

*Do you believe in magic?  
The Potency of the Fantasy Genre*

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**Abstract:** This article explores the popularity of the fantasy genre in the recent decades. In so doing, it seeks to provide a definition of the genre, claiming that fantasy literature is fiction that offers the reader a world estranged from their own, separated by nova that are supernatural or otherwise consistent with the marvelous, and which has as its dominant tone a sense of wonder. It does this through a discussion of previous definitions of fantasy, the fantastic, science fiction and supernatural horror. Furthermore, through a consideration of texts by Tolkien, and an exploration of contemporary novels (Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*; Terry Brooks *The Sword of Shannara* trilogy) and other franchises (*Star Wars*), it demonstrates how the generic boundaries should be read outside of the traditional limitations, and how these texts, coupled with contemporary technology, offer a freer range to imagination and make fantasy a potent critical force.

**Key Words:** Fantasy, Science Fiction, Genre, *The Buried Giant*, *The Sword of Shannara Trilogy*, *Star Wars*, Tolkien

I know what you are all thinking,  
That what you are hearing is too incredible to be true,  
but magic and demons are real.  
Wil Olmsford – *Shannara Chronicles*

The Fantasy genre is enjoying enormous popularity with readers and audiences worldwide. This is not solely built on the adaptation of Tolkien's epic fantasy series, *Lord of the Rings*, into three award-winning films by Peter Jackson, followed by the expansion of the prequel, *The Hobbit*, into an additional three films with the promise of an expansion of the universe within that medium. It is additionally augmented by J.K. Rowling's resounding success with the *Harry Potter* series both in book and film versions. In fact, Fantasy has been on

the rise since the mid-seventies with the publication of the first *Shannara* trilogy by Terry Brooks, and interest has hardly waned. That series, in a new adaptation into television by MTV, is counting on the continued interest demonstrated with *Game of Thrones* in television, and *The Hunger Games* in film. As Edward James argues, “Fantasy has become big business, for better or worse” (James 76).

While the genre is enjoying a period of popularity it is also seeing a rise in scholarly interest, with critical volumes studying many of the more popular franchises coming out in the past few years.<sup>1</sup> So, though fantasy is gaining official recognition, and increasing popularity, it does not have an accepted critical definition. Alec Worley, in *Empires of the Imagination* argues that “most detailed studies either qualify fantasy as the illegitimate offspring of science fiction or horror (its cousins in the triumvirate of the *fantastique*),” and goes on to claim that “unlike horror and sci-fi, fantasy has no unifying definition to call its own” (Worley 3). This article seeks to provide such a definition, claiming that fantasy literature is fiction that offers the reader a world estranged from their own, separated by nova<sup>2</sup> that are supernatural or otherwise consistent with the marvelous, and which has as its dominant tone a sense of wonder. Through a discussion of previous definitions of fantasy, the fantastic, science fiction and supernatural horror, a sense of the genre’s potential will be illuminated.

Rosemary Jackson, in her volume on fantasy, argues that “as a critical term, ‘fantasy’ has been applied rather indiscriminately to any literature which does not give priority to realistic interpretation: myths, legends, folk and fairy tales, utopian allegories, dream visions, surrealist texts, science fiction, horror stories, all presenting realms ‘other’ than the human” (Jackson 13-14). While such an inclusive definition is tempting, the genre would then need to be further delineated. Furthermore, genres such as science fiction, gothic and horror already have a rich critical tradition which does not include or account for all of the categories here identified as fantasy. In fact, Jackson’s project includes a specification of fantasy to relate more closely to Todorov’s fantastic, and considers a separation of different modes key to her critical project. This article also seeks to differentiate generic categories, doing so through several key factors including narrative position, verisimilitude, plot structure, and world-building.

Fantasy is often paired with science fiction in terms of publication, distribution and award consideration, using the convenient moniker of SFF. Orbit, DAW, Del Rey and Tor all explicitly publish both genres and market them together. Barnes and Noble and Amazon both have sections dedicated to Science Fiction and Fantasy, grouping them as a single category. Although issued through the auspices of the World Science Fiction Society, the Hugo awards, which has awarded top writers in the genre since 1955, explicitly considers works of both science fiction and fantasy in their constitution. The Nebula awards, issued by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, similarly consider works in both genres simultaneously. The genre of fantasy, critically and in award consideration, emerged from science fiction in the 1970s and 80s, and it was the addition of more and more self-proclaimed fantasy writers that prompted the official recognition of fantasy writers in the name of the guild, formerly known (until 1992) as the Science Fiction Writers of America (with the same

acronym). Prior to the change, fantasy writers were an assumed category, as they remain in the Hugo awards. So, if the genres are so tied together, how does one differentiate the genres of science fiction and fantasy into tangible and delineated categories? As science fiction already has a critical apparatus defining itself, we can use that a model for how fantasy can thus be delineated. Using science fiction's means of defining itself as a genre for a basepoint I will interrogate those definitions in arguing for the definition of fantasy I have presented.

Brian Stableford, in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, presents the cynical view on genre in sf, stating that "unfortunately, the clearest (or most aggressive) definitions are often the least definitive, although many sceptics have been attracted to Damon Knight's 'Science fiction is what we point to when we say it' or Norman Spinrad's 'Science fiction is anything published as science fiction' " (Stableford). While this can certainly also be applied to fantasy, it is not a satisfactory academic definition in either field. Both definitions both contain circular reasoning, and leave the text, author, and even the reader, out of the process of determining the genre of the text. Furthermore, specifically in consideration of fantasy, there does not seem to be a concurrence between the use of the term fantasy, colloquially, and the sense provided by the literary, filmic and televisual genres in question, as well as the confusion with the term fantastic, which has its own complications.

Damien Broderick provides a technical definition of science fiction that could be used as a parallel. He states:

SF is that species of storytelling native to a culture undergoing the epistemic changes implicated in the rise and supercession of technical-industrial modes of production, distribution, consumption and disposal. It is marked by (i) metaphoric strategies and metonymic tactics (ii) the foregrounding of icons and interpretative schemata from a collectively constituted generic 'mega-text' and the concomitant de-emphasis of 'fine writing' and characterisation, and (iii) certain priorities more often found in scientific and postmodern texts than in literary models: specifically, attention to the object in preference to the subject. (Broderick 155)

While this definition is multi-faceted, one could make the case that some of those characteristics could be found in parallel in fantasy. Both, indeed, are genres based on storytelling, invoke metaphor and metonym as basic building blocks of their world construction, and, often, deemphasize 'fine writing' in favor of plot development and world-building.<sup>3</sup> However, they differ on the type of world constructed, the characteristics of their mega-text, and most specifically on the relationship with technology and science (which is deprioritized if not absent in fantasy texts as a rule). The mega-text is here understood in science fiction as the intertextual features and tropes that are accepted as common in various sf universes, and I argue that fantasy has a similar mega-text component, as a genre, which fantasy authors mine at will, using those features as common as a way of creating generic intertext as well as aiding the reader understand their universe more quickly. Thus, the invocation of elves with pointy ears in texts from Tolkien carried over to more contemporary series, video games, novels, such as those by Cassandra Clare,

Terry Brooks and J.K. Rowling. As those features of world-building and mega-text are common, even if they have different specific referents, I would argue that they cannot constitute the differentiating feature between science fiction and fantasy. Thus, the distinction must be based on the use of science and technology specifically, the other features being common.

Perhaps the most widely cited theorist of science fiction is Darko Suvin. He provides two key concepts to the theory of science fiction, cognitive estrangement and the novum. Suvin's definition of science fiction is as "a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" (Suvin 7-8). In Suvin's conception, estrangement is a feature common to both fantasy and science fiction, and is the condition that separates these genres from realistic fiction or realism. By cognitive, Suvin indicates a belief in science, not in its particulars but in its essence. He argues that "typical SF methodology ... is a *critical* one ... combining a belief in the potentialities of reason with methodical doubt in the most significant cases. The kinship of this cognitive critique with the philosophical fundamentals of modern science is evident" (Suvin 10). For Suvin, the progressive nature of science and cognition imbues the science fiction story with a certain critical potential, one which is grounded in its ability to comment upon the world of realism, what he calls the "zero world of empirically verifiable properties around the author" (Suvin 11), (though I would suggest that a concurrence with the world of the reader, rather than the author, is a better indicator of keeping with the tone of this aspect). Consequently, Suvin has a less positive view of tales that are not grounded in technological progress. Estrangement is also one of the features most pointed to in terms of the potency of science fiction by figures like Adam Roberts who focus on the element of otherness as a means for science fiction to postulate difference that could not otherwise be meaningfully approached. He argues that "Reading SF, in other words, is about reading the marginal experience coded through the discourses of material symbolism; which is to say, it allows the symbolic expression of what it is to be female, or black, or otherwise marginalized" (Roberts 30). That feature, a critical feature of the argument for reading science fiction in an academic context and for its academic potency is premised on solely the estrangement aspect of Suvin's definition, and is thus equally applicable to fantasy, perhaps in a more substantial way as the coding can be even less tied to direct socio-cultural examples and give freer rein to the imagination.

Tolkien, in his short treatise *On Fairy Stories*, discusses the means by which a story of fantasy is constructed. He uses the concept of enchantment in describing the different levels of narrative construction, and magic as the element of differentiation. "Enchantment produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside" (Tolkien 48). This world-building aspect is critical to almost any fictional endeavor, but is perhaps more critical in Fantasy. Fantasy is the genre which leaves the most scope for imagination, and Tolkien's enchantment is a means of describing (using fantasy's own terminology) the suspension of disbelief required to let us 'escape' into the diegetic level of the story. There are key differences between the 'primary world' and this created 'secondary world' that Tolkien identifies. Tolkien explains

this as the power of magic. “Magic produces, or pretends to produce, an alteration in the Primary World. It does not matter by whom it is said to be practiced, fay or mortal, it remains distinct from the other two; it is not an art but a technique; its desire is power in this world, domination of things and wills” (48). The secondary world is that world created by the introduction of magic, essentially (supernatural) nova, and then added to a verisimilar world that the reader is familiar with. This allows the writer to not create everything, and instead rely on some aspects familiar to the reader (and also limit the amount of estrangement to those aspects critical to the story/plot/narrative or interesting for the explication and creation of the nova). Such verisimilar instruments could be the use of forests, deserts, oceans with similar tropes and stereotypes to those we are familiar with in ‘realist’ texts, to methods of transportation, weapons, and even physical laws and principles. The violations (the nova) of the familiar (verisimilar) are those things that require explanation (supernatural in fantasy, pseudo-scientific in sci-fi). Magic is the change within the secondary world, thus like the novum, a term taken from Suvin as a key defining concept of science fiction. Enchantment is the creation of the secondary world (by the author, film maker, artist, etc), through this use of novum, into which both the reader and author can visit.

Suvin argues that supernatural stories, with an affinity to myth, lay out stories that have a static background, and thus without the power of science fiction. “Cognition differentiates it not only from myth, but also from the folk (fairy) tale and the fantasy” (Suvin 8). It is the novum which provides the means by which one identifies the difference between the newly created world, the estranged reality, and the world of realism. Thus, in a science fiction tale, the possibility of man having developed interplanetary travel represents both a scientifically plausible novum but is also in keeping with plausible scientific progress. Furthermore, this type of story keeps the spirit of scientific discovery and the optimism implicit in the early days of the science fiction genre, the positive future worlds presented in *Amazing Stories* as envisioned by authors like Robert Heinlein.

A fantasy story need not have a plausible scientific rationale, but does still have a novum, features that allow one to feel the sense of estrangement from the ‘zero world’ mentioned above. Adam Roberts, in his New Critical Idiom entry *Science Fiction*, explains the distinction with reference to the story of Gregory Samsa in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, who wakes up as a bug one day without textual explanation. This can be contrasted with a story, such as William Gibson’s *Johnny Mnemonic*, which contains a dolphin that can communicate his thoughts through a lightboard, connected neutrally and which has been installed by the US Navy. Roberts argues, convincingly, for the inclusion of a story like Gibson’s into science fiction because of the explanation of the phenomenon, whereas Kafka gives no plausible explanation for the change (presumably if he had explained the connection, it would fall under science fiction). Thus, he claims, the transformation in Kafka’s story is a “physical impossibility” (Roberts 4).

Through this example, we can see how science fiction uses the novum as a feature in its definition, and I argue that fantasy does something similar. The example from Kafka, however, would not be significant enough of a feature, as the majority of the world

constructed remains the same; the story focuses on the alienation of Samsa through this direct contrast with an otherwise realistic world. Fantasy's nova are more wide-reaching, postulating an alternative world with its own boundaries, separate from the world of the reader. The fantasy nova, as Edward James and Farah Mendelsohn indicate in the Introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, concentrate on the construction of a world that is "impossible whereas science fiction may be about the unlikely, but is grounded in the scientifically possible" (1). Fantasy, thus, posits a world that can contain features sparked by pure imagination, giving it a broader scope to investigate estrangement than its more grounded cousin. While Suvin argues that this disconnect leads fantasy to be a literature of pure escapism, without relevance to human development (because of its lack of grounding in anything earthbound), I will argue that this freedom offered by fantasy is actually of benefit.

Tzvetan Todorov explores the potential of a genre he calls the fantastic in his seminal work. The fantastic, according to Todorov, is that point in a novel or story in which the reader is confronted with an aspect or characteristic which does not conform to the reader's reality, "either he is a victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and the laws of the world remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us" (Todorov 25). While this period of hesitation can be extended, in novels and stories Todorov classifies as truly fantastic (such as Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*), what is more common is a resolution of this fantastic hesitation, pushing the text into a related genre.

If he decides that the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomena described, we say the work belongs to another genre: the uncanny. If, on the contrary, he decides that new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena, we enter the genre of the marvelous. (Todorov 41)

This is best explained using the case of the literary Gothic, separating novels by Ann Radcliffe where everything is provided a logical rationale as uncanny (supernatural explained) and those in which one must accept otherworldly intervention, as in Horace Walpole, as marvelous (supernatural accepted).

Fantasy novels conform, and in fact revel in, the idea of the supernatural, and the nova offered is precisely the intervention of the new laws of nature, whether that is different races, diminished or enhanced size, or, most prominently, the inclusion of magic, into the reality of the created world. Fantasy need not have a moment of hesitation, although there are examples of universes that do, for example the recent television adaptation *The Shannara Chronicles*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*, and even, at least for the protagonist, the latest installment of the Star Wars franchise, *The Force Awakens*. Thus, I contend that the fantasy genre can be defined, in Todorov's terms, as marvelous, through its acceptance of the supernatural. Furthermore, one can separate the tone of texts, and thus I would separate texts which have fear as their underlying motif from those of fantasy. Todorov argues that "fear is often linked to the fantastic, but it is not a necessary condition

of the genre” (35), but I would argue that the resolution of stories that have fear as its base tone, texts of the literary Gothic and contemporary horror, resolve differently, notwithstanding if they are tales of terror (Radcliffe) or supernatural horror (Lovecraft), and thus can be separated from those texts with a more optimistic mindset. Fantasy, as a genre, does not revel in the hesitation, or the fantastic, but rather operates with the dominant of the marvelous. Its distinction from horror and specifically supernatural horror (Lovecraft, et al.) is in tone, with horror having fear as its overarching model, and fantasy embracing wonder and enchantment.

While Todorov classifies science fictional texts as marvelous (specifically the instrumental marvelous, or *scientific marvelous* (56)), he does so under a very specific understanding of science fiction. Rosemary Jackson picks up on that explanation in her own classification of science fiction as marvelous, maintaining that “much science fiction” belongs to the realm of the “pure marvelous” (Jackson 32) presumably on the same account as Todorov. This reading implies that the main features of science fiction belong to a fiction of pure imagination, and not one further connected to the spectrum of the “scientific and rationalistic world view” (32). Neither Todorov nor Jackson have as their purpose to clearly delineate either fantasy or science fiction, so the conflation of their characteristics and the different emphases and points of view are both reasonable and telling. Both argue that both science fiction and fantasy do not belong to the realm of the fantastic, as the question as to their association with the verisimilar is not in question. Like Suvin, I would, however, argue that science fiction belongs to the realm of the mimetic (on Jackson’s revised scale, noting that the uncanny is not strictly a generic category and that Todorov’s line is better served by this term), as it focuses on a plausible future based on developments in technology (hard sf) or social constructions (soft sf).

The fundamental difference between Jackson and Suvin in this regard seems to be the assumption that science fiction predominantly rests not only on scientific progress and optimism but on the ‘supernatural’ features of sf (aliens, etc), as opposed to realistic fiction (uncanny/mimetic). Fantasy, on the other hand, does not have the same relationship to the progress that science fiction brings to the fore, to the optimism in technology and development and progress for an earth-bound (or derived) species. “A fantasy is a story based on and controlled by an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility” (Irwin 4). For Irwin, and many scholars, fantasy stories are tales of the impossible, not connected to plausible future or past scenarios. As such, the estrangement is greater, and yet the tone is optimistic and wondrous (unlike horror and the Gothic), while the parallel to our own scenario is created more through analogy than conceptual future construction, as it is in science fiction. Fantasy is freer than science fiction in its world-building conceptions because it does not need to be grounded in the plausible or the possible, thus fantasy is the genre that can most powerfully utilize the potency of estrangement to discuss issues of race, gender, sex, politics, which are critical in our own contemporary society. This is particularly true in light of postmodernism in which those grounded features which we could attach to a science fiction scenario are already exposed as unlinked, and thus maximizing the estrangement allows us the freedom to explore all possible speculative

alternatives, in the past, present, and future, and on this world and on others, without the cognitive constraints that Suvin advocates.

In categorizing fantasy as a genre, the question is not just of a firm definition, but also a period in which to identify the genre's constraints. So, what is the origin of fantasy? One could point to some of the oldest literature, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the incident of Humbaba, as Adam Roberts, for other reasons, does in the consideration of science fiction. In the English tradition, canonical texts like that of *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* both invoke supernatural beings. The former presents the Cain-descended Grendel, his 'hell-bride' mother, and the final encounter with the dragon, as well as the Beowulf's recollections of fighting sea monsters off the coast of present day Sweden. The latter text uses the romance tradition, and the encounter with the mysterious, and magical, Green Knight. However, I would argue that while those stories conform to what we now consider fantasy, fantasy as an independent definable genre does not emerge until more recently.

William Irwin argues that the modern concept of fantasy is relatively recent. He catalogues a period of fantasy literature in the period from 1880-1950, but includes many authors who produced works which, although taking up themes consistent with the modern understanding of fantasy, do so prior to the development of the independent genre. The modern conception of the genre stems not from this prolific period, but from the period after what Irwin points to as a pause in the popularity of the genre, from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s. Writing in 1976, and referring to the period mentioned, he states: "these authors and others brought fantasy to its highest execution and left us with a body of fiction that deserves to be known and understood, even though its kind has all but disappeared from the literature in the past eighteen years" (Irwin 5). From roughly the publication of Tolkien's trilogy in 1954-5, until the revival (triggered in part by fans of Tolkien's trilogy), as Irwin argues, little 'fantasy' is published, and it is only in this later period in which fantasy is thought of and delineated as a separate definable genre. One could argue that even in pulp fiction there was a turn towards science fiction in the intervening period and the run up to the space race, at least in the West, as well as a proliferation of alien encounters and horror associated with the Soviet threat, and the concurrent Red Scare in the US.

The genre, however, goes beyond the concept of the 'high fantasy' texts (trilogies, primarily) that descend from the tradition of *The Lord of the Rings*. So, while it includes the highly popular *Harry Potter* series, which explores the concept of a parallel world of magic, and C.S. Lewis' influential Christian inspired Narnia series, I will focus on more contemporary texts to show the range of the fantasy genre, and then discuss why it is so popular in today's pop cultural society. Terry Brooks' *The Sword of Shannara Trilogy* (exacerbated by the MTV adaptation), presents a world of magic and supernatural beings in Earth's future (as opposed to an alternative world or distant past), Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*, which evokes a world of supernatural creatures in a medieval setting using a highly literary language, and the space opera *Star Wars* series, which similarly evokes a world of magic even in an atypical setting for the genre, each challenge certain preconceptions of fantasy and allow us to explore the reaches of the genre as currently understood.

The *Shannara* series allows us to consider the evolution of the fantasy elements. As Tolkien argues, “Fantasy, of course, starts out with an advantage: arresting strangeness” (Tolkien 44). In this series, Brooks sets out to use the intertextual references found in his fan-based love for the Tolkien series, but alter the origins of the supernatural creatures to a time thousands of years in the future. This reversal allows us to be estranged even from those verisimilar elements that Brooks does present, while making the supernatural nova seem more natural — and they are familiar due to the consistency in characteristics from the popularity of Tolkien’s own universe. It also plays on the traditional quest motif, and thus harkens back to the medieval romance tradition that is often evoked in this genre. In this sense, it presents certain differences, the supernatural nova, but calcifies the differences. This is a contrast to science fiction, in which the progress inherent in that genre often leads to developments in technology being evoked as a progressive means of solving the conflict. In fantasy, the magic is inherent in the universe, and thus, as long as one accepts the premises, the crises are averted through the natural development of the plot and characters.

Tolkien also emphasizes the importance of taking the secondary world seriously. “[Magic] must in that story be taken seriously, neither laughed at or explained away. Of this seriousness the medieval Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is an admirable example” (Tolkien 16). This is important because if the story is presented as a story within the diagesis, it removes the fantasy element from the text, essentially ascribing it not as an alternative universe in which magic is real, and the supernatural is commonplace, but presents it as a fiction, something which can be dismissed. The prime example of this is the story of Sir Gawain, in which the Green Knight of the title is beheaded and survives early on in the romance. This tale is taken up in Kazuo Ishiguro’s recent novel *The Buried Giant*. While Ishiguro is a well-known literary writer, praised not only for his ideas but for the quality of his writing, with this novel he moves into unknown territory. In an interview for the *New York Times*, he provides this quote on the novel: “I don’t know what’s going to happen,” he said. “Will readers follow me into this? Will they understand what I’m trying to do, or will they be prejudiced against the surface elements? Are they going to say this is fantasy?” (Alter, np). With this quote Ishiguro sparked a bit of controversy, as if he were dismissing so-called genre fiction, which includes both science fiction and fantasy, and he was specifically criticized by author Ursula Le Guin. The question is whether writing literary fiction can be separated from genre fiction. Ishiguro has already produced a well-received novel which does fall into a genre fiction category, the 2005 Booker nominated *Never Let Me Go*, and I argue that he has done so again here. By using the fine writing associated with literary fiction, combined with elements of the fantasy genre, specifically the use of ogres and dragons in a verisimilar setting of medieval England at the time of Sir Gawain, Ishiguro here challenges the notion that genre fiction is predicated on the idea of a focus on generic conformity at the expense of the quality of the writing. Despite its pulp origins, the genre does not dictate a specific quality line below which genre fiction must fall. I read Ishiguro’s concern as whether the reading public is willing to accept fantasy into literary fiction, not an assertion that the ascription is unwarranted. (Le Guin might also be additionally motivated by the controversy of science fiction’s literary status and the

positions taken by Margaret Atwood and speculative fiction, detailed in the 2012 *In Other Worlds*.)

If we accept the premise of *Shannara*, then the setting in the distant past is not a requirement for a fantasy text. Ishiguro's novel challenges the notion that a specific type of language is warranted, suggesting that literary language and conceits can also be used in a fantasy novel, which embraces the supernatural. The *Star Wars* sagas demonstrate yet another important concept, namely that there is not a particular setting that is inherent to the genre. I argue that *Star Wars*, rather than a science fictional tale, is actually a fantasy text. Science fiction has sometimes been defined by a checklist of items, with space travel and spaceships prominent on the list. Fantasy has been similarly defined, with many of Tolkien's own prominent supernatural creatures featuring highly such as elves, orcs, and wizards. Yet, the mere presence of any one of those elements doesn't define the text as fantasy (or science fiction), and as I argued earlier, I contend that it is estrangement, supernatural nova, the evocation of the marvelous and sense of wonder that define the genre. Each of those elements are present in the *Star Wars* series, and it lacks particular elements that are characteristic of science fiction, the genre that it is otherwise most associated with.

*Star Wars* does, as both *Shannara* and *Buried Giant* do, demonstrate a strong faith in magic. In Lucas's film franchise, that magical element is the force, the unexplained phenomenon that binds the universe and provides the Jedi, the mystical monk-like order that serves the Federation, with their historic power. Despite assertions by fans, and a mention in the prequel series of the concept of midi-chlorians<sup>4</sup>, *Star Wars* does not provide a technological or other scientific explanation for this force. Rather, what the franchise presents is the mystical and religious associations of the Jedi. Even as ships travel to other stars, the essential element is the wonder associated with the Jedi, a feature highlighted in the most recent addition to the franchise, in which the Jedi have become the stuff of legends and lore.

This franchise also demonstrates the optimistic tone that is essential to the Fantasy genre. Tolkien describes it as a 'Eucatastrophe.'

But the 'consolation' of fairy-tales has another aspect than the imaginative satisfaction of ancient desires. Far more important is the Consolation of the Happy Ending. Almost I would venture to assert that all complete fairy-stories must have it. At least I would say that Tragedy is the true form of Drama, its highest function, but the opposite is true of the Fairy-story. Since we do not appear to possess a word that expresses the opposite – I will call it the Eucatastrophe. The eucatastrophic tale is the true form of the fairy-tale, and its highest function. (Tolkien 60)

This term of Tolkien's is useful in separating the tone of the gothic and horror, from that of sci-fi and in particular fantasy. Sci-fi presents a positivistic outlook at its core, especially for those practitioners of hard sf and its derivatives. One could even argue that cyberpunk,

perhaps the most pessimistic of the sci-fi sub-genres, does not produce texts in which the interconnection of technology and the future end more dystopically than they start (and in postcyberpunk this becomes slightly optimistic about positive change). This is contrasted with the typical tone of fantasy, which I have argued is one of wonder. Falling on the side of the marvelous is not sufficient to arrive at this positive outlook, but it is a characteristic of fantasy which is not simply the mirror of the gothic, and does not follow directly in separation from science fiction. “The joy of the happy ending, or more correctly the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous ‘turn’ (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale) this joy which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially ‘escapist’ or ‘fugitive.’ In its fairy-tale – or otherworld – setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur” (Tolkien 60). Yet, while any specific point of grace, such as Luke’s ability to launch a missile at the precise moment to destroy the Death Star, seems miraculous, the genre itself provides the optimism that the protagonists will prevail, and the right will be achieved in the universe, by then end of any given cycle (often in trilogies, since Tolkien).

What these franchises further explore is a development from the above quote from Tolkien, in which he claims that “there is no true end to any fairy-tale.” That concept leads to some of the most potent explanations for the contemporary popularity of the genre in the internet age. As far back as the end of the nineteenth century (with Sherlock Holmes) fans have been exerting influence over various franchises (such as leading to the return of Holmes from the dead). Yet, it is in science fiction fandom where we see the building blocks of contemporary fan culture developing, and from that origin where we see the developing of the first fan societies around Tolkien and other fantasy franchises emerging. Along with the commercial benefits to publishers and movie studios, fans also produced many original works which expanded the science fictional and fantasy universes they so appreciated. And since the advent of the internet, that tendency has exploded to epic proportions. The rise in popularity of fantasy since the late 1990s can be traced to the developments of a convergence culture around popular fantasy franchises like *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings* (especially the Jackson adaptations), and *Game of Thrones* and which have pushed producers to look for more and more franchises to develop in this vein (like the recent *Shadowhunters* and *Shannara Chronicles*). This is due to the world-building inherent in these franchises and the space this opens up for the reader to develop the story as he sees fit, a form of textual poaching as Jenkins argues in his 1992 book but augmented for the digital age. While it was controversial twenty years ago during the Potter Wars (Jenkins 175), the concept of fans writing text which fill in the gaps of a franchise or universe, exploring the minor characters, undeveloped plot points, or continuing the story both within the original framework as well as beyond, has become an essential part of engaging the twenty first century audience. Fantasy is particularly adept at giving space to this exploration because it is founded in the freest expression of imagination, and thus the novel elements of each franchise give the most play for the reader-authors that participate in this contemporary form of expression. This in turn leads to the ongoing popularity of the series and franchises, and pushes the studios, and in particular today with the turn to television as the prime medium, to the development of more and more fantasy series and franchises. Tolkien argued that “Fantasy is a thing best left to words, to true literature” (45) arguing for

literature over drama due to the technical limitations of depicting the alternative or Secondary world as something other than farcical. This is ameliorated to a degree by the developments in film and television storytelling, which allow a more serious depiction of the fantasy realm, and which is sufficiently immersive to meet his requirements (although written text is still arguably a better medium as it gives more space to the story and more freedom of imagination to the reader).

In fact, it may be this particular historic moment that has the most need for fantasy.

It is part of the essential malady of such days – producing the desire to escape, not indeed from life, but from our present time and self made misery – that we are acutely conscious both of the ugliness of our works, and of their evil. So that to use evil and ugliness seem indissolubly allied. We find it difficult to conceive of evil and beauty together. (Tolkien 57)

Tolkien makes this comment about his own age, the 1950s, an age that seems ugly and evil and provides fantasy as the escape to a world in which good overcomes, and wonder is the dominant tone. A case can be made, especially in this arguably post postmodern condition, that this condition has grown rather than dissipated. By allowing for unlimited imagination, we are freeing the mind from the search for grounding and truth, by providing the possibility of exploring alternatives in the ‘safe’ environment of fiction. In fantasy, the rules are laid out, and then adhered to. By ‘arresting’ the strangeness, it limits its impact and, perhaps counterintuitively, gives us grounding in a world in which the rules are less certain, and less universal, than they ever have been before. This is what makes fantasy powerful, and why we all want to believe in magic.

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<sup>1</sup> McFarland, for example, has collections of Essays on *Game of Thrones*, Tolkien, *The Hunger Games*, and Harry Potter, among others.

<sup>2</sup> Explicating Darko Suvin's term, Adam Roberts defines the novum as "this 'point of difference,' the thing or things that differentiate the world portrayed in science fiction from the world we recognized around us" (Roberts 6), which I argue can be found equally in fantasy.

<sup>3</sup> I will argue that while a de-emphasis on fine writing is typical of both fantasy and science fiction, and indeed all 'genre fiction' which have as their dominant concept conformity to the genre and generic conventions rather than literature or literary language in general, a lack of 'fine writing,' here understood as a poetic use of language, is not eschewed necessarily as a generic condition. There are numerous examples of finely written texts of fantasy and science fiction, such as Kazuo Ishiguro who has books which fall into each genre (*The Buried Giant* and *Never Let me Go*, respectively).

<sup>4</sup> Midi-chlorians react to the presence of the force, which also flows through them, so cannot be evoked as a scientific or technological cause or explanation for this mystical presence.