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“Transmedia Worldbuilding and Mashup Mythology in *Penny Dreadful*”

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## **Abstract**

Transmedia characters are fictional figures whose adventures are told in different media platforms, each one adding details to their story, as they are rewritten, altered or extended, varying the degree of continuity with the original. By focusing on the merged, interfigural, and palimpsestic nature of the characters and mythology in the *Penny Dreadful* transmedia world, this article seeks to demonstrate that transmedia characters are essential to transmedia worlds as they are anchors from which plots and mythology develop and expand. From a narratological and narrative-centric position, this article argues that the construction of mythology in *Penny Dreadful*'s transmedia world is intricately tied to specific mythic plot structures, defining character conflicts, character narrators' embodied perspectives, and serialized character development, as well as character elaboration across media.

*Keywords:* *Penny Dreadful*, transmedia characters, worldbuilding, mythology, television, comic book series.



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# Transmedia Worldbuilding and Mashup Mythology in *Penny Dreadful*

## Introduction

Over the past two decades, there has been a flourishing scholarly interest in storyworlds, possible worlds (Ronen 1994; Ryan 1991), text-worlds (Werth 1999; Gavins 2007), narrative worldbuilding, and transmedial worlds (Ryan & Thon 2014), that is: world-centered approaches to narrative and storytelling.<sup>1</sup> “Storyworlds” or “imaginary worlds”, however, have like any other concept a history. As already suggested in J.R.R. Tolkien’s 1947 essay “On Fairy Stories”, what proves the “story-maker a successful ‘sub-creator’” is “He makes a Secondary World which our mind can enter” (Tolkien [1947] 1965, 37). In this way, the world-making properties of narrative and the ability to project virtual and imaginary worlds is related to narrative’s immersive dimension – i.e., its ability “to transport” (Gerrig 1998) interpreters into alternative places and times, in other words to secondary worlds inhabited by characters for whom reader/viewers feel empathy. Accordingly, narrative immersion is correlated with three forms of reader involvement (Ryan 2015, 85–86) in any media: *spatial immersion* (reader’s response to setting), *temporal immersion* (reader’s response to story), and *emotional immersion* (reader’s response to character).

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<sup>1</sup> Although Marie-Laure Ryan and other narratologists emphasizes that a paradigm shift within narratology has taken place by introducing “the concept of world, or storyworld” (Ryan & Bell 2019: 81), this, however, does not mean that narrative representations in terms of their represented worlds have escaped earlier research. In Roman Ingarden’s (1893–1970) *Das Literarische Kunstwerk* (1931), for instance, he provides a phenomenological interpretation of (literary) imaginary worlds, which he perceives as products of the constitutive activities of consciousness. Cognitive narratologists like Marie-Laure Ryan (1991, 2001), Richard Gerrig (1998), and David Herman (2009) among others draw a great deal on the insights of Ingarden and his distinction between (autonomous) objects of material existence, which exist in the world in their own right, and (heteronomous) objects, which only come into being when engaged with an observing consciousness.

Using the *Penny Dreadful* universe, introduced in John Logan's period-horror TV-drama *Penny Dreadful* (Showtime 2014–2016), as an example of character-centered transmedia worldbuilding, the aim of the present article is – from a cognitive narratological stance and in critical dialogue with Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca's analytical framework (Klastrup & Tosca 2004, 2014, 2016, 2020) – to argue that character should have a foregrounded position in transmedia world theory because the experience of transmedial worlds' worldness is, above all, dependent on reader-recognition of specific foundational characters who are central entryways to certain worlds and their mythologies. Furthermore, transmedia characters are not merely inhabitants of the world but serve as the embodied perspective (homodiegetic narrators) through which audiences engage emotionally with and at the same time get to understand the imaginary world.

## **Building Narrative Worlds – Storytelling and Worldbuilding**

Storyworlds are, broadly speaking, imaginary worlds, situated in space and time and populated with characters that undergo transformations due to the actions and events in which they are involved (Herman 2009). Storyworlds and transmedia worlds are usually considered highly immersive (spatially, temporally, and emotionally) if they supply sufficient world information through detailed descriptions of characters, landscapes, cultures, mythologies, etc. for the reader/viewer to have a vivid experience of a storyworld's inhabitants and surrounding environment required for immersion. Accordingly, world myths and traditional folktales play a significant role in contemporary popular culture and transmedia storytelling, as world details provide a certain atmosphere essential to maintaining the success and immersiveness of fantastic transmedial worlds. Expressed differently, when building storyworlds the construction of a cosmology, mythology, religion, culture, and (sometimes) a language is often based upon culturally canonical source material for the historical depth, complexity, and transcendental power (Ryan 2013) this material brings to an imaginary space and its inhabitants (characters). This transcendental power corresponds with what Marie-Laure Ryan calls transfictionality, defined as “the migration of fictional entities across different texts” (Ryan 2013,

383), which is also crucial to audiences' experience of 'worldness' (Klastrup & Tosca 2004; 2011; 2014; 2020) – i.e., the experience of not just being immersed in a single text but in a complete transmedia world.

The world metaphor seems to be at the core of many theories of transmedial storytelling, which – as stated by Henry Jenkins – “has become the art of world building, as artists create compelling environments that cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or even a single medium” (Jenkins 2006, 214).<sup>2</sup> Many fantasy transmedia worlds are based on extensive worldbuilding and in-depth encyclopedic descriptions of the imaginary world's settings, cultures, customs, and social values, thus supporting audiences' world imagination through detailed information on the world's properties. This, however, turns worldbuilding into a foregrounded activity, privileging description as representational mode over *story*-telling – i.e., the presentation of events, agents, conflicts, and the dynamics of action – since an excess of world information does not actively advance the story. Contrariwise, representational mode storytelling puts an emphasis on the happenings (actions and conflicts) and consequently on the agents involved – i.e., characters appearing in a spatiotemporal environment, *storyworld*. Accordingly, worldbuilding and storytelling are different representational modes and creative processes that sometimes come into conflict. In fact, in some fantastic worlds “the peculiarities of a secondary world can completely overtake narrative” (Wolf 2012, 30).

Considering that character has been a key subject of long-standing interest in narratology, and although some of the first theoretical work on transmedia dealt with the importance of character for transmedia franchise success (Jenkins 2003), overall, characters have played a subordinate role in studies of transmediality, while narrative worlds have been dealt with in greater depth. Over the past decade, transmedial scholars have started (re)emphasizing the crucial importance of character to narrative worldmaking across media (Steinberg 2012; Bertetti 2014; Pearson 2015, 2018; Tosca & Klastrup 2020). In *Building*

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<sup>2</sup>Interestingly, one of the first publications on transmedial storytelling was Henry Jenkin's early, well-known article “Transmedial Storytelling. Moving character from books to films to video games can make them stronger and more compelling” (2003), where he certainly touches upon the potential of transmedia storytelling regarding character-building and development but, even in this article, character seems to be a subordinate issue to the idea of world.

*Imaginary Worlds* (2012), Mark J.P. Wolf points out that “the simplest literary indication that a world exists beyond the details needed to tell a particular story is a transnarrative character” (Wolf 2012, 66). The key point here is that character’s presence in several stories may be what links these stories and their worlds together. This premise is also central in Marc Steinberg’s *Anime’s Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Character in Japan* (2012), in which he analyses consumer culture, character-based marketing, and transmedia worlds in anime, emphasizing the dual nature of character as an im/material entity. While the material embodiment of the character (through TV series, comics, commodities, or merchandise) “is the gateway to its world” (Steinberg 2012, 188), it is the immaterial aspects of character as “an abstract, circulating entity that maintains the consistency of the worlds or narratives” (ibid.). In fact, in some instances, the experience of worldness of some transmedia worlds can be anchored in the recognition of very specific characters. This especially applies to culturally prominent characters such as Count Dracula, Sherlock Holmes<sup>3</sup>, and Frankenstein who are so widely known that they tend to be cultural symbols that (regardless of their exact medial depiction) will be recognized easily through their prominent traits and unique names. Due to their distinctive and immediately recognizable features manifested through several previous incarnations, they do not exist exclusively within a homogeneous diegetic space but also in our cultural encyclopedia on a disembodied plane between and across spaces of narration.

## **Rewriting Characters and Mythology – Mashup Aesthetics across Media**

Invented languages, cultures, and mythologies appearing in fantastic imaginary worlds often take their inspiration from cultural content of multiple real-world cultures, merging and synthesizing this material into a new unique culture, language, and mythology.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Sherlock Holmes is an often-analyzed example of iconic characters (Pearson 2015, 2018) appearing in transmedia storytelling across literature, theatre, TV-series, comics, films, etc.

<sup>4</sup>Syncretism – i.e., the combination of different beliefs and various traditions of thought – also seems to be the very nature of mythology itself as mythology emerges when merging and assimilating several different belief systems. Thus, mythology is by nature “a multifaceted syncretic unity” (Alexander 2018: 176), as Lily Alexander describes it.

As emphasized by Lily Alexander in her chapter “Mythology” from *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds* (Wolf 2018), old mythic tales “still participate in the production of culture, contributing not only to story characters and events but with influential patterns, such as *mythemes* and *mythologemes* – the *Mythological leitmotifs*, able to form new and fascinating creative fusions” (Alexander 2018, 176).<sup>5</sup> Such creative fusions of diverse mythological elements and culturally prominent characters are the focal point of the present article, in which they will be termed “mashup mythology” and “mashup characters” (Albertsen 2019) – syncretic in nature and based on real-world mythology and mythic characters originating from different cultural contexts, such as Gothic fiction from the Victorian Era, Jewish folklore, Christian and Egyptian foundational mythologies (myths of creation and origin), and apocalyptic eschatology.<sup>6</sup>

The *Penny Dreadful* TV-series demonstrates how contemporary transmedia storytelling “encourages an encyclopedic impulse in both readers and writers” (Jenkins 2007, 3). The series is best described as a plagiarizing mashup – regarding both character and setting as well as the storyworld’s mythology – as it embraces heterogeneous literary sources (pretexts) and multiple (fictionalized) real-world nineteenth-century high and low culture, merging and synthesizing this material into a new narrative patchwork with unique storylines and atmosphere. On an ideological level, the *Penny Dreadful* TV-series reimagines a multitude of ideas by synthesizing Christian theology, elements from Egyptian mythology and nineteenth century folklore, spiritualism, and imperialism – merging it into a new mythological creation and using characters as vehicles of mythological transmission. Aesthetically, the TV-series is a multilayered transtextual entity of great narrative complexity with a storyworld populated by several recognizable narrative elements (themes, plots, settings, etc.) and an eclectic gallery of re-written literary characters originating from canonical

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<sup>5</sup>Lily Alexander defines a *mytheme* as “a dominant and recurrent theme in myths, or a type of mythic leitmotif” (Alexander 2018, 176), whereas she defines a *mythologeme* as “a dynamic logical unit – part of a narrative grammar/semantics as a structural whole” (Ibid.). In other words, a *mythologeme* is based on a syntagmatic relation, containing some sort of action or change (metamorphosis), which is vital to the meaning of the narrative.

<sup>6</sup>In some belief systems, ‘apocalyptic eschatology’ is a part of theology concerning the (prophesied) ultimate destiny of humanity and the final events of history.

nineteenth-century gothic novels (Albertsen 2019).<sup>7</sup> *Penny Dreadful* is a character mashup (Albertsen 2019) of culturally prominent figures like Dracula, Mina Harker, Quincey P. Morris, Dorian Gray, Dr. Jekyll, Victor Frankenstein, and his creatures, etc., who are brought together and made to interact with each other in *Penny Dreadful*'s crossover world. Additionally, several *Penny Dreadful* characters are themselves 'mashup characters' (Albertsen 2019) – i.e., merged characters shaped by postmodern bricolage storytelling strategies, sharing attributes, prominent traits, and large story elements (such as fragments of storylines and environments) with diverse well-known figures from various narrative and media contexts, as well as mythological figures adopted from different cultures. Carrying traces of previous incarnations, mashup characters have a palimpsest effect – i.e., the overlaps with previous texts – since the merged original creations interpenetrate one another, blurring the line between original and adapted material (Albertsen 2019).

The mashup aesthetics of *Penny Dreadful* appear to be intertwined with a syncretic historical process, where intertextual accretion of interpretations and reimaginings relating to certain characters – for instance Stoker's Count Dracula – “leads to the formation in our cultural encyclopedia of a ‘super’ or ‘mega’ character, a generalized literary figure [...] which both synthesizes and transcends any individual figure of this name” (Margolin 2007, 70). Accordingly, the name of a generalized (mega) character like Dracula – i.e., a culturally shared idea of Dracula based on a set of recognizable core properties appearing in all instantiations of him – both synthesizes and transcends any individual representation of “Dracula”. He is instantly recognizable with distinguishable traits (many of them traditional vampire tropes) – originating from the first version of him.<sup>8</sup> Although the Dracula-figure

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<sup>7</sup> Among these are Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde* (1886), James Malcom Rymer's *Varney the Vampire* (1847) and, not least, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). Many of these are themselves adaptations of pretexts. *Dracula*, for instance, is heavily inspired by *Varney the Vampire* and Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872).

<sup>8</sup> Bram Stoker's Dracula figure itself is, however, also a product of complex historical syncretic processes involving the assimilation and merging of various vampire-like beings from different traditions. “Notably, this current image of the vampire appears to have developed most directly from their image in Eastern European folklore” (Jøn 2001, 98), which contains descriptions of both vampirism and customs regarding vampire-slaying, among other things, also appearing in nineteenth-century gothic literature such as Stoker's *Dracula* and in the penny dreadful publication *Varney the Vampire* that served as inspiration for Stoker.



is featured in the *Penny Dreadful* TV-series, he is not only disguised in human form as zoologist Alexander Sweet (in the first few episodes of third season) but also manifested through a character expansion – a merged Dracula-Amun-Ra-demon-character<sup>9</sup> and thus based on a conglomerate of character traits belonging to various mythological figures of disparate origin. Whether or not they occur in a merged character (mashup), what makes mega characters particularly fertile for further expansion in other media is their essential indeterminacy and distinguishable traits immortalized through a history of numerous re-imaginings across media. As Jason Mittell argues, even if the term transmedia is new, “the strategy of expanding a narrative into other media is as old as media themselves; think of paintings dramatizing biblical scenes or iconic nineteenth-century characters such as Frankenstein or Sherlock Holmes whose narrative scope transcends any single medium” (2014, 253–54). Accordingly, culturally prominent characters like Dracula and Frankenstein were already transmedial<sup>10</sup> before appearing in the *Penny Dreadful* TV-series.

Through their status as culturally shared ideas, mega characters – also the ones manifested through merged character expansions – transcend any individual representation. Therefore, they have a similar potential for further transmedial expansion as storyworlds. In fact, they may even serve as central entryways to certain transmedia worlds since the experience of worldness of some transmedia worlds depends on instantly recognizable characters.

## Comic Book Tie-Ins and Transmedia Character Development

The comic book medium has a long-standing tradition of drawing content and gaining appeal from creating character mashups, eclectic character galleries created from various characters originating from different pretexts and protoworlds – an aesthetic strategy likewise demonstrated in John Logan’s *Penny Dreadful* TV-series. Already an

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<sup>9</sup>It is worth mentioning that the ancient Egyptian deity, Amun-Ra (meaning the hidden one), is also a syncretic product – a hybridization of two of the most important deities in ancient Egypt – Amun and Ra. When the popularity of the latter reached its peak, Amun’s powers and attributes became merged with those of the god Ra.

<sup>10</sup>Transmedia characters can be defined as fictional figures whose adventures are told in different media platforms, each one adding details to their story, as they are rewritten, altered, or extended, varying the degree of continuity with the original incarnation.

international success and with a well-established active fanbase<sup>11</sup>, it seemed perfectly natural for the series' co-executive producers, Chris King and Krysty Wilson-Cairns, to follow an idea that originated with Logan to expand the TV-series to comic book format, recreating the Victorian TV-setting with mimetic fidelity and adapting the physical appearance of the televisual characters (actors). The comic book iterations of *Penny Dreadful* are an example of transmedia extension located in the same storyworld, where plot and character development are unfolding and distributed across media "with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" (Jenkins 2006, 95–96).

The comic book series pursues two main tracks that take readers beyond the televisual narrative. The first is a prequel to the TV-series *Penny Dreadful, Volume 1* (2017). The prequel forms part of the TV-series backstory, providing more information about peripheral characters and filling in many story gaps from the show's first season, explaining things that were only hinted at or left open to interpretation. The second track is a sequel to Logan's original narrative in two volumes, *The Ongoing Series Volume 1*, entitled *The Awakening* (2017) and volume 2, *The Beauteous Evil* (2018). The comic book sequel series explores the aftermath of the events depicted in the final episode of the TV-series, adopting Logan's "original" mashup characters, continuing their storylines without fundamentally transforming them, and simultaneously expanding the *Penny Dreadful* mashup mythology through transmedia character development. When immersing ourselves in these different media instantiations of the *Penny Dreadful* universe, a transmedial world only becomes such in our minds by recognizing "the common traits that identify an individual work belonging to a specific universe" (Tosca & Klastrup 2020, 4). A key strategy for successfully integrating comic book tie-ins with the TV-series was to leave several narrative gaps in the televisual narrative discourse and, by centering the series around its characters and their plotlines, creating potential for further transmedia expansion by inventing continued adventures that allow more in-depth character-based exploration of the storyworld's mythology.

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<sup>11</sup>The TV-series has provided endless material for user-generated content such as online-based Wikis and discussion-forums as well as fan fiction and fan art. Fans have invested in a wide range of the series' narrative elements – from its merged characters and their literary Victorian precursors to their romantic relationships and the storyworlds' complex mythology.

## Character-Driven Audiovisual Worldbuilding in *Penny Dreadful*

Some film critics – Claude Ollier for example – hold that description as representational mode “has no equivalent in cinema” (Morrissette 1985, 22). Consequently, from this point of view, the distinction between storytelling (the dynamics of action, conflict, and character) and description (worldbuilding) only applies to literature. Unlike the extradiegetic narrator in prose, the camera in audiovisual media cannot convey the qualities attributed to storyworld objects and must imply adjectives by means of images. However, in *Coming to Terms* (1990), Seymour Chatman suggests that audiovisual media get close to explicit description on an extradiegetic level when the camera moves to create a close-up to “highlight properties, rather than actions, for the viewer’s attention” (43). Taking into consideration that literature and film/TV privilege different modes of describing, Chatman argues that we need to distinguish between *explicit* and *tacit* description, as “filmmakers traditionally prefer” (38) visual representation (*tacit* description) to verbal (*explicit* description). In other words, visual media “privileges *tacit* description” (*ibid.*), which is provided by the camera and concerns the *mise-en-scène* – the design aspect of everything appearing before the camera and its arrangement (actors, props, costume and prosthetic design, interior and scenic design, etc.) – world-creating elements and ornamental details.

In the *Penny Dreadful* TV-series, a lot of effort has been put into production design in order to establish an interesting and believable world through a high degree of (background) detail, world consistency, and high-quality sets, thereby bringing the illusion of the physical environment of Victorian London to life for the viewers’ eyes. This process is documented thoroughly in several video production blogs.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, like written narratives, TV-narration also exhibits a sort of encyclopedic impulse for *tacit* (audiovisual) descriptive interludes – points at which the narration (or the succession of events) is paused so that visual information about aspects, details, and the atmosphere of certain locations can be provided and temporarily give worldbuilding primacy over storytelling. Genette regards such places in narration as

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<sup>12</sup>These video production blogs can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/user/PennyDreadfulOnSHO> where the production team takes the audience into the process of creating a detailed believable world of *Penny Dreadful*.

having a purely aesthetic role “similar to that of a piece of sculpture in a classical building” (Genette 1976, 6); rather than simply slowing down narrative progress, they may also enrich the storyworld by giving it more background, depth, and atmosphere. In “Demimonde” (S1E4), the Grand Guignol scene, for instance, is driven more by an encyclopedic impulse to dwell on the details creating atmosphere than advancing the plot. Through camera movement, the audience is visually provided with an opulence of world details, enabling viewers to experience the theatre’s whole construction in all its splendor and architectural richness, which is emphasized through close-up shots of objects and characters. The camera utilizes Brona Croft (Billy Piper) as external character-focalizer and by explicitly depicting her as both overwhelmed and fascinated, the camera also indirectly conveys the spectacular nature of the Grand Guignol theatre through a character’s emotional reactions.

## Worldbuilding through Character Narrators

As mentioned earlier, the audiovisual equivalent of explicit description according to Chatman is when the camera moves to give close-ups to highlight storyworld properties rather than actions. Close-up shots, however, clearly concern an extradiegetic level of narrative. In audiovisual media, explicit worldbuilding description may also be provided by a homodiegetic narrator, with description expressed in character dialogue by one or several first-person narrator(s). This applies, for example, to the episode “Verbis Diablo” (S2E2), in which Egyptologist Ferdinand Lyle (Simon Russell Beale) narrates an embedded story concerning the origin of the *Verbis Diablo* relics (the memoirs of the Devil): “In the eleventh century, a Carthusian monk known to us only as Brother Gregory, began to lose his mind. He said he was possessed by a demon. Perhaps the father of all demons...” (S2E2).

Lyle’s embedded account of eleventh-century events serves as backstory to the relics, which are intricately linked to an invention of the series’ eclectic mythology – the eternal battle between the two brothers Dracula and the Devil, with protagonist Vanessa Ives caught in the middle. Moreover, it also has an explanatory function as platform for explicit description of the invented language, *Verbis*

Diablo,<sup>13</sup> which according to Lyle has “roots as old as Aramaic, and likely much older. It was an oral tradition, for the most parts, like most now-dead languages. The language is technically forgotten, not mythical or completely dead, and has fallen out of usage” (S2E2). Accordingly, Lyle’s role as first-person narrator is crucial for the series’ worldbuilding as Verbis Diablo is introduced, explained, and gradually deciphered through his expertise in dead languages and extensive knowledge of the ancient world. Consequently, in the *Penny Dreadful* storyworld, Lyle not only plays a crucial role as first-person narrator but also has an actantial function as helper – advancing the plot – as he supports Malcolm Murray and his group in the first season’s gradual unravelling of the vampires’ Egyptian connection and in the second season’s deciphering of the Verbis Diablo relics. This dual narrative function is sustained in the *Penny Dreadful* spin-off comic book sequel *The Awakening* (2017), in which Lyle (in parallel with the TV-series) narrates an embedded story – a flashback to ancient Egypt in the twelfth dynasty – that expands the televisual narrative by providing a mythical backstory to Vanessa’s tragic fate in the TV-series. But due to the comic book medium, Lyle’s embedded story does not completely parallel the televisual narrative in regard to framing devices. The comic book emphasizes narrative embedding by using a homodiegetic narrator supported by spatiotemporal information provided by an impersonal narrator: “ANCIENT EGYPT / Back in the time when the sun was new and old gods walked / Belial and Amunet were lovers, but only in secret” (King et al 2017, 50). This information occurs enclosed in a textbox at the top of the comic frames, indicating that it is situated in a larger spatiotemporal (extradiegetic) level than the picture shown in the frame.

Storytelling and worldbuilding are two different but interdependent processes and, as demonstrated above, crucial elements of a trans-medial world, such as its mythology, are provided through character narrators and character development. Therefore, the world is not only an abstract setting but a relation between the narrative space and a character’s embodied perspective, or as phrased by Steinberg the

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<sup>13</sup>Linguist and language creator David J. Peterson was hired to develop the artificial language Verbis Diablo (meaning the Devil’s tongue) for the *Penny Dreadful* TV-series. Verbis Diablo is a pastiche made up of real-world sources – i.e., several languages such as Arabic, Middle Egyptian, Sumerian, Attic Greek, Latin, Farsi, and Turkish. Peterson combined grammar as well as pieces of multiple words from many languages to produce new ones through a process of linguistic and semantic blending.

“reader must ‘view’ the ‘world’ through the eyes of the character” (2012, 199). In other words, worldbuilding and character building as well as character elaboration/expansion are interdependent creative processes and therefore character should not be subordinate to the idea of world.

## **Transmedial Storyworlds – Transcending Boundaries**

Recent developments in transmedial world theory tend to give special emphasis to the imaginative act of recipients regarding the ontological status of transmedial worlds. This applies to the work of Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca, who, influenced by phenomenology and cognitive narratology, establish a genuinely transmedial concept of storyworlds around the idea of worldness. Their approach to transmediality is phenomenological in the sense that they consider the act of reception as defining. Thus, until someone begins to perceive it as such, interconnected narratives do not form a transmedial world. It only comes into existence when someone, based on transtextual cues, engages in an act of “interpretation, interaction, or creation” (Klastrup & Tosca 2016) in relation to the world. Thereby, Klastrup and Tosca emphasize the dual nature of transmedial worlds as “partly imagined, and only partly realized in any medium” (Klastrup & Tosca 2020, 21). Accordingly, such worlds are defined:

... by the shared idea of the world, a sort of platonic approach that situates the ontological status of the TMW in a disembodied plane. We call this mental image “worldness” (Klastrup & Tosca 2014, 297).

Thus, transmedial worlds perform the same way as genre, i.e., as a mental construct, evoked by transmedial storytelling and corresponding to “a number of distinguishing and recognizable features of specific transmedial world” (Tosca & Klastrup 2020, 31), transcending the concrete manifestation of the world in a media product. The experience of “worldness” is an aggregate of a recipient’s experiences of “story, aesthetics, scene, ethics, morality and central characters of the world” (Ibid., 33). In their theoretical and analytical framework, Klastrup and Tosca identify three dimensions that encompass these elements and inform the experience of worldness. These are *topos*,

*ethos*, and *mythos* of the world, which any story set in the transmedial world must comply with. In the following, these categories will be employed as an analytical framework for mapping the narrative world-building in the *Penny Dreadful* transmedia world, operationalizing the concept of worldness and simultaneously reflecting on the importance of character and character development regarding *Penny Dreadful*'s mythology.

## A Topological Design of Bricks and Coal

In Tosca and Klastrup's theoretical and analytical framework, the category of *topos* refers to the setting of the world in both space (geography) and time (history) and comprises the physical laws as well as the social, technological, economic, political, and legal systems of the world. Despite the obvious supernatural elements, there is a certain "actual-world-like"-quality to the physical setting of the *Penny Dreadful* universe. The topological design is strongly inspired by historical elements from late-Victorian London, though a more sinister version of the city – an industrialized smoggy mass of brick and coal at the threshold to the Modern Era with respectable streets side-by-side with crooked alleys and overcrowded sinister slum areas populated with supernatural beings (witches, vampires, werewolves, etc.). Somewhat constrained by historical specifics, Logan includes real-world locations and institutions in London in *Penny Dreadful*'s storyworld like Bedlam Asylum, Royal Botanic Gardens and the British Museum, providing a historical backdrop for the setting.

Logan's fictionalized revisioning of London and its Victorian setting draws not only on material from canonical gothic literature but also refers to British imperialism and Victorian male-dominated society and the social control its institutions had over female sexuality and deviance, as manifested by marriage and the mental asylum providing moral treatment. To create vivid environments that allude to real-world material, Logan also blends in cultural content like horrific popular culture and unsettling public amusements of the late nineteenth century, such as Putney's Family Waxworks – a gruesome fictional version of Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum – showcasing historical figures, an underground grotesquery of everything that is frightening and disturbing, and re-created London crime scenes. Logan furthermore includes Grand Guignol's blood-

splattered naturalistic horror theatre,<sup>14</sup> popular parlor games like spiritualist séances, and a crime-ridden underground of private clubs where aristocratic gentlemen indulge in lawless behavior and macabre sexual proclivities such as snuff theatre shows. *Penny Dreadful* also alludes to press sensationalism and through its title also to popular serial literature of the nineteenth-century, both designed to shock and awe a mass audience by offering Victorian readers escape into a world of sensational horror, ghoulish murder, and blood-splattered violence.

In Klastrup and Tosca's conception, the *ethos* of a transmedia world encompasses "the belief systems at work in the world, such as religion, politics and other ideologies, explicit and implicit ethics, or the moral code of behavior" (2020, 36). In *Penny Dreadful's* world, *ethos* is shaped by the religious and moral ambivalence of the *fin de siècle*. Central to the ideological dimension of *Penny Dreadful's* world is the Victorian exploration into the duality of the human mind and into mankind's choice to do moral or immoral acts, as the series dwells on the shadow side of the human psyche associated with evil, repression, and demonization of the other self, i.e. the *doppelgänger*.

Furthermore, an underlying discourse that permeates the world of *Penny Dreadful* is Victorian patriarchy and female subjugation and resistance, reflecting a discrepancy in the status of Victorian women. This discrepancy between the suffragette organization and the domestic and socially restricted Victorian women is encapsulated in *Penny Dreadful's* gallery of female characters, many of whom incarnate an ambiguous blend of submissive womanhood and moral emancipation. On the surface, Vanessa Ives (Eva Green) embodies the ideal of compliant womanhood by being a ward under a male guardian (Sir Malcolm Murray) and through her Victorian clothing, with its tight-lacing and high-necked dresses, perfects a message of willingness to conform to submissive patterns and sexual repression. However, Vanessa's inner demons lurk beneath this surface of equanimity and they are released every time she gives in to her true nature, liberating

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<sup>14</sup>In a real-world context, *Le Théâtre du Grand-Guignol* (1897–1962) known as the Grand Guignol was originally a theatre in the Pigalle district in Paris. The theatre did not exist in London in 1891, when the action of the series' first season takes place. First in 1920, Jose Levy opened a London-based Grand Guignol theatre. But like its fictional counterpart, the Grand Guignol specialized in blood-splattered naturalistic horror shows.



her from social restrictions. Many female characters in this transmedia world, including Vanessa Ives, Lily Frankenstein, Dr. Florence Seward, Joan Clayton, and Catriona Hartdegen, can be perceived as distortions of the Victorian ideal of womanhood. They all fight social restraints imposed upon them by a male-dominated society, such as when Lily – after her resurrection, empowerment, and vendetta against men – escapes Victor Frankenstein’s plans to domesticate her by turning her “into a proper woman” (S3E7). By “proper”, he means a tame, compliant, obedient, and silenced woman who loves him but has no independent thoughts or impulses. Consequently, the logic running beneath patriarchy is conformity and social control, which is forced onto women who deviate from the cultural norm in terms of role, sexual orientation, or demeanor, etc.

As argued by Tosca and Klastруп, ethos encompasses various belief systems at work in the world – “the underlying discourses that permeate a TMW” (2020, 36). However, one could disagree with this idea – implied by their model – that something at the most abstract levels in a “text” (in the broadest sense of the word) such as cultural and social belief systems should be subsumed under the storyworld’s setting. In fact, as demonstrated above, one could argue that cultural and social values, social laws, and code of behavior are embodied in a storyworld either through a narrators’ direct commentary, through statements made in dialogue, or as projected by (and derived from) characters’ behavior and choices, traits, appearance, point of views, conflicts, etc. Consequently, given that characters in this way perform as vehicles of ideological transmission in transmedia worldbuilding, they should perhaps be given primacy over setting in regard to ethos (Tosca & Klastруп 2020, 34).

## **The End of World – A Mythological Love Triangle**

Invented languages and mythologies are crucial elements in building compelling transmedial worlds. Mythology may be central to imaginary worlds and to the stories unfolding in them, or merely used to add atmosphere or background décor. In the *Penny Dreadful* transmedia world, mythology cannot be reduced to background décor since mythologies and mythical figures of various cultural origin

(Christian, Egyptian, and Jewish) participate in the production of this world's mashup mythology. Intercultural mythic plots and recurrent *mythemes* such as the twin brothers whose rivalry leads to conflict contribute not just to the creation of merged (mashup) characters but also serve a structural function by molding material on the actantial level (agents, objects, and conflicts) into specific plot patterns.

Mythos is, according to Klastrup and Tosca, one of the “distinguishing and recognizable features of specific transmedial world” (2020, 31) which prompts audiences’ experience of worldness. If those essential aspects of the world that audiences expect to find in all media instantiations are absent, then audiences will react negatively, which was the case with the *Penny Dreadful* spin-off TV-series *City of Angels*.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, in Klastrup and Tosca’s understanding of transmedial worlds and their essential aspects, “mythos” refers to:

...the establishing story, legend, or narration of the world, with the defining struggle that explain for instance, the relation between various opposing parties or races in the world. (Klastrup and Tosca 2020, 33)

In the *Penny Dreadful* world, this establishing story or defining conflict is introduced in the TV-series and reiterated twice in the comic book series. Functioning as a mythological backstory for Vanessa Ives’ struggle with her (inner) demons, this story provides historical depth to her situation and character. As cued several times in the TV-series, she turns out to be the reincarnation of the Egyptian primordial goddess Amunet (meaning “the female hidden one”). This backstory is shaped as an eternal love triangle and it is presented through a lore item – the Verbis Diablo relics – and by means of the classic mythological leitmotif of the battling (twin) brothers, whose rivalry leads to an eternal conflict over “the mother of evil”, Amunet, in all her incarnations across time, and media instantiations one could add. Another mythological element associated with the defining conflict of *Penny Dreadful*’s world is the chronotope of mythology – the circular conception of time and the eternal recurrence of the same mythological

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<sup>15</sup>Without the Gothic horror tropes, recurrent characters, and the Victorian London setting of the original show, *City of Angels* takes a completely different path, disrupting the original topos, ethos, and mythos, undermining audiences’ experience of worldness. Therefore, it is preferable to consider *City of Angels* an independent spin-off with a separate storyworld.

drama – that, because of its recognizable narrative structure and its reemergence, is a core element of this world, advancing audiences’ experience of worldness. Furthermore, due to the reiterative nature of this defining conflict, it has potential for continuous transmedial growth.

Dr. Alexander Sweet is, as mentioned previously, a rewritten Dracula-figure that Logan takes beyond Stoker’s original creation by merging him with the Egyptian god Amun-Ra. Through Dracula’s alias “The Dragon”, Logan also reimagines him as Lucifer’s brother expelled from Heaven. In “Memento Mori” (S2E8), Ferdinand Lyle reveals the full translation of the relics. By deciphering the satanic memoirs, Malcolm Murray’s group learns that Lucifer did not fall alone:

And thus were we set in eternal enmity. [...] Both in an eternal quest for the mother of evil, who will release us from our bondage and allow the one of us to reconquer Heaven [...]. And so will the Darkness reign on Earth, in Heaven, everlasting. And so comes the Apocalypse. (S2E8)

Taking shape as a prophetic apocalyptic vision, these satanic memoirs draw on several mythological texts of Christian Biblical origin – such as *The Book of Revelation* – concerning the heavenly war and the fallen angel “The Dragon” *Lucifer*.<sup>16</sup> *These texts are rewritten, expanded, altered, and merged into /Penny Dreadful’s mashup mythology, according to which Lucifer is a demon of spiritual essence who feeds on the souls of the dead in Hell, while his brother Dracula is a demon of the flesh who fell to Earth, where he was cursed to feed on the blood of the living by night. As eternal rivals to the heavenly throne, they both quest for Vanessa in her incarnation as the mother of all evil. The prophecy saying she is needed to complete the apocalypse is echoed in the first season’s deciphering of the hieroglyphs etched beneath a dead vampire’s skin, which are later found to originate from the Egyptian Book of the Dead. Through Vanessa’s merged character (Amunet, clairvoyant, witch, etc.) and the narrative paralleling of*

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<sup>16</sup>Lucifer/Satan and Dracula are linked through the Romanian “Dracul”, which means the Devil and/or the Dragon. “The Dragon” appears in *Revelation 12: 7–9* as an alias for Satan: “And the dragon and his angels fought back but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent [...] and his angels were thrown down with him.”

the prophecy relating to the hieroglyphic inscriptions and the Verbis Diablo relics, the *Penny Dreadful* mythology synthesizes Christian and Egyptian mythology.

As merged Dracula-Amun-Ra-demon-character, Dr. Sweet/Dracula is provided with a complex backstory with mythological implications. Together with Vanessa Ives and Ethan Chandler, Dr. Sweets' merged character is braided into a mythological love triangle between Dracula, Lucifer, and Vanessa. The Verbis Diablo prophecy also mentions the Lupus Dei (wolf of God) as Vanessa's eternal supernatural protector, a possible deciding factor in the war for Earth and Heaven. This protector is Ethan Chandler's merged American Cowboy-werewolf character, which draws a lot on Stoker's Texan gunman, Quincey Morris from *Dracula*.

## What Stained-Glass Windows Can Tell

In earlier versions of Klastrup and Tosca's transmedial model, characters were subsumed under the category of mythos (Klastrup & Tosca 2016). In *Transmedia Worlds in Everyday Life* (2020, 33–38), however, they emphasize the importance of character by including foundational characters as a core element of worldbuilding, alongside their original triadic model of mythos, ethos, and topos, but without elaborating further on the relationship between character and mythos in their revised model. The creation of mythos in the *Penny Dreadful* world is an example of character-driven worldbuilding, which will be obvious if we draw our attention to the *Penny Dreadful* comic book spin-off series. The televisual mashup mythology is elaborated in Chris King's *The Awakening* (2017) by means of an embedded story – a flashback to ancient Egypt in the twelfth dynasty – narrated by Lyle to provide a mythical backstory to Vanessa's tragic fate in the TV-series. From this we learn how the story of Princess Amunet, daughter to a great pharaoh who is betrothed to Amun-Ra but in love with Belial, parallels Vanessa's story. Princess Amunet is also caught in the middle of an eternal and bloody war between two evil forces, Set (Lucifer), a demon of spiritual essence, and Amun-Ra (Dracula), a demon of the flesh – pursuing her from the inside and outside, respectively, as they would Vanessa centuries later. Thus, through this narrative paralleling of temporally distant events and characters across media, King's narrative adds further layers to the mythology surrounding Vanessa Ives by suggesting that Amunet

and her corresponding destinies are shaped by an eternal return of the same mythical drama and conflict.

The subsequent volume of the comic book sequel *The Beauteous Evil* (2018) extends the *Penny Dreadful* mythology even further by including elements from Jewish mythology that align Vanessa with another female character of destruction, the primordial she-demon and Adam's first wife before Eve, Lilith. Already in "Séance" (S1E2), it is hinted during a spiritualist séance performed by Madame Kali/Evelyn Poole (Helen McCrory) that: "Amunet, girl!? No, much older!", leaving story gaps in the televisual narrative. This textual indeterminacy is filled in by a complementary prehistory in *The Beauteous Evil* about Lilith, who "was the *first* mother of evil" (King 2018: 25). To facilitate readers' understanding, King's comic book narrative explicitly references the TV-series via its mimetic retelling of the Verbis Diablo story, which is narrated by Lily Frankenstein and visually presented through the narrative of a church's stained-glass windows, depicting Lucifer and Draculas' fall from Heaven:

What man don't know is that God first banished both Lucifer and Dracula to Earth during the great fall [...] Banished into the darkness by God, Lucifer and Dracula discovered the beautiful and alluring Lilith, lost and alone. / Both demons desired the fertile Lilith. (King 2018, 25)

This depiction of the fallen angels' rivalry over Lilith adds another iteration of the love triangle conflict between Lucifer (Set), Vanessa (Amunet, Lilith), and Dracula (Amun-Ra) to the transmedial world of *Penny Dreadful*. Thus, by integrating crucial story elements from the televisual mythology and by reutilizing the instantly recognizable (through repetition) plot structure of the love triangle conflict, King creates world consistency across television and comic books, supporting reader/viewers experience of worldness. At the same time, he adds new elements and details to this recurring mythological conflict that expands the *Penny Dreadful* mythology, for instance, that Lilith was given a flame sable by God, enabling her to trap Lucifer in his eternal prison in Hell. From Lily's narration and the stained-glass window depictions of the eternal love triangle conflict, we learn that Lilith was the first mother of evil. Therefore, her struggle may be considered the *ur*-conflict of the *Penny Dreadful* world – the backstory of all

backstories providing historical depth, explanation, and purpose to the events of the world “so that story events seem more meaningful and perhaps even the completion of a long character arc” (Wolf 2012: 189).



From the research on the mythological dimension of transmedia storytelling presented in this article, it may be argued that characters (and story) should have a foregrounded position in transmedial world theory. As demonstrated above, the grand narrative (mythos) of the *Penny Dreadful* world is intricately tied to specific mythic plot structures, character (narrators’) embodied point-of-view, defining character conflicts, serialized character development, and not least to character elaboration across media. Therefore, characters have the same potential for transmedial expansion as worlds, and they are equally foundational for the construction of mythos and essential to the experience of worldness.

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