

Foreword

Mark J.P Wolf,
Concordia University, Wisconsin, USA

The study of imaginary worlds is finally becoming a rapidly-growing field of study. Although authors like MacDonald, Tolkien, and Lewis were writing about imaginary worlds decades ago, only recently have worlds begun to receive the more widespread attention they deserve as a subject all their own. While many approaches in Media Studies look at the windows through which they are seen, and Narrative Studies looks at the stories occurring within them, worlds are more than merely a backdrop for narrative action. Many worlds are seen through a variety of media windows, and contain dozens or even hundreds or thousands of stories within them. They are places that audiences vicariously inhabit, and return to again and again. And, of course, continuing audience loyalty and return visits are just what franchise owners are hoping to achieve.

The nascent field of World-building Studies (or perhaps the more succinct and alliterative Subcreation Studies, to use Tolkien's useful term) is very interdisciplinary and still too new to divide up into approaches or schools of thought, but it is evident that much of the work in it is mainly analyses of particular worlds, and occasionally more broad theoretical work about the structures and experiences commonly found in worlds. With the convergence of a number of approaches, however, it seems that we are entering into a very fruitful time for world-building studies, one that includes a growing number of conferences, books, essays, and discussions. How worlds appear in multiple media and how narratives interact with them and within them are all highly productive veins to mine, and a number of topics that extend beyond discussions of media and narrative are beginning to receive more attention, such as world design, structure, and style, the role of background details and ancillary materials, the layering of world details, and the way meaning can be embedded in the changing of world defaults, just to name a few.

While there are many aspects of worlds and world-building to explore, probably the one most pertinent to *Participations* is the audience's reception of worlds, and the vicarious experiences, and participation, of visitors to imaginary worlds. This topic alone could be its own sub-field of study, and the uses to which worlds are put —such as entertainment, art, play, therapy, escape, satire, commentary, places to socialize in, social science experiments, thought experiments, exercises for the imagination, utopian speculations, dystopian

warnings, and just about any reason for which collaborative projects come into existence—are so diverse that reception theory, applied to worlds, will probably always find new things to say and investigate in regard to them. Although my focus in *Building Imaginary Worlds* and elsewhere is typically more on the worlds themselves, rather than how they are used, there certainly is much that has been written, and remains to be written, about their reception and use.¹

And that brings us to the essays that William Proctor and Richard McCulloch have selected for this special edition of *Participations* entitled ‘Exploring Imaginary Worlds: Audiences, Fan Cultures and Geographies of the Imagination’. Reading through the abstracts, I am eager to see read the essays and discover their findings, which demonstrate the wide range of approaches to such material. As they imply, participation in imaginary worlds runs quite a gamut, from that of merely reading about them or watching (or listening) to them, in the case of traditional media; to interacting with them, in the case of single-player video games; to establishing an on-going presence within them, as in MMORPGs or other persistent virtual worlds like *Second Life*, where players’ activities arguably constitute canonical events, since they are part of a shared world with a shared past; to helping to create them, whether as an employee hired to create canonical material (at varying levels of canon), or freely creating noncanonical materials for oneself and others. And, we might add, academic activity which analyzes worlds and discusses them, as the essays here do, constitutes another way to participate in worlds. While different in nature than fan fiction, which explores its themes and ideas in a different manner, academics can enjoy dissecting, analyzing, speculating upon, and reconstructing worlds or parts of them, for many of the same reasons, and often with much of the same pleasure.

Writing about fan fiction, then, can become a kind of meta-analysis; an analysis of how fans analyze the worlds they love through the way they choose play with them and add their own ideas to them. And even though the works created by fans are not canonical, they can influence the way those events are seen by others, just as academics’ writings can provide perspectives on them. For open worlds still being expanded by their makers, fan activity can help influence the future direction of a world, when makers pay attention to fan discussions and fora (some may even listen to what academics have to say about their worlds; or is that being too hopeful?). In any event, the study of worlds and their enjoyment and usage should keep Reception Studies busy for many years to come, and as worlds continue to advance in scale, size, and complexity, even the way they are experienced and studied will be constantly changing and developing. The one thing that will not change will be the gathering of communities based on shared passions which center on realms of imagination, and the collaborative effort to breathe life into those realms that they would otherwise not have had without an audience.

Biographical note:

Mark J. P. Wolf is Full Professor and Chair of the Communication Department at Concordia University Wisconsin. He has a B.A. (1990) in Film Production and an M.A. (1992) and Ph.D.

(1995) in Critical Studies from the School of Cinema/Television (now renamed the School of Cinematic Arts) at the University of Southern California. He has published widely on a range of topics and includes titles such as: *Abstracting Reality: Art, Communication, and Cognition in the Digital Age* (2000), *The Medium of the Video Game* (2001), *Virtual Morality: Morals, Ethics, and New Media* (2003), the two-volume *Encyclopaedia of Video Games: The Culture, Technology, and Art of Gaming* (2012), *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (2012), *LEGO Studies: Examining the Building Blocks of a Transmedial Phenomenon* (2014), and *Video Games Around the World* (2015), amongst other publications. He is also founder and coeditor of the Landmark Video Game book series from University of Michigan Press and the founder of the Video Game Studies Scholarly Interest Group within SCMS. Mark is on several editorial boards including those of *Games and Culture* and *The Journal of E-media Studies*. Contact: mark.wolf@cuw.edu.

Note:

¹ Admittedly, fan fiction has not been the focus of my writings on imaginary worlds, due to the fact that fan fiction is almost always noncanonical material, and therefore not officially part of a world; however, when it comes to the audience reception and use of a world, such material is obviously of great importance for research and central to the study of fandom. The status of fan fiction itself is rather interesting, as it intersects with such topics as intellectual property, fair use provisions, popular culture, and the public domain. There are, of course, a range of attitudes that one can take regarding fan fiction; on the positive side, it can be seen as love letters to the franchises in question, which are so much a part of people's lives that they want to participate in the creation of the worlds they love; thus a world becomes a shared culture among the fans and participants, and an enduring part of popular culture (for example, one finds *Star Wars* references all over). On the other hand, one might even go so far as to suggest that fan fiction is very derivative in nature; that rather than applying their creativity to developing their own characters, locations, and franchises, fans use pre-made characters which are already developed in order to get their own works noticed and read by others, without putting in the effort to create something original from scratch (those that *do* add much new material to an already-existing world raise the question even more, why not create your own?). And there are many stances in between. In any event, it is an interesting case of world-building as a way of experiencing or taking part in a world made by someone else.