking it not as a descriptive analysis of epic structures, but rather as an almost prescriptive formula for *crafting* an epic narrative—and, as epic is the highest authority (and praise) in fantasy spaces (indeed, synonymous with “high fantasy” in many spaces), Campbell’s hero’s journey becomes a standard to which fantasy works are held and a commonly recommended source for aspiring fantasy authors (albeit typically filtered through Wikipedia-style summaries and bullet points, not in its originally published form). Campbell is referenced, either obliquely or directly, at least 24 times in the corpus<sup>20</sup>; this is a low number, but fairly high for an academic source.

What is most interesting about the influence of new media on old is that, with the dividing line of millennials, we can see a difference in the writing of those who grew up with game-based (system-based) narrative against those for whom game-based narrative was introduced later in their narrative development. In comparing the old guard, such as Anne McCaffrey, to a newer popular fantasy writer, such as Jim Butcher, we can see the influence of the digital age appearing differently. McCaffrey’s later dragon novels do indeed feature computers, but they are strange artifacts, and feature more like golden age science fiction’s imaginings of the interactions of computers and society. However, the influence of ludic storytelling on Jim Butcher is very different—more ingrained and internalized, less explicit. Butcher’s *Codex Alera* series, for instance, is said to be explicitly based on the *Pokémon* franchise—the video game and its attendant trading card game, both of which rely on players mastering ludic systems of hierarchies and taxonomies of a large encyclopedia (pokédex) of creatures in the second-world space of the game. Thus, we see that the *Codex Alera* series, along with other work by Butcher, relies heavily on the audience becoming familiar with intricate

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<sup>20</sup> 8 attributions to Campbell directly, and 16 references to the Hero’s Journey as a “trope” or convention.

artificial systems that govern the settings Butcher creates. It is no longer sufficient in fantasy to wave a wand and say “a wizard did it”—relying on the collectively shared mythology of a wizard being mysterious, as in earlier folklore—but it is now necessary to explain *how* a wizard functions in terms of rules, so that the audience can anticipate the effects of whatever the wizard did in the same way that a sports fan might anticipate the meaning of an athlete’s choices on the fields based on the shared knowledge of the *system* of the game being played.

There is, furthermore, a shift not only in how authors are approaching the creation of what we consider “traditional” media (e.g., print media such as the novel), but also in the way that readers are interpreting it and in the way that constructs are applied by authors, audiences, and critics alike. This shift is not entirely evident in academic works, which thus far tend to resist transmedial analyses apart from simplistic comparisons, but it is quite evident in the way that fans and critics in the popular fiction fields talk about texts.

It seems also that, in transmedial genre spaces, a shift from one medium will often trigger shifts in other media—for instance, my research suggests that fantasy novel writers regularly cite *Dungeons & Dragons* and its affiliate properties as an authority, defining their conception of how fantasy *should* work according to how *D&D* functions, and thus shaping how they generate and interpret fantasy texts. This multimedial, transmedial approach to understanding rhetorical spaces is becoming normal; audiences no longer interact with texts in one medium alone (if indeed they ever did), but expect texts to transcend media boundaries—and if they do not, audiences will fill the gap by remediating the texts in fan spaces.

But what is significant here is that the new media’s iterations of genres—that is, of these mutable, associative patterns—enters into the older media’s iterations of the genres. What is considered an authority in the present becomes applied as a criteria and critical lens for texts in

the past, and in turn changes how those texts are presented, received, and understood. The mechanism for retroactive changes lies in genre recognition on the part of the audience. Without genre as a sort of cipher, there *is no meaning* in a text. Genre functions, in a metaphorical way, like a start/end code in a barcode or on a string of DNA, setting up the framework for the audience's interpretation and establishing the system by which the audience will make meaning from the text. Thus, since the meaning of a text is understood *through* genre, like a lens, the meaning of the text actually changes as the genre system changes.

Perhaps the strongest evidence for this counter-temporal progression is simply the existence (and consistent use of) the TV Tropes website (Tvtropes.org), which now tellingly describes itself as “The All-Devouring Pop-Culture Wiki.” As the name suggests, the site originally identified, named, and documented tropes from television as a media; however, as any sample page demonstrates, these tropes are now understood to apply to *any* media. At the bottom of a trope's page on TV Tropes, there are expandable sections for examples of the trope listed according to media/genre (it's hard to say which, depending on definitions), as identified, contributed, and edited by users of the wiki in accordance with TV Tropes's own documentarian conventions.

On a sample page acquired through TV Tropes's “Random Trope” button—“Blood Bath”—the folders available for examples were: Anime And Manga, Comics, Fan Fic, Film, Literature<sup>21</sup>, Live Action TV, Music, Music Videos, Mythology & Folklore, Poetry, Tabletop

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<sup>21</sup> Literature, it should be noted here, seems to refer only to published works of prose fiction, and not specifically to “literary fiction” or to historically significant texts. The first reference on the “blood bath” page is, for instance, to Mercedes Lackey, and the second to Terry Pratchett, both authorities in almost exclusively fantasy media communities. It is, however, distinguished from Fan Fic, which is kept separate from Literature and other canon works, even though some works of Fan Fic appear in other categories, such as Web Originals. There seems no debate that there *is*

Games, Toys, Video Games, Web Comics, Web Original, and Western Animation. This is an expansive and inclusive range of media (and understandably not all tropes will have the same set, depending on the conventional use of the trope). What is important here, however, is that here—in the internet’s “All-Devouring Pop-Culture Wiki,” widely recognized by authors and audiences alike as an authority on the identification, documentation, and interpretation of media conventions—we have an acknowledgement and conventionally accepted notion of conventions, and thus the genres they make up, are *transmedial*. Generally this list is divided by what I am calling media—that is, the physicality of the text and its attendant affordances and conventions—but not in all cases. Western Animation is considered distinct from Anime And Manga, a category which assumes, by its grouping, that materiality is, frankly, immaterial—what is conventional in anime is conventional in manga, the category tacitly claims. This may well be the case in many tropes; “tropes,” as TV Tropes calls them (“conventions” in my terms, since “trope” is, in rhetoric, a very distinct concept, which TV Tropes acknowledges throughout the wiki) are likely to be culture-bound more than they are medial.

And in identifying a culture-bound trope, we recognize that understanding a text is a matter of understanding the culture that receives it. This is distinct from, say, New Historicism, because it does not demand understanding the culture that *produced* the text to arrive at an ideal interpretation, but rather understanding how the text *persists* in the cultures that take it up. In keeping with Jauss’s theories of textual use, as well as Beebee’s definition of genre as changing ideology and “use-value”, texts—and the genres that define their use and creation—only persist when they are continually repurposed, which means allowing for new material to enter old, and

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a line between fan work and canon work, but some disagreement among the self-selected editors as to exactly how that line should be drawn.

new media practices and understandings to influence the creation of new material in old genres and the meaning of old material in old genres.

### 4.3 Rules and Ludic Play in the Genre Space

Much has been made of what studies of what research in new fields of rhetoric and media studies, such as video games and internet discourses, might use from traditional theories of narrative, genre, and other literary analysis approaches; however, far less has been said about what traditional media studies might gain from new media studies. If the application of old theory to new media works because new media isn't all that different from old, then so, too, should the application of new theory to old media, as I have argued in the previous chapter. Although the discourses and communities under study here are certainly facilitated by new technology—by the internet, by easy access to a range of different multimodal and multimedial materials, and so forth—and the notion of fandom *per se* is a fairly new notion<sup>22</sup>, texts have been interactive far longer than any existing critical theory, and only recently are we rediscovering this interactivity through new media studies in addition to more conservative reader-response approaches. In fact, Jamison argues in her monograph on fanfiction that “fanfiction is breaking new ground, but it also trying to retake ground that was lost centuries ago. Before the modern era of copyright and intellectual property, stories were things held in common, to be passed from hand to hand and narrator to narrator... fictional characters and worlds were shared resources” (xiii). This is a somewhat idyllic perspective on the breaking down of notions of authorship to a more pre/post-modern approach, but it does emphasize the importance in approaching these spaces of popular readership of recognizing that authorship is not quite as authoritative as it has been previously perceived in academic work.

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<sup>22</sup> Jenkins dates it to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century with the *Star Trek* fandoms; Jamison dates it somewhat earlier to the Sherlock Holmes following in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## The Magic (Genre Space) Circle

While much criticism in academic spaces has tended to treat the author of a text as an almost god-like figure, which the goal of criticism being to praise the maker's skill and craft or to discern the maker's will, even into the 21<sup>st</sup> century in a post-intentional-fallacy academic environment, the role of the author is somewhat different in the spaces under study, both an all-knowing maker<sup>23</sup> and an imperfect source of raw materials to be crafted and perfected. Instead of seeing the role of the author as one of authority over reader-subjects, no matter how imperfect that authority may be, I propose that the role of the author—or rather the text—is more like that of the Dungeon Master (DM) in a *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)* game, while the genre itself, as understood by authors and readers alike, more like the manuals that guide the actions of DM and players alike in the *D&D* game. In this scenario, the author and the audience collaborate together to construct the text, the author presenting a system of choices within a rule set understood by both author and audience (that is, the genre) and the audience actively choosing which aspects of the text presented to accept or reject and how to navigate the text, including making challenges and modifications as seen necessary according to the rule set or the audience's requirements for the narrative. The author may plan as much as he pleases, but ultimately the audience (the players, in this metaphor) decide the direction and value of the text through participation in the genre space. This is not an image entirely original to my study; Espen Aarseth has likewise used the *D&D* game scenario as the most obvious example of his notion of “ergodic literature” or “cybertext,” which is a text whose construction is dependent on the reader/audience's role in

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<sup>23</sup> As evidenced by such fan-specific terms as “Word of God”, which, according to TVTropes, is “A statement regarding some ambiguous or undefined aspect of a work, the Word of God comes from someone considered to be the ultimate authority, such as the creator, director, or producer. Such edicts can even go against events as were broadcast, due to someone making a mistake” (TVTropes.org). TV Tropes defines this term as an item of “trivia” and not a “trope”, meaning that is a metadiscursive concept rather than a convention that appears in texts.

making active choices to navigate the text rather than being presented purely linearly to the reader/audience.

More significantly, every participant in the genre space—the author, the audience, critics, and so on—understands that the rules of the genre space, though they may be tacit and ambiguous, are requisite for participation in the genre space; this is, in many ways, not unlike the ways that Discourses (as defined by James Paul Gee) govern communication practices. In fact, it is easy to see a genre as a Discourse, but this is not entirely accurate. A Discourse is an identity, a way of being, that participants take on in order to interact in that space; a genre, however, is a rule set by which participants *play*, which can make it subject to and part of a Discourse, but also keeps it apart. It is not possible to fully criticize or describe a Discourse from inside the Discourse, because from inside the Discourse it is transparent; it is, however, possible to describe and criticize a genre from inside the genre space, in the same way that it is possible to describe the boundaries of a parcel of land from inside the parcel of land. Likewise, as the genre space is not an identity *per se* (although closely associated to Gee’s notions of how identity and discourse (little d) are connected), participants are aware when they are entering and exiting the genre space. In this way, the genre space functions more like Huizinga’s notion of the “magic circle”, a description used to understand how a game space functions, set apart from ordinary life and governed by special rules of social interaction that are recognized by the participants as being specific to the game space. Inside the magic circle, participants interact in ways they might not be allowed to do outside the magic circle; while outside the magic circle of a competitive game, it would be seen as rude and antisocial to interfere with another person’s attempts to reach a goal, inside the circle it is expected and anticipated as a strategy.



Genres, then, are a sort of magic circle, whether a narrative genre or any other kind of genre (such as “the essay” or “the cover letter”). Inside the genre, certain rules of interaction apply that do not apply elsewhere, and upon recognition of the genre being enacted, a participant selects and applies those rules to the text and situation. Thus, while in a cover letter it is unacceptable to conceal information or attempt to surprise the reader, these are *expected* in a fantasy text. Moreover, these rules of engagement apply not only to the text itself, as has often been discussed in previous genre theory, but to the participants engaged in the genre space; it is possible, then, to invoke a genre space—to enter the magic circle—without actually having a specific text involved, because genre is the *system*, and not merely the additive effect of texts imitating other texts in response to rhetorical situations.

In this way, the genre space rules are very much what Heather Dubrow is describing when she defines genre as a “social code”. Indeed, since *some* genre is in effect at all times, in all social interactions, all social codes are in effect genres; however, to have a “genre space” requires something much more sophisticated than simply noting that, say, a “greeting” is a genre with many options, governed by a social code that determines which options are suitable in a given circumstance. A genre space requires that the social code(s) in place be separate from what participants recognize as “ordinary” or “default”—separate, then, from the participant’s “primary Discourse”, as Gee has called it—just as the magic circle does.

Significantly, if genre spaces are defined by the rules that govern them, their social code, the question arises in analyzing any genre just *what* the rules are governing or to what goal. Beebee argues that genre invariably expresses an ideology system, proposing “that generic differences are grounded in the ‘use-value’ of a discourse rather than in its content, formal features, or its rules of production” (7). While the participants in my study certainly seem to see

genre as a constellation of features, enumerating either conventions or values that define fantasy as fantasy or differentiate one fantasy sub-genre from another, they nevertheless see it as a system, a game to be played, as evidenced by the almost algorithmic argument of content generation seen in the discussion of “Do you have to be a fantasy reader to be a fantasy writer?” discussed in a previous chapter. One participant, for example, argues “Change the trigger, change the ideas you get. Then use the old triggers to trick the reader” (P552), defining trigger as “a concept which causes you to think of other related concepts,” essentially arguing that by enacting a genre, the author can enact a series of associations for the reader. If, however, genre is a constellation of triggers, this model does not fully account for the “use-value” of the genre; that is, why the participants choose to enter the given genre space in order to participate at all.

In the case of purely practical genres, such as applications for employment, the use-value is clear: the participant perceives the rules of the genre as being requisite to the rules of achieving his or her goals in the given space, and so enters the space willingly with an objective in mind and behaves according to his or her understanding of the rules of that genre space. However, it is not immediately evident what *use-value*, in Beebee’s term, a popular genre, such as fantasy, might have, if “genre gives us not understanding—the abstract and passive sense—but use in the pragmatic and active sense” (14). Beebee accounts for this in his synthesis of other studies of popular culture, on which the justification of this study is largely grounded, arguing that “since the use-values that Radway and Kissinger and Wright and Habermas find lying at the heart of the romance, the western, and philosophy are social rather than private (reading as a hidden, imaginary form of social action), genre theory in their works inevitably becomes a form of ideology” (14-15). The question raised here then becomes just what is the ideology of fantasy, and this is a more difficult question, since like all popular genres, it is constantly under

negotiation, and moreover is subject to subversive techniques that may and frequently do emerge as new normative ideas in the genre space. Indeed, participants have variously named the use-value of fantasy as carnivalesque (“There are no rules in fantasy” P1613; “In fantasy, you can do whatever you want” P1011), escapism (“I use fantasy as an escape” P1339), a shared cultural imagination (“fantasy is like the next step in the evolution of mythology” P1339), social criticism (“fantasy... allows a writer to demonstrate ideas and possibilities are [sic] difficult to explain otherwise” P1339; “Fantasy is an abstraction” P827), human connectedness (“at the heart there is often a strong element of humanity amid all this, which is not only identifiable and relatable, but also serves as an anchor for the reader” P1339), and so on. However, it is certainly agreed that fantasy has *some* function for the participants in the genre space, even if that function is not agreed upon. That is, while the rules are different in the magic circle, they are also mutable.

### **Playing the Game**

The mechanism of change in genres is largely due to the fact that participants in a genre space see the boundaries of the space not as inviolable, but as frontiers to be explored and tested. Thus, the genre space can expand, contract, and change shape as the participants draw new lines around the boundary markers, add or remove boundary markers, or otherwise challenge the rules of the genre space. As often happens in academic work, but also elsewhere, any statement of a rule or definition in a genre space—that is, any attempt to codify the rules of the space—is often taken not as absolute, but as a challenge. Such challenge is not necessarily subversive (although it can be), but rather is emergent, a feature of the ludic nature of genre spaces rather than necessarily resistance to the ideology of the genre space. Although the rules of a game may inhibit players from easily reaching the goal, it is not a subversive act to still attempt to achieve

that goal or to work within the rules to advance in the game; it is a *playful* act. This is not to say that there are no subversive acts in genre spaces; there certainly are, and indeed some acts of play *are* subversive acts, even without being identified openly as such by participants, since the challenge to the system of rules in the genre space must necessarily also change the rules, and thus reshape the ideology of the space. Indeed, if we accept Beebee's assertion that, since genre is social in nature, the rules of genre spaces form ideology, then we must also accept his claim that "the struggle against or deviations from genre are ideological struggles," but also "genre is never fully identical with itself, nor are texts fully identical with their genres", so that to participate in the genre space is not only to participate in the ideology, but also to reshape it through emergent results and imperfect iterations of the mutable system inside the genre space (19).

To argue that the boundaries of a genre such as fantasy represent a system of ideology makes intuitive sense. For instance, one of the boundaries that is evidently under intense debate in fantasy at the moment is the expression by the genre as a whole of gender roles and the nature of genders and sexuality<sup>24</sup>. Explicit mentions of the fantasy space being male-dominated appear at least 59 times in the corpus, while mentions of feminism as a value appear at least 84 times. Likewise, gender roles as a convention appear at least 54 times; while this frequency does not suggest a particularly strong interest in the abstract ideas about gender roles, it does suggest that it is a persistent issue. However, more strongly, three out of the five longest conversations overall (all from Community A) are concerned with feminism and gender roles: one in which a participant asks if they have included too few female characters, one debating the value of the Bechdel Test, and one asking how best to write from a "Female POV" (that is, from the

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<sup>24</sup> This concern is not unique to fantasy genre spaces; indeed, this is consistent with the ideological struggle playing out in many social spaces, especially digitally mediated ones.

perspective of a female character). In general, conversations of this sort end when they are shut down by a moderator because the conversation is becoming too hostile, rather than when participants lose interest, as in most conversations; the hostility suggests that there is real ideological ground at stake, that the very appeal of the genre to certain members seems under attack. That appeal, of course, is likely different for different parties in the discussion, as some participants are no doubt attracted by a male-dominated space, while others no doubt see fantasy as a space for subverting patriarchy and creating a more feminist space.

Yet if genre is simply an ideology (not to say that an ideology model is simple), then one would expect more resistance to these challenges; rather, they are *welcomed* as originality, although only within certain parameters. In fact, the playfulness of the genre space is better revealed in Community B, whose longest posts are often games or invitations to criticize the genre space. The longest thread asks “What threw you out of a story?” but the next two are games: “Rename This Horrible Cover” and “Guess what we’re reading!”, both of which require familiarity within the genre to play effectively. The first requires participants to use knowledge of naming conventions in fantasy and apply it to a surreal cover for a Ray Bradbury collection that inexplicably features a centaur with centaurs for arms; the game here, which has very little in the way of explicit rules beyond the title, is played successfully when other participants recognize the made-up title as humorous and somehow reflecting something about the fantasy genre space. The second game has clearer rules, which involves quoting a passage of a fairly well-known fantasy text or author and having other participants guess what text or author the quote represents; this game functions on the prestige of familiarity with authors, and on the desire to both trick and be recognized as fluent by the participants offering quotes for guessing.

The appeal for the participants guessing lies in the prestige of being well-read in the genre space, as well as active and quick to respond in the community.

Such games occur in Community A frequently as well, although they are not as immediately prominent in the data as the ones in Community B as a result of the different formats through which these communities interact. However, these games are merely the most explicit manifestation of the play that happens at all levels in the genre space, play that is often not named such but is nevertheless a primary mechanism of text generation, criticism, and fan response. Much of the discussion in Community A is centered on sorting out the rules of the genre space in such a way that will allow the participants to better navigate and gain more power and prestige for themselves while “playing the game.” There are moments, though, at which the ludic dimension becomes transparent. In a vivid example, participants are debating the value of prologues in fantasy novels, and the debate transforms into an explicit challenge of publicly writing examples and letting other members of the community jury between them. Clear rules are spelled out in this case for the way that the debate should be settled in this case, and the challenge is explicitly called a game:

5-12-13, 7:31 PM

**NN-1**

SE-1, Mr. Moderator, Sir-"if you need a prologue to hook the reader, you should probably take a hard look at your first chapter and figure out what is wrong with it. :) "Challenge accepted. ☺ I will gladly stack the intro of my manuscript up against one of your own. It was a challenge, wasn't it? ☺. Sorry; maybe my blunt, muscle bound brain is too slow to grasp the concept. ☺

Yours vs. Mine.

I'm sure to lose, of course, your reputation, as is, being beyond repute.

Competition is good for the soul, or so I was taught. Winning is easy; losing is where you actually learn to be better. This, in turn, presents us with a unique opportunity: let's do a competition. A bracket, of sorts. Let's see if [moderator] will allow us to set it up. Sixteen eager writers from this site, stacked up in competition. The winner of each bracket will be decided by vote. The winner will gain "acclaim", and everyone else will be better from the experience.

Your line has been drawn in the sand, sir, and I've accepted.

You have the connections, so the next move is yours. This could be great fun for all

☺

5-12-13, 7:35 PM

**IH-1**

[...] If a challenge it is, then I readily accept it, SE-1 and NN-1!

5-12-13, 7:51 PM

**SE-1**

Quote: Originally Posted by NN-1

*You have the connections, so the next move is yours. This could be great fun for all ☺*  
We have a challenge forum. If you wish to start a challenge, all you have to do is post it there. No connections required.

5-12-13, 8:01 PM

**NN-1**

Game on; let's go. This is going to be awesome. I'm halfway retarded with technology/ forums...any suggestions on getting others involved? Even on the websites I write for, most prefer to read rather than contribute.

C'mon, people; get in on this...it'll be fun, and we can only get better.

[NN-1's work] is ready to scrap...are you? (P1002)

There are, of course, many aspects of this exchange that are idiosyncractic to the community in which they take place, such as having an explicit space for writing challenges and the ways in which the participants recognize the reputations of the moderators; nevertheless, these are symptomatic of the *kind* of community this is; many such forums have challenge or game boards, and the moderators are often ubiquitously known personas with excellent reputations (generally one becomes a moderator either by being a founding member of such a community of having a good reputation among other community members for active participation and positive involvement). These community features aside, this exchange shows in unusually clear detail how exactly members of a community negotiate power within a genre space and how they perceive the conventions of the genre—not as guides, not as requirements, but as rules to a tacit game, challenges to be overcome in much the same way as any labeled game might be played, including microgames within the larger game. What is here, then, is the ludic sense of genre—genre spaces are not merely social spaces regulated by the dominance of a particular genre's presence, but they are *game spaces*. They are textual playgrounds, where there

are endless social negotiations, spatial modifications, and microgame features to play with. Participants may move freely within this playground as it pleases them, declaring rules and debating them as they go not unlike children negotiating who gets to use which toy when on a playground.

Indeed, the hesitation to label genre—a clearly messy and ambiguous thing that changes with every observation—as the game space it is likely comes from a misunderstanding of games in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in which what most people conceive of as games is regulated by clear, unmoving, explicit rules, which are in turn regulated by some external force. The general conception of a game is either as in sports, which are highly regulated by organizations that oversee the uniformity of organized sporting events, or as in video games, in which the computer regulates the rules of the game and there is no possibility of flexibility except as already designated by programmers (or “modders”, who modify game features as a hobby). Yet it is an injustice to game studies, and ludology in general, to characterize games and game spaces in these ways, and certainly this is not what Huizinga has in mind when describing the “magic circle,” since Huizinga’s work predates many of these modern institutions that make games as certain as we generally perceive them to be. The historical fact is that games have, prior to the 1990s, been the province of folklore studies because their transmission and engagement shares more features with folklore than with literature; I am arguing here that *genre* itself shares more features with folkloric games than with literary games, more like the orally transmitted games of tag children learn early in life or word games played at parties among adults than like the highly codified and regulated games of *Skyrim* or Major League Baseball.

The notion of genre as a ludic space, a magic circle, seems more amenable when dealing with a genre such as fantasy, whose stakes seem low and insignificant and thus easy to dismiss as



“just a game”—but it is equally applicable in a higher stakes genre, such as job applications or political speeches, about which much scholarship has been produced. These are highly codified genres, more so than fantasy, and yet they are nevertheless transmitted primarily orally (although manuals exist) and consist of a system of actions with rewards and punishments, even more so than in the case of fantasy. Moreover, in these genres, it is generally accepted that the rules are *different* than outside the circle, out in the “real world”; one does not speak to one’s friends in the formal language of the cover letter, nor does one use the vaunted rhetoric of speechmaking casually without intending to invoke the rules of the speech for some rhetorical reason.

Dubrow observes this ludic aspect of genre, but stops short of calling genre a game, when she writes about the horror genre that “the rules of the genre carefully spell out what can and what cannot happen and in many instances preclude the realization of our worst fears even while permitting others to be enacted... We receive further reassurance from the fact that the very nature of the genre implies its distance from ‘real life’” (33). Here, Dubrow essentially describes Huizinga’s magic circle—a space in which participants may act freely in certain ways because they are restricted by the rules in others, safe in the knowledge that by having entered the game space they are removed and insulated from “real life.”

As for the folkloric aspect of genre, in which the rules of the game are under constant negotiation and often unspoken or assumed, yet still the genre is recognizable, the key aspect here is to remember that genres are not made solely of their texts, nor is any given text going to completely encompass a genre. A genre is generally recognized through boundary marker texts, yes—as I have already argued—but it is also characterized by ideologies that underpin the genre, attitudes about the genre, evaluative opinions about the genre’s use-value, and communities that interact in the genre space. In this sense, genre transmits and defines itself somewhat like legends

or other folktales, in that each iteration is likely to be unique, even as it's formulaic. This challenge in pinning down genre by its texts, or even spelling out the rules of a given genre space, is made clear in Beebee's definition of genre, arguing that "As a form of ideology, genre is never fully identical with itself, nor are texts fully identical with their genres. Furthermore, if genre is a form of ideology, then the struggle against or deviations from genre are ideological struggles".

These struggles are indeed evident, as I have already described, in the data collected for this study. Perhaps the strongest evidence, though, is the debate about definitions of "cliché" or "trope" throughout the corpus. Although the strongest values by far that were expressed explicitly in the data had to do with fitting into rules systems—that is, research (broadly defined in this genre space), worldbuilding, scientific plausibility, character building, and realism—*originality* falls close behind these, with at least 111 instances. Participants are frequently concerned about whether a concept is cliché, and to even label something a "trope" is sometimes seen as a threat, as if trope and cliché were synonymous. Consider, for instance, one participant writing "since I've been really struggling with not writing tropes, I decided the other night to write the COMPLETE OPPOSITE of a trope... Is there such a thing as too original?" (P370). In response, other participants clarify that "Tropes, to me, are NOT the same as clichés. Tropes are just common themes and ideas that people can relate to and recognize. Cliches are devices that are used time and time again as cheap fodder to move a story along. Tropes are mostly fun and can be manipulated. Cliches are mostly boring and can't be manipulated." Here, we see an example of sorting out the rules of the genre space; a rule that doesn't work anymore becomes dismissed as "cliché" while those that work become "tropes"—identified, codified, perhaps, but still useful because they can be "manipulated," or played with, for "fun". Nevertheless, there is

strong anxiety about labeling anything, lest it remove the playfulness of the space. In another conversation, a participant writes “by assigning the term ‘trope’ to the theme of good v evil, the entire theme has been reduced to obscurity and borederline [sic] derision. As a result, the rise of the morally ambiguous or gray characters has been swift and is itself quickly approaching ‘trope’ status” (P1332). Here, there are values assigned to using motifs used before and recognized as “trope”, and moreover there is an expectation that, to play the game, the participants in the genre space are in a constant struggle to produce something both new and recognizable, to both acknowledge tropes but also to fight against them and subvert them. Indeed, there is a fear of codification and study to some degree, as in the same conversation another participant writes “something like TV Tropes, while entertaining, has obliterated the creativity of a lot of people. It’s created this constant stream of ‘I can’t do that because it’s been done already.’”

It is in this landscape of constant tensions introduced by perceived or imposed rules that participants in the genre space negotiate their own positions. As with any game, participants have entered more or less willingly into the circle—they have chosen, for whatever reason, to participate in the genre space, although in the case of certain more pragmatic genres that choice is often coerced by powerful social pressure. Nevertheless, once in the genre space, participants are aware that they are in a space with rules like a game. They recognize that it is time to play. In fantasy and other popular media genres, this play consists of microgames that privilege familiarity and other forms of establishing authority relative to the genre, or of gleefully subverting or stretching existing rules, or otherwise manipulating the genre space or one’s own position in it.

Indeed, it is no accident that in describing fanfiction, Jamison describes how fanfic writers establish their authority in the space by calling it a “game”: “The best fic writers are

fantastically close readers, and they write layered stories for layered audiences... that's the game." Jamison chooses the word "game" in part because she refers heavily to the various fandoms that have sprung up around the original Sherlock Holmes stories by Arthur Conan Doyle as well as their subsequent adaptations, and participants in these fandoms often describe their work as a "game" in recognition of the character Holmes's predilection for calling his engagement with criminals as a "game." However, it is also the most apt description of how fanfiction writers engage with the texts they are transforming in their own work—it is a game, in which players must create something original without violating certain rules of the subject matter, in which they strive for novelty and recognizability at the same time. Without the tensions caused by apparently conflicting rules in a genre space, the genre space would likely not be engaging, and the genre would die; it is thus that genres that become *too* codified often fall out of use, since a genre's use-value often lies in its generative ability, and that generative ability often lies in tension within the genre space.

### **Winning the game**

Many definitions of games require that there be a *goal*; it simply doesn't make sense to play without some object that is hindered by the rules in some way. In a game of tag, the goal is to touch another player or to avoid being touched (depending on the player's role); these goals are at odds, and the rules of the game, by whichever variation, will serve to hinder these goals variously in ways that add more challenge to the goals. Likewise, although the rules may seem like impediments, they are actually challenges in a genre space, and the goal of participating in the genre space will vary depending on the participant's role and the ideology that underpins the genre's system.

In most popular genre spaces, the goal for those who aspire to authorship is simple: to create something recognizable as an iteration of the genre, but also novel, and to have it appreciated by audiences. Audiences' goals will vary far more than authors' goals in a given genre space, depending on their purposes in consuming media. It may simply be to be entertained, which requires playing by the rules set by the genre and the author for that particular text—recognizing what the author is doing, getting pleasure from that recognition, and participating in the temporary illusion of the text by responding appropriately. Other audiences may create other goals, but still in the same playfulness of the genre space's nature; one may seek to subvert the text by reading it ironically (if it is not an ironic text), or one may seek to adapt the text into something else, or one may seek to use the text as a tool to enter into another authorial activity, such as fanfiction or cosplay, which are governed by overlapping but distinct rules.

At any rate, “winning” the game is only a temporary state in which a participant succeeds in a goal “for now” in their participation in the genre space, and as a participant's roles may change as he or she moves within the genre space, so also will his or her goals, along with any applicable rules, although all the rules of the genre space (mutable though they are) are available to any participant at any time. To return to the *D&D* game model, this is not unlike the choice of books available to a player at any given time; a dungeon master, who is arguably the most authorial figure in the space, requires access to most of the “core” books, as well as any relevant to the campaign he has either designed or chosen to run; this requires having available rules for players, non-player characters, monsters, weapons, and other elements. The other players, however, may only require a players' manual, which is a shortened version of the rules including only those most relevant to those who are “role-playing” a character. Likewise, in a genre space,

certain participants will be “experts”, like the DM, and have more access to the rules of the genre, and indeed may have studied them explicitly as an expert in baseball (such as a professional coach or player), while other participants are more casually engaged and have access to a more limited understanding of rules, such as the other players in the *D&D* game or children playing baseball in the park. In the case of the latter participants, these orally transmitted or abbreviated rules are *sufficient* for their participation, and the game is no less enjoyable for them as a result, and their participation in the magic circle is recognizable as such no less than the participation of the experts.

Ultimately, though, the game is “won” when a participant has combined what Cawelti calls invention and convention: “conventions are elements which are known to both the creator and his audience beforehand... Inventions, on the other hand, are elements which are uniquely imagined by the creator” (71). Thus, the goal of the game is to balance conventions and inventions, and to do so in a way that earns recognition by other participants. In essence, to win the game in a genre space, one must become an author, but not in the sense of necessarily being a published author (though many of the participants I have studied see that as their own goal), but to gain authorship in the sense that Aarseth describes, in which authorship “means to have configurative power over not merely content but also over a work’s genre and form” (164). In a genre space, then, the goal is to participate fluently, to be able to respond to texts and generate texts as desired, and to use rules to one’s advantage rather than to see them as hindrances.

#### **4.4 Genre and the Soundscape: Music in Fantasy Genre Spaces**

In an opening post, one member of Community A asks: “Do you listen to music for ideas?” (P421). As in most threads in Community A, the participant is assuming that they are speaking to people who self-identify as fantasy writers, and in this case is asking about writing process. Underneath this are at least two assumptions: first that authors need “ideas” or to, as the writer later clarifies, “unlock your imagination”; second, that music is potentially part of the composition process for a fantasy author.

In the subsequent conversation, many members of Community A admit to using music as part of their writing process, and specify (as requested) exactly what they do with the music in that process. Although references to music are one of the rarer media attributions in the corpus, conversations such as this one (there are others) suggest that at a deep, almost unconscious level, there is a soundtrack to the fantasy genre space, and these conversations reveal assumptions about familiarity. That is, music is perceived *so ubiquitous* in fantasy that, for the most part, it needn’t be even discussed; it is background noise, essential for establishing the genre space, but completely unnecessary to draw attention to, as it’s more or less uncontroversial.

#### **How We Know that Music Matters**

At the surface macro level, which I have already used to argue the transmediality of genre based on the frequency of references to film and other media besides written literature in spaces explicitly dedicated to written media, music seems fairly insignificant; so insignificant, in fact, that I have lumped it with visual art in my analysis, and indeed this chapter could just as easily have been about visual art for many of the reasons that it is about music: visual art appears seldom as a reference, yet is accorded great regard when brought up, and seems to be nearly universally used as an accompaniment for other, more prestigious media in the fantasy space. As

noted in previous sections, music and visual art *combined* appear only at a rate of 31 instances per 100 documents in the corpus, which seems meager compared to film's 80 instances per 100 documents, or even history's 44.

In light of this, however, it is necessary to examine *what* is being said about music when music *is* attributed in conversation, as well as what is *not* being said when examining the corpus as a whole. In this case, I argue that the low occurrence of attributions to music (and visual art) suggest not that these media are unimportant, but rather that they are taken for granted as a function of their low prestige and high ubiquity, and as such are likely powerful enforcers of the ideological system that underpins the fantasy genre space. Moreover, when music does come up in the corpus, it is generally in questions of how more prestigious written media is produced, or in questions about the value of more powerful film media as an evaluative criterion. As in the example at the beginning of this section, in which a participant asks if other participants use music to “unlock your imagination”, music is seen largely as a tool—notably, in the very first response, another participant cites specific instances of music being used as inspiration for stories and characters, but also includes in their response other media: “the book I'm currently trying to publish had NO musical inspirations. It was influenced entirely by comics, video games, and other narrative works. In other words, I don't necessarily need music to create--it just gives a little direction” (P421). Thus, although music appears as an attribution less often than games, it is nevertheless seen as equal to games as just another tool in service of the more prestigious writing medium. Yet it's a little more than just another tool like any other media; games have their own space in Community A, as they're seen as fairly prestigious and noticeable, but the power of music is largely invisible. There is no music space in Community A, and while Community B frequently discusses the quality of audiobooks or considers the value of



film, its participants seldom even discuss music except where it is a distraction. Rather, it functions in the background. When these discussions about the importance of music in the composition process come up, there is a consistent theme that many writers use music as a part of their writing environment, in the same way they use reading as practice for writing, or film as inspiration, or any other media influence on their processes. Indeed, it is often the *only* media that is in use *during* the composition process—and it is evident from these conversations, in which participants discuss their musical selection processes, that a lot of thought goes into just what *sort* of music is appropriate in a fantasy author's (broadly defined) composition environment, music that must in some way be connected to the task of generating genre-appropriate output.

### **How Participants Interact with Music**

The manner in which participants interact with music is both symptomatic of how music is generally used in contemporary media-saturated culture and the influence of multimedia texts on the genre space. It is, of course, common practice for people to listen to music while doing other activities, and in this case writing or other generational activities in the genre space are no different. However, more telling about the nature of genre in this case, is that the use of music not only is background to the activity of composition, but rather integral as part of the composition process for many participants in these communities. Thus, the way that participants in the fantasy communities under study here see music is very much the same role that soundtracks play in film, television, and video games: it is omnipresent and generally background material, barely noticed at a conscious level, but nevertheless significant as a way to set tone, establish boundaries for the text and its relationship to genres, developing characters, and otherwise contributing significant conventional and inventional material to texts, even when

the musical media makes no actual appearance in the texts and would be generally untraceable in the finished products in most cases. In many cases, participants don't consider this background music an actual influence in their work, as in the following descriptions of how individual participants arrange their environments when they are working on composing texts:

“Before I write I make sure I'm comfortable. There's nothing to distract me or pull me away from the story. I have a drink and a snack in arm's reach, I have music or a movie or some enjoyable noise in the background.”

“Before I write or edit/revise, I like to pray for help and inspiration to do so. I also like to listen to music while I write, things like Enya and Globus, or other music I may have. I am totally into the epic, dramatic-feeling music.”

“I usually try to write at night, not sure why but it helps. Also, a little bit of alcohol never hurts in my case; that and some nice, smooth electronica.”

“Sometimes, I'm listening to a particular piece of music, singing along, and then it hits me once more, that strange metaphysical hand of my book reaches me, and once more I find myself sitting in front of my computer and typing away”

“I can not [sic] listen to music while I write because it distracts me too much. So I might listen to something before I write to get me in the mood. If I feel I want to write something epic, I'll listen to Two Steps From Hell.”

“If I am about to write a specific scene and it is violent or in the middle of a big battle I'll listen to something heavy like Pantera, Messhuggah, Lamb of God, Behemoth, etc. But sometimes I like to mellow and and [sic] listen to Tycho (very ambient and calming tunes)”

“I just listen to music. I find it easiest to listen to instrumental music (movie soundtracks, mostly) while writing prose, but when I'm coding, I'll listen to anything on my playlist. For some reason, listening to words with lyrics distracts me when I'm writing” (P595)

The notion that lyrics distract from writing is very common when music is used as background, and although the participants offer little in the way of explanation (but enough in the way of affirmation) for this phenomenon that many participants experience, it seems a reasonable argument for the influence of the music, even if the influence is not overtly acknowledged. It is not *merely* background, no more than the soundtrack of a film or the set dressing of a play is; it is an integral part of the composition process, and expresses itself in the author's work in some way (or, as in this case, interferes with it). Likewise, the *choice* of music expressed in these participants' descriptions of their use of music in the composition process is significant: they

choose music they see as somehow relevant to the genre at hand. The most commonly referenced genres of music in the fantasy genre space are metal (in the above examples, Pantera or Lamb of God), Celtic/new age (Enya), soundtracks (Two Steps from Hell, a group that regularly makes soundtracks for film trailers), and electronica (Tycho). These are in some way associated with the fantasy genre space, and the participants name these groups with the assumption that other members in the community are likely to recognize the names without need for explanation.

Notably, the genres of music<sup>25</sup> that are commonly encountered in fantasy genre spaces exhibit many of the values that the fantasy genre itself seems to exhibit: “epicness”, the veneer of historicity (especially the medieval), power, masculinity<sup>26</sup>, and the supernatural, for instance. Indeed, the soundtracks that are selected are also generally from films that have some role in the fantasy genre space—especially from Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, for instance, which likewise conforms to the values and musical associations mentioned above. Thus, these soundtracks have been pre-selected to be part of the fantasy genre space, and specifically composed for that use; generally participants are not using soundtracks from genres seen as irrelevant to the space, such as the romantic comedy; or, at the very least, they are not admitting to using such soundtracks, nor any “unsuitable” genre of music, as doing so would harm a participant’s personal prestige in the space.

Indeed, where the soundscape is not coming from is nearly as significant as where it is coming from. Although issues of race, gender, sexuality, and culture are significant and much-discussed in the fantasy genre space, the overall whiteness, westernness, appropriation, and masculinity of the soundscape goes entirely unchallenged—less challenged even than the

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<sup>25</sup> Although I have defined genre as transmedial, that the term “genre” here must apply in both the transmedial sense (fantasy genre) and the monomedial sense (music genre), as this is the commonly understood usage.

<sup>26</sup> With the exception, perhaps, of Celtic/new age.

illustrations and visual artwork that pervade the genre space and emphasize these traits as well, which are often challenged for sexualizing women (especially with “impractical armor”) and excluding people of color. Although many participants will claim to consume “exotic” music—Asian or Celtic, for instance—they will do so for its exoticism, and it is not taken for granted as mainstream western music is, especially that with classical<sup>27</sup> roots. Excluded from this space are musical genres associated with minority groups or lower socio-economic in western cultures: rap, hip-hop, pop, jazz, country, etc.

Moreover, this soundscape that is dominated by white, middle class masculinity is being openly drawn upon for character development, world building, interpretation, themes, and other inspiration by participants in the genre space. As such, it is characterizing the fantasy genre along these lines, and doing so largely without explicit acknowledgement or criticism. It is, at least in the case of fantasy, in the soundscape that we see the deepest assumptions about genre; arguably, this easily applies to other large genre spaces, such as the academic genre space that is generally dominated by likewise western and masculine music genres, such as classical, while any study of the excluded musical genres tends to be relegated to “pop culture studies” or “folklore studies”, enforcing a barrier between the popular and the academic.

### **What the Soundscape Means**

For the purposes of understanding the nature of genre, it is sufficient to say that the soundscape is yet another case of the transmediality of the genre space, along with its associative and recognizable properties. The values and motifs found in the soundscape move tacitly from sound to page, canvas, or code, often without even acknowledgement as the move is so

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<sup>27</sup> Classical here in the musical sense, referring to neo-classical movements in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in which western tonality and music theory was codified, and from which most western music such as rock and metal derive.

ubiquitous as to be merely background to the participants. However, the sound itself is selected through recognizability and association. The music that is most commonly included in the soundscape of fantasy is that which is recognized as suitable, as somehow marked as “fantastic”; the recognition is largely through association. For instance, Enya might be included through association of the Celtic with the supernatural (an association that will be addressed in a later section) and through association of the supernatural with fantasy; moreover, Enya is associated with *The Lord of the Rings*, having performed a piece for it, and also through *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy’s extensive use of Celtic imagery and sound motifs—Celtic knotwork associated with the elven-made objects, Celtic singing styles and modes used in the soundtrack, and so forth. Likewise, metal music regularly uses the same martial imagery and definitions of masculinity that are to be found in “epic” fantasy, notions of heroism through violence and self-reliance, and a good vs evil theme; thus, it is suitable for inclusion in the genre space through its association with the most prestigious of fantasy genres, the “epic” fantasy. Indeed, the musical groups and styles most referenced use a variety of transmedial ways of marking themselves as suitable for inclusion in the fantasy genre space, ranging from specific musical modes to lyrics derived from the same genre-appropriate lexicon to cover art that matches the fantasy genre’s oeuvre.

In fairness, there is some selection bias involved in the choice of music; as the participants in this study are those who identify strongly enough with the fantasy genre that they are active members of communities dedicated to the same, no doubt their preferences will tend to run along the same lines in any space of their lives. However, it is nevertheless significant that music, which is generally omitted from these discussions of fantasy media for not being sufficiently narrative (despite the prevalence of narrative lyrics in the more fantasy-marked sub-

genres of metal and Celtic music), still exhibits selection along the same criteria as other kinds of texts in the space. Music mentioned freely in discussions in these spaces must be in some way sufficiently recognizable as fantasy to be mentioned without apology, in the same way that, as mentioned in previous sections, participants feel compelled make some kind of apology or explanation for consuming narrative media that is not fantasy.

Indeed, the producers of music included in the fantasy genre space are aware of the need to be recognizable, as evidenced by the metatextual signals that these musical groups use to mark their work, such as their official band pictures, cover art, or names. Consider, for instance, Figure 1, in which I compare the publicity poster for Peter Jackson's 2001 *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* and the cover art for the power metal band Falconer's 2002 album *Chapters from a Vale Forlorn*. Although in terms of literal content these objects are entirely unrelated, and they are governed by separate sets of conventions as their media-bound genres demand (different aspect ratios, different requirements for providing metatextual information, and so forth), these are remarkably similar visual texts. The placement of objects in the visual field in both cases creates similarly shaped arcs, suggesting symmetry and a sort of gothic arch. Both are produced in the same green-dominated earth tones palette (not reproduced here for technical reasons), and both employ the same sort of lighting and coloring effects, with an emphasis on the reflectiveness of metals and the radiance of light sources in a sort of hazy fog. Both utilize foreground and background in similar ways with an almost sublime emphasis on landscape, which is remarkable considering the emphasis on characters in the *Lord of the Rings* poster, but the overall effect is to create a sense of distance, generated in the poster by the approaching riders in contrast to the towering character images, and in the album cover by the contrast between the darkened candle-lit room and the wide expanse in the window. Yet in

content between the film and the album represented by these images, there is very little in common save for being recognizable as fantasy with little mistake.

A further visual analysis of other pairs would reveal similar structural unity; as I have mentioned, color palettes and other visual structures tend to be dictated largely by conventions of the genre space, and fantasy in particular tends to favor cool colors, earth tones, and splashes of jewel tones to indicate the supernatural, along with shining metals and reflective surfaces and an emphasis on contrasts between light and dark, as in Figure 1. What matters here, though, is less what the similarities are, and more that the similarities—though often subconscious—are recognized as triggers for the genre, and thus are criteria for inclusion in the genre space; and, perhaps more significantly, signify to those who would consume the texts what sort of values the text will espouse and what sort of motifs it will utilize as a function of its generic associations, setting up the audience’s framework for interpreting the text appropriately and letting the



Figure 10 - Comparison of a Movie Poster and an Album Cover

audience know what uses are appropriate for that text. In this case, these texts are marking themselves as consistent with other motifs and themes acceptable in fantasy spaces, such as trees, supernatural elements, the mythological, “epicness”, warriors, and so on. Moreover, both the texts represented in this example exhibit the qualities that translate these genre motifs and values into sound: celtic influences, full orchestral instrumentation that emphasizes flutes, horns, and plucked strings, modes outside the usual major and minor most common in modern music to signify antiquity, and so forth. While the soundtrack of *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy has little in common with the power metal sound of Falconer at first glance (or listen), they are nevertheless occupants of the same genre space, and use many similar markers to indicate their status within the genre.

## **Conclusions**

Like visual art in the fantasy space, sound is more or less background, but as background it is ubiquitous and serves to delineate the genre space and its ideology. As I have argued in this section, the instrumentation of the fantasy genre space privileges the old, the traditional, and what is deemed “epic” or “heroic” in western culture—sweeping and grand—with disdain for other popular genres, especially those seen as too common or modern, such as hip-hop, rap, or pop, even though there is substantial room for *some* modernity, as seen in the preference for metal and electronica. It is modernity that *remixes* the traditional rather than modernity that replaces or rejects it, or at least that is the perception of it.

Most significantly, however, is that in a given genre space there are things that are so ubiquitous as to be nearly invisible, such as sound is for fantasy. These ubiquitous elements can be best seen when participants, in efforts to establish their own normality and subsequent authority in the space, ask if what they are doing is “normal”—in this case, we have seen it when



participants ask if it is normal to use music to develop characters or to delineate a writing space, which, apparently, it is.

## 4.5 Fantasy and Historicity

Although the name *fantasy* would suggest the fantastic, unreal, and implausible as key features of the genre space—and, indeed, *magic* is the most commonly named convention in association with fantasy in my research—the values expressed by participants in this study suggest instead that what is sought in fantasy isn't the fantastic so much as the plausible. As I have mentioned, the most frequently expressed values used for evaluating or expressing fantasy are research, worldbuilding (that is, systematizing the fantastic elements of a given imagined setting), scientific plausibility, character building, and realism. Originality is statistically equal to historical plausibility and believability, and fantasticism, exoticism, or even escapism completely fail to appear in the 20 most frequently expressed values, despite appearing frequently in explicit definitions of fantasy. Here is a fundamental tension: participants in the genre space want fantasy to be fantastic by definition, yet they evaluate texts within the genre space on standards of believability, plausibility, and research.

This tension, however, is not unique to fantasy, even if it might be at perhaps the most visible level in fantasy spaces. The tension between realism as an evaluative criterion and the desire for escapism in fiction has been observed in countless other studies of the aesthetics of narrative, ranging from Coleridge's coining of the regularly-referenced (in fantasy) "suspension of disbelief" to the most recent of research into fandom. This tension accounts for some of the oddest characteristics of fantasy, such as the recurring question "Did they really have that back then?" in regards to a fictional work set in an imagined setting. Behind this question—and underneath the tension between historicity and originality—is the assumption that works in high fantasy, sword and sorcery fantasy, or traditional fantasy (that is, those that are not "urban

fantasy” or “portal fantasy”<sup>28</sup>) have a medievalized or “pseudo-medieval” setting, as some members of the communities under study have termed it. In fact, medieval setting as a defining convention of fantasy appears 136 times, putting it on par with elves as a clear trigger for the recognition of fantasy genre in a text, and significantly more common than the term “fantasy setting”, which appears 87 times.

Yet the use of the imagined and presupposed version of a specific time period is hardly unique to the fantasy genre, and has been closely studied in other genre spaces; indeed, it might be expected to become even *more* common, as more time periods undergo what may be termed a sort of generic colonialism, such as the steampunk genre’s romanticization of the Victorian period. When taken up in such a genre space, texts original to the target time period take on a new use-value for the participants in the genre space, not in the way that historians might view the texts as a primary source, nor as literary scholars might view it as an authority and a cultural landmark, but rather the text becomes a treasure chest for plundering, and thus subject to a wide range of interpretive strategies and tactics, subsumed into the genre space and transformed into what the participants of the genre space need it to be to justify their perceptions of the target time period or to construct their fluid genealogies of the genre. In the process of this construction, the target time period of the genre space itself becomes constructed *as a genre*, here the process of periodization, subject to the same rules as any genre space, so that what matters most in representation is the position of the representation against the constructed idea of the period itself. Although participants in the genre space debate historical accuracy quite a bit and are quite convinced of the value of their research, what matters in the genre space is actually the perceived

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<sup>28</sup> Urban fantasy is that which is set in a modern setting, but nevertheless has other fantasy elements such as magic (the *Dresden Files* by Jim Butcher, for instance); portal fantasy is fantasy in which the main character travels between the “real world” and a fantasy world, such as in C.S. Lewis’s *Narnia* books.

historicity of the genre space rather than the strict history value as a historian would understand it.

### **Periodization, Genrefication, and the Conflation of Time**

To say “the medieval” is to conflate a period of nearly a millennium (depending on whose definition one uses) into one homogenous unit; this is the process of periodization. A historian will make distinctions between different sub-periods, but anything associated with the broader period (even if wrongly so, from a strictly historical view) is suitable for use in discussion or texts in the genre space. Indeed, it is not necessary that the historical time period referenced in a genre-space actually ever existed; the genre space *creates* the time period of its own accord. Thus, there is a period for science fiction, even though the period is generally in the future—nevertheless, there are characterizations of that particular future in the same way that periodicization seeks to establish a unified feel for a given space of historical time, even though in reality history is fluid and disparate.

Much attention has already been given in the field of film studies to the relationship between cultural narratives and the Western as a genre, including ground-breaking work on the nature of popular genres as a “tacit ‘contract’... established through the reciprocal studio-audience relationship” (Schatz 93), work on which much of this study has been founded with its emphasis on audience reception and interaction. Stephen Neale argues that “genre films and their conventions tend to be collapsed into the ‘reality’ which is held to motivate them. Hence, two impulses are constantly at odds, their mutual incidence engendering a further set of contradictions, most notably between general statements with regard to a genre and its socio-historical ‘roots’ and particular analyses of specific genre films and conventions” (15-16). He further notes that Ed Buscombe has argued that any attempt to hold the Western against its

American historical “roots” will fall apart, since “the specificity of the genre [should] be located within the ‘outer form of visual conventions’ rather than within the particular relation a genre like the western may have with socio-historical reality” (Neale 16). Here, I am arguing that the mistake Buscombe is pointing out, and Neale with him, is the mistaking the period for the reality. The period is a socially constructed object, a mythological past with either a clear beginning and end and no relation to any other period, or with no beginning or end but a timelessness only possible in the epic and the myth. The period is, in essence, a genre space of its own, subject to the same sort of interplay of convention and innovation already discussed in previous sections regarding the relationship between genre, audience, text, and author. That is, perceived history becomes genre function (to use Bawarshi’s term)—there is, then, *period function* that is closely tied to certain genre functions, and is used in any popular representation of a given period, even when that representation attempts historical accuracy. This perceived historical period is what I mean by historicity.

Much of what gets included in fantasy genre texts, then, is dictated not by history, but by historicity. Consider, for instance, this participant discussing the decision of what sort of dialectal markers to include in dialogue in a fictional novel, presumably set in a fictional world:

it's all supposed to be a translation, anyway; I'm not expecting that my characters speak English. So I can assume that the translation includes turning their colloquialisms into equivalents we would better understand. I do have my limits. But there are certain phrases that I'm pretty sure wouldn't have existed back then that I include for simplicity's sake. Such as "shooting the breeze."  
I like it much better this way, because before I settled on this style I'd be paralyzed over the decision of whether or not to have a character say "Okay" because it seemed too modern. Haha. (P1653)

This participant is, of course, not alone, especially in the final decision over the ubiquitous (but modern) idiom “okay”. It is notable, though, that often casualness is conflated with antiquity; in order to make the characters seem pre-modern, they are made to seem more formal, which

explains the objection to “okay” even further. These degrees of formality indicate further the way that historicity functions, and the alterity of the past: what is formal is unfamiliar, as one begins contact with an unknown person on formal terms, and thus the formal is pre-modern because the pre-modern is unfamiliar; what is informal is familiar, and thus modern is modern, because modernity is familiar. The key here is not, as this participant points out, a question of actual historical accuracy, but as perceiving the act of writing fiction as an act of translation, translating not only language but culture, and making active choices about how to represent even an imagined and fictive culture.

### **Controlling the Past**

Since popular genres, in constructing their tacit “contracts” with audiences and authors, which are agreed to upon entering the genre space, serve as a unifying construction and increasingly include periodicization in their contract, they serve to construct the received/perceived narrative of history. Again, this has already been studied extensively in film studies concerning the Western, which has served to codify the period of “the American West”—a period of time, like all periods subject to this process, that is bound both chronologically and geographically, but is also largely constructed through popular narrative in all its forms. Schatz notes that such an understanding of popular genre—for him, the genre film—posits these texts more as folklore than as literature in the traditional author-focused sense. Schatz argues that “This view of the genre film as a contemporary folktale leads us even further into an area of investigation that genre analysts have consistently recognized as important and yet have never profitably developed—the relationship of the genre film to myth” (94). This relationship is now fairly well accepted in some ways, and the notion of genre as social action or as contract supports his later assertion that “As numerous mythologists and also cultural and structural

anthropologists have recently observed... a ritualized form, whether religious or secular, does not *have* a myth; it *is* a myth—or rather it serves a mythic function” (95).

Schatz, writing before interactive media or fandoms really came to the forefront in media studies, could not have anticipated the *active* role that audiences now play publicly in the ritualized consumption of media, which is largely the process of mythologizing individual narratives as well as entire genre systems. The Western, as has been argued elsewhere, controls and constructs the American West, and, through that mythology, American identity and ideology. The Western has, since its heyday, shifted and transformed; no longer as clear as it was when Wright or Cawelti studied it, now it wrestles with complex issues in American identity such as race, slavery, colonialization, and so forth, yet it still serves to codify a particular period and the markers of the genre are still unmistakable: the gunslinger, the native warrior, and so forth.

Likewise, the fantasy genre codifies a mythology about the medieval (not the actual medieval, which is a subject for other studies and methods, but the constructed and mythologized medieval, that is). The difference between the fantasy genre’s and the Western’s controlling and constructing of a time period is that the fantasy genre is not generally recognized *as* a historically rooted genre, whereas the Western (and numerous other genres) are. As I discussed in earlier chapters, participants generally define fantasy in terms of its fantasticism, imagination, and escapism—that is, its disconnect from reality and realism. Nevertheless, it is rooted in a perception of a mythologized past, a past that is simpler, more hierarchical, and more mysterious, because it is veiled in the “medieval”. Like the mythic past in the epic, it is a past that never was but always is, a past with neither beginning nor end but has long since ended.

Despite not being considered a historical genre, fantasy is nevertheless recognized through triggers that mark a specific imagined period of history. Indeed, the potential damage done in fantasy is not the potential (and demonstrated) damage of the Western, which has completely ingrained a particular narrative as *the* narrative of American history, but rather of entirely erasing the medieval as fantastic and unreal; by marking anything considered (as opposed to actually) medieval as a trigger for “fantasy”, which itself is considered the “dark ages” and unworthy of serious attention except as something between great empires, the entire medieval space becomes dismissed as dark, mysterious, and beyond serious study. There is no unified narrative in fantasy the way that there is in the Western, since fantasy is a far more sprawling genre space, although there are recurring motifs that construct a suitable range of fantasy narratives: clear good vs. evil, for instance, or the rightful rulership of a hereditary king.

As I have argued already, research and realism is highly prized (to an extent) in the fantasy genre at present<sup>29</sup>; significantly, much of the research is done on existing historical cultures and constructs. However, the research is done through crowd-sourcing and informal, popular materials as much as it is through anything that would be recognized as reliable in academic work, so that the product of the research is a pastiche collage of vaguely medievalized stuff, valued more for its appearance of historicity than for its actual use of history. Figure 1 shows the 25 longest threads in the section of Community A’s boards designated for “research”, which Community A defines as “questions about history, mythology, customs and other real world subjects” (P1631). Here again can be seen the emphasis on realism and believability, including a popular thread about “Science! (Theoretical, Factual, or otherwise)” and several questions about armor, pre-modern weaponry, and injury or illness. Underneath these threads is

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<sup>29</sup> This study, of course, does not offer a history of the fantasy genre, but only a snapshot of fantasy as it exists at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



the assumption that anything old or traditional enough is suitable source material for fantasy, apt for blending as desired, but that anything dealing with the human body or basic common-sense perceptions of science must be accurate, realistic, and above all believable.

Doc ID	Thread Title (Community A)	Posts
P1193	Research > British Slang	61
P1321	Research > Armor through ages. Ask us anything.	43
P1646	Research > How would a knight in full armour climb down from the top of a mountain?	36
P1526	Research > So I Was Shot By An Arrow...	36
P269	Research > Ask me about Science! (Theoretical, Factual, or otherwise)	34
P1412	Research > LHF - Trying to understand an Obscure disease	31
P1645	Research > Burn Scars	29
P1558	Research > Judaism, beliefs, terminology, etc.	29
P1291	Research > Medieval sword fighting: realistic vs fantastic	27
P561	Research > Names / Legendary Spears	27
P1626	Research > Swords vs Axes	27
P1595	Research > Multi-cultural, multiracial Fantasy races	26
P1255	Research > Can solar systems orbit one another?	25
P1559	Research > Hybrid creatures, sterile?	25
P1611	Research > Fair and Dark creatures - Any thoughts?	24
P369	Research > The Why of Weapons: The Great Sword of War	24
P1591	Research > Do you care about Psychology?	23
P439	Research > Gladiators - a few questions	23
P1164	Research > Two Science/Astronomy questions	23
P1091	Research > Ask me about Horses	22
P513	Research > Boat Speed?	22
P955	Research > Medieval and 19th Century fashion	22
P1625	Research > Reasons To Start Large-Scale Conflicts	22
P1077	Research > Food for a Journey	21
P1612	Research > What was the cost of a room at an inn in England in the 1890's?	20

Figure 11- Table of longest threads in the research board of Community A

Interestingly, this table also shows us a glimpse of a process that is happening in the fantasy space that has not been observed in other popular genres such as the Western: fantasy's historicity purview is *expanding*. Where previously the 19<sup>th</sup> century was considered too modern for fantasy, or perhaps too urban for traditional fantasy, it is now included as an addenda to the medieval, consuming the early modern period and even later modern periods into the medieval, as in the thread "Medieval [sic] and 19<sup>th</sup> Century fashion". The OP (original post/poster) in this thread is fully aware that the title covers an inordinately long period, and makes distinctions throughout the thread according to period, but at the same time anticipates that these distinctions are not always needed, wanted, or recognized by members of the fantasy space. The OP writes:

Medieval and 19th Century fashion

It's something I've looked into so much it hurts. I know my stockings from my hosen, my tunic from my toga, and my fishtail from my bustle skirt. I know I'm new on here, but if anyone is struggling with cultural fashion or clothing vernacular, I'm here! :D

P.S. I know a thing or two about fashion in the centuries between, too.

This is a fairly typical offer for help in such a community; the OP offers no concrete credentials save "I've looked into" it, nor are any needed. The examples the OP provides of garments are chosen to be contrastive pairs, but they also belie the conflation of time here: a toga (ancient) is no different in utility for a fantasy writer than a bustle (19<sup>th</sup> century). Tellingly, the first questions concern "medieval or early modern European" nobility and corsets; common motifs in the fantasy space, with its concern for nobility and intrigue and with its renaissance fair-style sense of history. Although later discussion in the thread does make distinction between periods and acknowledge the rapidity of fashion change throughout the medieval and early modern periods, it is significant that the initial approach of the thread makes no effort, nor does anyone complain about any conflation. The question isn't how to make anything accurate to a specific

time period, but rather to make it believable to a specific genre space's construction of the mythic past by tying material loosely to a real past.

The construction of a mythic, exotic medieval is hardly unique to fantasy and is, in fact, a larger trend that has been well observed in medieval studies by researchers such as John Degenais and Margaret Greer, Catherine Brown, Bruce Holsinger, Hans Robert Jauss, and others. According to these scholars, the medieval is set up as a temporal "other" against which modernity can justify itself through the same mechanisms that postcolonial theory describes empires using to colonize synchronous spaces and establish a "civilized" center with a "savage" other and conflicted marginal spaces of contact. Temporally, as we see in the expansion of the medieval above to include the early modern and even the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these marginalized zones of contact are the very origins of modernity: the invention of the printing press, the 19<sup>th</sup> century spread of photography, the easy access to gunpowder, and other technological advances used to create a narrative for forward-moving progress toward the present modernity as center. Fantasy, then, is a space that explores these margins, but does so safely from the center, conflating everything beyond the clarity of media memory as a hazy temporal outerworld where things are different and alien, and thus magical, exotic, and escapist.

The medieval in fantasy serves, then, not only as an escape into fancy but also as a way of constructing something that fills a mythic function. At present, there is much discussion of "gritty" fantasy, or even a sub-genre called "grim-dark", which is generally attributed to fantasy with low magic and high violence, such as that by Joe Abercrombie or George R.R. Martin, in which good and evil are not as clear and there is an emphasis on the gruesome aspects of conflict, corruption, and other forms of violence. As a genre term, "grim-dark" appears only 39 times (22 times it is defined, and it is named as a convention 17 times); however, the elements of

grim-dark combined, *gritty* and *dark*, combined appear as a value 58 times (value: *gritty*, 23; value: *dark*, 36), making this system of unpleasantness, variously described by participants, as significant in the fantasy space as values such as pacing (55), storytelling (52), and humor (59), and more significant than having a meaningful theme (42) or likeable characters (42). Separately, these terms do seem to have slightly different meanings: *gritty* seems to be more a characterization of the representation in the narrative, such as describing battle wounds in detail or having characters who curse; *dark* seems to be more about the thematic or plot content of a narrative, such as having stories in which good does not prevail (or is entirely absent) or stories about widespread corruption, torture, rape, or other unpleasant concepts. Nevertheless, the combination, along with the apparent meaning of “realism” for many participants as meaning that there is no clear force of good, suggests that part of what is currently valued in fantasy is not the black-and-white good vs evil of “high fantasy”, but a sense of historicity tied to a narrative space that is bleak, dirty, and amoral. Or, when there is clear good and evil, the good is generally represented as human, while evil is generally represented as other and wholly evil by nature, as in most “epic” or “high” fantasy, according to participants.

Altogether, this presents an othered (alter) medieval space, in which time is paused by conflation, and which is wholly brutal and disorganized, “savage” even. On the other hand, “traditional fantasy”, to which the grim-dark trend is responding, has been understood as portraying this mythic past as an idyllic place in which morality is simple, and as a source of arcane spirituality and knowledge that has been lost to modernity’s complexity. This contradiction in fantasy is not unexpected if fantasy is, as a genre, an expression of othering, nor is it unprecedented either in postcolonial studies or in media studies. The contradiction is present in the narrative of American history presented by the Western (which, notably, is a clearly

colonialist narrative, involving a marginalized native peoples being pushed out by Westerners of European descent), both nostalgia for a simpler time and triumph over a more primitive state into western modernity at the same time. Dagenais and Greer note that “temporal colonization is already inherent in the colonialist project, then: the colonized other is ‘primitive,’ exists in a past state opposed to the European present. Although we may inhabit different spaces, newly colonized lands and The Middle Ages inhabit the same time” (436). It is not uncommon for marginalized regions (from a Western perspective) to be called “medieval”, frequently as a shortcut term for brutality, as seen in fantasy carving out a space for the grim-dark. Indeed, fantasy texts can often be used as a justification for these perceptions of the medieval and of the medievalized Other that exists contemporaneously with the Western modern, precisely because it is the fantasy genre space that most shapes popular conception of the medieval.

When a person asks of a fantasy text “Did they really have that back then?” he is enfolded several assumptions, and perpetuating the othering. He assumes that fantasy is somehow historical, tied to a researchable past; he assumes that the mythological past of fantasy is to be conflated with the factual past of medieval history; he assumes that the medieval past, thus conflated, is a single “then”, rather than a complex sequence of “whens”; he assumes that the medieval is characterized by its lack of modernity and its trappings, rather than by its own responses to human problems; and he assumes that the author of the text is beholden to the same set of assumptions about the setting of the text that he is making in the question. Indeed, as Brown has argued concerning the construction of an Othered past in popular media, including fantasy, “if the Middle Ages hadn’t existed, people might have had to invent them, just so that we could safely be non-medieval, and have someplace exotic to fly to when modern life got too, well, modern. Or so that we could have a convenient Other against which to define ourselves”

(549-550). In fact, we *have* invented the Middle Ages; fantasy is that invention, and the past is re-invented with every act of worldbuilding (of which there are many, both by authors constructing an imagined world for their narratives and by fans systematizing a presented narrative's setting; worldbuilding appears as the second most prevalent value and the third most prevalent convention). And as points in the past grow more distant, they continue to be collapsed into that medieval by virtue of their seeming exoticism and distance from the centering present, which accounts for the addition of lace (an 18<sup>th</sup> century fashion) to supposedly medieval gowns, and for the collapsing of the 19<sup>th</sup> century into the purview of fantasy.

The mechanism for this collapse is the inclusive and expansive approach to “research” undertaken by members of the fantasy genre space, in which it is acceptable and even encouraged to pillage the past and put together any pastiche that is pleasing and entertaining, but it is also the repetition of media, the remediation of narratives into more modern aesthetics, and the appropriation of media that once was new and now is “literary” and antique, often without regard to its function in its own context. I do not argue that such appropriation of media is unacceptable; audience uptake is a natural process of media consumption, and part of the way that culture and language changes. It is, as Jauss has argued, simply impossible for a present-day audience to read a centuries-old text with the same aesthetic sense as the centuries-old audience may have done, because of the intervening centuries of textual change; indeed, Jauss argues that part of the pleasure of reading older texts is actually “that of pleasure through alterity” and that “for us medieval literature is even more alien than that of the antiquity which is further away in time,” largely due to humanistic and positivistic values that have canonized antiquity over the medieval, so that the medieval in fact seems new to readers (“Alterity” 187). It is, in fact, necessary that the genre of a text shifts over time, and as such the use-value of it, if the text is to

remain in use at all; the medieval, then, has fallen out of use in more positivistic times and returned as useful for escapism and alterity. Thus, when participants in this study—that is, people who are functioning within a fantasy genre space—read texts such as the *Illiad*, the Norse *Eddas*, and other pre-modern texts, they do so conflating them all into one space: source-material. There is no credence given to the divinities mentioned, nor attention paid to the poetics or prosody; certainly neither is performed, but both are read in isolation, in keeping with modern reading practices. Rather, they are plundered for narrative material: for names, for characters, for scenarios, and it is acceptable to mix and match as needed.

Moreover, in the process of this conflation and plundering, much social nuance is lost. Gothic novels are plundered for their representations of the medieval as easily as medieval narratives such as *lais* or Chaucer; perhaps more so for their accessibility to modern sensibilities, since a modern reader need not trouble with Middle English or translations to read a Gothic novel, nor be concerned significantly with different literacy practices, since by the time of the Gothic novel, reading in private and silence as an individual entertainment was fairly accepted and common. The trouble for the study of the medieval here comes in that this practice of plundering perpetuates perceptions of the medieval presented in Gothic novels, which quite explicitly and unquestionably have used the past as an Other against which the progress of modernity might be celebrated. It is no question, then, as to how it is that the fantasy genre tolerates such a range of conflation, in which Orientalist exoticism happily exists alongside temporal colonialism and any other mix of othering or alterity that is seen as pleasing in the rhetorical context at hand. Like academic entitlement, the fantasy genre space sees itself as entitled to examine and remediate any material it encounters if it does so in an appropriately fictive way.

The plundering applies not only to texts, but also to any cultural marker. In a way, this is liberating, in that fantasy need not be bound by the physiological realities of the present world; however, it is complicated by the way that these markers, as signifiers to both audiences and authors, are taken up in the fantasy space. Consider, for instance, this participant's description, in the midst of a discussion of race and other real-world issues in fantasy, justifies a pastiche of human physiological characteristics and cultural markers:

Fantasy is a nice genre to write in, because a fantasy world may not have the same issues as ours.

For instance, my MC is what most people would consider Native American, but I chose to give his culture a Celtic base, and make them the dominant society in their little corner of the world. Therefore his brownish skin and black hair is normal. However, when he heads north on the obligatory quest, he's suddenly and acutely in the minority among the northern people, who have fair skin and black or red hair.

Here, racial markers and cultural names are interchangeable, and it is significant that the cultures being blended here are those that are marginalized from the Anglicized Western center—one that is marginalized through modern colonialist processes, and the other that has historically been marginalized through pre-modern colonialist processes, meeting here together in an exoticized fantasy. While the participant offers this as an example from their own work of fantasy not needing to reflect the same cultural markers and attendant “issues” as reality, the description must, as a matter of communication if not assumption, be framed in cultural and racial markers that are attached to these real-world issues. This is not to dismiss the participant's reasoning or entitlement to create this fictive space; the participant argues further on that this combination tackles head-on thematic issues that the participant has experienced, including a shift from being in the center to being a member of a marginalized group. What is relevant here, though, is that despite any efforts in fantasy to escape cultural markers, fantasy must (if it is to be intelligible to an audience, if nothing else) include cultural markers, and where there is an expectation of real-



world parallelism in fantasy, it is impossible to remove entirely any significance in the inclusion or lack of inclusion of any particular relevant cultural markers.

Still, Brown is correct to point out that “medievalism will never affect the lives of medieval people as Orientalism has affected and continues to affect the lives of living people,” and the harm done in colonizing the past is comparatively minimal if we focus on the past (550). However, it is evident from this study (as discussed in a previous section) that fantasy is not “mere escapism” to any significant portion of participants, but rather has real-world meaning where issues of representation and cultural construction are concerned. If fantasy has a mythic function, then it is significant how that mythology presents the past of various peoples, even if only allegorically or by association.

### **The Value of Periodization**

Although the perceived history constructed in popular genres may (whether accidentally or strategically) omit or misinterpret key aspects of the historical period associated with the genre, and thus construct an imagined history in place of a more accurate or nuanced narrative, the perceived history and process of periodization carried out in genre spaces is an important way of building shared identity within the genre space and of mediating and justifying ludic rules within the genre space without requiring explicit enforcement; the historical narrative that dominates the space serves as a way of regulating these interactions as well as a way of identifying the boundaries of the genre space.

Returning to the “did they really have that back then” question, variations on this question are ways of regulating material introduced into the genre space and questioning its appropriateness. While “back then” here refers to a mythic past, without regard to anything but the perception of historicity, it nevertheless calls attention to and invites debate about some

minutiae of the ludic procedure, not unlike the option to require a player to look up a word in a dictionary in *Scrabble*. Moreover, by grounding the genre-space in a particular historical narrative, participants are able to actually open up the genre space to modification as values shift and the ideology codified by the genre's ludic rules systems requires revision. The criticism is notably not a correction, but an invitation to discussion, which fits well into the ludic model of genre, since rules are constantly under debate and any potential violation of a rule that is within a certain acceptable range is subject to defense as well.

Moreover, as Brown has pointed out, the harm done is limited; as long as the texts and expectations in the genre space are up for debate, remediation, and re-interpretation, participants in the genre space are free to reshape the narratives governing the genre space as needed. While there is real harm synchronously in the representations of cultures and races as reduced, exoticized elements, the simplicity of the narratives and the appeal of periodization makes the genre space accessible to a wider range of participants, who in turn, through the use of the genre space, transform the narratives and the genre space itself. When a participant justifies the use of material as "historical", the participant is participating in the periodization and shaping the narrative; moreover, the introduction of novel combinations and emerging understandings of the period(s) that trigger the genre is an action that garners authority in the genre space, and is thus desirable. While the processes of periodization are the same processes used to control identities as described in postcolonialist theory, the use of the processes does not intrinsically make the periodization negative. At present, the fantasy genre space is largely dominated by a white, European narrative of modernity and progress, for which fantasy narratives serve largely as a mythologized other from which that progress has emerged (or forgotten), there has always been an elegiac subversion of the narrative of progress in fantasy, largely dominated by the Anglo-

Saxon influence translated through Tolkien, and there remains through the increasing prevalence of Asian popular media and expanding subgenres in fantasy spaces an expanding place for decentralized narratives and nuance.

Periodization thus serves a function of unifying and codifying the narrative to which the ideology that frames the rules of the genre space, in order to create a cohesive space in which participants can play. Debates concerning historicity serve to establish and regulate these boundaries, but also as mechanisms for changing the boundaries.

## **Conclusion**

Fantasy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is characterized largely by medievalism, just as 20<sup>th</sup> century Westerns were characterized largely by their narrative of American history, as described by scholars in film studies. Nevertheless, it is through fantasy that most people understand “the medieval,” and, although the medieval is subject to many apparently othering processes in its role in fantasy, the fantasy genre space is not without its mechanisms for introducing nuance and discussion concerning its narratives about the medieval or its definitions of medieval. The fantasy genre space, like any ludic space, is characterized by tensions of contradictory objectives and values; in this case, nostalgia for simplicity and modernistic desire for complexity are at tension with each other, inviting into the gap between them the introduction of ever more cultural material, criticism, and nuance.

Any attempt at preserving original intentions or reconstructing all the nuances of any specific moment in the conflated medieval period will summarily be rejected from the space, since in the genre space texts and other material are subject to utilization by participants in accordance with the rules of the space. They are playing a game, not constructing a picture that is

meant to be an accurate representation; but in the process of playing the game, they are constructing identities and negotiating an ideology that is shaped out of the rules for the game.

## 5.0 Practical Applications and Discussions

In this section, I address two of the most significant applications of this study: how fantasy in specific, as a popular genre, mediates and interacts with significant social issues, and how instructors might incorporate this genre space model of genre into their curricula and classrooms. In the first case, the question of how race functions in fantasy gets to the core of the fantasy genre, what I have called the *generative tension*. In the second case, I illustrate how instructors might use the descriptivist framework I have been working in to help students become agents in their own rhetorical situations by feeling valued for their existing knowledge in the classroom initially.

## 5.1: Where Races Are Species, Where Is Race?

As discussed in the previous chapter, the practice and expectation of worldbuilding in the fantasy genre—and the concurrent practice of utilizing real-world material to generate these fictional spaces—comes with significant problems regarding representation. These problems do not disappear, as some participants would argue, when all mention of race or human culture is replaced with non-human (but generally humanoid) “fantasy races” such as elves, dwarfs, orcs, and so forth. In general, fantasy has historically erased notions of human race in favor of these fantasy races, but the erasure has been predominantly European-centered, so that while humans are the “default” race in most fantasy spaces, these humans are typically white, European, and medievalized; indeed, it is only in the most recent editions of *Dungeons & Dragons* (5e) that illustrations of humans as characters have included people of color, leaving four editions that completely erase the existence of people of color from the “human” default. Moreover, non-human races in fantasy have typically been homogenous in culture and appearance, and participants in fantasy are well aware of the possibility of fantasy races standing in for human races or cultures in an allegorical fashion; they are also well aware that this tendency in fantasy is problematic and, at the moment, undergoing significant changes that are sites of intense debate and negotiation in the genre space. Thus, ultimately, fantasy again exists both as a stabilizing, nostalgic space that oversimplifies but also as a space where constructs of race can be remediated, driven not only by social justice concerns but also the constant need for “freshness” and invention within the tradition of fantasy. While the default remains Euro-centric whiteness in humans with homogenous non-human races for exoticism and variety, the default is controversial and that controversy is generating criticism, remediation, and the generation of new materials for the fantasy space.

In general, fantasy races are essentialized, built around a few key aspects to characterize them. Consider, for instance, a thread in which the OP (original post/poster) asks “What’s your favorite race to play as” in games. In general, the construction of essentialized races from role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* persists into most narrative media in fantasy spaces, so this discussion easily applies beyond games. In typical fashion, the question is self-interested, as the OP is building an original game system, which includes “high races”, “middle races”, and “lesser races”, including goblins, and “different human cultures” (P1661). In this way, it is clear that human cultures are *equivalent* to entire non-human species, such as goblins, so that goblins are expected to have just one culture and form, yet human cultures are so distinct as to be codified into rules as *different species* to choose from, and frequently all or most of the races in a fantasy space can interbreed with humans, resulting in descriptions of such as “half-elf” (where the other half is presumed human). This participant’s set-up is hardly unique in fantasy, as indicated both by their question about other participants’ favorite races to play as, but also as indicated by the lack of explanation that the OP has to provide concerning the concept of race to approach the question.

There might be little trouble if these non-human races were entirely apart from human culture, but the features around which they are built often are human cultural features. Consider the OP’s later description of their planned races: “One of them will be the Samebito, a shark-like race based partly on Japanese mythology (they can breathe underwater).” In this description, the cultural parallelism is clear: here, the participant is borrowing from Japanese culture; but since the entire system is not all based on Japanese mythology, the result will be a pastiche with each race generally representing aspects associated with particular cultures or human races. Yet the invention of a shark-like race is welcomed with general approbation by other participants saying

such things as “I would play the heck out of that species”. More significantly, the shark-like race will be characterized according to essentialized traits: sharks are “known for coming out of nowhere, striking quick, striking hard, and disappearing back into the gloom,” so the Samebito here will be a race whose culture reflects those attributes and whose rules in the game optimize and all but require these strategies as gameplay<sup>30</sup>. Choosing a race, then, becomes choosing not only an appearance but a personality and a set of strategies for the duration of the game; in narrative, choosing a race becomes a quick shorthand characterization: the elf will be beautiful, magical and a good archer, while the dwarf will be swarthy, earthy, and good with an axe.

The use of mythology here is no mistake; this is a clear action for authority, and a common way of justifying the use of non-human races as essentialized species. In one of several discussions concerning the nature of fantasy races, and particular various versions of elves, a participant expresses a concern about using “svartalfar, or black elves, from Norse mythology; [while] their enemies are ljosalfar, or light elves, as well as Fae and Humans” because “the light elves are fairskinned and beautiful, while the black elves... are black-skinned and misshapen”, and the participant does not want to imply that the dark elves are the enemy in the story because they are dark-skinned. However, when another participant asks “Does it have to be a difference in skin color?”, the OP defends the choice by saying “I’m just going by what the original myths say” (P733). Indeed, although this justification is a common way of dismissing concerns and also of asserting one’s authority in the genre space, it is also one that, through various interpretations and translations of source material, frequently opens up the debate for correction by other

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<sup>30</sup> Notably the participants treat this Samebito as original, and focus on the construction of the Samebito according to their own characterization of sharks. Notably also it is sufficient for the OP to simply say “from Japanese folklore” even though this particular name seems to have a single authored source, if Wikipedia’s entry on Samebito is to be believed (and, given the nature of Wikipedia’s place in these communities, this entry is likely the source of the name, or at least a means of verifying it from other sources—this is, however, speculation in this case).



participants in the genre space. For instance, in this case, another participant then suggests that the OP's "translation is too literal. Svartalvar are dark elves, not black. I see that 'svart' translated as 'swarthy' and picture them more like coal miners" while another adds "Dark elves are dokkalfar, and I think they're another thing altogether. They're often confused with svartalvar", and there is some further debate on the matter in the thread.

The same sort of appeal to mythology appears elsewhere in the corpus: while discussing intellectual rights, one participant defends the use of "drow" or "dark elves" by saying "Drow existed in scandinavian [sic] mythology as 'Dock Alfar' – dark elves who lived underground and had nastier than usual dispositions... but their society and abilities were nothing like AD&D drow", while another in the same conversation argues that "Drow come from Shetlandic folklaw (I had to google that) which means you're safe using the term" (P995). This latter example is an excellent demonstration of how research as an action for authority functions in these genre spaces; what matters here is that there is precedent, and furthermore the presentation of that precedent need not be very exact. It is acceptable to simply use Google results with little criticism of them; what matters is that the parallel exists, not how accurate or close it is, because so long as the precedent is found and identified, the author of the particular representation of fantasy races at hand may deny culpability for any associations that are unwanted or unintended, and may also assume the authority that comes with remediating traditional folkloric material as one of the accepted strategies in the fantasy genre.

However, underneath the debate concerning source material, and the defense of the use of dark elves based on source material, lies another problematic tendency in the fantasy genre space, which is that generally good and evil are clearly marked, and they are marked by light and dark, respectively. In a similar conversation to the previously described one, another OP is

asking about including “Fair and Dark creatures” in a story, adding “I was wondering what people might think or say if all the bad creatures have dark skin? Because it’s obviously not my intention to be ‘racist’ or whatever”. Nevertheless, recent criticism on fantasy and science fiction has focused extensively on the problem of dark/light divisions as a problem of racial representation, operating under the notion that, as genre is generally associative, the pattern of dark/light reinforces cultural assumptions that dark skin is not as desirable as light skin, along with other Euro-centric motifs in fantasy. As one participant responds to the

Fair and Dark creatures” question, they explain that “This whole trope (black = bad, white – good) was one of the thing that got me to do scholarship about race in SFF 17 years ago. No one was even asking the question then. Now it is a topic that raises a lot of hot feelings and anger... Even if there were not a racial issue, characterizing any group of people as good or evil based on any one trait such as skin color removes a lot of complexity from the story and probably make it less interesting.

Likewise, another participant adds: “I think fantasy as a genre tends to rely heavily on white characters and “other races”. Like... few books have true dark-skinned human heroes. If they’re dark-skinned, they tend to be other than human.” Thus, there is a growing sense among participants in the fantasy genre that racial matters have been largely ignored, and moreover that the social *function* of “fantasy races” is more as a stand-in for the Other than as entities of their own.

In this sense, there are two competing use-values for fantasy, both in a somewhat escapist mode: the first, and likely the most traditional, is a space where human racial tensions (and other social concerns) can be comfortably ignored, erased and hidden behind a curtain of fantasy races and alternate worlds; the second, which is no doubt becoming more common given the self-described increase in diverse representation in fantasy genre spaces, is as a space where racial tensions and other social concerns might be played out in ways that might suggest an alternative way of being and propose changes to existing real-world ideologies by playing with notions of

race (or gender or other social constructs) in a safer space where the veil of irreality allows participants to discuss constructs through criticism of texts concerning fictional spaces rather than through social criticism concerning real divisions. In fact, this second role could *not* exist without the first role providing plausible deniability for the participants who are using their participation in the fantasy space for the second purpose; in this way, if participants come under uncomfortable or dangerous criticism, they can deflect the criticism by saying “it’s only fantasy” and appealing to the first escapist function, in which real-world issues may be ignored entirely. Indeed, a single text performs both functions as long as it is recognized as fantasy; in this sense, fantasy as a genre has taken up much the same social role as allegory has had in other eras.

Indeed, the tension between a desire to maintain the escapist capacity of fantasy and the need for more nuanced representation is one of the most significant engines of change in the fantasy genre space at the moment, and demonstrates precisely “the conscious effort of individuals to fill a previously unmet need” that Carolyn Miller and Dawn Shepherd suggest is one of the ways that genres change in an almost ecological way resembling evolution. Moreover, as fantasy races are fairly codified, they serve as a mythos that unifies the fantasy genre space and makes the rules of engagement fairly clear. As participants in the study note, it is acceptable to change fantasy races to make them unique to the story, but only so far; it is *useful* to include the existing fantasy races because they are recognizable:

You can casually mention elves in passing, and the reader knows pretty much what you mean (pointy ears, live in trees, archers, etc), so you don’t have to describe them in detail. It’s shorthand, so an author can get straight down to the plot. And throw in little twist (hey, my elves live underground/can fly/are green and ugly! Look, I’m subverting the trope!) (P722).

This description also highlights the tension between convention and invention, in which participants want to be both recognizable as fantasy but also noticed for originality. Thus, the inclusion of fantasy races becomes a study in signification; which elements will successfully

trigger recognition of, say, an elf and therefore must be included by the author, and which elements are free-floating and modifiable for the author's purposes. Successful authors in the genre space recognize this tension and utilize it; unsuccessful authors may make the same attempt, but fail to select the correct elements. As in many game spaces, the larger the gamble and stakes, the greater the return if the attempt is successful: when an author is recognized as truly "original" in the use of a fantasy race, the text is more likely to be popular and respected in the space, whereas a text likewise might be more rejected for the very same level of risk if the wrong signifiers are selected and audience members either fail to recognize the presentation as a fantasy race or recognize it as either a failed attempt or a different sort of fantasy race that might be seen as inappropriate for the space. A smaller risk—that is, using a fantasy race almost exactly as it appears in the *Dungeons & Dragons* manuals' descriptions, for instance—will be more likely accepted in the genre space, but also will not be recognized as original and therefore gain less prestige. Although this calculation is not necessarily conscious for authors in the space, it is always present, a feature of enacting the rules of a genre space: as Van Dijk argues, "language users are 'doing' all these things at the same time, even without being aware of that", negotiating power and taking calculated actions to gain authority of either kind within the rule systems at their disposal (*Social Action* 5).

As the ideology expressed by the fantasy genre changes to meet social needs, new rules are introduced into the space governing the use of fantasy races. In particular, there is a sharp increase in the explicit concern over representations of race and gender in fantasy spaces; even as any mythology is seen as acceptable for plundering and inclusion in the expansive act of "research" in fantasy spaces, seemingly opening up the space to even more acts of appropriation and erasure, there is harsher criticism of racial representation in fantasy races, requiring

participants to adjust how races are constructed in order to accommodate real-world racial markers and how these markers might be understood by readers who are increasingly aware of race as a construct that can be applied problematically<sup>31</sup>. The following exchange between participants in a conversation about character description exemplifies this tension and awareness:

Quote<sup>32</sup>:

*I do believe that modern Western society's cowardly stance towards racial discussions reinforces many writers' reluctance to describe their characters physically. When one of my aunts taught as a schoolteacher, she read an excerpt from a book which simply mentioned the characters' skin colors, and one of the students cried racism. The irony is that this kind of phony "colorblindness" that tells people not to mention skin color actually strengthens white privilege, because it means you can't describe a person as anything other than the white default.*

Not to turn this into another "Sensitive Topics" thread, but I think you're not far off. The thing is, there are ways to describe characters' skin colors that could piss off your readers for very good reasons. For instance, food descriptors are tired and cliché, and also rather dehumanizing. I try, when describing people of color, to think of how I would describe my own skin tone, and it's staggeringly difficult because I am the default and I have never had to think about it before. Past a certain point my brain just switches into Crayola mode and I'm apricot, which doesn't solve anything. ;)

[...] It is, no doubt, enough to put a writer off describing characters entirely, but I still think the effort toward inclusiveness and well-crafted description is worth it. (P1463)

In many ways, fantasy races seem safer, since if the character is non-human, then it seems that racial issues could be avoided; still, at some level participants are aware that race, whether fantasy or real-world, is a social construct, and that the essentializing of fantasy races is to a large degree equivalent to the essentializing (that is, stereotyping) of real-world races, making the two interchangeable. One participant argues in a heated discussion about diversity in fantasy:

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<sup>31</sup> The same applies to gender, of course, although the metaphorical level is not as strong, since the fantasy races generally map onto cultures rather than genders; nevertheless, the longest threads recorded concerned gender.

<sup>32</sup> It is common practice in forums of the sort Community A uses to quote all of or a portion of a post to which one is responding; if the participant uses the appropriate html formatting code to do so, the forum displays "Quote" before the quoted passage and renders the quoted passage in an altered font, represented here as italics.

“One thing I have always thought about too in the fantasy genre is that instead of writing about elves, orcs, dwarves, and whatever other tropes have been beaten into the ground why not write about a race other than your own?” (P1423). Here, this participant draws a connection between fantasy races and real-world racial constructs and subsequently justifies the authority of any participant to borrow from either as freely as participants borrow from mythology or history. Contemporary fantasy, then, becomes less cultural appropriation (though arguably some of the older fantasy representations clearly were) and more cultural remediation. While participants may freely take elements from any culture, which whiffs of appropriation in many ways, they are expected to do research and to try to give fair representation to their conglomerate creations.

The license for borrowing and plundering does not, of course, absolve fantasy from appropriation concerns nor from conventional and systemic racism. It does, however, create a safer space for participants to practice understanding a range of culture and to imagine alternate versions of reality that construct race and culture differently, whether with a small “twist” one variable at a time or with a large systematic world-building exercise.

The function of fantasy as a way of working through issues of race and diversity may be unique to fantasy (although science fiction fills some of the same function), but the function of a popular genre as a space to work through particular social issues is not; the ideology of the genre will determine what issues are appropriate for discussion and remediation, but every genre has the capacity to negotiate larger social issues and change as ideologies adjacent to the genre space also change.

## **5.2 Teaching the Genre Space**

The concept of the genre space, along with my definition of genre as a transmedial, mutable, associative, recognized system generally requires a descriptivist and rhetorical approach, which applies in teaching as well as critical analysis. This particular approach, given the ludic nature of the genre space, also lends itself easily to a gamified classroom at a deep level, one that allows for the classroom to be gamified without gimmicks but also in such a way that enables students to understand new rhetorical situations in gamified terms as they encounter them both in and out of the classroom. In order to properly apply the concepts discussed in this dissertation in the classroom, teachers should encourage students to see reading and writing as a game with the rhetorical triangle as a flexible and reliable model of the “magic circle” of the genre space as well as a way of visualizing the specific rhetorical triangle.

### **Descriptivism**

Owing to the discourse analysis techniques used to arrive at this definition of genre as a transmedial, mutable, associative, recognized system, the definition is inherently descriptivist, requiring any application of this definition to identify exactly what system is being enacted by authors as well as what aspects in the genre are being recognized by audiences, and which texts are being associated with the genre, and which media are incorporated into the genre space and where the generative tensions are that motivate change. Because of the descriptivist nature of this definition, and of the attendant concept of the genre space in which participants negotiate the system in order to negotiate their own authority and that of others, it is necessary that any teaching approach that incorporates this understanding of genre—in any discipline, though most likely in a composition, literature, or popular culture classroom, where genre is an important concept—also impart to students a respect for the genres being studied in the process.

In order to foster respect, teachers should encourage students to start by analyzing genres that are familiar to the students. Students should be allowed to self-identify genres and should articulate their own understandings of genres before the instructor applies much in the way of intervention; initial discussion of genre should encourage students to brainstorm, collectively, what genre means to them before imposing any scholarly definitions on students.

The best approach to teaching genre will encourage students to use a consistent framework for identifying aspects of different genres, in order to see the comparable natures of diverse and disparate genres, ranging from musical genres to academic writing genres. Depending on the students' level, acceptable frameworks include evaluating risk/reward pairs in a target genre, describing the genre's rules, identifying key texts or conventions associated with the target genre, and determining genre boundary markers according to power and prestige. For lower grade students (elementary and junior high), it may be best to focus on the associative and recognizability properties of genre, asking them to identify texts that the genre brings to mind and to create lists of identifiable conventions, perhaps even to create texts of their own that incorporate these conventions and then to complete reflection activities that have them identify the conventions and inventions in their own text. Such students might be asked to create a picture book and then identify the choices they have made in doing so, or a similar activity as appropriate for their grade level. Work should be largely evaluated on the ability to identify key aspects of the target genre and imitate them, as it is this imitation that makes a text recognizable in a given genre, and thus the use-value or social action (as per Beebee or Miller) clear to the audience, and thus producing a rhetorically effective text.

For upper grade students, such as those in high school or early post-secondary, the goal is more likely to produce an awareness of new rhetorical situations and to help students acquire



academic and workplace genres in addition to the genres that they are familiar with in their own existing literacies. For these students, a more abstracted and direct analysis of genre may be appropriate, ideally led through a consistent form that presents a heuristic for students to use to identify and analyze *any* genre. As with students at lower grade levels, it is not necessary to burden students with technical definitions; it is only necessary to provide a clear framework for analyzing genres so that they can understand for themselves and independently identify what sort of rhetorical actions are appropriate in a given genre space in order to succeed in entering and navigating genre spaces. In Appendix A, I have included a sample lesson plan, including a heuristic worksheet, for students at the lower post-secondary or advanced secondary levels for use in the classroom.

Ultimately, the goal of bringing explicit discussion of genre into the classroom should not be a rote act of classifying texts into genres, as some previous literary approaches to genre have been, nor should it be seen as an exercise in creating an inclusive, prescriptive formula for any genre. The goal is to make a student's understanding of genre *generative*. To this end, genre analysis makes an excellent companion to discourse analysis in the classroom, but also a good accompaniment to literary or popular culture studies where understanding how a text is or has been used by audiences is key to understanding the text and its social context.

### **Rhetorical Awareness**

Gee has argued that the act of learning is an act of role-play: that students must take on a new identity in order to learn any new discourse and its attendant skills, knowledge, and ways of knowing. My model of a genre space depends on the notion of genres and the texts that constitute them as interactive objects, around which people select roles according to the use-value of the text and according to the available roles in the genre space and the perceived

prestige and power of each role. Thus, if students are taught a genre space model, one that sees readers, writers, and other participants in the genre space as active agents, then students are presented with a variety of roles to use when interacting in the genre space: they may be authors, generating texts; or the target audience, knowing and comfortably inside the conventional rhetorical triangle; or they may assume other roles, such as critic, fan-author, adaptor, researcher, and so on. Each of these roles interacts with a text in a different way. Indeed, much of the resistance students often have when asked to engage with literature in an academic way—that is, as critics and researchers, rather than as casual readers or fans—arises from the tension between how different participants in a genre space interact with texts and how students perceive their own roles in the genre space. Students in most conventional classroom settings feel more or less powerless over the content of the course, which limits the roles that students feel free to take in the genre space (moreover, they may be confused as to which genre space the classroom presents, since the classroom often incorporates texts that *seem* to belong to a different genre space than the academic). It is necessary that students have some sense of authority in order to assume a role that assumes authority in the genre space, such as critic.

Just as participants in this study were seen to negotiate their own power and prestige, students also do so in the classroom; likewise, where power and prestige are often assumed to be functions of recognition and official sanction from publishers in the fantasy genre space, in the academic genre space power and prestige come in the form of official sanction from academic institutions, with students in a very low position, much like a new member of a forum or a person who has read very little in fantasy in the communities examined in this study, or as many have viewed the reader in relationship to the author (although fan work tends to subvert this hierarchy). However, those with little power in a space have little agency, and thus are unable to

effectively generate texts for the genre space or otherwise effect any sort of change. It is necessary, then, for students to feel that they are able to select a role at need, even if only in simulation, in order to master content.

To this end, teaching genre space is a way to help students gain awareness of the rhetorical situation, and through awareness agency. As already suggested, students should be encouraged to start by analyzing genre spaces over which they may feel they have more mastery than their instructors, such as popular culture spaces. The instructor provides the framework and guides the student to identify the various parts of the genre space, but ultimately the knowledge is the student's.

In explaining the genre space, the rhetorical triangle is a useful visual tool, as it illustrates the most commonly understood and most easily identified roles a participant can have in a genre space, especially as concerns a specific text or instance. In the rhetorical triangle, students can identify the two clearest roles: author and audience. They

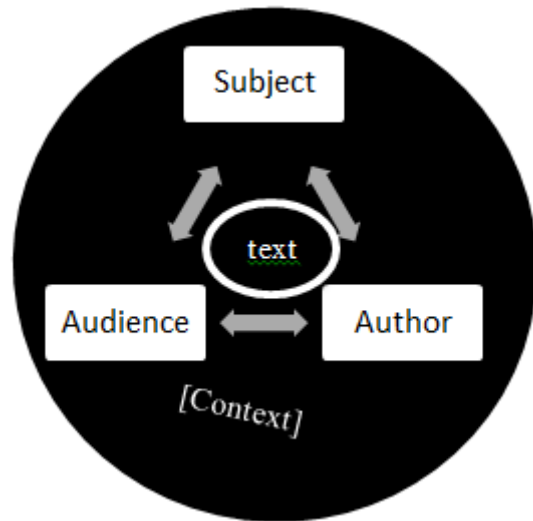


Figure 12 - The Expanded Rhetorical Triangle

can identify the relationship between these, and in a modified rhetorical triangle, one which includes a circle that is labeled context, they can appreciate that there is more in the rhetorical situation than the traditional rhetor, audience, and subject. As students suggest more roles a participant can take in relation to a text or within the genre space, the triangle can be expanded

and modified to reflect more of a web of intertextuality and of strategies and tactics<sup>33</sup>. For instance, students might identify that instead of reading to understand, sometimes people read to argue, or they read to adapt or remediate.

The goal here is for students to see any action in the genre space as a rhetorical action, in keeping with Miller's notion that genre itself is a typified social action in response to a situation; the difference is that the genre space model sees the response as a text, rather than the genre itself, and the typified aspect is guided by tacit rules that govern multiple participants in the space rather than by the repetition of the form of the text. The goal, then, is for students to be able to articulate their purpose in every action they make in the genre space. If they choose to present a book report as a song or a video, they should be able to answer questions about the choices they have made concerning that remediation. If they choose to read generously and for deep understanding, they should be able to articulate that goal, as opposed to reading with a different purpose, such as to find a pithy quote or to imitate.

When students are able to actively and consciously select between roles in the genre space, as a player selects a character class at the beginning of a role-playing game according to an estimate of the character class's available strategies in gameplay, students have agency as readers and authors. I return here to Aarseth's assertion that authorship requires "configurative power" over genre and form as well as text itself; our goal in teaching students should be to provide them that power, so that they can act as full agents in the genre spaces of their choosing. When they are able to do so, then they are able to create effective texts that anticipate their

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<sup>33</sup> Michel de Certeau argues that a strategy is the position of the centered or the authority, while a tactic is the position of the marginalized, of the weaker force, and that while there is a sanctioned use-strategy for a given text, there are numerous and infinite tactics that are in "everyday use"; a genre space houses both.

rhetorical situations more fully, whether those texts are essays for exams, business documents, or fanfiction.

In the process of fully comprehending the rhetorical situation, students should also be encouraged to be able to identify what I have called “generative tensions,” or conflicting elements of the ideology that governs a given genre space’s rule system. This is an advanced concept that requires not only analysis of texts and rhetorical situations, but also metacognitive thinking about the values espoused by the rules that students identify for a given genre, and thus discussion of generative tensions should be regarded as a capstone lesson in genre and reserved for students in advanced levels of coursework. A generative tension, as I have argued, is an inherent contradiction in a genre space’s codified ideology; for fantasy, the key generative tension I have identified is that between escapism and cultural criticism in allegory. For academic writing, another generative tension might exist between the requirements to follow tradition but to present “new” and “disruptive” material. Generative tensions are not in themselves inherently hypocritical, and it will be difficult for most lower-level students to comprehend that these tensions are merely a coexistence rather than a self-contradiction; however, if students can be guided to see generative tensions as a risk/reward model, then the concept of a generative tension can help students more adroitly assess a rhetorical situation and make deliberate choices in that situation.

The risk/reward model of generative tension emphasizes the systematic nature of genre, and sees the genre space as a ludic space governed by rules for each participant (as I have earlier argued). Thus, students can be encouraged to articulate the risks of a rhetorical action and weigh them against the potential consequences of that action. For instance, a student might consider risk in protesting a school policy: there is a potential that the protest will effect change, but there

is also potential that the protest may call disciplinary attention to the student. Likewise, a student might assess the risk/reward values of an action such as starting a paragraph in an essay with a conjunction: it is risky because it is counter to the established convention, and consequences may include a reward of drawing attention to the connectedness between paragraphs or drawing extra attention to the particular paragraph, while it carries a risk of failing and merely drawing censure from a teacher or evaluator. Nevertheless, the action of starting a paragraph with a conjunction is an action available to the student rhetor working on an essay for a class. In this way, considering risk/reward pairs, which is a way of introducing generative tension by helping students to understand contrasting values in a genre, can enable a student to evaluate rhetorical actions and select which one is most likely to achieve the student's goal, in much the same way that a *Dungeons & Dragons* player will assess a situation for his character by considering his character's attributes against the probability of the dice, what he knows about the situation before the character, and the potential risks and rewards of an action. While no participant in a genre space can ever fully apprehend every possible variable in the genre space, participants *can* evaluate what they know about the rhetorical situation and their own role in it.

## **Authorship**

Because authorship becomes more fuzzy in light of this model of genre, which sees author as merely one *kind* of role in the genre space, and audiences as co-authors in the construction of meaning, it is necessary to take a softer approach in teaching to authorship, intellectual property, and plagiarism. Rather, teachers can approach issues of plagiarism and authorship from a perspective of risk/reward and Cawelti's convention/invention pair. Thus, teachers should have discussions with students about the conventions of academic writing, which expect citation and quotation as an action for authority, and that while uncited material carries

very little reward it carries very high risk, and is therefore an unsound rhetorical choice in the academic genre space. Likewise, the text must be composed of a recognizable mix of convention and invention, where cited and quoted material is a convention, and the original student-generated material is invention; both carry significant reward for fairly low risk in the academic genre space.

In this way, teachers can also foster a more comprehensive view of discourse and conventions governing originality in any genre. Students are often confused by plagiarism concepts, because outside of academic discourse the methods of attributing material (and gaining authority by doing so) are starkly different; students are used to reblogging, writing fanfiction, sharing posts, and other forms of using the material generated by others that require less formal acknowledgments. Instead of insisting on academic integrity as a set of inviolable laws, it is best presented as rules for the ludic space of academic work; in this way, academic integrity policies function more like red and yellow cards in sports. Many sports have some iteration of the yellow/red/black card (or flag) system, and in all of them these colored signs represent some kind of violation of accepted rules of play and usually some penalty for the player who has been found in violation of the rules, but in each sport the cards are issued for different kinds of fouls, according to the values embedded in the sport's rule system. Likewise, every genre space has some way of regulating authorship and punishing violations of accepted guidelines of authorship and originality, even if these rules and punishments are only implied and not explicitly stated. However, like with sports, it is necessary to have some understanding of these rules and their consequences to participate fully in the genre space. Ideally, a softer approach to matters of academic integrity and plagiarism should reduce student fear of participation in the academic genre space, and thus give students more configurative power over the space.

## **Gamification**

Since the genre space model sees genre as a socially constructed space with ludic rules to govern behavior and interactions, any classroom using the definition of genre presented in this study or the genre space model should lend itself to gamification, since the instructor is suitably motivated to make the classroom itself a microcosm of the target genre space. I do not propose here what might be termed a “surface gamification,” in which students are awarded “experience points” and given avatars and allowed to “level up” instead of earning traditional marks. This sort of gamification, which looks at the surface elements of games rather than their actual ludic systems that encourage particular ideologies, is likely to alienate students who do not identify with games, and likely to cause students who identify actively as “gamers” to regard the course with suspicion, because it seems to them somewhat appropriative and a violation of the separation of academic and popular that they are accustomed to.

Rather, I propose a deeper level of gamification, one in which instructors must consider carefully what sort of ideology the rules—both explicit and tacit—of their classrooms impose on students, and where the power centers are, and what the boundary marker texts are. It is necessary to consider and balance rewards with risks in a way that encourages students to make calculated risks in the interest of learning. Moreover, students should be encouraged to analyze their own classroom and even offer revisions; that is, rather than simply reading out the policies and procedures on the first day, instructors might make a lesson plan out of analyzing what sort of behaviors, texts, and reading methods are encouraged by the policies and procedures document, and what sort of risks and rewards students might make.

Likewise, it is important for instructors to create clear systems in their rubrics and to create more than one way to achieve goals in the course, so that students can have more



configurative power over their own texts and roles in the genre space of the classroom. Such an approach will value students' backgrounds and abilities as well as encourage the use of multimedia in the classroom, producing a decidedly 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom with a descriptivist ideology.

## **Application**

Appendix A consists of a sample lesson plan provided for instructor use; it is designed for use in upper-level high school or lower-level undergraduate classrooms. It has been tested in an advanced college-preparatory 9<sup>th</sup> grade course with 3 sections of students under the same instructor. The testing instructor has recommended that instructors employ a “flipped” classroom model and have students go over definitions and other lecture material on their own time before beginning the lecture, as otherwise the definitions will become too burdensome for the students. However, the worksheet and the heuristic for identifying and evaluating genre seems to work, and encourages students to discuss genre actively; one section, for instance, came to debating how one recognizes the genre “pizza”, a discussion that, while seeming trivial, becomes especially significant in understanding how definitions work and how cultural constructs (such as the notion of pizza) can be taken for granted when unexamined. Moreover, instructors are encouraged to employ immediately relevant examples; the test instructor explained the extended rhetorical triangle with the use of examples that were relevant at the time of the testing, such as political advertisements and Marvel super-hero films and found such examples particularly useful. Thus, it will be up to the instructor to apply this proposed lesson plan in a way that is consistent with existing classroom practices and the particular *Kairos* of classroom at the time. Finally, it is the recommendation of the instructor who did the testing that the majority of the class time be spent actually working with real-world examples of genres, since this is the part of

the lesson that is most generative of discussion and active participation by students, and thus most likely to produce deep learning in the students.

## **Conclusion**

Although the notion of genre as a transmedial, mutable, associative, recognized system, along with the attendant notions of the genre space and its generative tensions, is *most* applicable in composition courses and literary or popular culture studies settings, the concept of a genre space as a place with many participants, roles, and rules is applicable in any subject, if only as a background concept in classroom and curriculum design. It is, in this way, similar to Swales's notion of the discourse community, and in harmony with Gee's concept of Discourses and "identity toolkits" as a model of learning. Like Swales's and Gee's concepts, any classroom incorporating the genre space model must value students' prior experience and knowledge while allowing them to analyze, act, and enter unfamiliar genres. It is necessary in a classroom guided by these concepts to point out risks and rewards and prestige and power so that students can learn to assess risk in their own rhetorical actions and better negotiate genre spaces for their own advantage. Rather than giving students assignments that they "have to" do, students should evaluate the risks for themselves of failing to do an assignment. In fact, students often make these calculations (often framed as "What grade do I need on the final to get the grade I want in the class?"), but they are not aware that these tactics are a rhetorical action and apply also to their own writing, composition, and reading. Thus, it is to students' benefits to look for patterns of risk/reward, power/prestige, and generative tensions in genres when discussing conventions in class, whether they be conventions of academic writing or conventions of a historical genre, or whatever genre at all. Most importantly, this definition of genre requires instructors to take a

descriptivist approach to teaching, focusing on “rules” as a game of actions and consequences rather than rules as requirements.

## 6.0 Conclusions

Although many of the quantitative findings of this study, in particular those about which texts, authors, and ideas are most prevalent in the fantasy genre, might seem unsurprising, it is important that this study makes these findings available and confirms and describes mechanisms of genre. It is well documented that genres change in studies such as those by Dubrow and Miller, and it is well documented that genres rely on recognition and mediate authority and use, as in studies such as those by Beebee and Bawarshi, but it is less well documented precisely how those processes occur or what engines drive them.

To this end, perhaps the most significant contributions of this study are the concepts of *genre space* and *generative tension*, which both arise out of my proposed definition of genre as a transmedial, mutable, associative, recognized system. The genre space uniquely models genre as a social location rather than as a community or abstract system; rather, although it may lack a physical space (but some genre certainly do occupy physical spaces), genre functions as a space in the same way that sites on the internet are conceptual spaces—a mix of social, textual, and other kinds of loci. Likewise, the notion of generative tension allows for a heuristic for identifying the engines of change in genres, mixing the notion of genres needing to fill new rhetorical notions and the concept of genre as ideology.

However, this study is only a small piece in the complete picture of genre. It remains for other genre spaces to be studied in detail beyond this study of fantasy; it also remains for fantasy itself to be studied even further, for these studies to be confirmed in more communities or through analysis of the texts identified in this study as particularly significant, which was beyond the scope of this research. If we are to fully understand the full power of genre<sup>34</sup>, it is necessary

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<sup>34</sup> With credit to Rosmarin for the phrase.

to conduct further research on the matter, to test the parts of my definition to determine what aspects require further revision. Indeed, there is little doubt that some aspects of this model will require revision or updating with further research and application; such nuance and discussion is invited, because just as genre itself is mutable and must be receptive to change as social needs change, so also must our definitions of genre if the notion of genre is to continue to be of use.

However, I insist once more that any study of genre, if it is to be truly comprehensive or useful, must keep its scope interdisciplinary and approach its subject matter from a descriptive perspective. Although in teaching concepts such as genre it seems necessary to provide formulae to students—and there is a lot of value in providing formulae to students—it is necessary for these formulae to be derived as Propp’s formula is derived, not from prescription but from exhaustive understanding of the subject matter and examination of texts under the purview of the formula. Because it is increasingly clear that genre functions in a transmedial, multimodal way, it is necessary that we use the tools of several disciplines to understand it, since no one discipline can entirely comprehend how genre functions with only its own tools.

Finally, there remains space in academia for further studies that respect the popular as worthy subjects of study. It is hoped that this study has served as an example of research that fully respects the expertise of those it studies, although there is no doubt room for criticism on that point. Nevertheless, one of the findings of this study has been that the academic and the popular coexist beyond the space of academic work with little trouble and no clear distinction between the two. As such, my definition of genre is also a call for uniting the popular culture studies with the traditional literary or fine arts studies in order to recognize the substantial overlap between the two. Moreover, if there is to be such a union, it is hoped that other fields may also be brought into the fusion; that medieval studies’ contributions to literary theory may

be recognized as the fully post-modern work they are, for instance, or that emerging fields such as game studies might be able to contribute back to the fields from which they have borrowed for methods, theories, and legitimacy.

Ultimately, no study of genre can be fully complete, and no definition of any particular genre can be entirely comprehensive. As this study of genre has argued, and in keeping with Beebee's notion of genre as ideology, genre is simply too large, powerful, and mutable to entirely pin down in one theory or model. Nevertheless, the project must be undertaken in order to fully understand how rhetors and audiences negotiate authority amongst themselves and between texts, and by what mechanisms that authority is recognized or distributed.

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## Appendix A: Sample Lesson Plan

### Goals

At the end of this lesson, students should be able to:

- Identify and describe a genre
- Identify and define the parts of a rhetorical situation
- Describe some relationships between texts
- Better assess their own rhetorical choices according to context
- Select and describe a role for themselves in a rhetorical situation
- Critically analyze some values expressed by conventions in a given genre

### Key Terms and Definitions

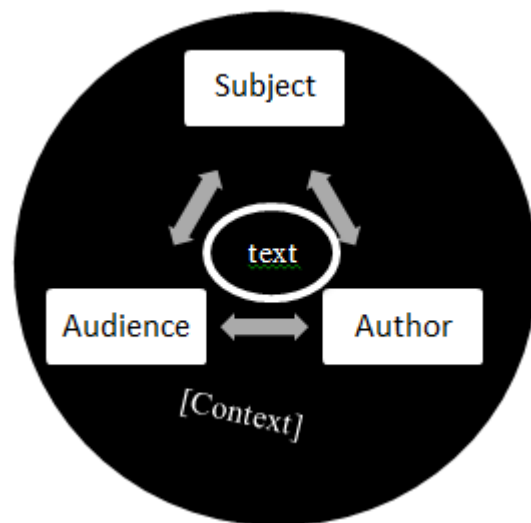
- Genre: *a transmedial, mutable, associative, recognized system. Or, social action (Carolyn Miller) or ideology (Thomas Beebee).*
- Genre Space: *A social space marked by the rules of a particular genre's ideology*
- Rhetorical Situation: *The constituent elements of a given context for the generation of text*
- Text: *Any rhetorical object, including speech, images, and other media.*
- Intertextuality: *The web of relationships between texts at a linguistic level*
- Trigger: *any convention or "trope" that signals recognition of a genre*
- Prestige: *Recognition as a valuable or desirable position or text*
- Power: *Positioning in a genre space that gives a text or participant configurative authority*
- Generative Tension: *A self-contradictory pair of ideological values in a genre that produces texts and criticism*
- Rhetoric: *Intentional composition*

### Instructions:

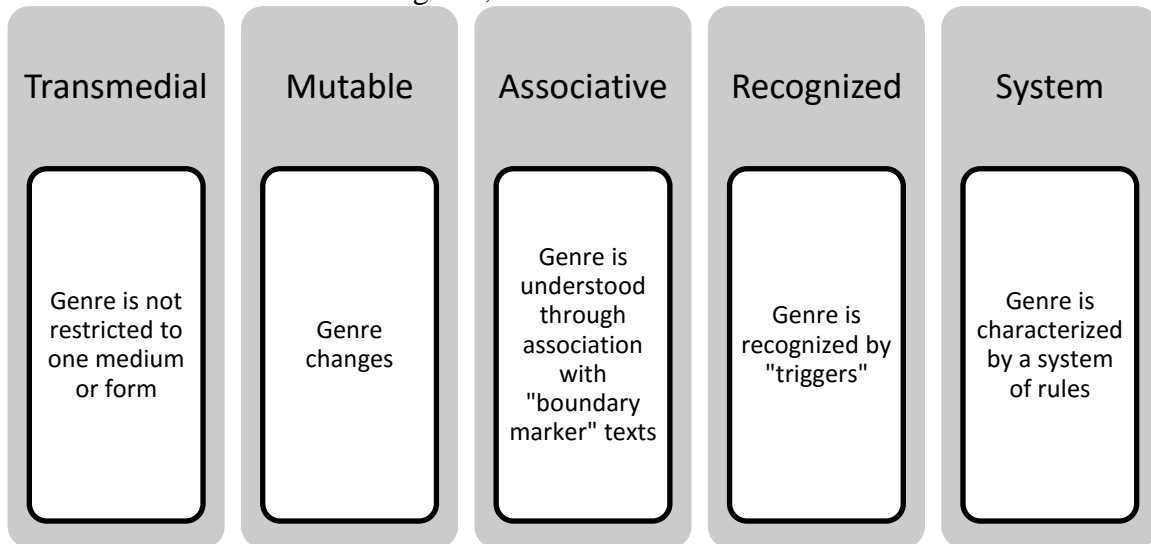
Interactive Lecture (20-30 minutes)

Begin class by introducing the key concepts necessary to complete the attached worksheet, in accordance with the following outline:

- Ask students to brainstorm collectively about the question "What is genre?" Write answers on the board. Discuss their definitions.
  - Offer definitions of genre as *social action*, and *ideology*.
- Present the rhetorical triangle as illustrated:



- Explain how these elements are all related, that the author must consider audience and subject simultaneously, while the audience brings what they know about the subject and the author to the situation, while the subject is accessible by both author and subject. Explain how context affects all aspects equally, and that the text is a generated thing between all three elements, not merely in the control of the author.
- Introduce *intertextuality*, and explain that not only are the elements of the rhetorical situation linked as in the rhetorical triangle, but all texts are linked to each other through linguistic and conceptual means. Have them offer some ways texts can be related.
- Ask students where they think genre might fit into this model.
- Introduce the new definition of genre, as follows:



- Discuss the implications of these definitions and allow students to raise questions. Bring up the notion of a “genre space” as a “magic circle” where the rules are different—where the system of the genre is in place, and people can be “participants” just like they can be players in a game.
- Introduce the definition of *rhetoric* as *intentional composition*, and ask students some reasons they might write. Challenge any answers that seem rote, such as “to entertain, inform, or persuade”.
- **Fill out a sample chart for one a genre of your choice**, using the worksheet as a model, answering questions about the sections of the worksheet as you go.

### Activity (20-30 minutes)

Break students into small groups (3-4 students per group should work best) and have them fill out the worksheet as a group, one sheet per group. Let them choose one genre of their own defining, and provide the second genre as appropriate for your classroom: e.g., “the timed writing” or “a research paper”. Float as needed to help groups as questions arise.

### Reflection (20-30 minutes)

Briefly discuss students’ answers to the worksheet, then collect the worksheets. Have students use the following form, or simply have them write their answers on their own paper, to complete a written reflection on what they have learned about genre and rhetorical situations.

**Reflection Activity Worksheet**

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

To me, genre means:

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When I am writing, speaking, or otherwise creating, I should be aware of my audience because:

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In your own words, explain what you learned from this lesson and how you will use this lesson in the future:

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## Genre and Rhetorical Situations Worksheet

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

	Genre Name:	Genre Name:
Acceptable Media or Forms		
Prestigious or Powerful Texts		
Recognition Triggers		
Roles People Can Have		
Conventions or Rules		
Values Expressed		

## Appendix B: Research Approval Letter



UNIVERSITY OF  
ARKANSAS

Office of Research Compliance  
Institutional Review Board

September 25, 2014

### MEMORANDUM

TO: Angela Cox  
David Jolliffe

FROM: Ro Windwalker  
IRB Coordinator

RE: New Protocol Approval

IRB Protocol #: 14-09-117

Protocol Title: *The Power Fantastic: How Genre Expectations Mediate Authority*

Review Type:  EXEMPT  EXPEDITED  FULL IRB

Approved Project Period: Start Date: 09/25/2014 Expiration Date: 09/22/2015

Your protocol has been approved by the IRB. Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. If you wish to continue the project past the approved project period (see above), you must submit a request, using the form *Continuing Review for IRB Approved Projects*, prior to the expiration date. This form is available from the IRB Coordinator or on the Research Compliance website (<http://vpred.uark.edu/210.php>). As a courtesy, you will be sent a reminder two months in advance of that date. However, failure to receive a reminder does not negate your obligation to make the request in sufficient time for review and approval. Federal regulations prohibit retroactive approval of continuation. Failure to receive approval to continue the project prior to the expiration date will result in Termination of the protocol approval. The IRB Coordinator can give you guidance on submission times.

**This protocol has been approved for 10,000 participants.** If you wish to make *any* modifications in the approved protocol, including enrolling more than this number, you must seek approval *prior to* implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact me at 210 Administration Building, 5-2208, or [irb@uark.edu](mailto:irb@uark.edu).

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