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In this proposal I will be exploring the meaning of the words; story, adaptation, and tone in relation to the genre of fantasy, focusing specifically on fantasy art. Fantasy is the genre that I have developed my style around as well as used as my main source of inspiration for my work both personally and when possible for academic projects. Through my exploration of the genre I have become intrigued by how fantasy tales, characters, creatures, and worlds have been interpreted by different artists and writers as fantasy has evolved through many cultures throughout history. By exploring this topic in my writing, through the catalyst of my chosen three words, I intend to find a question for my independent project. I

have chosen these three key words to focus on as they cover what I feel are some of the core components of the fantasy genre.

Word 1 - Story

To discuss the topic of fantasy art one cannot avoid the topic of fantasy stories.. Indeed, fantasy art and storytelling both find their beginnings in the ancient myths and legends told by the civilizations and cultures that have preceded us.. As is noted in *A Short History Of Fantasy* (Mendlesohn & James, 2009), the stories told by ancient cultures, for example the *Epic Of Gilgamesh* or Homer's *Odyssey* both commonly use what we consider to be the tropes of fantasy, heroes going on epic journeys, fantastical creatures, the existence of other worlds and so on. Mythology laid the groundwork for what will become after thousands of years the genre of fantasy, therefore I have concluded that mythology is a sort of 'proto-fantasy'.

But why has fantasy remained as popular and ingrained in our culture throughout history as it has ? A potential answer may be found in the fact that these ancient myths and legends differentiate themselves from fantasy as we know it today the most in the fact that for the most part, those myths and legends were believed to be true by the people who lived during those times, making them more akin to historical accounts rather than fantasy stories. To the ancient Greeks the story of Prometheus' theft of fire from the Gods and his subsequent

gifting of that fire to humanity is not just an epic tale as something like *The Lord Of The Rings* is to us, but their genuine understanding of how humanity came to be. It can be argued that how significant these proto-fantasy stories were to early humanity is a key factor in why the fantasy genre is so popular and ingrained in our culture. As Joseph Campbell wrote in his book *The Power Of Myth*, ancient mythology has “made a psychological difference in the character of our culture.” (Campbell, 1988).

My research has reinforced and expanded my understanding of how art comes into play in the development and spread of early fantasy as well as the development of storytelling in general in the expression and communication of these stories. There are two main ways humans have told stories from early history to now: orally and visually, and oftentimes a mixture of both. Mosaics, tapestries, statues, and carvings were the forms of art used by ancient cultures. Archaeologists in northern Syria unearthed what is believed to be a stone relief depiction of a scene from *The Epic Of Gilgamesh* (seen below in Fig 1) in which the characters Gilgamesh and Enkidu battle the monster Humbaba made as far back as 10 BC (The Walters Art Museum. (n.d.). Much like illustrators such as myself are inspired to this day by fantasy stories to create art, so too did these stories capture the imaginations of the artists who lived during early eras. Examples of later artists being inspired by these proto-fantasy stories are the famous Sandro Botticelli painting *The Birth Of Venus* painted around 1485 (Parenti, 2019) depicting, as the name implies, the birth of the goddess Venus

(known to the Greeks as Aphrodite), or the illustrations of various Greek and Roman myths by 15th - 16th century Dutch engravers Hendrick Goltzius and Jan Harmensz. Muller (James, 2021).

Fig 1



Coming forward into the modern era we started to step away from just retelling myths and began creating our own fantasy stories. The fantasy writer and artist who is considered the father of modern fantasy is J.R.R Tolkein, creator of what is known as the Middle Earth Legendarium, which is the fictional universe in which his books *The Lord Of The Rings* and *The Hobbit* take place. Tolkien had a great interest in mythology from his early life and even the name of his fictional world, Middle-Earth, is derived from the name given to the realm of

humans in Norse mythology, Midgard (itself being derived from the old english word Middengeard). Tolkein is credited with introducing concepts such as creating entirely original worlds instead of stories based in our world, and the depictions of fantasy races such as orcs, elves, and halflings (Day, 1991). Tolkein produced hundreds of illustrations depicting the world that he had created, bringing further life to his work and a clearer picture of his fantasy creation. Tolkein made reference to how he saw the relationship and art in his essay *On Fairy Stories* where he claims his belief that “Fantasy is a higher form of Art, indeed the most nearly pure form, and so (when achieved) the most potent” (Anderson, 2014).

The link between fantasy art and story relates to my practice as It is a large part of my process to draw from the story behind an illustration I am working on to provide me inspiration, whether it is a story of my own creation or that of another. An artist whose practice similarly relied heavily on inspiration from stories was French artist Gustave Dore. Dore is known for his illustrations of scenes from John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Dante Alghieri’s *Divine Comedy*, in which Dore uses his own imagination to give form to the characters and locations depicted within the aforementioned stories (Zafran, Rosenblum, Small, 2007).

But the question presents itself, is story essential to the creation of fantasy art, and if so are fantasy artists as much storytellers as they are artists ?

Word 2 - Adaptation

Adaptation, in the context of fantasy, is the process of taking elements of previous fantasy works and putting a new spin or simply applying one's own artistic style to that element. This process can be observed as far back as ancient Rome. The Romans adapted the mythologies of other cultures, most famously Greek myth, to fit with their own mythology. The Greek tale of Hades and Persephone became the tale of Pluto and Proserpina to the Romans, Ares became Mars, Zeus became Jupiter, with changes being made to their stories as well as their names (National Geographic Society, 2018). Art played a role in this process, as the Romans created artistic depictions of these Gods in their own style fitting with their own culture.

This process of adaptation can be seen in modern fantasy art, and I have found an example within the sphere of video game development, specifically video game concept art. Artist Abe Taraky served as the lead concept artist on the latest installment of the action-fantasy video game series *God Of War*, released in 2018. The game is set in the world of Norse Mythology, and Taraky used the process of adaptation to create the game world and the characters and creatures that inhabit it. For example, rather than just reusing existing Norse patterns Taraky created new patterns whilst maintaining the design principles found in existing Norse patterns (e.g Swirling shapes, interconnected patterns). The same process is used for the character designs in the game. Norse cultures often depicted their Gods wearing similar armor and clothing as they did, and so

Taraky maintained this element but added elements more in line with modern fantasy to create character designs that are at once faithful to classic depictions of Norse myth but also unique to Taraky's work (Shamoon, 2018).

Whilst researching this concept and searching for more examples I came across a book titled *Norse Myths That Inspired Final Fantasy VII* written by M.J Gallagher. As the title implies, the book explores how Norse Mythology inspired the video game *Final Fantasy VII*. While the book focuses on the story of the game and how it relates to Norse Myths, I found that elements of the artstyle and design reflect this influence as well. The most obvious example I found was that the design of the main city of the game, called Midgar, adapts artistic depictions of Asgard, the home of the main pantheon of Gods in Norse mythology, into its cyberpunk-fantasy aesthetic. The design of Midgar resembles the description of Asgard in the Norse myth *The Fortification Of Asgard* in which a high wall is built around Asgard (McCoy, 2019). The large tower at the center of Midgar could also be an artistic allusion to the world tree Yggdrasil, which in many artistic depictions of Norse cosmology is shown to be at the center (images showing comparison can be seen below in Fig 2 and Fig 3). This form of adaptation leans more into the realm of allusion through design rather than a direct adaptation, and the argument can be made that this form of adaptation allows for more creative freedom for an artist as it does not rely heavily on incorporating existing designs and more on original ideas.



Fig 2 - Asgard



**Fig 3 -
Midgar**

Ever since Tolkein introduced the elements that make up the fantasy genre as we know it, and even well before Tolkein, fantasy artists have been adapting,

interpreting, and readapting races, characters, worlds, and mythologies for their own work. In my own practice I adapt what came before, applying my own style and interpretations like all fantasy artists before me. The quote “Good artists borrow, great artists steal.”, supposedly first said by Pablo Picasso, is perhaps a fitting summary of the concept of adaptation.

This line of research has led me to the question, is it possible for a fantasy artist to be entirely original, or is all fantasy art in some way derivative of a previous artist’s work ?

Word 3 - Tone

Tone in the context of fantasy refers to whether a fantasy piece of art or writing falls into either of two main categories: light fantasy or dark fantasy. Light fantasy usually utilizes a bright colour palette, more exaggerated character and world designs, and little if any heavy subject matter or violence. Fairy tales and stories aimed at a younger audience are examples of light fantasy. Dark fantasy usually has a style that tends more towards realism, and deals with mature subject matter and is not shy on depicting violence. The *A Song Of Ice And Fire* book series is an example of dark fantasy, as the world it is set in is depicted as realistic and gritty, often depicting violence and other mature content

However, a great deal of fantasy artists and writers employ elements from both tonal styles. Artist H.J Ford illustrated fairy tales and legends using a more

realistic and detailed illustration style but a bright colour palette resulting in a unique style that reflects both sides of fantasy (A.Menges, 2010). The video game series *The Legend Of Zelda* varies in tone game to game, altering between a cartoonish, colorful artstyle to a more realistic and sometimes scarier style depending on the game.

In recent times, fantasy works have begun to lean more towards a dark tone. Fantasy series such as *Game Of Thrones* (a television adaption of the *A Song Of Ice And Fire* book series), the *Dark Souls* series of games, and manga such as *Berserk* and *Blade Of The Immortal*, all known for their dark, gritty settings and inclusion of difficult subject matter have become immensely popular. When asked in an interview with IGN why he created fantasy worlds with such a dark and bleak tone, *Dark Souls* creator Hidetaka Miyazaki answered;

“Light looks more beautiful in darkness. When there is something beautiful in the middle of a wasteland, we are able to appreciate it more. One jewel doesn’t look like much when you have a pile of them, but if you find one jewel in the midst of mud, it is worth so much more.” (Krabbe, 2019).

This philosophy is reflected in the artstyle of Miyazaki's games. Muted colours are used and everything from the environment to the armor designs are designed to look worn and tired (example below in Fig 4). This style makes particularly beautiful and colourful elements of the game stand out more, as was Miyazaki’s intention.



Fig 4

Many different types of fantasy Artist Mike Mignola, creator of the comic book series *Hellboy*, bases his storylines and characters after folk legends, fairy tales, and Arthurian legends but with an added gothic twist. Mignola uses an overarching fantasy horror style to bring all these different branches of fantasy into one original dark fantasy world (Constant, 2011). The change in how fantasy is interpreted in art can be seen when comparing the work of artists like Mignola to the depictions of legends and mythical creatures in Medieval times. Medieval artists used bright greens and golds in their art, and put emphasis on the hero of these legends triumphing over a monster, as can be seen in the illustration of St. George slaying the dragon in the *Book Of Hours* (Westwell, 2021). In modern depictions of such battles, the monster usually towers over the hero, who is not

depicted with the same reverence and glory as heroes such as St. George once were. Has our view of heroism changed, and so our depictions of heroes have changed too ?

Conclusion

The three words that I have looked at in this proposal have led me to look deeper into the motivations and origins behind fantasy art. Fantasy art has evolved from what were essentially depictions of what we thought were real events and Gods into depicting stories and characters of our own creation, as well as reinterpreting classic mythology. The importance of storytelling to fantasy art has not changed, but the types of stories we tell and why we tell them has. I have also observed how our interpretations have changed, becoming ever more fantastical and dark as time has passed. I will look to and reference thinkers such as Joseph Campbell in my future work, as he wrote extensively on the role of stories and mythology in our culture, and how that role has evolved over time.

The key question that I have arrived at is; why has our interpretation of fantasy changed ? I will explore this question through sub questions such as what role has our evolving values and beliefs played in changing the way we view fantasy ? These are the questions I intend to use to initiate my independent inquiry.

As for my practice based project, I have decided to create a large series of illustrations based around fantasy characters and environments from a fantasy world of my own making, much in the same vein as how Tolkein produced illustrations to further conceptualize his fantasy world. The process will be similar to that of producing concept art for a video game (see Fig 4 again for an example of what I am referring to) or a graphic novel. The tone will be that of dark fantasy and I will draw from Norse mythology as a source of inspiration, using what I have learned about the process of adaptation through my research.

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