

Essay Two: Creativity in World-Building

Jason Phillips

TCOM 610

11-14-16

## INTRODUCTION

During the heyday of soap operas it was not unheard of for characters from one soap opera to cross over and appear on another soap opera (assuming both were on the same network, of course). As such, viewers came to understand that the two shows were interconnected. Viewers came to realize that characters from several shows existed in the same reality. In this way, a media form that is decidedly obsolete today was engaging in early forms of two related trends in contemporary media: Transmedia storytelling and world-building. Jenkins defines transmedia storytelling as a process where important elements of a fictional narrative get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels and, in doing so, a unified and coordinated entertainment experience is created (Jenkins, 2006). Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story. Jenkins also notes that the outcome of transmedia storytelling is the development of deep, complex fictional contexts that can contain multiple interrelated characters and their various stories. This process of building a shared fictional universe can lead creators to approach their work from an encyclopedic approach (Jenkins, 2010).

Two elements of Jenkins's foundational conception of transmedia storytelling and world-building seem to be of particular interest to thinking about creativity. First, he uses the word "process" in his definition of transmedia storytelling. This implies the need for more than ideas or even technical or artistic skill. Transmedia storytelling requires a particular approach grounded more heavily, or at least more intensely, in a creative process. Further, Jenkins specifies a particular impulse that creators need to engage in world-building: An encyclopedic approach. This suggests a broader and deeper creative agenda and to-do-list than we might normally consider.

Transmedia storytelling and world-building, then, require unique creative approaches and skills. This essay will explore some of the creative processes and structures necessary for fictional world-building, discuss particular examples, and examine the recent evolution of fictional world-building to outline the elements necessary for effective fictional world-building.

### **CREATIVE ISSUES IN TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING AND WORLD-BUILDING**

For a form of storytelling that has gained much traction in the past several years, there is a bit of a lack of literature on world-building in particular. What research there is often gets subsumed into the broader topic of transmedia storytelling. That's natural. But one isn't necessary for understanding the other. Early research suggests four key components creators must consider: collective creativity, managing an overarching vision, additive comprehension, and creating entry points. Each of these has unique creative challenges. Both transmedia storytelling and world-building begin as decidedly collaborative creative experiences. Jenkins (2006) argues that collective intelligence is the best way to approach such storytelling. Creators each focus on their particular medium of expertise in terms of practice. Or they each create and contribute different pieces to the overall puzzle (such as the variety of writers and directors who have contributed to Marvel films and television series). But they must also be mindful of, and contribute to, a larger vision and a fuller story experience with multiple nodes.

This complex creative process often requires a kind of creative executive to manage the entire project. The term creative executive is not a formal one but it helps to conceptualize a specific and important role in the transmedia creative process. This person performs executive and managerial duties and must have those kinds of skills, but they must use those skills to further specifically creative (as opposed to business, marketing, or legal) agendas. The best practical example of this may be Joe Quesada's status as Chief Creative Officer at Marvel. Quesada is an

artist by trade and has contributed to the creation of several popular comic books characters (Glaser, 2011). So he is a creative professional and has spent his life in such work. But his current job is executive in nature. He is responsible for ensuring that the portrayals of Marvel's characters and stories in all platforms, including on film and television, remain faithful to source material or audience expectations (Dittmer, 2012). This includes playing a role in script and story development of nearly all projects under the Marvel banner. So Queseda performs executive duties but focuses them toward managing creativity. This seems to be a new, or at least evolved, type of creative professional. And, indeed, one can logically argue that this kind of top-down management (however seemingly inartistic in terms of the mythology of the artist) accounts for why Marvel has successfully launched and maintained a shared fictional universe while DC (which lacks an equivalent to Queseda) has struggled with its efforts at world-building .

Beyond the organizational and structural issues at play with understanding collective intelligence and executive creativity as they relate to transmedia storytelling, building a fictional universe also includes two unique narrative and creative problems: additive comprehension and creating appropriate entry points. Additive comprehension is defined as adding new texts with new pieces of information that forces audiences to revise their understanding of the text as a whole (Jenkins, 2010). Along with this, creators of these kinds of stories face the problem of when, and how, to install entry points for new audience members (Scolari, 2009). How and when can they pick up the story without having prior knowledge? The creative problems posed here can perhaps be summed up as the *X-Files* or *Lost* problem. These stories arguably found themselves burdened by their own complex mythologies and suffered from an inability to attract new audience members because such a depth of knowledge was needed to understand any given episode.

Scolari (2013) examines how *Lost* attempted to use expansion and compression strategies to ameliorate this problem (with differing degrees of success). Compression strategies involved efforts to sum up, restate, or summarize key events or plot points within the narrative in order to catch an audience up as a precursor to a looming narrative or temporal expansion. The process involved finding creative ways to re-integrate previous material without it bogging down a story or seeming like an information dump and then using that as a jumping off point for a further elaboration of the narrative. So, it's a forward moving process. A kind of catch up, stop, then move forward process.

For as much criticism as *Lost* and shows like it get for having too much going on, those expansion and compression strategies seem to have worked. The show was, after all, quite successful. I would argue, though, for considering a kind of reverse approach to additive comprehension and creating entry points. Admittedly, I'm drawing on a limited set of personal experiences but I have found it helpful to cull elements from a pre-existing larger narrative and present them in a more stand-alone fashion that hints at larger contours. I have been involved in two productions to date of material that was drawn from a larger fictional universe I've constructed over the years. But the stories I pursued production on were presented as stand-alone experiences. But within them, there were residual elements of larger stories lurking under the surface. I found those contours provided an added layer of richness to the experience. "Big" stories that were not at all elaborated (or intended to be) served to enrich a smaller story. This is the reverse of how such problems of adding details and allowing audiences to access the narrative tend to be handled. But I have found something of value in the reverse approach.

## TAKING FICTION BEYOND FICTION

The elements of world-building discussed in the previous section deal with some organizational and mechanical issues related to the creative process of world-building in transmedia storytelling. But one of the more interesting aspects of this form of narrative is how it has the potential to expand into forms and media previously unused in fictional storytelling. Indeed, these forms and media can even move into non-fictional mediums and even bleed over into real life. Jenkins anticipates this possibility when he discusses the capacity for audiences to enact these kinds of stories through performative aspects of real life (2006). But Jenkins's examples tend to remain at the level of children playing with action figures, or cosplay, or fan fiction. And while these are interesting examples, they do not capture the full creative potential for blurring real life and fiction.

Those interested in viral and social marketing have examined, to some extent, how guerilla marketing principles can meld the "real" and the "fictional" (Cochoy, 2014) or how consumer experiences are enhanced when they engage with stories or interactive texts (Qualman, 2009). Even in these examples, there is the implication that audiences and consumers become part of the creative process. And, of course, this establishes a model of a creative process where authors, producers, and "professional" creators are not in total control of the narrative.

But such endeavors have tended to be the domain of marketing, promotion, or advertising. Lance alters the terrain and ups the ante significantly when he discusses the creative and production processes behind the *Flickerman* audio drama project. Lance demonstrates how *Flickerman* expands the concept of transmedia storytelling and world-building beyond traditional textual means by incorporating such diverse forms as social media profiles, Flickr photo albums, and even GPS coordinates on Google maps designed to cue audiences to setting (Lance, 2014).

Flickerman provides a model for ways in which creativity can be augmented by, and demonstrated through, social media and other (often non-narrative in design) digital platforms to construct a story where reality and fiction blur and where audience members become active creators of content. Creativity, then, becomes a collaborative, lived, open-source process in such a conception. The creative process also evolves in this model to include an understanding of tools not normally a part of a creator's toolkit. Creators must not so much reflect the "real" world but figure out how to use the real world as a narrative and creative device.

Lance extends the idea that world-building involves just what the term implies: Constructing a universe for a narrative. As such, creativity becomes about a set of issues beyond story or characterization. It becomes a process that is perhaps best thought of as simulating a narrative environment or context that is populated with elements beyond plot and characters. Johnson (2009) examines the ways in which the television series *Lost* introduces fictional institutions into its narrative (such as the Dharma initiative) to create the sense of a distinct universe with its own reality. Indeed, *Lost* was using its fictional institutions to engage in the kinds of concepts Lance would further develop by having its fictional institutions bleed over into real life. For example, the fictional corporation that owned the airline that crashed in the show (Oceanic air) had a website complete with the kind of press and news material one would expect if such a horrific crash occurred in real life. There have also been examples of business cards from fictional organizations and institutions within the show being found in various places in the real world.

It is speculative to imagine what the creative process of coming up with this type of content and figuring out how to distribute it was like but one can reasonably imagine that it involved figuring out what type of content would seem legitimate, what kinds of real world settings could accommodate such content, and knowing when to apply traditional creative skills to creating the

content and when to bring in others from outside creating television to ensure accuracy and legitimacy.

But the show took it farther than just distributing produced artifacts to place the institutions from *Lost* within the real world. In a sometimes difficult to explain blurring of reality and fiction, the character of Rachel Blake was created to detail the transgressions of the show's fictional Hanso Corporation in a series of YouTube videos that offered no veneer of, or nod to, being fiction. Blake also regularly showed up and "harassed" the show's creators and stars at annual Comics Conventions for their presumably "fictional" portrayals of Hanso and other supposedly "real" corporations, institutions, and governmental organizations (Brooker, 2009).

It was, at the time, a stunning and jarring example of creators engaging with their own creations in a seemingly real way. And it suggests framing the creative process as a conversation between author and text. These fictional, scripted interactions between the Blake character (portrayed by actress Jamie Silberhatz) and the show's creative personnel served to make various elements populating *Lost's* fictional universe seem more real and, as Jenkins noted (2010), to increase the audience's investment in the show. From an ideological perspective, such an approach may seem to be simply an exercise in "meta" storytelling and creativity. And perhaps it is that to an extent. But in some ways it also exposes the way that the real world is itself simply a narrative that we all understand and internalize in some way.

### **CONCLUSION: SPECULATION ON HOW TO CREATE A WORLD**

The cases of *Flickerman*, *Lost*, the Marvel Universe, and various other fictional universes suggest that world-building and constructing fictional universes involves more than just creating stories and characters. It necessitates that creative professionals rethink organization, mechanics, what counts as textuality, and how to engage with audiences. It also means being able to create

more than stories. World-building involves creating an environment replete with institutions, social dynamics, and philosophy. It involves creating context in addition to creating texts. Based on the research presented here and some of my own informal experience, I will conclude the essay by offering some broad, general, and certainly incomplete thoughts on what types of institutions and dynamics must be accounted for and constructed in the creative processes of world-building.

First, there is the matter of history. A fictional world seems to need its own history (which can, and maybe should, diverge from “real” history). And this further suggests the need for historical figures (which, again, may or may not be real). Further, its created, fictional institutions should work to establish the political and social structure of the universe. Fictional universes also often seem to have their own particular religion or philosophy. That doesn’t necessarily mean a “new” or “fictional” religion. But, rather, this often takes the form of altered spins on real-life religions. A fictional universe also seems to need its own popular culture. This can be demonstrated through various means (such as popular music) but the way it’s done needs to link popular culture to the foundational identity of the universe. It should also present a popular culture that tells the story of the universe in much the same way real popular culture tells the story of the real world.

Beyond this cursory list of some narrative building-blocks needed for world-building, creators must think about using different platforms in the right way, making sure all the elements connect or converge even as they stand apart, and making sure that real life is reflected or engaged in some ways. Using social media as a storytelling device can be helpful in many of these creative endeavors. But, beyond that, the process of creating and crafting this content and its supporting

environment involves targeting the right kind of creative expertise and carefully assigning and managing roles and responsibilities.

This essay has attempted to discuss the evolution of transmedia storytelling and fictional world-building as both an academic field of study and as a creative endeavor. It involves a creative process that is uniquely collaborative yet individualistic. It also offers particular creative challenges related to integrating new material and absorbing new audiences. Further, creativity involves a different kind of relationship with the real world in this type of storytelling and involves being able to create context as much as text.

## WORKS CITED

- Brooker, W. (2009). Television out of time: Watching cult shows on download. In R. Pearson (Ed.), *Reading Lost: Perspectives on a hit television show* (pp. 51-72). New York: Tauris.
- Cochoy, F. (2014). *Myriam's 'adverteasing': On the performative power of marketing promises*. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 31(1), 123-140.
- Dittmer, J. (2012). Captain America in the news: Changing mediascapes and the appropriation of a superhero. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 3(2), 143-157.
- Glaser, B. (2011). Q+A: Joe Quesada. *Visual Arts Journal*, 19(2), 50-55.
- Jenkins, Henry (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York: New York University Press.
- Jenkins, H. (2010). Transmedia storytelling: An annotated syllabus. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 24(6), 943-958.
- Johnson, D. (2009). Fictional institutions in *Lost*: World building, reality and the economic Possibilities of narrative divergence. In R. Pearson (Ed.), *Reading Lost: Perspectives on a hit television show* (pp. 27-50). New York: Tauris.
- Lance, D. (2014). Only half the story: Radio drama, online audio and transmedia storytelling. *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media*, 12(2), 141-154.
- Scolari, C. (2009). Transmedia storytelling: Implicit consumers, narrative worlds, and branding in contemporary media production. *International Journal of Communication*, 3(1), 586-606.
- Scolari, C. (2013). Lostology: Transmedia storytelling and expansion/compression strategies. *Semiotica*, 195(1), 45-68.
- Qualman, E. (2009). *Socialnomics: How social media transforms the way we live and do business*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Publishing.

