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Assembling Fantastic Storyworlds

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AFUNDAMENTAL ASSUMPTION regarding fantasy worlds is that they need to have a certain degree of internal coherence and consistency, otherwise the audience's ability to immerse themselves in the storyworld will collapse under the weight of its contradictions. Nothing is considered more annoying than having characters resolve a major dilemma by using some previously unheard of magic or technology. Fans tend to sour on storyworlds that are seen to be riddled with inconsistencies because they offer no reward for the time and energy fans have put into establishing a coherent mental picture of the fictional universe.

These assumptions have become embedded into theories of fantastic worldbuilding. In his seminal *Building Imaginary Worlds: the theory and history of subcreation*, Mark J.P. Wolf emphasizes the importance of fantastic worlds having both completeness, "the degree to which the world contains explanations and details covering all the various aspects of its characters' experiences, as well as background details which together suggest a feasible, practical world" (2012, 38), and consistency, "the degree to which world details are plausible, feasible, and without contradiction" (43). Tolkien's Middle-Earth sets the literary standard for theory, providing an almost unsurpassed depth of historical, linguistic, and mythological richness to the storyworld.

¹<https://tidsskrift.dk/imaginingtheimpossible/>

Yet as transmedia storyworlds have developed across platforms, it has become apparent that assumptions about the importance of storyworld coherence and consistency may be more visible in theory than in practice. Fans seem perfectly capable of folding contradictions into the multiverse, until fantastic storyworlds can seem like one of M.C. Escher's impossible geometries, illogical yet existing nonetheless. For example, time travel narratives generally place a lot of emphasis on the question of cause and effect with changes to the timeline needing to be properly explained, unless the series in question is *Doctor Who*, whose fans place little to no importance on establishing a complete, internally consistent timeline. *Spiderman* fans immediately accepted that there would be no continuity between Sam Raimi's *Spiderman* trilogy (2002–2007) and Marc Webb's *The Amazing Spiderman* films (2012–2014), just as Batman fans accept that there is not supposed to be any consistency between Heath Ledger's Joker in *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008) and Joaquin Phoenix's Joker in *Joker* (Todd Phillips, 2019).

Completeness and consistency can thus often be suspended as horizons of expectation. This is something that major media conglomerates are aware of and have an economic interest in fueling. Why stick to one official story, world or character, if a brand can have parallel branches that are developed simultaneously and can be separated and intertwined more or less at will, appealing to different customer categories? Reboots and alternate timelines offer ways of reaching new audiences, but this also suggests a less coherent and more modular approach to storyworld construction. As Derek Johnson has argued in *Media Franchising*, “given the immense creative energies poured into multiplied production of worlds from a variety of institutional positions, professional identities, and creative contexts, there might be greater benefit in embracing the oft-suppressed potential for emergent creativity suggested by franchising” (2013, 149). Moreover, from a reception perspective, fans may reject a franchise's most expensive components and instead favor some ancillary product that is considered more innovative and intriguing. These processes work against the desire for consistency and completeness, instead producing storyworlds characterized by multiplicity and contingency.

It is time to reconsider some of our ideas about storyworld design. “Building” imaginary worlds implies construction according to an architectural masterplan. In *Imagining the Impossible #2*, we consider

whether “assembling” may be a more productive term, implying the conjoining of different modular parts into forms that may be put together in various ways by different fans, like someone playing with Lego pieces drawn from several different sets. Even if audiences have access to the same overall pieces, different worlds may be assembled depending on which pieces are selected and how they are put together. Such a terminology emphasizes the complex and changing relationship between authors, fans, brand owners and multimedia companies, as shown by the articles in this issue.

Stephen Joyce’s article, “Video Games in Transmedia Storyworlds: *The Witcher* and the Mothership Problem,” considers how the industrial organization of transmedia worlds affects their development. Distinguishing between “narrative cores” (the canonical texts of the storyworld) and “industrial cores” (the medium that provides the revenue to expand the franchise), the article uses *The Witcher* as an example of how different media within the same franchise can deliberately police the boundaries between their different visions without harming the storyworld’s integrity.

Anita Nell Bech Albertsen’s “Transmedia Worldbuilding and Mashup Mythology in *Penny Dreadful*” considers the often-overlooked importance of character within theories of worldbuilding: “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.”

Steen Ledet Christiansen’s “Unworlding in *Nameless*: The Negation of Worldbuilding” considers the idea of unworlding, “when the imaginary world is filled with contradictions and impossibilities that break any attempt at constructing a system or structure.” Theories of worldbuilding often use epic fantasy and sci-fi as examples, but weird fiction is also a part of the fantastic and explores things that cannot or should not be told; through a close reading of the comic *Nameless*, Christiansen shows how weird fiction can exploit processes of unworlding rather than worldbuilding.

Finally, Tem Frank Andersen, Thessa Jensen, and Peter Vistisen show how fandom can take elements of the storyworld and expand them in ways the creators could not have imagined. Focusing on Canadian YouTuber The Hacksmith’s attempt to create a real-life *Star*

Wars lightsaber, the authors explore the idea of “design fiction... a way of merging the fantastic with the reality of existing technology, both in its potentially dystopian or utopian extremes.” The article aims to understand how The Hacksmith’s work “can be considered both fanfiction and design fiction, while also raising questions about what can be considered fandom.”

We hope you find these in-depth explorations of how storyworlds are industrially produced, textually constructed, and creatively assembled by audiences a stimulus that helps you assemble your own ideas about the complex processes of fantastic worldbuilding.

Cited Works

- Johnson, Derek. (2013). *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries*. New York: New York University Press.
- Wolf, Mark J.P. (2012). *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*. New York: Routledge.