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No limits? Multiverses, alternate universes and the media franchises

It is no coincidence that the biggest franchises today (*Harry Potter*, *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *Marvel* etc.) all pertain to fantastic genres: their specific narratives, namely their ancient uses of “other worlds”, provide a perfect ground for media expansions — fictional spaces and times in which to locate stories and games. Thus, they pretend to be “worlds” in a double sense – because they are made of so many media texts that we have to apprehend them out of any precise given form (they are not just a film or a series of films, a game or a series of games, a novel or a series of novels), but as something *more* than that: the fictional world, inasmuch as it is a product of the transmedial worldbuilding process, transcends its various instalments. Of course, we must think of it as a world in a different sense also, because those constructions embed such cosmogonic issues into their narratives, telling us about other worlds, one or many, as taking us to explore those worlds is the very reason for their expansion as media texts. Both sides of this “use of worlds” work together and strengthen each other, producing a very powerful result, some of the most popular settings and narratives of media culture today (see Besson, 2015). Celebrating “*the connectedness of things*” (MacCarthy, 233; emphasis in the original) and the powers of imagination, they may be seen as the ultimate fictions of our time, when the Internet age meets the collective desire for opening new possible ways of doing and thinking.

This paper will focus on the stories that take place in those universes, and question their potential limits: is there something like a “threshold of worlds”, a *maximum*, a *higher limit*? How many stories can we tell, *how long will it hold*, those are the narratology problems illuminated in the following discussion. A double drive has to be identified first in order to describe the relations between stories and worlds, from the production *and* reception points of view, that tend to blend on those matters. *Expansion* and *unification*

are the opposite and complementary drives motivating what can be analyzed as the “universe strategy for telling stories”¹. If we use the cosmic metaphor that always seems to pop up when one works on those matters, the image of worlds, or the simple word of “world” work as a *gravity force*: it aggregates around otherwise loosely connected items; its orbit can attract many satellites. But such a centrifugal power is only needed if and when centripetal forces are exerting themselves; hence the “worlds” or “universes” of such-and-such character, *Xenaverse* or *Buffyverse* for instance (for the TV shows *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Xena Warrior Princess*²). They appear only when needed: when a center of unity has to be opposed to more and more pressing forces, expansive forces, working the other way. In those two examples, the coining of “*Buffyverse*” and “*Xenaverse*”, portemanteau words blending the first name of the main character and the noun “universe”, clearly shows a need to regain control on a narrative whose complexity has reached a critical size, for the double related reasons first pointed to: many (too many) related works to keep together (different TV shows, spin-offs, comics, novelisations) and the narrative slope that goes with *and* allows such expansions – a Mouth of Hell opening under a small town, creatures and gods constantly visiting and altering the geography and chronology of the fantasy world of Xena in her “legendary journey”.

Universe here is the name for an operation, a gathering of fictional data into a common index or repertory – a guide, typically, or a wiki (see Berthoux). That is to say that the constitution of such worlds is part of the reception history of the fictions: they can only be constituted after some time, as a re-seizing of an already long story between consumers and a set of related works; they can be official, “canons” given in an encyclopedic form³, or most likely and more often today, community-driven works of fans trying to collect and gather as much intel as possible on the characters and stories they like; but, and this is the last feature of this kind of use of the “universe” device, the intel in question is now given in a non-narrative form, each one being taken and isolated from the others, in an encyclopedic structure, in order to be more easily accessible. This

¹ On the overall relation between medias, stories and worlds, see Ryan, 2001, 2010, 2016.

² *Buffy*, 1997-2003, The WB/UPN; *Xena*, 1995-2001, syndication.

³ See the title of Robert Weisbrot’s *Xena Warrior Princess: The Official Guide to the Xenaverse*, supposedly the first appearance of the name.

first “world-type” of media franchise — consumer-made, reorganizing the proliferation of a narrative into a more structured, mock-documentary form — already provides hints on the limits a tale can reach in its reception process: a need for sharing, assembling the knowledge and memories, and an urge to give them another form that will *help* the community to cope with an ever-growing complexity.

But if the fictional world works as such a unifying strategy, it also, conversely, in a way *allows* for more and more expansion, and the term “universe” can also be an excellent excuse for adding new tales and versions: since we stay in the same “universe”, not only will people recognize names, settings and tropes, but as we just noted, they will spontaneously provide collective intelligence for holding it together—so where are the limits? Popular media contents are often referred to as “shared universes” or “expanded universes”, the emphasis being put, in the first expression, more on appropriation by active consumers, and more on the production process in the second one. It is a pretty complex matter, but to put it in a nutshell, *Star Trek* is to be considered a shared universe and *Star Wars* an expanded one (Besson, 2015, section “Partagés, étendus... Formes des mondes” 74-112), because of the relative role and importance given to fans by each franchise. The world here is a *practical tool for creative teams, a way to promise more stories*: it is the famous line from Henry Jenkins saying that “[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.” (Jenkins, 2006, 114). And quoting an Hollywood screenwriter stating that

when he started, you would pitch a story because without a good story, you really didn’t have a film. Later, once sequels started to take off, you pitched a character because a good character could support multiple stories. And now, you pitch a world because a world can support multiple characters and multiple stories across multiple media. (Jenkins, 2006, 114).

You don’t have to do it all over again each time, you can rely on something already familiar to audiences, this sense of familiarity that has always been essential to popular narrative fiction and has been at the core of seriality itself (see Letourneux, §3-4). The “world” promises only *more* of it, because it is theoretically vast enough to support

multiple instalments with the big bonus that they will appear only mildly affected by “continuity” issues. But it is, again, a question of quantity, of limits, that are always tested and pushed back, but sometimes hit the wall.

The two types of worlds we have distinguished are two ways of facing storytelling difficulties: it’s hard to keep in mind everything that happens, the way it happens and the order in which it happens, hence the community-based Wiki-worlds. But it is also hard to find what to tell that has not been told before (that is not such a big problem, you can always repeat) and, more importantly, what to tell that will not contradict what has already been told. Hence, the use and abuse of certain solutions by producers of media contents: retcon, prequels, reboots, alternate timelines (see Ryan, 2017, §17). We will quickly explore those avenues and give examples of what is or what is not considered acceptable in cultural circles (fan communities) that are at once highly tolerant and easily upset: in some ways, it’s easy to please the fans by giving them what they want (more ways to connect themselves with what they love), and equally easy to get them angry, as soon as the new interventions are perceived as tampering with the object of love. It is thus easy to produce toys and other tie-in objects, which provide ways, for adults as for kids, to extend the pleasure of a fiction by literally *handling* it; but it appears much more trying to produce new stories, even though they are necessary if you want to reach new audiences, or just produce new toys. The recent developments of the *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* franchises provide fruitful examples of that goal and the challenges it faces. *Star Wars*, now owned by Disney, has explored two different paths to connect successfully with a new audience: a sequel very close to a remake (*Star Wars 7: The Force Awakens*, J.J. Abrams, 2015), then a prequel (*Rogue One*, Gareth Edwards, 2016) with an interesting subtitle: “A Star Wars Story”, one among many potential other stories... In a similar fashion, *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* (Rowling et al., 2016) was badly perceived for being the eighth volume fans didn’t ask for, when *Fantastic Beasts* (David Yates, 2016) represents a try for a fresh start: a new era and a new trademark, the “wizarding world of J.K. Rowling”.

Among the solutions to worldbuilding narrative issue, retcon, retroactive continuity, is a way to erase a narrative past now considered as “misguided”. If you don’t want your storyline to go this way anymore (which means you *have* a storyline, it’s not

compulsory), you can decide that up to a point, it was just a dream (famous *Dallas* retcon: Bobby was not dead⁴), or it was a misunderstanding, something believed to be true at this point, but that we now know to have been a fiction, illusion or lie – the second part of the *Hyperion Cantos* by Dan Simmons (it was the way the Poet told the story, it was not the real truth). It can be hard to swallow, and one can't obviously do that too often, but the idea of “it was all happening in the head of (any given character)” is nonetheless a line of thought pretty common in fans' hermeneutics. As a consequence, screenwriters that can experiment variations because they deal with long-time seriality like to play with it, in TV shows typically (see Hatchuel). Buffy or Hurley (from *Lost*) are both seen as patients of mental asylums, just for an episode⁵, but the possibility then stays open, and so everything we know about them could be rewritten as mere hallucinations. The last episode of *St. Elsewhere* (NBC, 1982-1988) suggested the entire seven seasons were just the product of the fertile mind of an autistic kid (Saint-Gelais, 2011, 417).

Reboots are retcon from the start: erase everything and start anew, a bit like a remake, but with more freedom in the process. Comics, and the superheroes franchises are well known for doing that a lot. The comics companies have wanted to promote their catalogue as “universes” (Marvel Universe, DCU) early on, which implies establishing and then protecting a certain form of minimal continuity; but there are so many comic books, so many heroes, so many writers, that the ambition was quickly challenged: not only was each hero entitled his own version of Earth, but furthermore, facing a constant impending threat of narrative saturation, because their possible scenarios are so clearly limited, comics constantly reinvented themselves in new worlds, so that their shared universes became multiverses of an incredible complexity.

DC was having a hard time telling and selling stories in that context, so the studio chose a complete reboot in 2011 : it was called “The New 52” because there were 52 worlds in DC Universe... but only since the 52 series, back in 2006: five years before! Such examples of “fast reboots” multiplied in the recent years : the story of Spiderman, made a new come-back in 2017 (Spiderman: Homecoming, Jon Watts), but it has also been retold in a series of films since 2012, five years after the end of the previous trilogy in

⁴ “Blast from the Past”, season 9, episode 31, 16th of May 1986, CBS.

⁵ *Buffy*, “Normal again”, season 6, episode 17, 12th of March 2002, UPN. *Lost*, “Dave”, season 2, episode 18, 5th of April 2006, ABC.

20076... Superman, for his part came back from the 80's, in a new costume, for Man of Steel (Zack Snyder) in 2013 (if one agrees to forget the Superman Returns of 2005...). In each case, those reboots are supposed to portray the “origin story” of the hero, and thus converge with the “prequel” logic. Prequels provide another way to escape a story too well known, and the consequences it has on any future of the narrative, by going back into the past, as far as needed. But they are bound to come back to what is already known, even through pretty creative ways; even more freedom can be found in alternate timelines, or how to tell the *same* story *differently* while preserving the connections with previous versions (no contradictions to fear, no continuity breach).

It was the option chosen by the gifted J.J. Abrams for his first instalment of the new *Star Trek* film franchise, in 2009. The movie recounts the youth of the heroes and how they met, but it is another version of the story we know (Kirk, being an orphan, is more a rebel than a good guy). The whole scenario explains how and why this divergence happened; so, there is a necessary leeway, escaping a very tight continuity, and at the same time authorizes the interventions of the heroes’ “other selves” (namely Leonard Nimoy, the historical Spock, guest starring in the movie, where he visits the new young version of his old friend) – a little too bright to be honest, maybe, but deeply satisfying altogether. Alternate Universes pose a potential threat though and must be handled with care – too many disruptions, too many versions, and the centrifugal force of “the universe” may not be strong enough to resist the pressure. A well-known and well-liked narrative must be respected, it is essential to fan communities: not everything can be done. But, the fact has to be stressed, it is more and more done: the uses are quickly evolving, the habits changing, the importance of fan fictions being one of the key factors to explain that (see François). Even if they have no direct impact on “canons”, official universes and storylines, their weight, their number, their new visibility, considerably expand what is considered legitimate to do with any given fiction. Each one of them is an alternate universe, the exploration of a “what if”, an “happentrack” to use the word coined by the English novelist Michael Coney for his own alternate Arthurian legend (see Besson-Langlet, 163, 170).

⁶ First trilogy by Sam Raimi, *Spider-Man* 1, 2 and 3 (2002, 2004, 2007), featuring Tobey Maguire and Kirsten Dunst. Two films by Mark Webb, *The Amazing Spider-Man* 1 and 2 (2012, 2014), featuring Andrew Garfield and Emma Stone.

All in all, a lot of radical options have been tested to make room for new episodes in fictional universes already very rich and dense, combining good old stories with necessary renewal. The question is always the same: what keeps it together?, and the answer is interesting because not much is in fact required. Storyline continuity appears easy to disregard, and may not even be a relevant criterium when it comes to game universes, born of the very fragmented data provided for instance by a card game, such as *Magic: the Gathering*⁷, or by an ensemble of games and minimal stories reflecting them, as in Japanese mediamixes, Pokémon, Yu-Gi-Oh and such (see Ito, 86). Of course, comparatively small and controlled universes give more food for thought when analysed: that's why *The Matrix*, built from scratch and well thought by the Wachowskis, still stands out as *the* transmedia project in every critical text. What can be said in a synthetic narrative way about Marvel Common Universe for instance, and even more so about Pokémon, is inevitably so poor and contrived at the same time as it is just irrelevant. But that's only one way of looking at it: thousands of wikipages, websites and forum posts are dedicated to doing just that, and it obviously works. An economic reality, a group of texts produced by the same vast entity for Marvel, a succession of instalments, always expanding, as in the case of Pokémon, are narrativized, translated into a world, a fictional setting above and encompassing all the individual stories, explaining the coming and going of creatures, the game mechanisms, in terms of generations and cosmic mythos. Connections, links, that are also the essence of the Web itself, of the navigation/surfing process, are constantly being created, discussed, refined. The "stitching drive of the fandom", as Richard Saint-Gelais calls it ("pulsion suturante qui anime le fanon", 413), is at work on any hole or inconsistency: if Klingons look different, it cannot be just because of a change in the latex prosthesis area (412), if the scar of Watson changes place (464), it is not just the result of a lack of attention. Those are two real and well-known examples of creative (or delirious) fan interpretation, of the way it manages to take back into fiction and explain within narrative the very details one will tend to overlook or, worse, use to challenge the sacred premise of fictional cohesion.

⁷ Wizards of the Coast "don't sell cards, it sells a universe where you can play cards" ("la société [Wizards of the Coast] ne vend pas des cartes, elle vend un univers qui permet de jouer aux cartes" (Brogère, 380, the author's own translation from French).

The questions that have been appearing on and on through this paper can and should be interpreted from a cognitive or anthropological perspective that broadens their impact and gives them their true meaning. Let's just indicate very quickly how to conclude. Do we still need narratives to give the world its shape and order, which is what narratology traditionally tells us is the use of stories (Kermode, Ricoeur) or is it not the world (or worlds) instead that now comes first, providing grounds for new, alternate, narratives? It would mean storytelling's long abuses ("alternate facts", "post-truth") have seriously altered our collective trust on the shaping force of tales – how they can change the world, the real one, that never changes, or just for the worst. But the proliferation of alternative realities as new settings could well be an attempt to rebuild that trust by celebrating the power of tales so full of wonders they can create entire worlds, and the power of interpretative communities, artful enough to hold those worlds together by tirelessly drawing connections between their otherwise dismantled parts. No more big narratives, and deep troubles with reality, but expansive fictional worlds to experiment what can still be done to master the "infosphere", the informational environment that now surrounds us and that our narrative minds seem unable to fully grasp.

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