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Exploring imaginary worlds: Audiences, fan cultures and geographies of the imagination

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According to Michael Saler, fantasy fans have historically ‘been the most visible adherents of imaginary worlds,’ even while being the butt of many jokes, ‘as geeks wasting their youth playing Dungeons and Dragons and demeaning their adulthood by parsing sentences written in the Klingon or Elvish language’ (2012: 3). However, in the contemporary new media zeitgeist, ‘geek’ cultures, narratives and genres have ‘blossomed from a niche interest to become one of the most popular and lucrative fields in contemporary entertainment’ (3-4). Words such as ‘geek,’ and ‘nerd’ have largely (though not completely) shifted from the pejorative association of the fan as a figure of ridicule, diagnosed as ‘a psychological symptom of a presumed social dysfunction’ (Jensen, 1992: 9), towards ‘an endearing term of affection’ (McArthur, 2009: 61). Indeed, the rise of the seemingly paradoxical term ‘geek chic’ – now recognised and reified by the Oxford English Dictionary – demonstrates that being a geek can now even be considered ‘cool’.

Developments in digital technology, especially the Internet, have clearly played a role here, as the habits and preferences of minority fan cultures have been brought to the attention of wider audiences. Among these audiences, however, are the culture industries themselves, with producers increasingly turning their gazes towards geek culture, repeatedly raiding the archives in search of nostalgic touchstones to inspire the next blockbuster windfall. What this means is that, since the turn of the twenty-first century, *fictional worldbuilding* has also shifted in visibility, moving with fandom from the margins and into the mainstream. Seen in this context, it is hardly surprising that superheroes, wizards, orcs, dragons, spaceships, time travel and aliens are very much in the ascendancy.

Typically, academia has responded in turn. We have seen a proliferation of scholarly work of fans and fandom in recent years, as well as an enduring fascination with the

production and distribution practices involved in the creation of successful fantasy worlds. Most famously, in *Convergence Culture* (2006), Henry Jenkins conceptualised ‘transmedia storytelling’ as a principle of worldbuilding in the new millennium – a kind of intensive serialisation whereby a narrative unfolds across a range of media platforms rather than within a single medium.¹ As he explains:

More and more, storytelling has become the art of worldbuilding, as artists create compelling environments that cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or even a single medium. (116)

The affordances of the new media environment have undoubtedly led to a reconceptualization of narrative and the possibilities offered by ‘multiplatform content strategies’ (Murray, 2005: 416).

Like most things, however, imaginary worlds are certainly not a new media phenomenon. In *Building Imaginary Worlds: The History and Theory of Subcreation*, Mark J.P. Wolf demonstrates that fictional worldbuilding has considerable vintage spanning three millennia of human history (2012: 2). From Aea, Aeolia and Cyclops Island in the works of Homer, and Aristophanes’ Cloud Cuckoo Land, to the city of Kallipolis in Plato’s *The Republic* (290) and King Arthur’s Camelot, it would seem that fictional worldbuilding is a *sine qua non* of narrative history rather than emanating purely from the new media environment.

Yet, despite this heritage, worldbuilding has inexplicably been overlooked in academia, at least until fairly recently. This would change with the publication of Saler’s *As If: The Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality* and Wolf’s *Building Imaginary Worlds*, both of which provide frameworks for an emergent field of inquiry, of worldbuilding studies. Indeed, the genesis of this themed section of *Participations* can be traced to these landmark publications – as illustrated by our title, which draws from both authors. Both books are tremendously well researched and provide valuable insights into imaginary worlds. That both come from different disciplinary perspectives is also most welcome. But we also thought that something was missing – not only from these two sources, but existing studies of worldbuilding, transmedia, and fandom more generally. It was these gaps that we had in mind when writing our original Call for Papers. We set ourselves three goals that we wanted to achieve – academic interventions that the articles collected here begin to address.

Intervention 1: Push worldbuilding studies beyond fantasy and sci-fi

The mainstreaming of marginal, minority fan cultures may have drawn the attention of the culture industries, but this turn has also resulted in a privileging of geek culture in the academy. In studies of both fandom and worldbuilding, fantasy and science fiction rule the roost. Now, there is nothing inherently wrong with that *per se*, and as such, we have still chosen to include work on these very topics. However, we also wanted to push at the concept of the imaginary world in order to broaden the field and its horizons.

All stories build worlds. But it would seem that only some worlds, and some stories, are deemed valuable enough to warrant our attention; from *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Harry Potter*, *True Blood*, to *The Matrix*, *Halo*, *World of Warcraft*, *Doctor Who*, *The Expanse*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and, of course, the panoply of superhero narratives reproducing and multiplying across various media. The list goes on. But what about those genres traditionally constructed as ‘feminine,’ such as the soap opera, the costume drama, ‘classic’ literature and romance? What about *Coronation Street*, *Mad Men*, *War and Peace* (recently dramatized by the BBC), *Fifty Shades of Grey*, *Mr. Selfridge*, or *Grey’s Anatomy*?

In fact, given that Scott McCracken describes romance as ‘a fantasy world where a full and complete identity can be imagined’ (1998: 75), can *entire genres* be thought of as imaginary worlds? This may sound like an impractical suggestion. After all, are genres not too diverse and too inconsistent to be able to locate them in shared worlds? Do they not emerge from too many sources to be coherent? However, if we follow the lead of Jason Mittell (2004), and approach genres as ‘cultural categories’ rather than components of texts, it becomes clear that industries, audiences and critics very often *do* view genre in this way. Generic worlds may not cohere spatially or temporally, but particular audiences may well place considerable value on narrative, representational and ideological consistencies that exist across multiple texts, without ever being reducible to a single one.

As Brett Mills has pointed out, ‘there is television that gets watched and there is television that gets discussed: the two do not necessarily coincide’ (2010: 1). The same can be said of imaginary worlds, with popular, complex and intriguing examples existing far beyond academia’s current purview. It seems to us that the increased visibility of fan cultures has cast a shadow over the practices, habits and behaviours of other kinds of audiences. After all, as Saler points out, ‘soap opera fans and romance readers tend to be less noticeable [...] than people who wear Spock ears or Hobbit feet’ (2012: 3). But a de-privileging of science fiction and fantasy is not just a question of canon; it can also help us to move research forward in another key way, and this brings us to our second intervention.

Intervention 2: Challenge the distinction between ‘Primary’ and ‘Secondary’ worlds

One of the principle issues we had – and still have – is the concept of ‘subcreation’ and the dichotomy between Primary and Secondary Worlds. As Wolf explains, the concept of ‘subcreation’ comes from J.R.R. Tolkien’s essay ‘On Fairy-stories’ whereby ‘the ‘sub’ prefix designat[es] a specific kind of creation distinct from God’s *ex nihilo* creation’ (2012: 6).² For Wolf, imaginary worlds exist on a continuum between the farthest reaches of ‘secondariness’ – science fiction and fantasy worlds, say – and worlds which are closer to the constitutive dimensions of ‘reality’ – such as historical drama, or genres and texts classed as ‘realistic.’ In a nutshell, all stories build imaginary worlds, but, following this line of thought, *some imaginary worlds are more imaginary than others*. Wolf’s examples include *Dune*, *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, George R.R. Martin’s Westeros, Robert E. Howard’s

Hyborian Age, Tolkien's 'First, Second or Third ages,' Edgar Rice Burroughs' city of Ashair, and many more besides. All are considered legitimate imaginary worlds.

On the other hand, Wolf notes that 'many fictional cities are less isolated in "secondariness":

Stephen King's Castle Rock, John Updike's Eastwick, and Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon, for example, are much closer to towns of the Primary World, both geographically and conceptually, and arguably far less 'secondary' than the other examples mentioned above. *Only a more inclusive definition of secondary world would include them*, and then only because their authors have set multiple stories in them and developed them to a greater degree than most fictional towns or cities [...] As secondariness is a matter of degree, it may be more useful to arrange fictional worlds along a spectrum of attachment to, or reliance on, the Primary World (as we know it) and its defaults (2012: 26-27, our italics).

Although in principle Wolf recognises that fictional worldbuilding exists on a spectrum and does not completely rule out other narratives, we reject the premise of 'secondariness' as a kind of Suvinian 'cognitive estrangement', in favour of the 'more inclusive' study of worldbuilding that Wolf seems to dismiss.

To touch on the Primary World model for a moment, it seems to us that this is an essentialist paradigm, as if 'reality' is a concrete manifestation that we all share and inhabit. As many social constructionists have argued, there might well be an 'objective' reality as a single world 'in respect of basic axes of time and space' (Giddens, 1991: 5), but 'we', as in the human species, do not have access to it because we are 'born into language,' as Jacques Lacan would have it (Storey, 2008: 103). We obviously agree on a great deal of things, but, at the same time, a unitary 'world' is 'one which creates new forms of fragmentation and dispersal' (Giddens, 1991: 5). Hence, the so-called 'primary world' is nothing of the sort. What we experience as 'reality' – and we cannot go into this philosophical debate beyond the rudimentary – is a 'symbolic organization of the Real,' 'an intersubjective network of meanings,' as opposed to an objective ontological system shared by all. As Storey explains, 'once we enter language, the completeness of the Real is gone forever' (2008: 103).

If we each have different experiences, beliefs and world-versions with which we 'see' reality, then there is 'no primary real world which we subsequently subject to various forms of representation' (Andrews, 1984: 38). Moving from Wolf's monistic unitary world and towards Nelson Goodman's pluralistic account in *Ways of Worldmaking*: each of us makes 'the world' from the flotsam and jetsam of everyday life; from available data; frames of reference; from the social, the cultural and the ideological; from much more besides. There are many different 'world-versions' (or versions of the world). As Goodman claims: 'We are not speaking in terms of multiple possible alternatives to a single actual world but of multiple actual worlds. How to interpret such terms as "real", "unreal", "fictive",' and

“possible” is a subsequent question’ (1978: 2). From such a perspective, then, the ‘primary world’ fragments and fractures into a ‘multiplicity of worlds’ (ibid).

Equally, while the distinction between ‘fictional’ and ‘non-fictional’ worlds would be easy to take for granted, several of our articles here show that line to be far more nuanced. Audiences, after all, routinely use fiction to make sense of the world they actually live in, and – as demonstrated by the other themed section in this issue of *Participations* (on ‘live cinema’) – there are countless examples of storytelling where the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction are incredibly difficult to discern. It is clear, then, that when it comes to navigating or ‘using’ imaginary worlds, textual/ narrative analyses can only take us so far. They can certainly help to develop blueprints and frameworks that are also candidates for ethnographic testing, but their conclusions are frequently challenged by the heterogeneous behaviours, activities and responses of actual audiences. This brings us to our third, and probably most important point.

Intervention 3: Explore worldbuilding in the context of real audiences

For all of their strengths, both Saler and Wolf’s books emphasize the behaviours of fans by constructing *an imaginary audience of imaginary worlds*. Generalisations and assumptions abound in both works. Our central goal was therefore to test existing theorizations about worldbuilding against studies of real audiences and fan cultures. What exactly is the relationship between what Saler calls ‘geographies of the imagination’ (2012: 4) and those who actually engage with them?

As Jenkins remarks in relation to transmedia storytelling, ‘the [fictional] world is bigger than the film, bigger even than the franchise – since fan speculations and elaborations also expand the world in a variety of directions’ (2006: 116). In other words, imaginary worlds are at least partly the product of audience engagement, and so it would be remiss to exclude those engagements from our studies. Following Martin Barker, we contend that studying one side of the dialogic relationship between text/audience ‘would be like listening to one end of a telephone conversation without thinking about the other person’s part’ (1989: 261). Like the falling tree in the empty forest, imaginary worlds do not exist ‘somewhere out there’ in the multifarious texts of culture, but in the relay between author and audience, within the imaginations of readers, viewers, players, and participants.

How, precisely, do audiences explore imaginary worlds, and in what ways do people ‘use’ imaginary worlds in their everyday lives? How can we begin to develop methodological instruments to capture the way in which, not only fans, but audiences, regularly visit and explore the vistas and visions of imaginary fiction? Generally, what do they get out of it? These are the questions we had in mind when we drafted our call for papers. Just what would we get? Would it be all science fiction and fantasy?

Overview of the themed section

We were impressed and buoyed by the range of proposals that were submitted. Of course, we did receive proposals for articles on audiences of *Game of Thrones*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Terry Pratchett's Discworld, Frank L. Baum's Land of Oz and *Star Wars*. That was to be expected and welcomed, if only to test the claims made by others. Yet, in the main, the proposals were fascinatingly diverse in terms of focus. So, we may have the *Lord of the Rings* films represented – and as one of the most successful and critically acclaimed franchises of all time, why not? – but in this case **Daniel White** provides an analysis of the ways in which different audiences feel able to inhabit Middle-Earth through Howard Shore's music. Similarly, **Casey McCormick's** article on *Fringe* and **Carmen Spanó's** piece on *Game of Thrones* approach their respective fantasy worlds through a discussion of how audiences respond to and navigate diegetic complexity, with both sets of viewers ultimately playing important roles in linking multiple texts and storylines together.

We were also pleased to be able to feature articles by **Evelyn O'Malley** (on outdoor performances of Shakespeare), **Gill Jamieson and Ann McVitie** (on immersive fandom at the Noir City film festival), and **Craig Norris** (on yaoi fandom and media tourism). These pieces are not only noteworthy for moving beyond the usual definitions of fantasy and science fiction texts, but all three provide fascinating examples of the ways in which 'imaginary worlds' bleed into, overlap with and intertwine with 'real-world' locations. While we did not explicitly set out to explore historical approaches to world-building when planning this project, the standard of proposals we received in this area really intrigued us. As such, we are delighted to be able to include articles by **Fabrice Lyczba** (on 'sandbox spectatorship' and 1930s film serials) and **Nancy Reagin** (on German fans of the American West throughout the Twentieth Century). Both persuasively demonstrate that audience explorations of imaginary worlds significantly pre-date the era of convergence and participatory culture, with Reagin's even showing how this functioned transnationally and transmedially. The section also features an interview between academic **Dan Hassler-Forest** and **Steve Coulson**, Creative Director of Campfire – a Toronto-based company specialising in participatory storytelling. Finally, the section concludes with two book reviews. The first is **Martin Barker's** review of **Mark J.P. Wolf's** *Building Imaginary Worlds*, which also features a follow-up response from Wolf, who addresses and rebuts some of Barker's concerns. Last, but by no means least, we have **Bethan Jones's** advance review of **Dan Hassler-Forest's** forthcoming book *Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Politics: Transmedia World-Building Beyond Capitalism*.

As proud as we are with the work featured in this section, we have no desire to be the final word on this topic. On the contrary, we call for scholars of imaginary worlds – especially those working in related areas such as transmedia studies – to make a more concerted effort to integrate studies of audiences into their analyses of multi-platform storytelling. If 'we're all geeks now,' as Saler attests (2012: 3), then engaging with imaginary worlds is fundamental to our engagement with popular culture, and accordingly, the range of worlds we are studying needs to expand swiftly. If, on the other hand, audiences are still

extremely fragmented and unpredictable in their choices of (and responses to) imaginary worlds, then we need to adapt our research methods to allow us to capture this diversity as it spreads across texts, media and genres. Either way, there is plenty of work to be done.

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Richard McCulloch is Lecturer in Film and Cultural Studies at the University of Huddersfield, UK. His research focuses on film audiences and reception, with a particular emphasis on topics such as fandom, taste, and cultural value. He is currently working on three book projects, including a monograph on the Pixar animation brand, and edited collections (with William Proctor) entitled *The Scandinavian Invasion: The Nordic Noir Phenomenon and Beyond* (Peter Lang), and the two-volume *Disney's Star Wars* (University of Iowa Press). Richard is Co-Director of The World Star Wars Project, and he is on the board of the Fan Studies Network. Contact: r.mcculloch@hud.ac.uk.

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Notes:

¹ As a method of worldbuilding, the transmedia model has influenced an armada of publications in the last decade or so, including:

(a) Manuals specifically catering towards wannabe transmedia creators working in the media industries. See, for example: *A Creator's Guide to Transmedia Storytelling: How to Captivate and Engage Audiences Across Multiple Platforms* (Phillips, 2012), *Transmedia 2.0: How to Create an Entertainment Brand Using a Transmedial Approach to Storytelling* (Bernardo, 2014), *Transmedia: One Story – Many Media* (Dowd, 2015), and *Getting Started in Transmedia Storytelling: A Practical Guide for Beginners* (Pratten, 2015).

(b) 'How to' guides to devising fictional worlds, often produced by successful (science fiction and fantasy) authors and aimed largely at non-professional writers. For written examples, see: Jeff Vandermeer's *Wonderbook: The Illustrated Guide to Creating Imaginative Fiction* (2013); Mark Rosenfelder's *The Planet Construction Kit* (2010); Orson Scott Card's *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy* (2005); Adam Roberts' *Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy: Create Fantastic Worlds and Stories* (2014); Matthew Wayne Zelznick's *Worldbuilding for Writers, Gamers and Other Creators* (2013); Jamie Buckley's *Worldbuilding Basics* (2014) and *Advanced Worldbuilding* (2014); Sarah Klein's *Eight Day Genesis: A Worldbuilding Codex for Writers and Creators* (2012) ('you want to make a fictional world? Twenty authors want to help!'); and an anthology of essays by gaming designers, *The Kobald Guide to Worldbuilding* (2012).

For online sources, see, for example: Simon Provenchar's 'Worldbuilder' blog (worldbuildingblog.com), which promises to 'provide you with the tools and means to create your

own fictional setting, as well as promote the sharing of ideas and literature associated with worldbuilding'; On *Reddit*, an entire subreddit invites 'geeks and nerds, artists, writers, philosophers, politicians and scientists alike' to '[share] your worlds and [discuss] the many aspects of creating new universes' (<https://www.reddit.com/r/worldbuilding>); And on YouTube, a series of lectures on worldbuilding, created by popular fantasy novelist Brandon Sanderson, are available (<https://www.youtube.com/user/BrandSanderson>), as well as a cornucopia of other instructional videos.

(c) So much academic literature examining the multifarious ways in which the media landscape is responding and adapting to new modes of convergence and transmediation, that we may be said to be in the midst of a 'transmedia turn' (Fast and Örnebring, 2015). See, for example: *Transmedia Television: Audiences, New Media and Daily Life* (Evans, 2013), *Transmedia Television: New Trends in Network Television Production* (Clarke, 2013), *Transmedia Archeology: Storytelling in the Borderlines of Science Fiction, Comic Books and Pulp Magazines* (Scolari, Bertetti and Freeman, 2014), *Fantastic Transmedia: Narrative, Play and Memory Across Science Fiction and Fantasy Storyworlds* (Harvey, 2015), *Science Fiction, Fantasy and Politics: Transmedia Worldbuilding Beyond Capitalism* (Hassler-Forest, 2016), collected editions, *Storyworlds Across Media: Towards a Media-Conscious Narratology* (Ryan and Thon, 2014) and *Storytelling in the Age of Media Convergence: Exploring Screen Narratives* (Pearson and Smith, 2015).

² That God is the 'author' – the literal 'author-God' – of the Primary World is addressed in Martin Barker's review of *Building Imaginary Worlds* in this Themed-Section of *Participations*.