Playful Texts: Play Theory and the Adaptation and Reception of Fantasy Genres

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Abstract

This dissertation examines fantasy and its two subgenres horror and science fiction through the theoretical lens of Play Theory to illustrate the role of play rubrics in the plot and social settings in these works as well as explain the reception and adaptation of various franchises by fan communities. Using close readings of key texts from each identified genre, the study illustrates how the genres follow the basic trajectory of play rubrics outlined in Roger Caillois' Man, Play, and Games, mirroring the trajectory of human societies as they move from tribal to industrial forms of governance and social structures. From there the dissertation examines the phenomenon of fan culture and explains the deep affection its members have for various fantasy franchises and the urge to engage with those franchises on an extra-textual level. The study concludes that fantasy in all its forms appeals to people on a personal, symbolic level in the same way that religious symbols and stories have in the past and that the urge to adapt stories and settings into other forms, such as games, operates on the same level as ritual actions. Fantasy through games provides a sense of personal identity and serves as the superstructure on which community can be built.

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