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HERE BE DRAGONS

ADVENT AND PREHISTORY OF THE ADVENTURE GAME

Introduction

'At the end of the Middle Ages, Europe's thousand year sleep – or perhaps thousand year germination – between antiquity and the Renaissance, wondrous things were happening. High culture, long dormant, began to stir again. The spirit of adventure grew once more in the human breast. Great cathedrals rose, the spirit captured in stone, embodiments of the human quest for understanding. But there were other cathedrals, cathedrals of the mind, that also embodied that quest for the unknown. They were maps, like the fantastic, and often fanciful, Mappa Mundi – the map of everything, of the known world, whose edges both beckoned us towards the unknown, and cautioned us with their marginalia – "Here be dragons."¹

At the start of the twenty-first century the exploration of our own planet has been more or less completed. When we want to experience the thrill, enchantment and dangers of past voyages of discovery we now have to rely on books, films and theme parks. Or we play a game on our computer, preferably an *adventure game*², as the experience the older games create is very close to what the original adventurers must have felt. In these types of game the player also enters an unknown labyrinthine space which has to be mapped out step by step, without knowing which dragons might be lurking in its dark reaches. The main difference with the original Mappa Mundi is that this adventure world has been created in the mind of a modern griot, a master storyteller who word by word leads you into his immersive world so that reality gradually disappears with every step you take.

In game literature the adventure game is often overlooked, firstly because this type of game originated on mainframe computers and didn't find its way into the living room until the arrival of the home computer (like the Apple II)³ in the early eighties. Secondly, as the original adventure games were text based they were not attractive for game Arcades⁴. That's why they are usually not mentioned in game histories as these are often based on the hardware the games run on. Thirdly, in the West adventure games, for a long time, were only played on home computers, unlike Japan, where games like ZELDA (Nintendo, first version 1986) and FINAL FANTASY (Square, first version 1987) that ran on game consoles were and are hugely popular. However, with the arrival of the keyboard-less consoles like the Game Boy (1989) and the Playstation (first version in 1995) in the West, the nature of the adventure game changed. Until then adventure games had been either completely text-based or

they relied on text-input. For die hard adventure fans the new point-and-click interface didn't feel natural and game sales dropped. This eventually led to a crisis in the nineteen nineties when less and less games were produced. Finally in the heated debate between narratologists and ludologists adventure games were not seen as real computer games by some game researchers like Jesper Juul⁵.

In this article I want to shed more light on the adventure game, or interactive fiction as it is sometimes called. I will dwell at length on the two cultural phenomena that preceded it: the stories by J.R.R. Tolkien and the role playing game DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS. To keep things in perspective I'll limit myself to the history of the adventure game and to games that were produced for home and personal computers⁶. I'll also briefly look into the fascination with the Middle Ages which is often found in adventure games⁷.

The wherefore and the why of adventure games

Although there is a clear difference between the early adventure games which were text-only, both in input as well as in output, and the more modern graphic adventure games, both can be termed interactive fiction because of their emphasis on the storyline. In an adventure game the protagonist, hero or heroine, faces a 'problem' (finding treasure, exposing a murderer, finding one's identity, etcetera). The protagonist has to resolve this problem by finding and using objects and clues and by solving (logic) puzzles and riddles. Depending on the game the player will do this 'personally' i.e. using first-person perspective or by guiding a player-character (avatar). Being able to participate in a story is one of the key attractions of the traditional adventure game as observed in this entrance in the *Wikipedia*:

'Un jeu d'aventure, du point de vue du joueur, est une oeuvre de fiction interactive, soit bien plus qu'un jeu vidéo. Cette phrase donne l'essence de tout ce qu'il y a à dire sur les aventures. Tout d'abord, une fiction. Comme un film, un roman ou une bande dessinée, une aventure raconte une histoire. Interactive, car contrairement à un film, un roman ou une bande dessinée où l'on reste prisonnier de la linéarité de l'intrigue, on interagit dans un jeu d'aventures avec l'environnement. Du fait de son caractère narratif, le jeu d'aventure se rapproche de ce qui fait la substance même des œuvres d'art'.⁸

Apart from traditional adventure games there are also *Role Playing Games* (RPG's), adventures in which the player is part of a group that has to bring an adventure to a satisfactory conclusion. In offline role playing games the player is either the leader of the group (e.g. Robin Hood) or first chooses from a set of playable characters (Aragorn, Legolas, Gimli). In online adventure and role playing games, e.g. *Multi User Dungeons* (MUD's)⁹ and *Massively Multiplayer Role Playing Games* (MMRPG's) the player usually creates her own avatar. In these games there are also missions to complete and problems to solve, but the main emphasis is on character development and on keeping the illusion and fantasy world in tact. With the arrival of Lara Croft

in the game TOMB RAIDER (Eidos Interactive) in 1996 a new subclass of the adventure game is introduced: the *action adventure*.¹⁰ In this subclass agility of the avatar (and dexterity of the player) is a key ingredient; you cannot end the game without this ability. A variation on the action adventure game is the *stealth action game*, introduced with the game THIEF: THE DARK PROJECT (Looking Glass Studios, 1998) but epitomised on the personal computer by TOM CLANCY'S SPLINTER CELL (Ubisoft Entertainment, 2003).

Although many of these modern games seem far removed from the first adventure games, the key elements of the game type can still be distinguished. These elements originated outside the world of the computer game in the fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien and the role playing game DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS. Because of the recent phenomenal film adaptations of the *Lord of the Rings* (1954) books by Peter Jackson (New Line Cinema, 2001-2003), Tolkien's work is again at the forefront of attention. This led, amongst others, to new game adaptations both of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* (1937); most of them based on the film adaptations but some also based on the original books. We should probably say that this is yet another resurgence of the Tolkien hype, as every new generation rediscovered and reinterpreted his works in a new cultural context, ever since *The Lord of the Rings* first appeared in a bootleg edition in the United States in 1965.



THE LORD OF THE RINGS, THE RETURN OF THE KING (Electronic Arts, 2003)

Tolkien and the origin of the fantasy genre

Tolkien's influence on the popular culture of the twentieth century cannot be denied. It can be seen in all popular media: the (comic) book, television, cinema and the computer game. Or as one of the best known fantasy writers of the twentieth century, Terry Pratchett, puts it: 'Tolkien influenced everyone that came after. He set his stamp on the [fantasy] genre so heavily that there is an echo of it even now'.¹¹ Because of this influence, most people assume that Tolkien was the first person to write fantasy and that he thus invented the genre. This is not so. In the Victorian era, under the influence of industrialisation, economic expansion and colonisation, which turned Great Britain into an empire, we see a renewed interest of the British in their past, especially in the Middle Ages. This can be seen in the revival of the Gothic style, especially in the buildings funded by the new industrial capitalists. It can also be seen in the work of the Pre-Raphaelites who dominated British Art at the time. Now that Science seemed to have undermined the old religious ideals, the Pre-Raphaelites were looking for new values. And they found them, amongst others, in British myths and legends, especially in Arthurian legend.¹²

One member of the Pre-Raphaelite movement was the multi-talented (painter, poet, statesman, etc.) William Morris. To us he is known foremost as graphic artist and designer and as founder of the *Arts and Crafts* movement. What few outside England know is that William Morris is the real creator of the *fantasy genre*. Like the other Pre-Raphaelites Morris was interested in the literature, myths and legends of the Middle Ages. But Morris took this interest one step further. Together with Eiríkr Magnússon he translated Old Norse poems, of which the *Volsunga Saga* proved to be especially influential. Morris was Tolkien's direct precursor in that both recognised that Old Norse and other Older Germanic literature were the real cultural heritage of Western Europe.¹³ The *Volsunga Saga* became the base for Morris' own poem Sigurd (1877) and novel *Tale of the House of the Wolfings* (1898). These more historical writings were the overture for Morris' later fantasy stories like *The Wood beyond the World* (1894) and *The Well at World's End* (1896).

Tolkien's premises, however, are different. Like Morris, Tolkien was disappointed that England lacked her own homogenous cultural heritage. Even as a child he was taken by Germanic myths and legends like the story of Sigurd.¹⁴ Morris' translation of the *Volsunga Saga* and *Tale of the House of the Wolfings* also were part of Tolkien's favourite works.¹⁵ But the reintroduction of these old Northern European works into the cultural awareness of the English public was not enough for Tolkien; he wanted to reinstate them into England's cultural heritage:

‘I had in mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy story(...) which I could dedicate simply: to England; to my country.’¹⁶

As a philologist Tolkien not only knew medieval works of literature, he also studied Germanic language history. Using this background he hypothesized that given that every Germanic language has a linguistically related word for dwarf¹⁷ they not only share a common Indo European base,¹⁸ they also should have the same basic concept of what a dwarf is.¹⁹ He further hypothesized that, as it is possible to determine the original Indo European form of a word, it must also be possible to determine the original ‘Indo European’ story from modern day myths, legends, sagas, fairy-tales and folk tales.²⁰ Strictly speaking, therefore, Tolkien's stories are not original. In *The Silmarilion* [published posthumously in 1977] and *The Lord of the Rings*, however, Tolkien's mastery weaves these original elements into stories of epic grandeur that have a mythical presence of their own. Or as his biographer Humphrey Carpenter put it:

‘He [Tolkien] said that he wanted to create a mythology for England. I don't think he did exactly that, but I think that he rediscovered kinds of narrative with the power of the saga and the adventure story which had been lost from twentieth century English fiction.’²¹

Tolkien's influence on popular culture was immense. The hippy generation called for ‘Gandalf as President’ and English environmentalists in the 90's were inspired by Tolkien's love of Nature. For the ultimate medium of the last decade of the

twentieth century, the computer game, Tolkien proved to be indispensable, as game-designer Ian Livingston says:

‘Then suddenly comes Tolkien. You got this world of condense gloom and danger and doom, all this disgusting creatures that he created out of his imagination. (...) he made us see a much darker, stronger, richly imagined world of fantasy, which he had never done before.’²²

Especially the authors and designers of the first generation adventure and role playing games owe tribute to Tolkien. One of these is Richard Garriott designer of the legendary ULTIMA series (first part 1981):²³

‘“Three important events happened in 1974,’ says Richard Garriott. ‘First, my sister-in-law gave me a copy of *Lord of the Rings*. Second, I discovered DUNGEONS & DRAGONS. And third, I became acquainted with my first computer. In combination, these three events began a love affair with the computer that has continued to this day.’”²⁴

In my opinion, the computer game is the medium best suited to recreate Tolkien’s immersive worlds and in doing so these games can fulfil the greatest wish of many an avid Tolkien fan: taking part in this ultimate fantasy called Middle Earth. But Tolkien’s contribution to the computer game does not end here. His inspiration did not only give rise to a new imaginative game world, complete with exciting new characters, it also brought us — be it at first limited — games with stories.²⁵

DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS; on tin soldiers and a cultural phenomenon

‘A friendly unicorn named Alabern lives in the woods near your town. With a touch of its horn, Alabern heals wounded people who come to it for help. Now a woodcutter has come to town with terrible news. Evil goblins have captured the unicorn and taken it away...’²⁶

This is one of the many stories with which an adventure in the game DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS starts. DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS is a role playing game²⁷ coming to life in the imagination of its players. Where historic re-enactments and *Life Action RPG’s* (LARP’S) take the players en masse outside, DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS players usually gather in student’s dens and similar places. The participants consist of a Dungeon Master, the person who knows the game secrets and controls the monsters, and a group of players. Although it is not obligatory for the players to participate in costume they have to play ‘in character’ i.e. they have to leave their daily self behind and take on the identity and role of the character they are playing. The characters in a traditional DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS game represent a particular race, for instance human, elf, or dwarf. Next the player can choose from a set of “roles”: cleric, wizard, thief, fighter etcetera. The combination of race and role determine the initial strength and abilities of the player. The combined weaknesses and strengths of the group determine whether or not they’ll succeed in solving the

adventure's problems and overcome its dangers. Faith (dice) helps determine the outcome. In the course of the adventure and the ones following it the players, who usually take their character from one game to the next, will gain new skills and abilities, but some of them may also die. Some Dungeon Masters create their own adventures, but they can also be bought as complete sets or just as adventure books. The fact that you can only succeed as a group is the distinguishing trait of DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS. Only through cooperation the group can overcome the game's obstacles (locked doors, hidden passageways, monsters, evil wizards, etc.). The now extremely popular online (*Massively Multiplayer*) *Role Playing Games* like WORLD OF WARCRAFT are in fact computerized versions of DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS. And card swapping games like MAGIC THE GATHERING also originate from the game.

DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS itself originated from the *wargaming* phenomenon, the (re-) enactment of (famous historic) battles using tin soldiers and a model of the battlefield. At first this was solely done by the military, but it soon became a popular pastime of the middle classes. A well known wargamer was the English science fiction writer H.G. Wells, author of *The War of the Worlds* (1894) and *The Time Machine* (1895). Wells was so taken by wargaming that he even published a book of rules: *Little Wars* (1913).²⁸ In the nineteenth and the twentieth century the popularity of wargaming kept growing and societies were founded all over the world. One of these is the *International Federation of Wargamers* (IFW) which was founded circa 1963 in the United States.²⁹ One of the founders was E. Gary Gygax,³⁰ whose love for the history of the Middle Ages soon led to the creation of a subsidiary society: the *Castle and Crusade Society*. Gygax created battles based on the medieval art of war and medieval weaponry. Apparently waging miniature battles using imaginary arrows, halberds and trebuchets leaves something to the imagination as member numbers soon where dwindling. To give the game a new impulse Gygax, inspired by Tolkien, Fritz Lieber and Robert E. Howard,³¹ added fantasy elements like wizards and hobbits. These changes saved the society, as the new game, the rules of which were officially published as *Chainmail: Rules for Medieval Miniatures* in 1971, was an instant success. But the game remained a wargame i.e. based on a campaign and not on role playing. Then in 1971 Gygax met Dave Anderson. Using Gygax' rules Anderson had written a scenario in which a group of adventurers has to break into a castle. This is the first scenario in which the adventure itself and the individual characters are more important than the campaign. From this moment on Gygax and Anderson collaborate and new scenarios are written in which exploring dungeons in a fantasy world and character development become the definitive game elements. As it becomes increasingly difficult to recreate these fantasy worlds in miniature, the game world is soon transposed to paper: DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS is born.³²

Because of its popularity and cult status DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS featured in books, television series and films.³³ As would later happen with the representation of the computer games, the portrayal is mostly negative, expressing the concern of over anxious parents as in the film MAZES AND MONSTERS (made for TV, Warner Studios, 1982) featuring Tom Hanks as the main character Robbie Wheeling.³⁴ Because Hanks (as Robbie) plays DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS obsessively his parents have sent him to another school where they hope he'll again devote his time to his lessons. At this school he soon befriends other students who are also fans of the

game. To make their gameplay more realistic the group decides to move the game to some subterranean caves nearby. There Robby suffers psychosis and his mind remains permanently in his medieval fantasy world. The film's content seems to echo the first public scandal involving DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS which took place in 1979 when James Dallas Egbert III, also a student, disappeared. William Dear, a private detective who was in charge of the investigation, concluded that Egbert had disappeared during a DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS game and that he probably was no longer alive. What really happened was that Egbert had fled his house after a botched up suicide attempt and when he reappeared a month later his family decided that the real reasons for his disappearance (homosexuality, a drug habit and mental stress) were best kept quiet. Thus DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS' bad influence was reaffirmed, and as Bear stuck to his own version, which he also presented in his book *Dungeon Master: The Disappearance of James Dallas Egbert III* (1984), public opinion never changed. As a result an anti DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS campaign swept the news and media. And, characteristic to this kind of response, no one bothered to find out what had really happened. Fans of the game protested while the uniformed public saw their worse suspicions confirmed.³⁵

ADVENTURE and ZORK, the birth of text adventures

Tolkien's books inspired DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS, and both inspired the first adventure game, simply called ADVENTURE³⁶ (1972, also called ADVENT or COLOSSAL CAVE ADVENTURE). Will Crowther, who designed the game, was a computer programmer at Bolt Bernak and Newman. In his leisure time Crowther and his wife Pat were enthusiastic speleologists. Crowther used his computer skills to transform data from their cave expeditions into plotter line-drawing maps. Then around 1972 Crowther and his wife separated. Because the cave expeditions had been their mutual hobby, Crowther stopped exploring. His major regret in doing so was that he now would be unable to convey his love for caving to his daughters. This, however, gave him the idea to use his maps to make a computer game:

'Also the caving had stopped, because that had become awkward, so I decided I would fool around and write a program that was a re-creation in fantasy of my caving, and also would be a game for the kids, and perhaps some aspects of the Dungeons and Dragons that I had been playing'.³⁷

The ultimate game did not only have to be fun to play, but should also be easy to use for novice computer users. Crowther therefore designed a 'translation-program' so that commands could be given using natural language.³⁸ Thus the user did not have to learn a set of commands first. The reason the game only consisted of text and did not have any graphics was because it was played on a central multi-user computer, as there were no personal computers at the time. On central mainframe computers, computer time is divided amongst the users logged in and processes that are already running. Real time input and commands therefore have to be short. Output did not appear on screen as screens were expensive and rare (especially for private use), so it was usually printed (cf. telex and teletype).

The original ADVENTURE focused on caving. The game-cave is very similar to the original Mammoth Cave of Crowther's explorations and the descriptions given are lifelike. The virtual cave is quite complex so that mapping takes a bit of time. But there are only five treasures and there is no scoring system or progress indicator. All the dangers and enemies are natural, e.g. snakes, and part of the vocabulary is taken from geology (e.g. room).³⁹ Crowther's daughters liked the game very much and it soon found its way to friends and associates. In the end the game could be found on every campus computer in America, including the computer of the Artificial Intelligence lab of Stanford University where Don Woods worked in 1976. He also loved the game but he wanted to expand it, so with Crowther's permission, and greatly influenced by *The Hobbit* (dwarves, dragon, volcano) and *The Lord of the Rings* (the passage through the mines of Moria), Woods made a new version. This new version had fifteen treasures, progress was recorded (maximum 350 points) and the number of rooms was increased with fictional rooms with fantasy elements and names (e.g. *Troll Bridge*). Caving was no longer the focal point but solving puzzles and riddles (cf. Gollum in *The Hobbit*), on finding treasure and on trying to get maximum points; elements that are still prevalent in the game today.

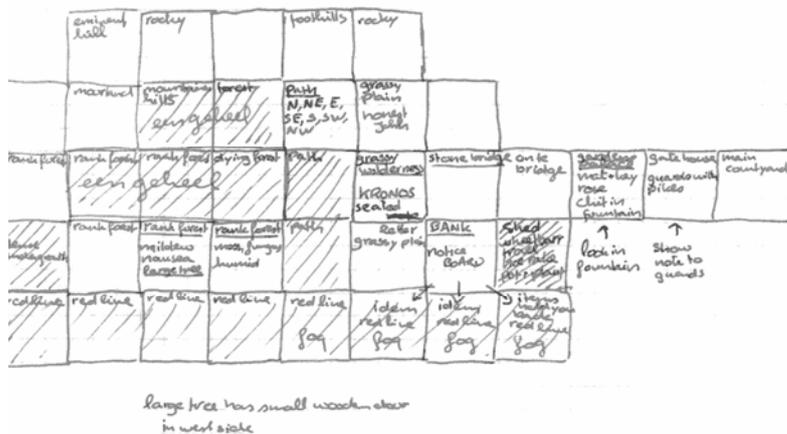
ADVENTURE⁴⁰ is mostly set below ground. The game starts with these, seemingly innocent, words:

'At End of Road

You are standing at the end of the road before a small brick building. Around you is a forest. A small stream flows out of the building and down a gully'.

The original version did not have instructions or a *backstory*, common to later and present day games.⁴¹ But as the original game was about cave exploration this information was not strictly necessary. Common sense dictates that you should look around for objects necessary to go underground like a lamp or other portable light source. By walking around (using commands like north, south, east, west, up and down, which can be abbreviated n, s, e, w, u, d to save on typing) you'll eventually find the locked grate, the entrance to the cave. If you explored the small brick building at the beginning of the game, you would have found a set of keys that are needed to open the grate.

Example of a game map





ZORK Trilogy
(Infocom, 1986)

As you only see text it soon becomes clear that you have to draw a map to avoid getting lost. This is why avid adventure gamers still have scraps of squared paper with maps of games they have played.⁴² Note that this automatically simulates the original cave exploration.

Because of Woods' additions solving the game's puzzles has become a lot trickier. Most of the problems are still quite logical e.g. that you need a cage to transport the bird. But why the bird should be afraid of the rod remains a mystery. Perhaps the most essential command is `save`, not only because you then do not have to start at the beginning every time you play the game, but also because, like later adventure games, *ADVENTURE* contains many *surprises*. In *ADVENTURE*, as in later games, the amount of items you can carry is limited. This means that you sometimes have to put items down temporarily. This is usually done by the command `drop`. Drop, of course, factually means that an item plunges a certain height, so it should not surprise you that the command `drop vase` leaves you with the broken pieces of a valuable Ming vase. These kinds of game-jokes together with the logic problems and puzzles to be solved and the drawing of a map have all become a set part of text adventure games. In the end all text adventure games are a *battle of minds* between the game designer and the player.

One of the first highlights and, like *ADVENTURE*, a legend amongst text adventure games are the ZORK-series (original game 1977-1979). ZORK's creation was directly linked to *ADVENTURE*, as one of its designers Tim Anderson recalls:

'In early 1977, Adventure swept the ARPANET⁴³. (...) When Adventure arrived at MIT, the reaction was typical: after everybody spent a lot of time doing nothing but solving the game (it's estimated that Adventure set the entire computer industry back two weeks), the true lunatics began to think about how they could do it better'.⁴⁴

Originally ZORK was an experiment consisting of only four rooms, but in the course of a few years the game grew to more than a hundred rooms. Like ADVENTURE ZORK was played on a central computer, but now most players could log on using a simple terminal (with a screen) so that the more elaborate texts ZORK used didn't pose any problems.

ZORK's growth was rhizome like. Whenever anyone felt like it, another part was programmed and added. More than once the addition of a new element, like explosives, triggered 'problems' in other areas of the game. Now wherever you used the explosives, even if you were standing in the middle of a lovely green pasture, the game would always respond that you had been flattened by twenty thousand tons of solid stone blocks. This meant that new lines of code had to be added to straighten things out. And again it became a game between the players (who always found new and innovative ways to use objects differently or solve problems creatively) and the programmers (who usually fixed the code). In ZORK's development DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS (fighting rules) and *The Lord of the Rings* (palantirs) again played a part⁴⁵. The only real thing that was holding ZORK back was that the game could only be played on large computers. However, at the time, more and more people owned a home computer so the designers decided to make a version that would run on these small machines. Still, as the game would not fit on a home computer⁴⁶ it had to be split into three parts.⁴⁷

Although ZORK was not the first adventure game to appear after ADVENTURE, and although the first ZORK games were not the best text adventures ever to be written, ZORK was the first commercially successful adventure game. You could even say that ZORK initiated the computer adventure industry.⁴⁸ ZORK was packaged, including a manual, and it was sold through regular channels.⁴⁹ Because mapping was not always easy and because some of the puzzles were quite challenging, a new kind of service soon took shape: *Movement Assistance Planners* (M.A.P.S.) and *Hierarchical Information for Novice Treasure Seekers* (H.I.N.T.S.) [sic] were sent to users on request. The fortunate who could access Usenet⁵⁰ (usually students and university personnel) helped each other with hints and tips when lost in the game or when a problem proved too difficult. Others had to buy special booklets with maps, hints and solutions that became more and more available with the increasing popularity of adventure games. Computer magazines were another useful source. These contained information on the hard- and software for a particular type of computer, including information on games. They usually also contained listings of complete (text adventure) games and other programs that you could then type in yourself. There were also books full of program code.

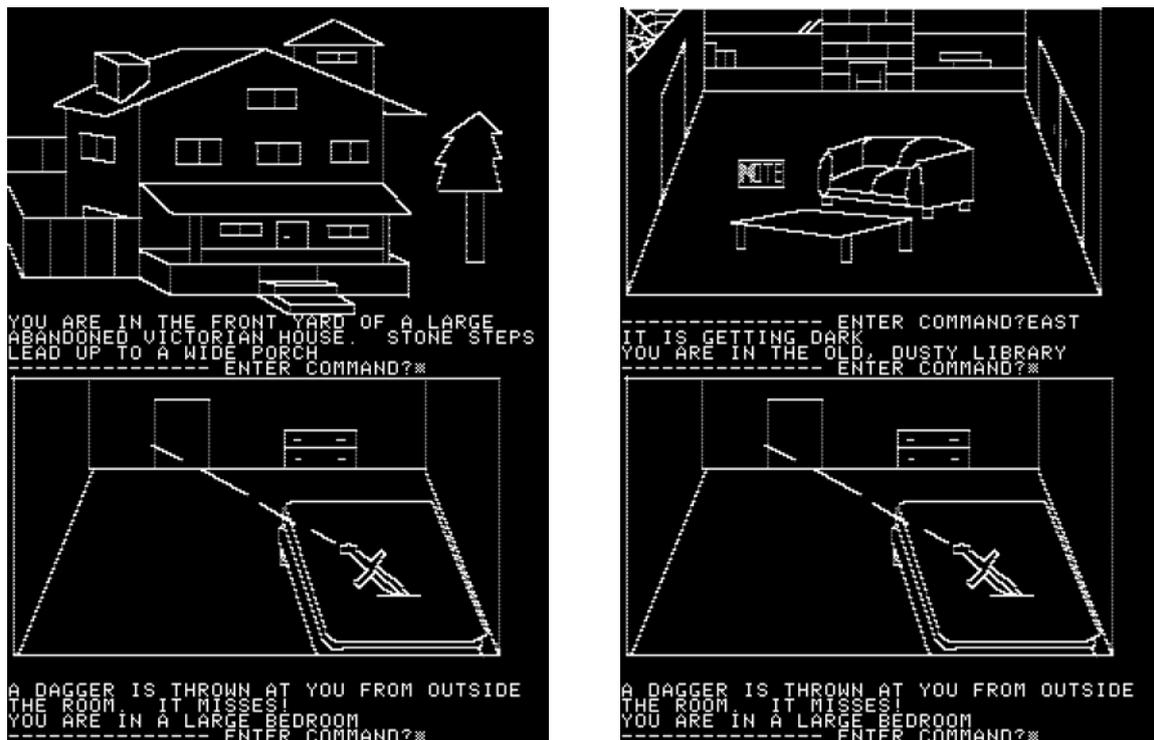
The transition from text to graphics, Sierra On-line and KING'S QUEST.

With the arrival of home computers text adventure games were not only ported to the home environment, the new computers also made simple graphic enhancements available. Depending on the type of computer, graphics in two, four, eight or sixteen colours were possible. In the beginning it was not possible to show text and graphics at the same time, as the machines used different *modes* to represent the one or the other. In early games, like the *Hobbit* for the BBC Micro computer (1982 Melbourne House software), the interactive text game mode was interrupted from time to time to draw a non interactive graphic of the room the player had entered. Because these graphics only functioned as enhancements to add atmosphere and because they were literally few and far between because of the technical limitations, the adventures were still true text adventures a.k.a. interactive fiction.

The first adventure game that featured text and graphics on the same screen was the game MYSTERY HOUSE which was released in 1980, a combination of the board game CLUE and Agatha Christie's detective *Ten little Indians*. MYSTERY HOUSE takes place in an old Victorian mansion. You and seven other people are in the house looking for treasure. But it doesn't take you long to discover that the others are murdered one by one. So you have to find the murderer before (s)he finds you. MYSTERY HOUSE (including the graphics) was designed by Roberta Williams in 1979 soon after she discovered ADVENTURE:

'I was inspired to design my first game because I had played a text-only adventure game called Colossal Cave and loved it. And – I had also played a couple of Scott Adams' text-only adventure games from a now-defunct company called Adventure International. I had loved the category of adventure game, and thought that I could do it – albeit with my own ideas and embellishments'.⁵¹

As there were neither scanners nor graphic tablets at the time, Roberta used a kind of pantograph to translate the drawings for MYSTERY HOUSE into the computer. Her husband Ken wrote the code. To draw attention to their game they put an advertisement in *Micro Magazine*. Response was phenomenal and they ended up selling eighty thousand copies of the game. Although MYSTERY HOUSE combined text and drawings, the graphics were not interactive, although they did change when opening doors or moving from room to room. After MYSTERY HOUSE Roberta and Ken created several other games, amongst others a second adventure game called THE WIZARD AND THE PRINCESS. These games were published using the name of Ken's firm On-Line Systems, but when the couple moved to the Sierra Mountains they changed the name of the game company to Sierra On-line.



MYSTERY HOUSE (Roberta & Ken Williams, 1980)

Roberta Williams was also the person to design the first two dimensional fully animated graphic adventure with a third person point of view: KING'S QUEST (1984).⁵² Roberta designed KING'S QUEST on the request of IBM who were about to launch their own personal computer and who were looking for a special game to do so:

"They said, "We want something like The Wizard and the Princess, but we want to push the machine's capabilities," remembers Roberta. "I had always wanted to do animation in my games, and have more colors. Up to then the adventure games had been first-person perspective. I had the idea to do something different." So I said, "I want to create a world with a little guy running around and you control him." But if you had a little guy running around, you had to give a sense of dimensionality in the picture. He has to go behind things like trees and rocks and stuff."⁵³

In KING'S QUEST I: QUEST FOR THE CROWN you play Sir Graham, a knight. You move through the game using a joystick or the arrow keys on the keyboard. In the original game commands still have to be typed, e.g. talk to gnome. And, although, the 'rooms' Sir Graham walks through can now be used as a visual aid, the game's manual still advises you to draw a map as in non graphic adventure games.⁵⁴ The manual also contains a backstory which tells you what happened before the actual beginning of the game. The KING'S QUEST series of games (eight games of which the last appeared in 1998)⁵⁵ takes you into a fairy world with kings, princesses, elves and dwarves and with puzzles based on original fairy stories. The backstory therefore

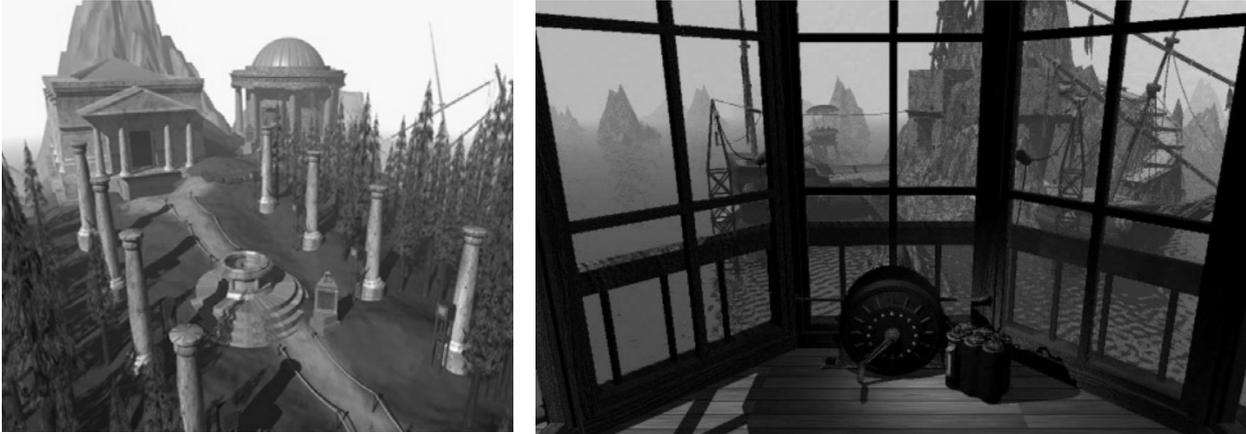
starts with the well known words 'A long, long time ago'. As the games are also aimed at younger players this is a brilliant idea because knowing what happens in the fairy stories helps you to solve the puzzles. And recognizing the fairy-tales adds to the fun, although for non Americans it is harder, as some fairy tales are different from the European version and some are not known at all. Though the game still uses input commands, adventure games now definitely embark on the road to animated stories.

The change from first person to third person point of view, however, does change the player's perception. Where before you had the feeling that it was you who underwent the adventure, the game experience is now mediated through an avatar, a player character with whom you have to identify. And where before you imagined the dark and sinister places you visited, graphics envisioned by the game's designer(s) now mediate your game world. Despite the risk of alienating the first generation of adventure gamers,⁵⁶ the game type thus reinvented itself so that it appealed to a new generation of players who had grown up with film and television.

The history of the adventure game does not end here. In the years that followed, new hardware developments pushed the game type forward. The popularity of console games meant that command-line input eventually disappeared so that all adventures became point-and-click (1990-1995). This meant a certain loss of interactivity because the 'natural' language interpreters the command-line adventures used had become very sophisticated, which made interacting with the game characters almost a dialogue. In the new point-and-click adventures the player could only choose from a limited number of preconceived possibilities. Thus the new games felt more like interactive comic books.



KING'S QUEST I: QUEST FOR THE CROWN (Sierra On-Line, 1984)



MIST screenshots (*Brøderbund, 1993*)

New graphic hardware also meant a more natural colour palette and a higher resolution. With the invention of the sound card and the cd-rom, game music became very sophisticated⁵⁷ and game dialogue could be spoken. Game companies even employed well known movie stars to record the dialogue. Graphic adventure games now had the look and feel of animated films. The cd-rom's capacity also meant that certain images and scenes could be pre-recorded, making the graphics even more stunning as in the famous game MIST (*Brøderbund, 1993*). MIST, subtitled 'The surrealistic adventure that will become your world', not only amazed with it's, at the time, stunning graphics, MIST also re-introduced the first person perspective so that, just as in the earlier text adventures, it was the player in persona who had to find his/her way through a labyrinthine world. This and its non-violent content made the game the computer hit of 1994 and the following years. In 1998 MIST was even the best grossing game ever.⁵⁸ For the computer game industry MIST was also a turning point. The hyper realistic images not only became the new industry standard (not only for adventure games), the game's players demographics (which included large groups of women and senior citizens) showed the industry that computer games were not only played by ten to fifteen year old boys.

In 1994-1995 game companies released the first adventure games in *full motion video*, turning them into interactive films. As this technique requires that everything has to be pre-recorded this not only meant that the number of cd-roms increased dramatically (games of six or eight cd-roms were quite common) it also meant that interaction became severely limited: if it was not taped it could not be played. Nevertheless some of the games from this period, like *UNDER A KILLING MOON* (*Access Software, 1994*), were still able to bring us compelling and interesting story lines with complex and sophisticated puzzles. The use of full motion video is not the only reason we see games from this period as interactive films. The genres used, e.g. detective and court drama, were directly copied from popular tv-series/films of the time. This is perhaps the reason why certain gamers still like games that are produced this way. For the real adventure gamer, however, the technique is too restrictive. So eventually adventure game designers started making three dimensional games that contained both pre-recorded scenes and *real time* rendering (made famous by games like *DOOM*, *id Software 1993*).⁵⁹ The drawback of generating graphics 'on

the fly' is that these kinds of games require more sophisticated hardware. On the other hand rendering real time reinstated the player's freedom to wander at will, which re-established the original feel of the old adventure games.⁶⁰ Modern computers are ever better equipped to deal with real time rendering, this means that the detail in game graphics becomes ever more sophisticated and eventually it will be hard to see the difference between computer generated images and the real thing. Realistic real time rendering means that nothing has to be pre-recorded, for future adventure games this means that they can once again focus on intricate interactive stories as was the case with the original text adventures.

Longing for the Middle Ages

Umberto Eco noticed that the second half of the twentieth century showed a visible longing for the Middle Ages, especially in popular culture:

'We are at present witnessing, both in Europe and America, a period of renewed interest in the Middle Ages, with a curious oscillation between fantastic neomedievalism and responsible philological examination.'⁶¹

But what are these Middle Ages we long for? As Eco shows the Middle Ages we envision are certainly not an accurate depiction (even if this was possible) but a modern construct especially the one portrayed by the mass media. In England this started in the 19th century with Walter Scott and William Morris, with the Pre-Raphaelites and with the Gothic style. In the 20th century Tolkien and C.S. Lewis continue this tradition, not only in their academic work (Lewis medieval literature, Tolkien medieval poetry), but also and more predominately by their works of popular fiction. Or as Norman F. Cantor puts it: 'In terms of shaping the Middle Ages in the popular culture of the twentieth century, Tolkien and Lewis have had an incalculable effect'.⁶² Still the mediaeval world Tolkien gives us in *The Lord of the Rings* is in some ways remarkably accurate. We owe this to Tolkien's vast knowledge of and love for this time. For those of us with knowledge of Anglo Saxon and Old Norse poetry and prose it is quite clear that he '[wrote] a modern work in the same [medieval] tradition' as he puts it himself.⁶³ This makes *The Lord of the Rings* 'a modern reconstruction of a fragment of medieval culture'.⁶⁴ This can be seen, for instance, in the way the party leaving Rivendell is composed. Though the participants all represent a different 'race' (man, elf, dwarf, hobbit, wizard) they clearly also represent the major classes found in the Middle Ages: the nobles (Aragorn, Boromir, Legolas and Gimli) who's task it is to rule and to defend the land and its inhabitants; the farmers (the Hobbits) who tilt the land and produce food; and the clergy (Gandalf, in a sense) who are responsible for the supernatural. In *The Lord of the Rings* this class distinction is not only obvious from the characters' actions; it can also be 'heard' in their speech. Of course there are also differences within a class (Frodo stems from a higher social order than Merry and Pippin) but the characters still fit the class they belong to. This distinction in separate classes and races was adopted in DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS, not only because of the influence

of *The Lord of the Rings*, but also because it already existed in the Gigax' CASTLE AND CRUSADE SOCIETY'S wargames.

screenshot from
THE LORD
OF THE
RINGS, THE
RETURN OF
THE KING
(Electronic
Arts, 2003)



The DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS distinction was later ported to modern (Massively Multiplayer) Role Playing Games. A player of the medieval fantasy MMRPG EVERQUEST (989 studios, first version 1999) is therefore still essentially moving in a society based on medieval classes. The medieval world they inhabit, however, is clearly a romanticised version of the Middle Ages, undoubtedly influenced by the mediated versions 19th century artists and modern comic books and films gave us.

There are games that try to give a more accurate depiction of the Middle Ages, but these are usually educational. A recent exception is the game MICHAEL CHRICHTON TIMELINE (Eidos Interactive, 2000) which was promoted with the slogan: 'the Future of Adventure is a journey into the past...'. The game is an adaptation of the book of the same title and relates the fictional story of a team of archaeologists who go back to the Middle Ages. The book's story is grounded on real archaeological finds and recent research. In the game, however, the designers had to find a balance between the 'historical accuracy and the artistic vision needed to meet the requirements'.⁶⁵ The game (and the 2003 film) therefore is a poor reflection of the original book. But technical concessions aren't the only reason the game failed. Just as with the CASTLE AND CRUSADE SOCIETY, a realistic depiction of the Middle Ages does not offer enough excitement and interaction for our present generation.

This longing for the Middle Ages we see in adventure and (MM)RPG games is not only found in computer games. In his book *Strange Landscapes*⁶⁶ Christopher Frayling

notes, as Umberto Eco did before, that this renewed interest in the Middle Ages can also be found in (popular) literature, art, comic books, film and music (especially Heavy Metal). The computer game industry, the fastest growing part of the entertainment industry, thus just follows suit, giving us its own interpreted and mediated version.

To conclude

The modern adventure game stems from the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and the role playing game DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS. But whereas Tolkien offers us a reconstructed version of medieval society, the modern adventure gamer isn't interested in a historically accurate depiction. Just like the generations before, the game-generation has reinterpreted Tolkien's work to suit its own time. This can be seen in the present *Lord of the Rings* games. The games that are based on Peter Jackson's film version, i.e. THE LORD OF THE RINGS, THE TWO TOWERS (Electronic Arts, 2002) and THE LORD OF THE RINGS, THE RETURN OF THE KING (Electronic Arts, 2003) sold particularly well. But these games do not focus on the story (as it is well known to all who saw the films [sic]) but on the action. Just as my generation hacked and slashed away on the playground imitating the Ivanhoe and Floris tv-series, so modern game kids hack and slash through hordes of virtual Orcs, not personally, but embodied by their heroes Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli.

In contrast to these immensely popular action games, modern cerebral adventure games are all but extinct. For female gamers, who always formed a sizeable part of the adventure game community, other games that focus on social interaction have emerged, such as the ever popular SIMS series (2000-2006). Still game guru Steven Poole believes that there is a future for the classic adventure game. A future where the restrictive choices of the point-and-click interface will be replaced by voice controlled gaming. Combined with the hyper realistic real time graphics of the modern game world, future adventure games will finally be able to again focus on their most compelling feature, the adventure story:

'But I suppose it's often that way. The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo: adventures as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of sport, as you might say. But that is not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind'.⁶⁷

Notes

1 R.H. & R.M. Seymour, 'A Mappa Mundi for the new millennium', *Proceedings of the Eighth International Coral Reef Symposium*, 2, 1997, p. 1357.

2 With the term adventure game I refer to a particular type of game in which narrative plays an important part. In an adventure type game the player (first or third person perspective) reaches the final goal by picking up items and clues and by solving riddles and (logical) problems. The subject matter or genre of adventure games can be quite diverse, e.g. science fiction, fantasy, detective, horror, etc. and, of course, adventure.

3 In the Netherlands computers like the famous Commodore 64, the Atari ST, the BBC microcomputer, the Amiga and the Spectrum ZX were referred to as home computers (as in the United States and Great Britain). The term microcomputer was used for both home computers as well as personal computers.

4 The first commercial adventure game that found its way to the Arcade was DRAGON'S LAIR by Cinematronic in 1983.

5 Jesper Juul, 'Games Telling Stories', *International Journal of Game Research*, July 2001, <http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/>. On the subject of time in games he uses "interactive narratives" (adventure games) to illustrate their fundamental difference with "normal" computer games: "In an "interactive story" game where the user watches video clips and occasionally makes choices story time, narrative time, and reading/viewing time will move apart, but when the user can act, they must necessarily implode [...] This means that *you cannot have interactivity and narration at the same time.*" [Italics in the original] As interactivity is an essential trait of computer games, adventure games, with their emphasis on narrative, can't be computer games especially since the users sole occupations seems to be watching video clips with only an occasional interactive event.

6 Console based adventure games are amply discussed in books like: Steven L. Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games*, Roseville 2001 and R. DeMaria & J.L. Wilson, *High Score!, the illustrated history of electronic games*, Berkeley 2002.

7 Real Time Strategy games (RTS) which became popular at the end of the nineteen nineties, and role-playing games which originated from adventure games also often use medieval (fantasy) settings. In the course of the article it will become clear that this fascination originates from the same sources as those of the adventure game.

8 Definition 'Jeu d'aventure' Wikipédia, see http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeu_d%27aventure.

9 This is the original term. When a new type of multi-user game developed, the multi user community, the term was changed into Multi-User Domain. For games the original term is still preferred.

10 TOMB RAIDER became the epitome of the action adventure game but was not the first action adventure to emerge. The subclass was first introduced on the game console with the LEGEND OF ZELDA series by Shigeru Miyamoto (first instalment 1986) and on the microcomputer with the game PRINCE OF PERSIA (Brøtherbund, 1989).

11 T. Pratchett in: J. Birkett (production & direction) J.R.R. TOLKIEN MASTER OF MIDDLE EARTH, BBC OMNIBUS, B. Comely (series ed.), BBC 2001.

12 J. Hackling, 'Introduction' in: L. Hawksley *Essential Pre-Raphaelites*, Bath 1999, p. 6-15.

13 W. Morris, 'Introduction' in: *The Volsunga Saga*, 1870.

Electronic version: <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/omavl/Volsunga/introduction.html>.

14 Tolkien's mother used to read him bedtime stories. One of which was 'The Story of Sigurd' which featured in *The Red Fairy Book* by Andrew Lang. Henry Carpenter, Tolkien's biographer writes: 'It was the best story that he had ever read'. H. Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: a Biography*, Suffolk 1977, p. 39.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 99.

16 Excerpt from a letter Tolkien wrote to Milton Waltman see in 1951. H. Carpenter ed., *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, New York 1995, p. 144.

17 Cf. German *zwerg*; Dutch *dwerf*; Norwegian *dverg*; Swedish *dvärg*; Danish *dværg*.

18 The Anglo Saxon (Old English) word is *dweorg* and the Old Norse *dverg*. The Indo European word is *dhwerg*^h*hos*.

19 T. Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien, Author of the Century*, New York 2000, p. xv.

20 In his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1947) Joseph Campbell shows that the hero myth is common in almost every society, making it archetypical. His findings support Tolkien's idea of shared original myths. Aragorn whom Tolkien based on Sigurd from the *Volsunga Saga* is one of Tolkien's reconstructions of this archetypical hero. See Connie Veugen, 'A Man, lean, dark, tall': Aragorn Seen Through Different Media in Thomas Honegger (ed.) *Reconsidering Tolkien* Zollikhofen 2005, pp. 171-209.

21 H. Carpenter in: J. Birkett (production & direction) J.R.R. TOLKIEN MASTER OF MIDDLE EARTH, BBC OMNIBUS, B. Comely (series ed.), BBC 2001.

22 I. Livingstone in: J. Birkett (production & direction) J.R.R. TOLKIEN MASTER OF MIDDLE EARTH, BBC OMNIBUS, B. Comely (series ed.), BBC 2001.

23 The first ULTIMA game was published in 1981 by California Pacific Computer. Nine single player games followed. The first online version aptly entitled ULTIMA ONLINE (Electronic Arts Inc.) was published in 1997. In 2002 Electronic Arts released ULTIMA ONLINE: LORD BLACKTHORN'S REVENGE.

24 R. DeMaria en J.L. Wilson, 'Richard Garriot & Origin Systems' in: *High Score! the Illustrated History of Electronic Games*, Berkeley 2002, p. 118.

25 Until then games were usually dexterity based. If there was a 'story', it was not part of the game itself but extra-diegetic.

26 Wizards of the Coast, inc., *Adventure Game Book Adventure 1: Rescue the Unicorn*, Renton 2000, p. 2.

27 'A game in which players take on the roles of imaginary characters, usually in a setting created by a referee, and thereby vicariously experience the imagined adventures of these characters', Oxford English Dictionary.

28 Go to <http://zeitcom.com/maigen/98lwars.html> for the original cover. The online version can be found here: http://www.miniaturewargaming.com/2004/06/hg_wells_little.html.

29 'International' is a bit exaggerated, as the majority of the members were from the Mid West and only a few came from outside the USA. The IFW still exists today.

30 Sones, B.E., 'Here There Be Dragons, into the past and future of role-playing games', in: *Computer Games Online*, December 2001. Online version: <http://www.cgonline.com/features/011218-f1-f1.html>.

31 That Gigax was inspired by Tolkien can be seen from the first adapted rules which featured Hobbits. But due to legal action by Tolkien's heirs the rules had to be changed. Consequently Gigax underplayed Tolkien's influence from then on. See DeVarque A., *Literary Sources of Dungeons and Dragons*, online version <http://www.geocities.com/rgdfaq/sources.html>.

32 The game wasn't officially called DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS until 1974. See, amongst others,

<http://www.wizards.com/default.asp?x=dnd/whatisdnd> for more information on DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS.

33 I'm not referring to the (rather bad) feature films of the same title, but to films in which the game is played.

34 The TV movie is based on the book of the same title by Rona Jaffe, *Mazes and Monsters*, New York 1981.

35 DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS and its players are no longer seen in this way. Nowadays it is considered cool if one plays the game. Famous dungeons and dragons players include Vin Diesel and Mike Myers.

36 ADVENTURE's complete history can be found at: http://www.rickadams.org/adventure/a_history.html. On computer games containing ADVENTURE like elements but preceding the game itself see Graham Nelson 'A short history of interactive fiction' in: *Inform Designer's Guide*, 2001, § 46. Electronic version: <http://www.informfiction.org/manual/html/s46.html>.

37 http://www.rickadams.org/adventure/a_history.html.

38 The term natural language should be seen in light of the time. Crowther's translation initially worked with two words only in the form action – object, e.g. 'TAKE KEY'.

39 In American geology all subterranean open areas, be it caves or other formations are called rooms. Therefore all areas, even open air, are still called rooms in adventure games.

40 Playable versions of the game can be found at http://www.rickadams.org/adventure/e_downloads.html (none for Windows XP). Woods and others have made several adaptations, some of which can also be found here. A version very similar to Woods adaptation can also be played online: <http://jerz.setonhill.edu/if/gallery/adventure/index.html>.

41 This was also due to the limitations on in- and output. In later versions, in game instructions were included.

42 Making a map of ADVENTURE is quite tricky as the game contains several levels and employs secret passages and magic words like xzyzy that transport you to a different room.

43 ARPANET is the precursor of internet. Originally only computers of the department of defence and of laboratories and universities linked with the department where part of ARPANET.

44 Tim Anderson, *The New York Times*, vol. 4, nr 1, winter 1985. Electronic version: <http://www.csd.uwo.ca/Infocom/Articles/nzt/zorkhist.html>.

45 Ibid.

46 The most elaborate home computer at the time could only hold 16K i.e. 16.000 text characters (for both the game as well as the data). The original ZORK game by now consisted of 1 MB (1.024.000).

47 The First three games ZORK I, ZORK II en ZORK III can be downloaded from the site <http://www.csd.uwo.ca/Infocom/>.

48 The micro computer industry at the time consisted of very diverse machines from different producers (Apple, Tandy, Atari, Acorn, Sinclair, IBM etc.). As different micro-computer chips were used several version of a program had to be made according to the machine it had to run on. For text adventures this was usually easier than for games using graphics, as graphic conventions were even less standardised. One of the reasons ZORK became a commercial success was because versions for all the popular home computers of the time were made.

49 Home computers did not use cartridges to distribute games (as did game consoles). As disk drives at the time were too expensive most home computers used cassette recorders. Because of this, home computer users could also write and record their own programs and games which pushed the growth of the industry as well.

50 Usenet at the time was what you could call a university version of ARPANET. Using a service called Usenet News (which was a kind of virtual notice board) the users could exchange messages. To keep things organised the 'News' was divided into categories called the newsgroups. Usenet and its newsgroups still exist and it still is a very useful place to find hints and tips for playing computer games.

51 K. Wright & A. Marold, 'GameGoddess Roberta Williams', in: *WomanGamers.Com Articles*, May 2000. Electronic version: <http://www.womengamers.com/interviews/roberta.html>.

52 In 1988 she also designed the first game with a female heroine, Rosella: KING'S QUEST IV: THE PERILS OF ROSELLA [sic] (see Justine Kessel and Henry Jenkins *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*, Cambridge Massachusetts 2000, p. 9), because of the Lara Croft phenomenon this is often overlooked. As with the introduction of TOMB RAIDER (in 1996!) there was some concern whether male gamers would buy a game with a female heroine.

53 DeMaria & Wilson, *High Score!* p. 138.

54 Drawing maps still makes sense as they are not only used for directions but also to record where items, helpers, opponents and secret passages can be found.

55 The KING'S QUEST games are still very popular. Some fans of the series have rewritten the two earliest games so that they now feature VGA graphics, mouse navigation and spoken dialogue (similar to later instalments of the series). These can be downloaded for free from the site <http://www.agdinteractive.com/>.

56 Text adventure games are not dead. New text adventures are created even today, and classic games are adapted so that they can be played on modern computers or through the internet. Text based role playing games (*Multi User Dungeons*) have even grown in popularity because of the internet.

57 Nowadays game music is even performed as part of the repertoire of symphony orchestras.

58 According to PCData (now NDP Market Tracking).

59 Although belonging to a different game type i.e. the first person shooter, DOOM clearly harks back to the early adventure games as you still have to master a labyrinth. But there are no puzzles to solve and the story is minimal. Finding and picking up useful items still is important, but killing your enemies and survival are the key issues.

60 3D games also use pre-rendered graphics. These are usually intros to tell the backstory and cut-scenes that bridge interactive game play. As these pre-rendered scenes can be made on state of the art computers they tend to be extremely realistic.

61 U. Eco, 'Dreaming the Middle Ages', in: W. Weaver (trans) *Travels in Hyperreality*, 1973, this version New York 1986, p. 63.

62 N.F. Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages, the Lives Works and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century*, New York 1991, p. 208.

63 Ibid p. 227.

64 Ibid.

65 Taken from the game manual.

66 C. Frayling, *Strange Landscapes: a journey through the Middle Ages*, London 1995, pp. 7-36.

67 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: the Two Towers*, London 2nd imprint 1974, p. 285.