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The Inner Consistency of Mythology: The Mythological Kernel and Adaptation in
The Golden Compass



THE INNER CONSISTENCY OF MYTHOLOGY: THE MYTHOLOGICAL KERNEL AND ADAPTATION IN *THE GOLDEN COMPASS*

DOUGLAS A. BARNICO

Fantasy has also an essential drawback: it is difficult to achieve. Fantasy may be, as I think, not less but more sub-creative; but at any rate it is found in practice that “the inner consistency of reality” is more difficult to produce, the more unlike are the images and the rearrangements of primary material to the actual arrangements of the Primary World.

—J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-stories” 48

J.R.R. TOLKIEN ASSERTS THAT AN “ARRESTING STRANGENESS” (48) is fundamental to any conception of fantasy. Since creating an “inner consistency of reality” (47), a hinge point between the *real* and the *unreal*, draws the reader into the world of the fantasy created, they experience this fictional Secondary World as both fantastic and possible.¹ While much has been written about how fantasy fiction relates its material and messages to the reader, especially with regards to Tolkien’s corpus,² what has been overlooked in examinations of fantasy fiction is how mythology acts as a way of investigating the relation between the real (the mimetic) and the unreal (the marvellous). The real/mimetic is that which in fantasy fiction is drawn from or related to the reader’s actual world; it is an imitation of that real world, but which is couched in the unreal/marvellous. The unreal/marvellous are the fantastical, often magical, elements in fantasy fiction that are impossible or inconceivable in reality. Rosemary Jackson clarifies that the fantastic “enters a dialogue with the ‘real’ and incorporates that dialogue as part of its essential structure” (36, italics in original)—that the fantastic is situated between the unreal/marvellous on one hand and the real/mimetic on the other. This paper develops upon the idea that mythology functions as a kernel—a necessary, core element—of fantasy fiction, although specifically regarding Philip Pullman’s *The Golden Compass*. Of particular importance is the narrative

¹ See Tolkien’s “On Fairy-stories” for a complete description of “Secondary World” (46-56).

² For an analysis of Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* with regards to its narrative development and cohesiveness, see Brian Rosebury’s chapter “*The Lord of the Rings*: Achieving the Narrative,” pp. 60-88.

structure through which the convention of mythology functions by inviting the reader to relate the real/mimetic to the unreal/marvellous. The novel's major thematics (its core meanings)—the *bildungsroman* (Lyra's self-actualization) and (mis)interpretation (deciphering truth from untruth)—are couched in the marvellous. Critical engagement with the marvellous through the mythological construction of the alethiometer—the golden compass Lyra consults to aid in her quest—reveals these thematics as imbued in the mimetic imitation of the reality Pullman's novel creates.

Thematics is a central element of the mimetic regarding the categorization of the novel within the genre of fantasy fiction. It is also fundamental to an analysis of the Sega Corporation's adaptation of *The Golden Compass* video game as fantasy fiction, which itself adapts elements from the film, both of which released in 2007.³ Since the video game uses the title from Pullman's novel, and thus shares a franchise with the novel, it adopts, perhaps undeservedly, its status as fantasy fiction. However, the video game's adaptation from the novel, and to a visual and aural extent from the film, challenges Jackson's argument that the real/unreal relationship in fantasy fiction is its essential feature. Discerning the mimetic from the marvellous in terms of the video game's themes is subverted by the shift in the audience's mode of engagement with the alethiometer from reading to interacting. In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon suggests that "there has been a long debate recently about whether interactivity and storytelling are at odds with one another" (13). Recent critical studies of digital narratives have, however, sought to argue the interdependence of storytelling and interactivity. Frans Mäyrä and Amy M. Green argue extensively over the necessity of the interrelation between player interaction and narrative development in video games. A seminal point in Mäyrä's book is the convergence of player and video game in co-constructing interpretive contexts for studying the culture of video games (13). He specifically underscores the notion of "playing as a form of understanding" (14), especially with regards to the balance of play as decoding (38). Green similarly (and rightfully) echoes Mäyrä's notion, and while her primary focus in analyzing digital storytelling is the story itself, she does examine how gameplay elements function in progressive and reductive ways to the service of the story (15-17), as well as how player agency is a key element to story development (44). Reading, viewing, and performing a narrative are different activities requiring different kinds of agency from the participants, and while my analysis here is not primarily concerned with *viewing* or *playing through* a narrative, I am

³ I have elected to leave out the 2019 HBO series *His Dark Materials* from my analysis, since it occurs after the release of the video game and is not part of the novel-to-film-to-videogame sequence discussed in this paper.

concerned with the changes that occur to narrative's relation to mythology when an participant's engagement shifts from reading to performing. While Hutcheon somewhat elides the narrative shift that occurs between novel and video game, it is my contention that the adaptation of the alethiometer (the mythological) in *The Golden Compass* disengages the player from experiencing the video game as fantasy fiction. The video game glosses over the core element of the relation between the real and the unreal that relates the video game to its source text.

This paper examines Philip Pullman's novel *The Golden Compass* and its film and video game adaptations in two ways. First, it is necessary to determine that the core element of fantasy in *The Golden Compass* novel is mythology and bound to the function of the alethiometer. The alethiometer acts as Pullman's specific way of structuring the novel by condensing myth and narrative into a comprehensive point of focus—a structure that the film replicates via the dramatic performances, as well as visually and aurally. Second, the paper explores the functional changes that occur to the alethiometer when Pullman's story is adapted to the mode of video game. While the alethiometer remains a convention in the video game used to navigate the story, the video game privileges narrative action, which mutes thematic (the mimetic mode of understanding). The alethiometer, then, does not function as a necessary component that invites the player, like the reader, to investigate the real within the unreal; resultingly, the video game cannot be considered fantasy fiction. Additionally, the film serves as a sort of intermediary between the two versions. While not the central focus of my investigation of mythology, it bears mention that the film does provide a visual and aural basis for the video game, what Green might suggest is part of "the intersection of the literary and the ludic" (136), and that would serve as a point of engagement for the player had they also viewed the film prior to playing the video game. However, the intertextual referencing (which as a corollary to literature might be understood as extradiegetic) enabled through the player's engagement with the alethiometer can enhance the player's story experience by synthesizing contextual elements from both the novel and the film into the video game.

MYTHOLOGY AND THE KERNEL

Before analyzing the function of mythology in *The Golden Compass*, it is necessary first to define the sense in which I employ the term. Mythology has a broad range of interpretive meanings, although commonly referring to ancient cultural modes of understanding, such as Greek, Roman, Celtic, and Norse gods and goddesses. In its traditional uses, mythology "served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of deities and other supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do [and] to provide a rationale for social customs and observances" (Abrams 178). Other conceptions of

mythology refer more generally to recurrent patterns of images and plot, much like Jungian archetypes operating as reference points for the comprehension of everything from literature to commercial advertisements. However, in this paper, I refer to mythology through the framework of Heidegger's definition, that mythology functions as a mode of "unconcealing" or "'bring[ing] into view'" (111). The question here is, of course, what do these related processes disclose? My application of mythology can be understood to aid the reader in the discovery of meaning located in the real, which is fundamental to the thematics of *The Golden Compass*. In his examination of modernist mythopoeia, Michael Bell remarks on Heidegger's view of myth stating "Heidegger [...] thought that modern man had lost the sense of Being, and he similarly emphasizes that myth is present not in the object seen, but in the *way of seeing*: for myth is 'the only appropriate kind of relation to Being in its appearance'" (121, emphasis mine). Bell further argues that mythology as a "way of seeing" has become "[b]y the end of the twentieth century [...] a means of investigation" (128). Mythology is not in and of itself specific to an object, person or place that is mythical, but rather as a way of evoking, according to Julie Sanders, "age-old, even universal, themes, alongside time- and place-specific issues" (63). While Sanders refers to mythology as a set of central stories that inform a text, her statement suggests mythology's investigative capability. In this sense, mythology has a similar function to Tolkien's "inner consistency of reality" (47). Whereas Tolkien's term is fundamental to fantasy fiction in general, I propose that mythology is fundamental to *The Golden Compass* as a relational vehicle between the real and the unreal. Mythology is the basis of what makes the novel fantasy fiction; it functions as a *kernel* of fantasy.

It is important to note that the use of the term *kernel* is not new to analyses of literature and language, and that, for my purposes, *kernel* refers specifically to mythology as a logical and necessary part of *The Golden Compass* as fantasy fiction. Notably, Roland Barthes discusses, in his chapter "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," two prime components or functions of narratives, "cardinal functions" and "catalyses," that drive and sustain narrative action. While catalyses, he suggests, "'fill' narrative space" and sustain "the contact between the narrator and the receiver of the narrative" (108, 109), cardinal functions, commonly referred to as kernels, "constitute veritable *hinges* of the narrative" and are both "consecutive and consequential" (108, emphasis mine).⁴ "[H]inges," which "inaugurate or conclude an uncertainty" (108), are a necessary component for the forward movement of the plot structure of a narrative. While this paper does develop how mythology is linked to the

⁴ Note that Barthes's term "cardinal function" is equivocal to the terms "kernel" and "hinge."

narrative structure, since the alethiometer, too, is partly a hinge, I am here rather suggesting a revision to the idea of the kernel. Mythology as a kernel is fundamental to discussing relations between the real and the unreal in the narrative, and not simply as a way to differentiate between events that drive the plot and those that do not.

ALETHIOMETER AND NARRATIVE: THE MYTHOLOGICAL KERNEL

The central object of discovery and comprehension in *The Golden Compass*, and indeed throughout Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, is the alethiometer. The alethiometer is first and foremost a "novum": a term Darko Suvin defines, and Adam Roberts refines, which indicates an essential element or object in a fictional secondary world, here discussed in science fiction, that "puts us [the reader] in a position of rewriting [and] reconceptualising the reality with which we are familiar" (Roberts 20). Borrowing from Samuel Delany, Roberts also identifies the novum as "a door through which we step into a different way of looking at things" (20). The concept of applying alternative perspectives is an essential element for both science and fantasy fictions. Tolkien's notion of "recovery" closely resembles the Suvinian novum: "[r]ecovery (which includes return and renewal of health) is a re-gaining—regaining of a clear view [...] [by] 'seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them'—as things apart from ourselves" (57-58). By definition, the novum of the alethiometer, which in part links to the notion of recovery, should be related to the function of mythology, as it is both a convention that aids the reader in engaging with the marvellous fictional world and one that operates as an investigative tool. Readers know that mythology is marvellous and that it creates a sense of estrangement with the novel's fictional elements, but it also enables readers to understand the significance of those elements in the development of the central meanings in the story. Furthermore, to bring together the concepts of mythology, kernel, narrative, and novum into an analysis of the alethiometer in *The Golden Compass* is to examine the relation between the real/mimetic and the unreal/marvellous. In this way, the alethiometer serves two interrelated functions: first, it invites the reader to engage with the mythological, thus partly sustaining Tolkien's "inner consistency of reality" (47) that draws the reader into the fictional Secondary World created; and second, it establishes mythology as a mode of investigation for the novel's thematic topics, and which aids in decoding and interpreting them. Therefore, through the alethiometer's dual process, the reader is invited to reconceptualize the unfamiliar and marvellous in the story as a way through which the mimetic—the novel's major themes of the bildungsroman and (mis)interpretation—are effected and commented upon.

Beyond being the namesake for *The Golden Compass*, which denotes its significance to the plot structure, the alethiometer's name derives from the Greek goddess of truth, Aletheia, and etymologically from a river in the Greek underworld, Lethe, which means forgetfulness or concealment. The alethiometer, then, is both an object connected to mythology in its more typical sense, and also a paradoxical interplay of truth and untruth discovery, both of which are forms of knowledge requiring interpretation of the discovered information via Lyra and the reader. Even the alethiometer's description suggests something uncertain about its function. While Lyra prepares to leave Jordan College to continue her tutelage under her (as yet unbeknownst) mother, Mrs. Coulter, the Master gives her the alethiometer and indicates that it "tells you the truth" (*Compass* 73). Farder Coram, on the other hand, suggests to Lyra while she attends a meeting to decide the actions the Gyptian's should take against the Gobblers (child kidnappers) that "it's a truth measure" (125). The most useful definition of the alethiometer's function comes from Lyra, whose reading and interpretation of the device indicates that it produces a kind of knowledge, although, as she states, "this is a different kind of knowing . . . It's like understanding" (150). The alethiometer metaphorically operates as a mode of discovery; even mythology's usefulness in discovering untruth, Heidegger suggests, "is not fixed in falsity" (67). The alethiometer does not reveal or unconceal a *correct* way for Lyra to proceed through her journey or for the reader to comprehend the novel's central themes. Rather, the alethiometer provides for Lyra and the reader a perspective through which to understand the events that occur in the story, as well as the expectation for active reader interpretation of the meaning of the compass and of the attending thematic developments.

Readers understand that Lyra can use the alethiometer to elicit information, and while told what some symbols mean, readers remain ignorant as to *how* these specific symbols mean. For instance, Farder Coram explains the specifics of the golden compass's symbols:

"All these pictures round the rim," said Farder Coram, holding it delicately toward John Faa's blunt strong gaze, "they're symbols, and each one stands for a whole series of things. Take the anchor, there. The first meaning of that is hope, because hope holds you fast like an anchor so you don't give way. The second meaning is steadfastness. The third meaning is snag, or prevention. The fourth meaning is the sea. And so on, down to ten, twelve, maybe a never-ending series of meanings." (126)

The alethiometer is the vehicle of discovery, a motif enabling the reader to engage with the marvellous, while the symbols here represent a series of meanings that Lyra's use of the device brings into perspective for the reader. However, the symbols require an act of decoding and interpretation on the part

of their reader (Lyra), and, since the narrative's focus is through Lyra, the reader is invited into the process of unconcealing the alethiometer's meanings. The golden compass becomes a suture point in conjunction with Lyra for the reader to enter into the novel's fictional world. Moreover, the alethiometer begins as a process of unconcealing the unfamiliar, as part of a reading/interpreting strategy for the novel as a whole.

Lyra's reading of the alethiometer's information via its symbols, which are described along the lines of visions, simultaneously illustrates the "arresting strangeness" (Tolkien 48) of the novum and further aids in the reader's comprehension and interpretation of the story, even though we are again ignorant of Lyra's exact process of interpreting the visions she sees. Like the notion of unconcealing, Lyra's visions aid in reader comprehension of the novel as a kind of discovery process. As Lyra tells Farder Coram about how she finds the alethiometer's meaning, we get a description of her feeling of learning to know:

"I kind of see 'em. Or feel 'em rather, like climbing down a ladder at night, you put your foot down and there's another rung. Well, I put my mind down and there's another meaning, and I kind of sense what it is. Then I put 'em all together. There's a trick in it like focusing your eyes." [...] It was a sensation of such grace and power that Lyra, sharing it, felt like a young bird learning to fly. (151)

The complex ladder metaphor and bird simile here, like the complex function of the alethiometer and unconcealing, are not unlike the reading process. The above descriptions enable a sense of demystification of the alethiometer's function, while they are also metaphysical descriptions that defamiliarize the exact process of comprehension because Lyra must trust what she has discovered. In other words, the reader is, like Lyra, drawn into the possibilities of knowing and eliciting meaning, while always uncertain as to the outcome of knowing such information. However, Lyra's command of the alethiometer is always moving toward an understanding of the compass itself, even if she does not always fully comprehend the information it provides. This is not unlike the viewer of the film whose immersion into the story is one of mystification and anticipation enabled by their limited agency in knowing what occurs next. However, increasingly progressive throughout the novel is Lyra's naturalization of the alethiometer's function: "know[ing] where most of the symbols are [...] [w]ithout even having to think about it," and feeling "her mind settle into the right meanings like a complicated diagram" (204). Near the end of the novel, the questions she asks the compass "sorted themselves out into their constituent symbols as naturally as her muscles moved her limbs" (327). Lyra's process of understanding the alethiometer's answers—of learning to know—parallels the

reader's movement from being unfamiliar with the marvellous, fictional elements in the text to being familiar with them, to experiencing them as part of the believable rendering of the fantastic and its interconnectedness to the reader's experience. The reader's contact with the fictional elements of the novel therefore becomes part of their movement towards understanding the narrative and comprehending the marvellous occurrences in the story.

Because reading *The Golden Compass* requires this movement on the part of the reader from experiencing the unfamiliar as familiar, plot forwarding, such as Barthes has outlined, cannot, in itself, be an analytical way of investigating the thematics that the novel illustrates. Structural analysis of the text's narrative alone does not indicate *how* or *why* the text develops its multiple levels of meaning through the themes associated with Lyra's process of self-actualization and (mis)interpretation. While, on the one hand, Barthes's notion of cardinal functions serves to articulate the "moments of risk of the narrative" (109), they do not, and cannot, articulate how those hinge moments in the plot structure, moments that "inaugurate or conclude an uncertainty" (108), reveal and offer a way to investigate the relation between the real and the unreal. On the other hand, the alethiometer's way of unconcealing, its function as a way of discovery, furthermore aids in the unpacking of the major themes in the novel. Lyra uses the alethiometer at moments that are narratively important, since her use of it simultaneously initiates an uncertainty and signals to the reader a thematic component that Pullman wants the reader to engage with.

The *bildungsroman* structure built into *The Golden Compass*, the theme of Lyra's personal growth and self-actualization, is thus carried by the motif of the alethiometer. The alethiometer operates as part of the narrative strategy in the novel that conceptualizes thematic components that intersect with the plot. The mythological kernel in the novel should be understood as operating linearly and consecutively like Barthes's notion of cardinal functions in plot, but that also clusters together interrelated episodes. Through consideration of the function of mythology in the novel, readers are aided in conceptualizing and investigating the meaning of the real. To illustrate this distinction, it is necessary to examine the episode where Lyra answers Lord Faa's question concerning the Gobblers's defence of Bolvangar (204), which is significant to both the narrative action of the plot and Lyra's personal growth:

"It's just like the witch's daemon said, Lord Faa. There's a company of Tartars guarding the station, and they got wires all round it. They don't really expect to be attacked, that's what the symbol reader says. But Lord Faa [...] It's telling me something else. In the next valley there's a village by a lake where the folk are troubled by a ghost." (204-5)

Lyra's facilitation of the alethiometer's message introduces a major plot component and also reveals a major thematic line embedded within it: the moral obligation of the Gyptians to return the missing children to their families (including those children not belonging to the Gyptians), which Lyra notes is "important too" (206). This plot moment intersects with Lyra's maturation in terms of her own sense of duty and moral obligation. The ghost turns out to be one of the missing Gyptian children, Tony Makarios, whose daemon, a novum representing the outward manifestation of the soul, was cut away (213). Lyra's discovery through the alethiometer drives and sustains narrative action, where rescuing Tony emotionally charges, and thus partially determines, the Gyptians's attack on Bolvangar later in the novel. Thus, this episode as a cardinal function, as a consecutive and consequential hinge between plot moments, does not, in this case, enable the reader to interpret meaning in the novel other than through foreshadowing of plot development. However, Lyra's use of the alethiometer underscores a corollary thematic to her maturity—that of questioning authority as a process of self-actualization. Her quest to save Tony introduces a critical, interpretive question for investigating thematic: what is the relationship between Lyra's challenging of authority and the development of meaning in the novel? The alethiometer partly answers this question by introducing and intersecting with another thematic topic: (mis)interpretation. For instance, the climactic episode of Roger's death, where Lord Asriel creates a link between Lyra's and Will's worlds by severing Roger's daemon (393), is in fact an intersection of the thematic topics of self-actualization and (mis)interpretation. Lyra's final reading of the alethiometer signals to the reader the importance of the interpretive act. While consulting the alethiometer about Mrs. Coulter's intentions toward Asriel and Lyra, it once again tells Lyra something else:

She bent over the instrument, concentrating furiously as the needle darted this way and that. It moved almost too fast to follow; Roger, looking over her shoulder, couldn't even see it stop, and was conscious only of a swift flickering dialogue between Lyra's fingers turning the hands and the needle answering, as bewilderingly unlike language as the Aurora was. [...] "She wants something I've got, because Lord Asriel wants it too. They need it for this . . . for this experiment, whatever it is . . ." [...] *Something was troubling her, and she didn't know what it was. She was sure that this something that was so important was the Alethiometer* [...]. *She felt that something had gone out of her during that last reading.* (359-360, emphasis mine)

Since Lyra misinterprets the alethiometer, because, as we find out, what Asriel "wanted was a child" (380) and not the golden compass, Lyra's final

consultation with the golden compass in the novel indicates part of her maturation process, the recognition of her fallibility. Lyra's feeling that "something had gone out of her" gestures toward her difficulty in consulting the alethiometer in the second and third books of Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, *The Subtle Knife* and *The Amber Spyglass*, which parallels her maturation—her "changing" (*Subtle* 259). The more Lyra becomes an adult, the less capable she is of consulting the alethiometer and of questioning authority as she did in the past, until, finally, she loses her ability to intuitively consult the alethiometer altogether (*Amber* 488-91). Ultimately, Lyra's ability to accurately interpret the alethiometer is inversely proportionate the trajectory of her personal growth. The alethiometer facilitates for the reader the understanding of real/mimetic—the novel's themes—while relating them through the unreal/marvellous—the alethiometer. In this way, mythology is both part and facilitator of the real and the unreal.

Subsequently, what we are meant to interrogate as readers here is the notion that Lyra's maturation, as enabled through the alethiometer, functions as a foil for Pullman's investigation of religious doctrine and authority throughout the trilogy. Mrs. Coulter's plan to destroy Lyra to "prevent another Fall" (*Subtle* 314) connects to Lyra's ability to read the alethiometer "by grace" (*Amber* 491), since Lyra's maturation and self-actualization throughout the trilogy is couched in Christian religious terminology. The notion of religious dogmatism, the control the Magisterium (the Church) attempts to assert over man, is scrutinized while it is reflected in Lyra's developmental process. While the reader champions Lyra's cause (her quest), it is the fulfillment of that quest which foregrounds the dangers of misinterpretation. The meaning of alethiometer as both truth-discovery and untruth-discovery takes on an additional significance, since it is both an aid for the reader in discerning the themes in the trilogy, and also functions as a metaphor indicating the necessity for readers to be cautious of how culture is interpreted in the primary world, the reader's reality. Pullman's cultural critique of the real through the alethiometer suggests a relevance to the reader that extends beyond the novel's narrative.

The thematic topic of (mis)interpretation that Pullman's alethiometer points the reader towards further comments on the alethiometer's function as a reading strategy for the narrative as a whole, and even the artistic process involved in creating *The Golden Compass* fantasy fiction. Throughout the novel, there is a continual synthesizing process that occurs between Lyra and the alethiometer. As previously noted, the alethiometer eventually becomes an extension of her body's natural movements (*Compass* 32); however, the inverse is also true, and Lyra inhabits the paradoxical functions of the mythological alethiometer: she tells truths and untruths, she unconceals and conceals. After being caught at Bolvangar and rescued by Mrs. Coulter from the intercision

(daemon-cutting) process, Lyra constructs an elaborate story to earn sympathy from Mrs. Coulter:

With every second that went past, with every sentence [Lyra] spoke, she felt a little strength flowing back. And now that she was doing something difficult and familiar and never quite predictable, *namely lying*, she felt a sort of mastery again, *the same sense of complexity and control that the alethiometer gave her*. She had to be careful not to say anything obviously impossible; she had to be vague in some places and invent plausible details in others; she had to be an *artist*, in short. (281, *emphases mine*)

While initially this passage elucidates part of the mystery of the alethiometer's function, that it provides a "sense of complexity and control," it also signifies how the novel is constructed as fantasy fiction, as a dialogue between the mimetic and the marvellous, to again use Jackson's terms (36). Lyra here constructs a narrative, and Pullman suggests that *this* narrative, *The Golden Compass* as fantasy fiction, metaphorically operates as Lyra and the alethiometer do: "careful not to say anything impossible" and "be vague in some places and invent plausible details in others." The liar/artist here is both Lyra and Pullman. The mythological kernel in Pullman's novel, the alethiometer, enables him to couch the real within the unreal, and to bring into view the significant thematic topics of Lyra's self-actualization and (mis)interpretation which can then be investigated.

ADAPTING THE MYTHOLOGICAL KERNEL

Mythology in *The Golden Compass* novel functions as a reading guide for interpreting the text and as a way to investigate the real/unreal relationship. The reader is positioned in an interpretive role, which aids them in the possibility of decoding and eliciting meaning from the text. This is a central function of novel's narrative. The interpretive role that readers inhabit—part of their identification with the text that engages both the themes and the motif of the alethiometer—can be characterized, in Hutcheon's words, as the "space of the mind [...] that novels portray so well" (14). However, it is that very same space of the mind that Hutcheon notes "videogames [...] cannot easily adapt" (14). Video game adaptations necessarily elide the novelistic convention of thematics because they are difficult, if not impossible, to reproduce. Moreover, Hutcheon argues that the movement from the telling mode of novels to the interacting mode of video game engagement "entails changes both in the story and even in the importance of story itself" (13). I would add here that the film adaptation maintains the investigatory function of the alethiometer and its use in developing hinge moments in the narrative and thematic development. The same anticipatory ambivalence in Lyra's consultations with the alethiometer

occur in both the novel and the film. And while Lyra's maturation and self-actualization are accelerated via the necessary condensing of the film's mode of representation, the effect is similar, if not as nuanced, as the novel's. The "changes" that Hutcheon suggests occur when stories are adapted from novel to video game are, in *The Golden Compass*, alterations to the mythological function of the alethiometer. Furthermore, I argue that the interpretive role of the player changes along with the shift in the mode of engagement. In this section, I explore both what *The Golden Compass* video game adaptation does to considerations of the mythological kernel in the novel, and to the film to a lesser degree, as well as what the video game indicates about the adaptation process.

What makes fantasy fiction indeed *fantasy* is in a video game not as simple as rendering interactive what a novel creates textually or a film produces visually and aurally. Certainly reproducing in video game form the fictional Secondary World from the novel is necessary to indicate that the video game's fictional world is virtual, but what is the difference, then, between a virtual world and a fantasy world? While this question is too broad to answer in full given the scope of this paper, subsequent questions can be addressed: if a major structural element of a novel is mythological, as it is in *The Golden Compass*, how can mythology be adapted from novel or film to video game? Does a change in the mode of representation from novel or film to video game alter *The Golden Compass's* original status as fantasy fiction? Does it even matter if mythology is adapted? This section explores first, how the kind of audience engagement in *The Golden Compass* video game subverts novelistic development of the mythological kernel and the real/unreal relationship. In other words, the transition from a *telling* (or a *viewing*) to an *interacting* mode of engagement in the adaptation from the novel and film to the video game privileges a plot-based narrative over the thematic development enabled through mythology, and even the type of agency that would be required. Second, this section examines the shift to interactivity with the alethiometer which enables for the player an intertextual engagement that brings together the novel's (and the film's) and the video game's narratives. The interpretive role of the player, therefore, negates the thematic investigation that the reader fulfills in the novel and film and privileges the facilitation of contextual material from the novel and film in the video game. Since the video game is visually an aurally borrowing directly from the film, it is necessary to discuss the scope and limitations of the video game's dependence upon the film. Ultimately, the video game adaptation reworks part of the source-text's narrative structure—mythology—and creates an interrelation with the novel and film. However, because adaptation changes the function of the mythological kernel, such that the real/unreal relationship fundamental to the novel is muted, *The Golden Compass* video game does not participate in the established genre of fantasy fiction.

In explaining her theory of adaptation from novel to video game—telling to interacting—Hutcheon argues that an “audience’s engagement is *different in kind* than when we are told or shown the same story” (26, emphasis mine). However, it is worth noting that Hutcheon does not develop this key notion through analysis of fantasy-like video games. In *The Golden Compass* video game, this different “kind” of engagement that players have with story disrupts what mythology enables in the novel. Hutcheon also suggests a similarity between telling and showing (reading and viewing) that the adaptation from novel to film maintains because of the uninterrupted interpretive agency of the reader and viewer—the hinge moments of discovery are narratively identical, even though the film renders them visually and aurally. Interacting, which I will examine more deeply later, interrupts the storytelling experience in *The Golden Compass* and those hinge moments in which revelatory and transitional aspects necessary to thematic development are customarily established. For example, while at Dr. Lanselius’s house, the player, through the avatar presented as Lyra, is given the objective of using the alethiometer to pick out Serafina Pekkala’s bow from amongst those resting on the fence. While picking out the correct bow, Dr. Lanselius tells Farder Coram of the witches’ prophecy about Lyra, who will “save the world,” but must remain ignorant of the task—that she cannot be guided (Sega). In terms of understanding the story the player plays out, this information proves irrelevant because remaining ignorant of her task is a moot point, since it is the player who controls Lyra’s actions, and it is the design of the game’s logic that the player is constrained by the linear sequence of objectives. Like the novel’s narrator, the player becomes part of the diegetic function of the story, what Mäyrä and Green would argue is essential to the co-constructing of meaning in the video game (Mäyrä 13; Green 28). Both Mäyrä and Green have accurately espoused the essentialness of player agency in the meaning-making process. However, there is an awkward conflation of narrative purpose at the confluence of the roles of narrator and player; the sort of extradiegetic role of the *player as narrator*, in which the player participates in the construction/unfolding of plot. This may be akin to the reader having to read the novel in order to progress through the plot or the viewer pressing play on the remote. However, where the reader and viewer are allowed the freedom to understand the story in a multitude of ways, even to misread it (even upon a second or third reading/viewing), and still be able to progress through the novel or film, the game delimits the options deemed necessary to fulfill the programming of the story structure—there is only one way, then, to complete the story, even if the player were to play through the game a second or a third time. Therefore, the adaptation of the event in which Lyra selects Serafina’s bow disrupts the thematic relevance it had in the novel and film, where the reader and viewer learn that Lyra’s self-

actualization, part of the bildungsroman structure of the novel, is part of the mythological function of the alethiometer, that which enables an investigation of the real and the unreal. What is only partially important in the novel and film, then, is vitally important in the video game: the sequencing of plot points. And if, as Green argues, gameplay elements function in the service of story, in *The Golden Compass* video game that service is not to nurture the mythological underpinnings of the fantasy fiction genre. In his article, "Toward a Theory of Interactive Fiction," Nick Montfort comments on the value of these types of in-game puzzles, such that "a solution may restrict rather than enlarge a player character's, and therefore the interactor's, options" (50). If we allow what Mäyrä and Green assert about the interdependence of the player and video game to the story, that play is understanding, the restriction of interpretive options for the player's gameplay must also restrict the potential of those moments as analytically important for the story's thematics. Thematic development cannot here be sifted through plot analysis, and video games cannot easily map the space of the mind (thematics and interpretation). This is not to suggest that *The Golden Compass* video game or video games in general lack the immersive capabilities of the novel or film. On the contrary, as Amy M. Green contends, there is a "more active and invested sense of engagement that is drawn out by video games" (37). Yet in *The Golden Compass*, the "negotiated space" that Green indicates helps players "create narrative meaning" (37) is elided, which I will examine in more detail later. What is adapted for the creation of *The Golden Compass* video game, then, is a gesture towards an autonomous fiction that in many ways appropriates contextual elements from the source texts (novel and film), a potential subtype of Cavallaro's definition of the "visual novel" (1) or Astrid Ensslin's definition of a "literary game" (41). But the question arises: does fidelity to the source texts matter?

As both Hutcheon and Sanders argue, adaptation requires first interpretation and then creation, and thus any analysis of the alethiometer's function in *The Golden Compass* video game must account for the limits of the medium into which it is reconceptualized. Hutcheon and Sanders also argue that fidelity to the source text is not the goal of adaptation, but rather an awareness of, as Sanders states, "its shaping intertexts" (22). In this way, the alethiometer's function in the novel and the film to aid the reader in the discovery and investigation of the real cannot function in the video game's program design, since the video game is based on a linear and "progressive" story structure: there is only one preset way to engage the story (Juul 56).⁵ *The Golden Compass's* relation to its shaping intertexts is tangential and is operative

⁵ See Jesper Juul's book *Half-real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* for a full description of "emergence" and "progression" games (56).

only on the level of shared titles, character names, visual and aural renderings, and plot sequence with the novel and film. Moreover, adapting the investigative function of the alethiometer to its necessarily plot-based function in the video game disengages the essentialness of mythology as a component of the game's narrative. As Dave Jones concludes, "if the game only allows a player to move in certain ways or perform certain actions, any thematic development important to the narrative is restricted, too" (26). The unconcealing function of the alethiometer is then substituted for a completionist, "goal-directed logic" (Hutcheon 51). In Lyra's meeting with Dr. Lanselius in the video game, the lack of the thematic component of Lyra's self-actualization is a logical omission, since the meeting is constructed as an objective meant to enable the player to progress to the next point in the narrative, the next goal, of securing the aid of the ice bear, Iorek Byrnison. The programming of the game restricts any thematic development, since it does not allow the player to progress without first completing the objective of answering Dr. Lanselius's questions and hearing the witches's prophecy about Lyra. In the adaptation from the novel and film to the video game, then, fidelity to the source-texts's structure (via mythology) should be necessary to the consideration of the video game as fantasy fiction. Fidelity, or at least an awareness of the shaping intertext, in *The Golden Compass's* adaptation, should be dependent upon both narrative strategy and format restrictions. *The Golden Compass* video game, therefore, is not a fantasy fiction because the adaptation of the mythological kernel subverts the prime characteristic of fantasy fiction—that, according to Jackson, it must stand in dialogue with the marvellous and the mimetic. I am not suggesting that *all* video games, or even video games that are adaptations of fantasy fiction novels and films, are not fantasy fiction. Rather, I argue that for video games to be considered fantasy fiction, and for them to be recognized as a mode of story that ascends to the level of requiring complete literary and analytic attention, they need to be developed by synthesizing the fundamental conventions of fantasy fiction. For a video game on the verge of being fantasy fiction, such as *The Golden Compass*, the investigation of the real/unreal relationship must be implemented into the game's development in order for it to move beyond its relatively marginalized categorization of what I would consider *Interactive Visual Story*, to adapt Cavallaro's term.⁶ However, the limitations of the adapted narrative still yield important information for comprehension of the adaptation process.

While the adaptation of the alethiometer in the video game is restricted in its fidelity to its novel counterpart, the player's interactive

⁶ See also Mark Wolf's *The Medium of the Video Game* and Dave Jones's "Narrative Reformulated: Storytelling in Videogames" for excellent introductions into narrative and video games.

engagement with the alethiometer provides intertextual references that heighten the experience of *The Golden Compass* as story. In this way, I partially agree with Hutcheon's argument that "the move to participatory modes in which we also engage physically with the story and its world [...] is not more active but certainly active in a different way" (23). However, Hutcheon's notion of video games being "active in a different way" must be explained, since she elides any specific and encompassing rationale for *how* or *why* this activity is so different or important or why interacting modes of engagement are "not more active." Green offers an alternative to Hutcheon's notion by putting it another way, stating that "at a minimum, digital stories have at least as much reach as their counterparts in some storytelling formats, and may well exceed them in others" (7). Activity, or the player's physical interaction with the story, and in the case of *The Golden Compass* video game their interaction with the alethiometer, can be viewed in terms of how the video game integrates the material it adapts. Interactivity in the video game, which is a player's agency, is partly intertextual and explaining what kind of physical engagement the player has with the alethiometer is germane to examining the link between interactivity and intertextuality. For example, in *Trollesund*, Lyra must consult the alethiometer and tell Iorek where the townsfolk hid his armour (Sega). Throughout the video game's story and its digital Secondary World, the player must discover symbol meanings that correspond to the symbols on the alethiometer. Discovering these symbol meanings makes answering the questions Lyra asks the alethiometer easier, since the more symbol meanings the player can discover, the less challenging it is to obtain the answer to the question the player has Lyra ask the alethiometer. The primary effect of this action is to mimic the maturity Lyra ultimately demonstrates throughout the novel. The Journal, which is unique to the video game, since it is not present in the novel, functions to bridge the plot to the alethiometer and enables the player to progress through the video game's story. Essentially, some of the Journal questions are embedded plot devices that require the player to complete the alethiometer's function—obtaining the answer to the question—before being allowed access to the next section of the video game. After selecting the question in the Journal, the player either confirms the symbols or attempts to fill them in randomly. The alethiometer appears and the three symbol hands move to the selected symbols, while the fourth swings around to other symbols to give the answer. During this time, the player attempts to maintain Lyra's focus on interpreting the question by using the controller's analogue stick to centre her concentration. Lyra's focus is seen in the game as a white light that, once centred, enables the player to select the appropriate cross-hair and complete the alethiometer's function of answering the selected question (Sega); naturally, the

more symbol meanings the player can insert, the easier it is to maintain Lyra's focus.

While some of the Journal questions correspond to game objectives and function primarily to "open" and "sustain" narrative action, to again use Barthes's language, most of the Journal questions provide intertextual references to the novel. Furthering Hutcheon's and Green's ideas, this different way of examining audience engagement, although not providing a way to investigate the real/unreal relationship, adds an element to the video game that attempts to equate the three different story modes, the novel, the film, and the video game. Questions such as, "Why does uncle Asriel have to travel so much?", "Why do the Gobblers kidnap children?", "Why did I stay at Jordan College all these years?", "Why can Pan only get so far away from me before it hurts?", "Why is the Magisterium so interested in me?" and "Why do all the staff members at Bolvangar seem so docile and complacent?" (Sega) have no bearing on the gameplay of *The Golden Compass*. However, when (and if) the player answers these questions, they are rewarded with story information from the novel. It is by answering these questions through the alethiometer, however irrelevant to the progression of the game's narrative as they are, that the video game subverts the linear, plot-based structure of the story and engages the player in a discovery of contextual story elements from the novel and film. In a sense, the video game operates in conjunction with the novel and film versions in order to direct the player to contextual material from them that makes *The Golden Compass*'s story experience more rewarding by localizing player agency in an immersive process. In another sense, since there is the possibility that the player has already read the novel or viewed the film, this intertextual information functions as the basis of the reward for playing, since the game is unable to develop a more enriching thematic investigation. And while not a standardized aspect of the video game narrative, this mechanism of game play does provide story elements. In one of the more unique rewards for completing the list of Journal questions, the video game provides a deleted scene from the film that shows the reunification of Lyra with Asriel while he's exploring the Northern Lights and just before he creates the bridge to the parallel world by killing Roger (Sega; New Line Cinema). The film ends prior to this scene (and to the novel's original ending) presumably because this scene was to be used at the beginning of the second film, which never occurred. Subsequently, the video game seems positioned as a transition point between the first and second films, and while *The Subtle Knife* was never dramatically realized, *The Golden Compass* video game is uniquely positioned as a sequential narrative transition, itself worthy of commentary and acknowledgment.

The alethiometer, then, is perhaps the video game adaptation's most innovative feature, since it functions to link intertextually *The Golden Compass*

video game to the novel and film. The player can choose not to answer all of the questions in the Journal, yet many of those questions pertain directly to story information to which the reader of the novel would have access. While intertextuality cannot fully consolidate the novel and film within the video game, since the video game lacks mythology's investigative property essential to a thematic analysis, it does gesture towards the video game's analytical potential. If *The Golden Compass* video game, and other fantasy-type video games, can be related to an established fictional genre such as fantasy fiction, there can perhaps be elicited new ways of comprehending narrative form because of the connection between interactivity and storytelling.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEW DIRECTIONS

As I have argued in this paper, mythology is a fundamental element of *The Golden Compass* as fantasy fiction. While functioning as a way for readers to engage with the marvellous in the novel's fictional Secondary World, the mythological kernel (the alethiometer), also offers the reader an opportunity to comprehend meaning in the novel by providing them with a way to identify and interpret themes in the novel that run corollary to the plot structure. Furthermore, the mythological kernel provides the reader with a reading strategy for the novel and even for the trilogy as a whole. While this analysis has been limited to *The Golden Compass* fantasy fiction, the mythological kernel is not limited to just *The Golden Compass*. As Jackson argues, it is the fundamental component of fantasy fiction to be in dialogue with the marvellous and the mimetic (36). Mythology as a way of relating the marvellous and the mimetic in order to investigate notions of the real can have applications to other fantasy fictions that also employ mytho-narrative structures—narratives that rely on mythology as a central tenet of their story structure.⁷

Along these lines, the function of the alethiometer as the mythological kernel in *The Golden Compass* changes when it is adapted from novel and film to video game. Since the alethiometer is, in the video game, a device for plot-logic, for directing and sustaining narrative action, its lack in terms of investigating the real/unreal relationship indicates a need for some fidelity to the source text, namely through consideration of mythology. It is because of this lack of awareness of the novel's and film's mythological structure as part of the video game's shaping intertext, to use Sanders, that *The Golden Compass* video game does not fit the established generic conventions of fantasy fiction. However, the video game gestures toward warranting critical evaluation because of its intertextual capability. The alethiometer as the vehicle through which the video

⁷ See Guy Gavriel Kay's *The Fionavar Tapestry* and Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Earthsea Trilogy* to name but a couple mythology-based fantasy fictions.

game intertextually links to the novel and film, then, enhances the experience of *The Golden Compass* as a story through the integration of some of the novel's and the film's contextual material. However, the adaptation of *The Golden Compass* novel and film into video game form raises a complex question partially answered in this analysis: what is the difference between a virtual world and a fantasy world? I have begun exploring this question by examining the mythological kernel in *The Golden Compass*. However, virtual worlds are becoming increasingly complex in terms of what actions the player can perform through their avatars, which can significantly influence how *narrative* a game can truly be. As fantasy-like video game worlds become more realistically rendered in terms of their graphic quality, aural dimensions, and fully navigable environments, developing thematics does not seem that far a stretch. To this end, recent video games should also receive critical attention in relation to the establishment of them as fantasy fiction or possibly the extension of the generic conventions of fantasy fiction to account for alternative ways to receive and process information.⁸ Video games adapted from source texts, such as 4A Games's *Metro 2033*, which is based on Dmitry Glukhovsky's novel of the same title, or those adapted from source lore, such as Monolith Productions's *Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor* and *Middle-earth: Shadow of War*, which are based on J.R.R. Tolkien's work, or those which draw from and adapt cultural mythologies, such as Bioware's *Assassin's Creed* franchise, all necessitate scrutiny of their various implications for the development of fantasy fiction and possibly as interpretable and literary modes of representation. Therefore, applying mythology as a lens through which to examine such games may very well produce significant insight into how narrative is constructed in fantastic virtual worlds.

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⁸ See Amy M. Green's chapter "Video Game Study and the Higher Education Classroom" for an excellent overview about incorporating video game analysis for student learning and how video game storytelling is analogous to studying written texts.

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