

“Exploring the Blind Spots: Snowblind Studios’ *The Lord of the Rings*: *War in the North*.”

Of the great War of the Ring, many songs have been sung and many tales told. The names of heroes like Gandalf the Grey, Aragorn the King, and Frodo the Ring-bearer are greatly revered. And rightly so... Yet Sauron’s grasp stretched much further than the lands of Gondor and Rohan alone, and his forces might have done great evil in the North of Middle-earth had a handful of heroes not stood in his path. Their stories, too, deserve to be told... Pay heed now to one such tale which begins here, in the town of Bree, just a few short days before Frodo arrived on his quest.

So Gandalf commands in the introductory voice-over to *The Lord of the Rings*: *War in the North*, moments before the player(s) are deposited before Aragorn inside the Prancing Pony. This is not, of course, the best imitation of Tolkien’s writing; it seems unlikely that Gandalf would ever refer to himself or his companions as “heroes” (he uses the word “hero” only once (ref. 1, p.263), and—as with its three other appearances in *The Lord of the Rings* (p.515, 697, 880)—its use borders irony), nor likely would the wizard state that his name is “rightly so” to be “greatly revered.” Nevertheless, one does not pick up a video-game controller with expectations of literary precision, nor to peruse on-screen text for any longer than necessary. One does so expecting an interactive, audio-visual experience—something that lends to the passive medium of film some of the active depth and explorative interface of the real world. With a game based in Middle-earth, the appeal is obvious. The question, as always with adaptations, is whether the experience is indeed worthy of its prestigious setting.

The Lord of the Rings: *War in the North* is an action-RPG developed by Snowblind Studios of Seattle, Washington in association with Middle-earth Enterprises, and published by WB Games for the Playstation 3 and X-Box 360 consoles, as well as for PC. The game is also affiliated with TimeWarner’s New Line Cinema, and is set in the world of the recent films. It has an ESRB Rating of Mature 17+ for the amount of gore, something relatively new among *Lord of the Rings* games, which are nevertheless all combat-heavy. *War in the North* was released in the UK on November 24, slightly earlier elsewhere. Snowblind Studios is responsible for a number of well-known hack-and-slash fantasy titles over the last ten years, including *Baldur’s Gate: Dark Alliance* (set in the Dungeons and Dragons setting, Forgotten Realms), as well as the generic *Champions of Norrath* and its sequel, *Champions: Return to Arms*. Veterans of any one of these titles will feel a profound sense of déjà-vu even before the true action of *War in the North* begins. The systems and protocols involving conversation, equipment, inventory, and purchasing are almost identical to the studio’s previous RPG titles, which, for their efficiency, is not to say they could easily have been improved. Level advancement and acquisition of skills are also similar, providing yet another example of where *LOTR* inspires *D&D* inspires adaptations of *LOTR*. For the most part (and especially at the higher levels of difficulty), combat remains a button-mashing, potion-swallowing mayhem, especially when one is surrounded by Orcs and the other party members are in need of reviving. Ranged attacks that involve precise aiming, as well as customisable abilities, tend to break this monotony somewhat, but the game remains overwhelmingly combat-based. *War in the North* can be played shoulder-to-shoulder with two players (except on PC), and over online networks with up to three.

For Tolkien aficionados, the most interesting aspect of the game lies in its use of literary material. While around a dozen electronic games set in Middle-earth have been published for

almost a dozen platforms since Peter Jackson's films began appearing (with most, but not all, being set in the world of the films), *War in the North* is the first one dedicated to peripheral areas, events, and characters. Choosing among three would-be heroes, players are sent north by Aragorn in order to investigate an attack on the Rangers' camp at Sarn Ford by nine black riders. They soon discover a campaign to conquer the North for Sauron's forces, one led by a towering black Númenórean who describes himself as the Dark Lord's "right hand." Before finally cornering the villain in his lair amidst the grisly ruins of Carn Dûm, players will visit Fornost, Sarn Ford, the Barrow Downs, Rivendell, the Ettenmoors, and Mount Gundabad, as well as ruins and a dragon's lair in the Grey Mountains, and an original Dwarvish kingdom called Nordinbad. Osgiliath and Lórien are also portrayed, though as 'challenge' areas for practising one's combat skills. During their journeys, players will encounter familiar, original, and never-before-portrayed characters. Most notable of the latter is Radagast, whom they must rescue in Mirkwood from the clutches of Saenathra, a clone of Shelob. Likely the most memorable of the original characters, however, is Úrgost, the fire-drake in the Grey Mountains, with whom characters must deal rather than duel (this is not the First Age, after all). That the wyrm bargains honourably—and that the player-characters chide him good-naturedly at the end of the game—will doubtless stick in the craws of most purists. In the Ettenmoors, there is also a 'Stone-giant,' a creature mentioned only (and possibly whimsically) in *The Hobbit*, and which *War in the North* has made to resemble the stone-based equivalent of an Ent.

The writers of *War in the North* appear to have made admirable use of literary and linguistic resources in developing original material. Allusions are plentiful; a journal of Malbeth can be found in Fornost, while references to Angmar are common. The Eagles play a role—Gwaihir himself appears—and the members of the Fellowship can be spoken with during the first visit to Rivendell. Though many new names are imperfect, most are transparent enough etymologically, or at least adhere to blind spots in Tolkien's less-developed languages. The names of two of the three player-characters—the Dúndan Ranger Eradan and the Dwarf Champion Farin—have precedents in literature, which was certainly the safest option for the writers. The name of the third, the Elf Loremaster Andriel, is Sindarin for 'great lady.' The game's villain is Agandaûr, whose name means 'death-pale' in Adûnaic (according to the Númenórean vocabularies in *Sauron Defeated*, however, the circumflex on *daûr* should have been on the *a*, providing *dâur*. Úrgost, the name of the dragon, is likely an attempt at Quenya 'heat/fire fortress.' If so, it should probably have been **Úrosto*; the incorrect *gost* suffix was likely deduced from 'Belegost,' which is Sindarin *Beleg* 'strong' + *ost* 'fortress'/'city.' There are several other examples of original names based on existing roots, with perhaps the most notable being Azan-zâram, apparently the name of the scenic subterranean lake within Nordinbad, and Khuzdul for 'dark pool.' The names of the Orcs and Dwarves—whose languages have very limited corpora—simply keep to established phonology.

While the amount of carnage in the game seems gratuitous for the franchise—players receive bonus experience for decapitating, as well as severing the limbs of, their opponents—the visuals of *War in the North* are breathtaking. Flowers bloom within the cracks of Fornost's pavestones, seed fluff drifts through the air at Sarn Ford, and breaths cloud the air everywhere north of Rivendell. The sounds of the game are equally gripping; steel grinds through steel and flesh, and Orc-horns blare like wounded cattle. Flies drone in the abattoir of Gundabad, and crows erupt alarmingly from the thickets of Mirkwood. The voice-acting is superb, and the musical score coordinated to the on-screen action. Though there are many issues in terms of character ethics and technical gameplay—players must smash shrines on the Barrow Downs to

find treasure, for example, while fellow player-characters, unlike enemies, cannot hurt each other with their attacks—*War in the North* is an electronic masterpiece, and by far the most majestic game yet developed for Middle-earth. Though there is not the space here to debate the rightful place of video games in Tolkien Studies, it is enough for now to point out that while no commercial literary fiction set in Middle-earth has appeared that does not bear the authorship of J.R.R. Tolkien, games—whether electronic or tabletop—routinely involve characters, events, and narratives that establish new material. Whether or not those creations will ever be considered canonical, the monetary, intellectual, artistic, and technical resources behind such products deserve more comprehensive consideration than the gaming industry and the discipline of Game Studies together will grant them. *'The Lord of the Rings': War in the North* is a deserving candidate of this consideration, and Tolkien Studies would certainly benefit from more thorough analysis.

1. Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings* 2nd edn (HarperCollins, 1965).
2. Tolkien, J.R.R. *Sauron Defeated* 423 (HarperCollins, 1992).

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