A Proposal for

Subcreation: Building Imaginary Worlds

Mark J. P. Wolf
Communication Department
Concordia University Wisconsin
12800 North Lake Shore Drive
Mequon, WI  53097
mark.wolf@cuw.edu
(262) 243-4262

PROSPECTUS

Originally coined by J. R. R. Tolkien, the term “subcreation” is used to distinguish human creation from God’s ex nihilo creation, indicating its reliance on the latter through the “sub” designation (literally “creating under”). “Subcreation” also refers both to the process and product of world-building, while avoiding philosophically slippery terminology like “real” and “imaginary”, which tend to be seen as mutually exclusive domains. Tolkien’s work built on the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and George MacDonald, and this book builds on all these author’s work, as well as later authors like Lin Carter, Thomas Pavel, Lubomir Doležel, Marie-Laure Ryan, and others who have paved the way for the study of imaginary worlds.

Subcreation: Building Imaginary Worlds, then, is a book-length study of the theory and history of imaginary worlds, including those of literature, comics, film, radio, television, board games, video games, the World Wide Web, and other media, and considers these worlds as distinct objects in themselves. Whereas most approaches in Media Studies are medium-specific or narrative-specific, this book is world-centered in its approach, while still taking issues of narrative and media into consideration.

This book is divided into seven chapters, and arranged to set a foundation in the first three chapters before proceeding to explorations of particular aspects of imaginary worlds in the latter four. Chapter one attempts to define imaginary worlds and lays the groundwork for a theoretical description of how they operate, such as the way world-building extends beyond storytelling, the engagement of the audience, and the way in which worlds are experienced. Chapter two is a history of imaginary worlds, following their development over three millennia from the fictional islands of Homer’s The Odyssey to the present, looking at the new directions and uses for imaginary worlds in the past century or so. It also follows some of the ways conventions and tropes changed over time and how worlds adapted to new technologies and new media windows through which they could be experienced. Chapter three then examines the various infrastructures used by authors and audiences to hold a world together, keeping track of all the relationships among all of a world’s elements, and also how these structures relate to each other.

Imaginary worlds are often transnarrative, transmedial, and transauthorial in nature, and these concerns are taken up in the rest of the book. Chapter four looks at narrative as a structuring device, as well as how multiple narratives set in a world can interact, resulting in what one might call internarrative theory. Other ideas, like retroactive continuity, multiverses, and interactivity are also considered in regard to narrative. Chapter five focuses on a particular kind of situation in which subcreation is itself a theme, resulting in self-reflexivity and subcreated subcreators. Chapter six grazes the surface of an enormous topic, that of transmedial growth and adaptation, and the demands they make on a world, as well as some of the processes that occur when worlds make the jump between media. Chapter seven examines the transauthorial nature of imaginary worlds, the resulting concentric circles of authorship, and related topics of canonicity, participatory worlds, and subcreation’s relationship with Creation. Finally, the book ends with a glossary of terms, and an Appendix which is a timeline offering a sampling of over 1,400 imaginary worlds produced across three millennia, along with the names of their authors and the works in which they made their first public appearance.
OUTSTANDING FEATURES

Apart from a different approach, this book proposes new terminology and analytical tools and concepts for the discussion of imaginary worlds, and collects the terms in a glossary. The book’s second chapter presents a history of imaginary worlds, which is the first time that such a history has been attempted. The list of secondary world infrastructures in chapter three is likewise something which will aid the examination of imaginary worlds. Finally, the book’s Appendix features a list of over 1400 imaginary worlds across three millennia, perhaps the most extensive list of worlds ever compiled and quite useful to the imaginary world researcher.

COMPETITION

Although there are books on imaginary worlds, including Lin Carter’s *Imaginary Worlds* (1973), Jesper Juul’s *Half-Real* (2005), Edward Castronova’s *Synthetic Worlds* (2005), Henry Jenkins’s *Convergence Culture* (2006), T. L. Taylor’s *Play Between Worlds* (2006), Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin’s *Third Person* (2009), Celia Pearce, Tom Boellstorff, and Bonnie A. Nardi’s *Communities of Play* (2009), and others, most of these works are more narrow in focus, for example, looking only at virtual worlds (which are a small subset of imaginary worlds), or looking only at specific media or specific narratives, or looking at sociological effects and other kinds of effects as they are found in worlds. Most of these studies are limited to new media or electronic media, and ignore the long history of imaginary worlds extending back into antiquity, as well as the non-interactive worlds of novels, film, television, and comics, and the non-electronic interactive worlds of board games and tabletop role-playing games.

Other books that discuss worlds do so in a more holistic fashion and are usually “how-to” books on world-building for writers, like *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy* (1990) by Orson Scott Card or *World-Building: A Writer’s Guide to Constructing Star Systems and Life-Supporting Planets* (1995) by Stephen L. Gillett. Such books may overlap in interest, but not in approach or purpose, and thus they cannot really be considered as directly competing with this book. *Subcreation: Building Imaginary Worlds* stands alone in the breadth of its historical view and transnarrative, transmedial, and transauthorial approach, confronting worlds as entities in and of themselves.

APPARATUS

The book includes an Introduction, seven chapters, a Glossary, and an Appendix. The Appendix lists over 1400 imaginary worlds, with each entry listing the world’s name, the type of world, author, and work of first public appearance. While I currently have no plans to write any supplemental materials for the book, I would be willing to should the press deem it desirable.

AUDIENCE & MARKET CONSIDERATIONS

The book is designed to appeal not only to scholars, but to be accessible to a general audience interested in popular culture. The interdisciplinary nature of the topic suggests that there ought to be an academic audience for the book in a variety of fields, including Literature, Comparative Media Studies, Film Studies, Television Studies, Video Game Studies, and other branches of Media Studies, as well as Anthropology, Communication, Geography, History, and Philosophy, to name a few. Since so many worlds have spawned popular franchises, each with enormous fan bases, there may be popular interest in the book for those who wish to go further into the history and theory behind the building of imaginary worlds, and even hobbyists and practitioners of world-building may find the analyses within both useful and interesting. The writing style, while academic, is still accessible enough for a college-educated audience, and lively enough to engage readers outside of a classroom, and the Appendix can be used as a reference work as well.

Institutions whose members the book might interest:
- Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS)
- Popular Culture Association (PCA)
- Mythopoeic Society (MythSoc)
- Modern Language Association (MLA)
STATUS OF THE BOOK

The text of the book is complete, at 168,043 words, and I am now working on the illustrations and images that will accompany it; I am guessing that the press will want around 20-25 images or so (this is flexible, as only a few are really necessary).

REVIEWERS

The following academics have written about imaginary worlds in various contexts, and would be qualified to comment upon this book:

Edward Castronova
Department of Telecommunications
Indiana University
Room 314 Radio and TV Center
1229 E. 7th Street
Bloomington, IN 47405
(812)856-5981
castro@indiana.edu

Mark Hayse
MidAmerica Nazarene University
2030 East College Way
Olathe, KS 66062
(913)782-3750
mahayse@mnu.edu

Henry Jenkins
Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism
University of Southern California
USC Annenberg, Suite 305
Los Angeles, CA 90089-0281
(213) 740-9727
hjenkins@usc.edu

Kevin Schut
Communication Department, Chair
Trinity Western University
7600 Glover Road
Langley, BC V2Y 1Y1
Canada
(604)513-2121
Kevin.Schut@twu.ca

Rachel Wagner
Department of Philosophy and Religion
Ithaca College
953 Danby Road
Ithaca, NY 14850
(607)274-3249
rwagner@ithaca.edu
Table of Contents:

Subcreation: Building Imaginary Worlds

Introduction

1. Worlds within the World
   The Philosophy of Possible Worlds
   Imagination, Creation, and Subcreation
   Degrees of Subcreation
   Story vs. World (Storytelling and World-building)
   Invention, Completeness, and Consistency
     Invention
     Completeness
     Consistency
   Immersion, Absorption, and Saturation
   World Gestalten: Ellipsis, Logic, and Extrapolation
   Catalysts of Speculation
   Connecting the Secondary World to the Primary World

2. A History of Imaginary Worlds
   Transnarrative Characters and Literary Cycles
   The Mythical and Unknown World
   Travelers' Tales and the Age of Exploration
   Utopias and Dystopias
   The Genres of Science Fiction and Fantasy
     Science Fiction
     Fantasy
   The Rise of Mass Media
     Early Cinema and Comic Strips
     Oz: The First Great Transmedial World
     Pulp Magazines
     Developments in Cinema and Theater
     Radio and Television
     Developments in Literature
     The Lord of the Rings and Tolkien’s Influence
   New Universes and the Rise of the Media Franchise
   Interactive Worlds
   Into the Computer Age
   Worlds as Art and Thought Experiments

3. World Structures and Systems of Relationships
   Secondary World Infrastructures
   Maps
   Timelines
   Genealogies
   Nature
   Culture
   Language
   Mythology
   Philosophy
   Tying Different Infrastructures Together
4. More Than a Story: Narrative Threads and Narrative Fabric
   - Narrative Threads, Braids, and Fabric
   - Backstory and World History
   - Sequence Elements and Internarrative Theory
   - Retroactive Continuity (Retcon) and Reboots
   - Crossovers, Metaverses, and Retroactive Linkages
   - Interactivity and Alternate Storylines
   - The Story of the World: “Making Of” Documentation

5. Subcreation within Subcreated Worlds
   - Importance of the Word
   - Self-reflexivity
   - Subcreated Subcreators and Diegetic World-building
   - Evil Subcreators

6. Transmedial Growth and Adaptation
   - The Nature of Transmediality
   - Windows on the World: Words, Images, Objects, Sounds, and Interactivity
   - Transmedial Expansion
     - Description
     - Visualization
     - Auralization
     - Interactivation
     - Deinteractivation
   - Encountering Transmedial Worlds

7. Circles of Authorship
   - Open and Closed Worlds
   - Levels of Canonicity
   - Originator and Main Author
   - Estates, Heirs, and Torchbearers
   - Employees and Freelancers
   - Approved, Derivative, and Ancillary Products
   - Elaborationists and Fan Productions
   - Participatory Worlds
   - Creation, Subcreation, and the Imago Dei

Glossary

Appendix: Timeline of Imaginary Worlds