

# Why Silicon Valley's Most Powerful People Are So Delusional About Hobbits

Tech power players and the global far-right are learning all the wrong lessons from “The Lord of the Rings.”

**Credit.** illustration by Alex Merto

By **Michiko Kakutani**

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For generations of fans, J.R.R. Tolkien's epic fantasy “The Lord of the Rings” remains their first experience of the immersive magic of fiction. The trilogy recounts how a motley group of friends set out on a journey to destroy the great Ring of Power and defeat the dark Lord Sauron, who intends to use its dreadful magic to rule all of Middle-earth through “force and fear.” The Ring corrupts all who use it, and its story endures as a potent allegory about the corrupting effects of greed and pride and what Tolkien called the evil “lust for domination.”

Given the trilogy's idealistic overtones, it's easy to understand why the books gained a cult following in the 1970s among hippies and Vietnam War protesters, who embraced its love of nature and rejection of consumer culture, and what they saw as its passionate denunciation of militarism and power politics. It's more difficult to understand why the trilogy's most prominent fans today are Silicon Valley tech lords like

Elon Musk and Peter Thiel, and a rising group of far-right politicians in both Europe and the United States.

How did a trilogy of novels about wizards and elves and furry-footed hobbits become a touchstone for right-wing power brokers? How did books that evince nostalgia for a pastoral, preindustrial past win an ardent following among the people who are shaping our digital future? Why do so many of today's high-profile fans of "The Lord of the Rings" and other fantasy and sci-fi classics insist on turning these cautionary tales into aspirational road maps for mastering the universe?

Some of the answers lie in the sheer popularity of the trilogy, which has sold more than 150 million copies across the world and permeated the public imagination, as genre fiction has moved from the margins to the mainstream.

Right-wing operatives realized that references to works like "The Lord of the Rings," "Star Wars" and role-playing games (many of which are heavily indebted to Tolkien) could serve their own political ends. Steve Bannon was fascinated by World of Warcraft gamers — "rootless white males" with, he said, "monster power" — and sought to channel their passions toward the right-wing site Breitbart News and, later, Donald Trump's 2016 campaign.

In Spain, the far-right party Vox tried to hijack "Lord of the Rings" imagery, posting a picture of the warrior Aragorn facing off against a group of enemies depicted as left-wing, feminist and L.G.B.T.Q. groups.

Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni of Italy is famous for her love of Tolkien. The Times correspondent [Jason Horowitz has chronicled](#) how as a teenager in the 1990s, she attended a Hobbit Camp organized by members of the country's post-fascist right, which had embraced the

fantasy series as a way of turning their own political marginalization into an asset: By identifying with hobbits, they hoped to override memories of Mussolini and recast themselves as underdogs. The young Meloni dressed up as a hobbit and attended singalongs with the extremist folk band Compagnia dell'Anello, or Fellowship of the Ring.

For some right-wing politicians today, “Lord of the Rings” embodies nostalgia for a bygone era, conjuring a vaguely medieval past where there are clear hierarchies of authority and class, and sharply delineated races (elves, dwarves, hobbits and orcs) with distinctive appearances and talents.

Others argue that “Lord of the Rings” embodies the tenets of Traditionalism — a once arcane philosophical doctrine that has recently gained influential adherents around the world including [Aleksandr Dugin](#), a Russian philosopher and adviser to President Vladimir V. Putin, and Bannon. According to the scholar Benjamin Teitelbaum, Traditionalism posits that we are currently living in a dark age brought on by modernity and globalization; if today’s corrupt status quo is toppled, we might return to a golden age of order — much the way that Tolkien’s trilogy ends with the rightful king of Arnor and Gondor assuming the throne and ushering in a new era of peace and prosperity.

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A similar taste for kingly power has taken hold in Silicon Valley. In [a guest essay in The Times](#) last year, the former Apple and Google executive Kim Scott pointed to “a creeping attraction to one-man rule in some corners of tech.” This management style known as “founder

mode,” she explained, “embraces the notion that a company’s founder must make decisions unilaterally rather than partner with direct reports or frontline employees.”

The new mood of autocratic certainty in Silicon Valley is summed up in [a 2023 manifesto](#) written by the venture capitalist Marc Andreessen, who describes himself and his fellow travelers as “Undertaking the Hero’s Journey, rebelling against the status quo, mapping uncharted territory, conquering dragons and bringing home the spoils for our community.”

Andreessen, along with Musk and Thiel, helped muster support for Trump in Silicon Valley, and he depicts the tech entrepreneur as a conqueror who achieves “virtuous things” through brazen aggression, and villainizes anything that might slow growth and innovation — like government regulation and demoralizing concepts like “tech ethics” and “risk management.”

“We believe in nature, but we also believe in *overcoming* nature,” Andreessen writes. “We are not primitives, cowering in fear of the lightning bolt. We are the apex predator; the lightning works for us.”

## ‘A Duty to Save the World’

Silicon Valley’s love of Tolkien — and fantasy and science fiction more broadly — dates to its earliest days, when rooms at the Stanford A.I. Lab were [named after locations](#) in Middle-earth, and a popular thread called “SF-Lovers” effectively became [the first online social network](#) in the 1970s.

In those days, the fledgling computer community was very much a part of the Bay Area counterculture, and hackers there saw themselves as rebels going up against the establishment represented by big

corporations like IBM. Like many hippies of the day, they identified with the little hobbits who help save Middle-earth and the eccentric outsiders who populate the work of science fiction masters like Isaac Asimov and Philip K. Dick.

Today, of course, Apple, Google, Microsoft, Amazon and Meta are more powerful than IBM, and the best-known figures in Silicon Valley are entrepreneurs and venture capitalists worth billions. Affection for Tolkien endures — partly because a love for fantasy and science fiction seems hard-wired in many geeks. But the small gestures of tribute to Tolkien that techies made decades ago (like equipping office printers with Elvish fonts) have given way to extravagant spectacles like the Napster co-founder Sean Parker's "Lord of the Rings"-inspired wedding, which cost, by some estimates, more than \$10 million and featured Middle-earth-inspired costumes for several hundred guests.

Amazon's founder, Jeff Bezos, a lifelong Tolkien fan, oversaw the company's purchase of the rights to the "Lord of the Rings" back story for \$250 million. Multiple seasons of its streaming series "The Rings of Power," [Vanity Fair reports](#), will most likely cost over \$1 billion, making it the most expensive series ever made.

Thiel, a billionaire venture capitalist and mega donor to right-wing causes, says he's read the trilogy at least 10 times. He has named several companies after magical objects in "Lord of the Rings." Vice President JD Vance, whose careers in business and politics were [nurtured by Thiel](#), followed in his steps. Vance has said that a lot of his "conservative worldview was influenced by Tolkien growing up," and he named his venture firm Narya Capital after Gandalf's magic ring of fire.

Classic fantasy and science fiction stories have informed how many fans think about the world, giving them a Manichaean vocabulary of

good vs. evil, and a propensity for asserting that the future of civilization is constantly at stake. The stories also acted as an exhortation to think big and to pursue huge, improbable dreams. In much the way that sci-fi anticipated many of the remarkable inventions we now take for granted (think: cellphones, video conferencing or biometric screenings), many engineers and inventors today aspire to create transformative technologies that might one day enable humans to merge with machine intelligence, say, or live in outer space. On one hand: the possibility of groundbreaking, disruptive innovations. On the other: all the dangers of hubris and carelessness we were warned about by science fiction from “Frankenstein” to “Metropolis” to “2001: A Space Odyssey.”

When he was a child, Musk read Asimov’s “Foundation” series — books that inspired his dream of building a colony on Mars and would spur his resolve, [as he put it in a speech](#) at the United States Air Force Academy, “to work hard to make science fiction not fiction.” The Asimov novels feature a brilliant mathematician named Hari Seldon, who develops an algorithmic scheme for predicting the future, which enables him to foresee the end of the Galactic Empire and make plans to preserve human civilization by building a new society on another planet. Asimov’s “Foundation” series and Tolkien’s trilogy (“my favorite book ever,” [Musk has said](#)) helped forge his grandiose sense of mission, as the heroes in those books, he [told The New Yorker](#) in 2009, “felt a duty to save the world.”

Like “Lord of the Rings,” the Foundation novels trace a narrative arc that has resonated with right-wing politicians intent on remaking the world. It’s a story line in which a hero or a group of heroes takes on the challenge of a civilization in crisis. They wage war against a dangerous or moribund establishment and aspire to build a brave new

world out of the ashes of the old. Similar plot dynamics are at work in Robert A. Heinlein's "The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress," which depicts a colony of freedom-loving settlers on the moon and their successful revolt against the oppressive rule of bureaucrats on planet Earth.

## Suspicious of 'Machine Worshipers'

Literary classics, of course, can support myriad interpretations, and we live in an age when the points of view of readers are increasingly prioritized over authorial intentions. At the same time, it's astonishing how many contemporary takes on classic works of fantasy and science fiction fly in the face of both common sense and authors' known views of the world.

Consider Mark Zuckerberg's decision to rebrand Facebook as "Meta" — a reference to the so-called metaverse, a term coined by Neal Stephenson in his 1992 novel "Snow Crash," which depicts an alarming dystopian future where corporate power has replaced government institutions and a dangerous virus is on the loose.

Or take Stargate, the name of [OpenAI's new artificial intelligence initiative](#) with SoftBank and Oracle, announced in conjunction with the Trump administration. Its name, weirdly, is the title of a campy 1994 sci-fi movie in which a stargate device opens a portal to a faraway planet, where a despotic alien vows to destroy Earth with a supercharged atomic bomb. Not exactly the sort of magical portal most people would want to open.

Tolkien himself regarded "machine worshipers" with suspicion, even aversion. His experiences as a soldier who survived the gruesome

World War I Battle of the Somme left him with a lasting horror of mechanized warfare; on returning home, he was dismayed as well by the factories and roadways that were transforming England's landscape. This is why Mordor is depicted as a hellish, industrial wasteland, ravaged by war and environmental destruction, in contrast to the green, edenic Shire that the hobbits call home.

Of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, Tolkien wrote that nuclear physics — or, for that matter, any technological innovation — need not be used for war. "They need not be used at all. If there is any contemporary reference in my story at all it is to what seems to me the most widespread assumption of our time: that if a thing can be done, it must be done. This seems to me wholly false."

Given these views, Tolkien would have been confounded by Silicon Valley's penchant for naming tech companies after objects in "Lord of the Rings" — particularly firms with Pentagon and national security ties. And yet two Thiel-backed companies with Tolkien-inspired names are becoming cornerstones of today's military-industrial complex: The data analytics firm Palantir gets its name from the magical "seeing stones" in "Lord of the Rings," while the artificial intelligence military start-up Anduril refers to Aragorn's reforged sword.

The growing embrace in Silicon Valley of "transhumanism" — including research into life extension, machine enhancements and even finding a solution to death — underscores one of the central questions animating fantasy and science fiction: What does it mean to be human? This question drives stories set in outer space (from "Star Trek" to "Star Wars" to "Doctor Who") and stories set in a mythical past. In the case of "The Lord of the Rings," Tolkien argued that mortality is



part of “the given nature of Men,” and the Elves called it “the Gift of God (to Men),” allowing them “release from the weariness of Time.” Sauron, he noted, used the fear of death to lure humans to the dark side with false promises of immortality, which turned them into his servants.

Many prominent readers of “Lord of the Rings” no longer identify with the hobbits in Middle-earth but crave more magical powers (of the very sort that the dangerous Ring promises to bestow at a terrible price).

In [a 2023 interview with The Atlantic](#), Thiel traced his fascination with immortality to the elves in “Lord of the Rings,” calling them “humans who don’t die.” Echoing the interviewer he asked: “Why can’t we be elves?”

The neoreactionary ideologue Curtis Yarvin, who thinks American democracy should be replaced by a monarchy or “chief executive,” dismissively refers to the sort of ordinary voters who helped elect Trump as hobbits who only “want to grill and raise kids.”

Tolkien, in contrast, proudly described himself as “a Hobbit (in all but size). I like gardens, trees and unmechanized farmlands; I smoke a pipe, and like good plain food (unrefrigerated), but detest French cooking.” Not only is “Lord of the Rings” told from the point of view of the hobbits, but it’s Frodo’s gardener, the humble Sam Gamgee — not the noble king Aragorn or the great wizard Gandalf — who emerges as the real hero of the epic.

Sam plays a crucial role in carrying out the mission of destroying the Ring, and his story is the one that concludes the trilogy. After the war of the Ring, we learn, Sam returns home to the Shire, where he is elected mayor, marries his girlfriend, Rosie, and raises 13 children.

Sam, Tolkien wrote in a 1956 letter, was inspired by the brave English soldiers he'd served with during World War I, and other letters suggest that he saw the heroics of Sam and Frodo as a testament to his belief that small hands "move the wheels of the world" because "they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere."

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