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"I'LL TRADE YOU FRODO FOR SMAUG": MIDDLE EARTH BECOMES COLLECTABLE

Doug Crane

*". . . do not meddle in the affairs of wizards
for they are subtle and quick to anger . . ."*

Lord of the Rings, Book I

ykcowrebbaj explores the translation of children's literature into many different media. As Jeffrey Garrett argued in his study of Alice illustrations, "[The Aryan Alice & Other International Misunderstandings](#)", translation goes beyond words and even cultures:

"My thesis will be that the most interesting and even most authentic pictorial interpretations are those that have been the most courageous in emancipating themselves from the iconographic conventions of the original, that the translations which seemingly are the most irreverent are often those which show the deepest grasp of and the greatest affection for Lewis Carroll's masterpiece, and succeed best in translating something very English into something, say, very Swedish, very Brazilian, or very Russian, which children in these cultures can relate to. And isn't that what translation is all about?"

We chose the name of Carroll's famous poem for this column since it has inspired so many translations, among them the ones that Garrett discovered at the [Jabberwocky Variations](#) site, and analyzed in his article. This initial column will present a variation on his theme by studying another classic of fantasy, translated not into a different language, but into a game.

When J.R.R. Tolkien's masterpiece, *The Lord of the Rings*, hit bookshelves in the United States, it caused a frenzy of fandom to sprout. In a manner similar to today's Trekkers, dozens of fan clubs formed, Hobbit parties were all the rage, and the phrase "Frodo Lives!" appeared across college campuses. That craze has long since died down, but the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* and its prequel, *The Hobbit*, remains strong. And it is this strength that has resulted in the Collectable Card Game, "[Middle Earth: The Wizards](#)" (METW).

I first encountered Collectable Card Games (CCG) in 1994 when a friend introduced me to "[Magic: the Gathering](#)". Produced by a company called [Wizards of the Coast](#), Magic's premise consists of two wizards battling each other to the death through spellcraft. It hooked me after the first play. Since then, I have become an avid player and collector of many card games, with titles ranging from "Shadowfist" to "Star Trek: The Next Generation", and even one based on the movie "Monty Python and the Holy Grail".

Of all the CCG on the market, my favourite remains "Middle Earth: The Wizards". In part this preference is due to the quality of the cards. The wonderful artwork and clever design make them valued collector's items. The game is also addictive, with room for dozens of different strategies and variations of play. On top of these attractions, I was primarily lured to the game by its link to the Tolkien books. I first read *The Hobbit* at age eleven, and took a stab at *The Lord of the Rings* the next year. Since then, I have reread both books numerous times, with each reading only adding to my love of Middle Earth.



As with sports cards, CCG are printed in sets, numbering anywhere between 100-400 cards. Although it is possible to buy a complete set from a dealer, one does not need every card in order to play. Cards are acquired through Starter and Booster packs. Starters are designed to offer a new player the bare minimum necessary to play, usually 60 cards for \$10. For those who desire more cards (greed plays a large part in these games) Booster packs sell for \$3.25 and contain between 12-15 cards. It is also possible to acquire single cards through dealers, with prices varying according to rarity and playability.

As evidenced by their name, CCG appeal to collectors. These people acquire complete sets on the assumption that time will increase their value. Collectors will often speculate on individual cards based upon their popularity and rarity. This is the sort of crowd that keeps their cards in plastic sleeves and showcase binders.

For the player, CCG are strategic and tactical pleasures, normally taking between ten minutes and two hours to play a single game. The biggest difference between CCG and standard card games is that players must supply their own cards. Players customize their deck by choosing which cards to include. This is an important step as most players own thousands of cards, but only play with 60-100 during any given match. The decks are also constructed in accordance with the rules of the game. For instance, in METW, no more than three copies of any one card are allowed in a deck.

The premise of METW is that each player controls one of the Wizards of Middle Earth: Gandalf, Saruman, Radagast, Alatar, or Pallando (The latter two Wizards appear only as brief descriptions amongst the late Professor's notes). The Wizards are competing to rally the forces of the Free People against the menace of the Dark Lord, Sauron. This is done by enlisting important characters, such as Frodo or Galadriel, raising factions like the Dwarves and Elves, or defeating orcs, dragons and the other servants of the Dark Lord. The most dramatic play of the game is to relive the original story by finding The One Ring and destroying it in the fires of Mount Doom.

Let's return to Garrett's thesis, and see how METW measures up. To be successful, a translation must emancipate itself from the conventions of the original. The most irreverent adaptation may demonstrate the deepest grasp of and affection for the original. And the form of presentation must be palatable to the intended audience. METW succeeds on all these counts.

METW definitely frees itself from the conventions of the original work. To win, players need not follow the original storyline, but in fact are encouraged to strike off toward places that the books only hinted at, such as "The Isle of the Dead that Live" or the Witch King's fortress at "Carn Dūm". As well, the game carries a random factor, in that combat is decided by the role of the dice. When Bilbo can be eaten by Smaug the Great Dragon, or Gandalf fall victim to the corruption of The One Ring, the cherished tale has taken a strange turn. A turn which would ruin the traditional tale, but only enhances the joy of play.

The game's creators demonstrate a deep grasp and love of Middle Earth through the cards themselves. METW carries arguably the highest quality artwork of any card game on the market. The colours are deep and rich, and much of the art was produced by the best fantasy artists at work today. Feel free to take a look a few sample cards:

"Orc-Mail"
"The Lord of the Carrock"
"The White Towers"

As well, most cards carry a quote from the story, a detail called flavour text. Many of the cards are named after specific lines from the books such as "A Friend of Three", "Hey, Come Merry Dol!", and "In Darkness Bind Them".

Perhaps the main reason that METW succeeds so well is that the creators understand their audience. The largest group of fantasy readers are young males, the same demographic which dominates the gaming community. Tolkien has often been considered a boy's adventure, since the female characters tend to stay to the sidelines. (In fact, aside from a few washerwomen and reference to an aunt named Belladonna Took, The Hobbit contains no female characters.) Therefore, METW appeals strongly to a group of boys who love fantasy literature and games. It also serves as a bridge, offering those who enjoy Middle Earth a chance to learn a CCG game, while those who only pick up the game for its collectable merits may be inclined to delve into the original text.



METW was created by [Iron Crown Enterprises](#). This company has acquired the exclusive rights from the Tolkien Estate to market products based on the late Professor's work. There are currently six sets of cards printed for METW:

- Middle Earth: The Wizards
- Middle Earth: The Dragons
- Middle Earth: Dark Minions
- Middle Earth: The Lidless Eye
- Middle Earth: Against the Shadow
- Middle Earth: The White Hand

In addition to the card game, Iron Crown Enterprises have been distributing the Middle Earth role-playing game for almost ten years.

Since I began the article with the words of Jeffrey Garrett, it is fitting to finish with them as well:

"As I said at the outset, I have wanted to show that translation ... can often serve its end best when it takes its object and adapts it to the cultural and aesthetic world of the target audience."

METW certainly succeeds from my point of view. Otherwise, I would not have busted my bank account to acquire complete copies of all six Middle Earth sets (that's over 1200 different cards). Iron Crown has taken a time-honoured work and adapted it to meet the criteria by which the game-playing audience judges their hobby. And isn't that what translation is all about?

*Three Rings for the Elven-kings under the sky,
Seven for the Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone,
Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die,
One for the Dark Lord on his dark throne
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.
One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.*

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