

BUILDING IMAGINARY WORLDS

The Theory and History
of Subcreation

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unnecessary, while those that consider the story's world will find their experience enhanced.

Another way that imaginary worlds differ from traditional media entities is that they are often transnarrative and transmedial in form, encompassing books, films, video, games, websites, and even reference works like dictionaries, glossaries, atlases, encyclopedias, and more. Stories written by different authors can be set in the same world, so imaginary worlds can be transauthorial as well. Worlds that extend and expand across multiple media are now common, and a world may even become something of a brand name or franchise, with new stories, locations, and characters continually being added. In some cases, an imaginary world's opened-ended and work-in-progress nature can work against the sense of closure often desired for the purposes of analysis and scholarship; an essay written about the 1977 version of the film *Star Wars* may no longer apply to the 1981 re-release, the "Special Edition" re-release of 1997, the DVD version released in 2004, the Blu-Ray version released in 2011, or the 3-D version of the film promised for 2015 (and, probably, a 3-D home video version after that).

Finally, imaginary worlds may depend relatively little on narrative, and even when they do, they often rely on other kinds of structures for their form and organization (see Chapter 3). Imaginary worlds are, by their nature, an interdisciplinary object of study, and thus likely to either fall between the cracks between disciplines and sub-disciplines or receive only a partial examination according to which features are considered salient according to the analytical tools being applied. Yet, the study of imaginary worlds is occurring in a variety of fields (such as philosophy, film studies, psychology, video game studies, economics, and religion) and the research regarding them is gradually converging, suggesting that the study of imaginary worlds can easily constitute its own subfield within Media Studies. I am hoping that this book will represent a step in that direction. Such a field of study is necessary, since visiting and creating imaginary worlds are likely to remain common and popular activities.

World-building as a Human Activity

Imaginary worlds are enjoyed not only by those who visit them, but also by those who invent them, and world-building activities often occur from a very young age onward. Little children enjoy building forts from couch cushions and blankets, and transforming spaces into imaginary places that they can physically enter into during their games of pretend and make-believe. As they get older, such play shifts to tabletop playsets where smaller physical spaces represent larger imaginary ones; pirate ships, space stations, LEGO cities, dungeons drawn on graph paper, and so on. Time is compressed as well as space; entire wars and the rise and fall of civilizations can occur in a single afternoon. Such play is removed even further from direct experience in the abstracted versions of events found in board games

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and the virtual and intangible worlds of video games. And even more common among adults are the imaginary worlds found in novels, films, and on television (which, of course, often extend to board games, video games, and other media as well). For many, the desire for imaginary worlds does not change over time, only the manner in which those worlds are constructed and experienced.

Some researchers have gone so far as to suggest that the building of imaginary worlds is something innate and even serves an evolutionary purpose. In *Literature and the Brain* (2009), Norman Holland summarizes the work of psychologists John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, stating their position in five points:

1. The ability to “simulate” situations (to imagine them without acting on them) has great value for humans both in survival and reproduction. This ability to simulate seems to occur innately in the human species. We evolved the “association cortices” in our large frontal lobes for just this purpose.
2. All cultures create fictional, imagined worlds. We humans find these imagined worlds intrinsically interesting.
3. Responding to imaginary worlds, we engage emotion systems while disengaging action systems.
4. Humans have *evolved special cognitive systems that enable us to participate in these fictional worlds. We can, in short, pretend and deceive and imagine, having mental states about mental states.*
5. We can separate these fictional worlds from our real-life experiences. We can, in a key word, *decouple* them.⁴

It seems only natural, then, that such abilities and activities would continue to develop beyond their basic initial purposes and into a form of art and even entertainment.

World-building, as a deliberate activity, can begin very early on in a person’s life. Imaginary worlds built during early childhood are common enough that they have been dubbed “paracosms” in the field of psychology, and since the late 1970s, they have been the subject of a number of articles and books. As Michele Root-Bernstein writes in “Imaginary Worldplay as an Indicator of Creative Giftedness”:

Early research explored ties between worldplay and later artistic endeavor. Recent study of gifted adults finds strong links, too, between worldplay and mature creative accomplishment in the sciences and social sciences. As many as 1 in 30 children may invent worlds in solitary, secret play that is hidden from ready view. Worldplay nevertheless figured tangentially in early studies of intellectual precocity. Improved understanding of the phenomenon, its nature and its potential for nurture, should bring childhood worldplay to the foreground as an indicator of creative giftedness.⁵

Many writers, including Hartley Coleridge (son of Samuel Taylor Coleridge), Thomas Penson de Quincey, the Brontë siblings (Emily, Anne, Charlotte, and Patrick), James M. Barrie, Isak Dineson, C. S. Lewis, Austin Tappan Wright, M. A. R. Barker, and Steph Swainston, invented paracosms during childhood, and some continued to develop them into adulthood. These early worlds were often the precursors for the imaginary worlds which they would invent and write about during their careers.

Imaginary worlds are sometimes very important to their creators and central to their own lives. L. Frank Baum's last words on his deathbed were reportedly "Now we can cross the Shifting Sands",⁶ while the tombstone for J. R. R. Tolkien and his wife Edith contains their own names as well as those of Beren and Lúthien, the heroic husband and wife from *The Silmarillion* (1977). Another subcreator, Henry Darger (who, like Tolkien, was born in 1892, died in 1973, and worked on his imaginary world for decades), was a recluse whose life's work was writing about and illustrating his imaginary world, into which he even placed himself as a character. Some use imaginary worlds for healing; while recovering from a severe beating and a coma with injuries that include memory loss, Mark Hogancamp began his imaginary town of Marwencol as a form of therapy, and his photographs of it later led to a gallery show in Manhattan and the award-winning feature-length documentary *Marwencol* (2010). And even when an author is less closely associated with his or her imaginary world, it will still often occupy a central position within the author's *oeuvre*, and is usually the setting for multiple stories.

My own interest in imaginary worlds extends back into my childhood. Looking back, I can see that many of the things that interested me—drawing, architecture, film, building with LEGO, animation, adventure games, and the works of my favorite author, Tolkien—all had to do with various aspects of imaginary worlds. Born in 1967, I grew up in the 1970s during the time when table-top role-playing games and video games were gaining popularity, and cinematic special effects were being developed for world-building, most notably in *Star Wars* (1977). At the time, Tolkien's work exerted a strong influence over fantasy novels, fantasy art, role-playing games, and video games of the adventure genre, and these collectively had an effect on the culture in general. Amidst my own creative endeavors were drawing and writing, making stop-motion movies, and even designing graphics and programming games on my Texas Instruments TI99/4a home computer. I eventually went on to film school in college, beginning at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and then transferring to the University of Southern California where I was accepted into the School of Cinema/Television (as it was called back then). While doing my Bachelor's degree in the Production side of the cinema school, I realized how much I enjoyed the analytical side of film and media studies, and went on to get a Master's degree in the Critical Studies side of the school, while doing a teaching assistantship in the Animation Department of the Production side. After that, a Ph.D.

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seemed the way to go, and I completed mine in the spring of 1995. Since then, I have also completed two novels (one fantasy, one science fiction) and am looking for an agent and publisher for them.

I mention all of this because I was interested in building imaginary worlds, and did so in various media, before I was consciously aware of how much I also liked analyzing them. My interest in making imaginary worlds greatly informs the way that I look at and analyze imaginary worlds, since the maker's perspective helps to account for much of the shape of a world; even when one has an initial plan, much world-building ends up being the result of problem-solving and a good dose of serendipity. Only in retrospect did I see the research value of some of my past activities, and how they provided a good foundation for further study. Since then, my research has become more deliberate, and even my work in video game studies was initially done to better understand them as imaginary worlds, and as a part of the background research necessary for this book.

Imaginary worlds are an interdisciplinary subject and can be approached from many angles, but Media Studies, which acknowledges and accounts for the windows through which imaginary worlds are so often seen, provides the best basis for examining them as entities in and of themselves, laying a foundation for contributions from other disciplines. At the same time, as a convergence of concerns, methodologies, and interests from a variety of other fields (including literary theory, film and television studies, psychology, rhetoric, linguistics, semiotics, anthropology, sociology, and art history), Media Studies is still relatively new as a field, while the study of imaginary worlds has roots extending back more than a century.

Toward a Theory of Imaginary Worlds

Before the field of Media Studies existed in academia, the making of imaginary worlds was discussed and theorized by writers and poets like George MacDonald, J. R. R. Tolkien, Dorothy L. Sayers, and C. S. Lewis, and later discussed as a practice in "how-to" books on world-building for writers, like Orson Scott Card's *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy* (1990) or Stephen L. Gillett's *World-Building: A Writer's Guide to Constructing Star Systems and Life-Supporting Planets* (1995). Lin Carter's *Imaginary Worlds: The Art of Fantasy* (1973) was one of the first book-length studies devoted to examining imaginary worlds, though it was mainly limited to novels within the fantasy genre. Tolkien in particular thought about imaginary worlds and worked on them his entire adult life, revising and adding to his own subcreation, as the posthumous 12-volume *History of Middle-earth* series, which documents over five decades of his work on his world, can attest. It was from Tolkien's famous essay on imaginary worlds, "On Fairy-stories", that the term in the subtitle of this book was taken; "subcreation" was Tolkien's word for the making of imaginary worlds, the "sub" prefix designating a specific kind of creation distinct from God's *ex nihilo* creation, and reliant upon it (thus "sub" meaning "under").

As poets and novelists, the authors mentioned above were mainly practitioners creating their own worlds and theorizing what they were doing, resulting in analyses concerned with authorial invention and limitations, and the experience of the audience. From the 1960s onwards, fictional worlds were studied from a philosophical point of view, using “possible worlds” theory and modal logic, which consider the ontological status of fictional worlds, the nature of their functioning, and their relationship with the actual world. These ideas have been combined with literary theory, setting the foundation for the study of imaginary worlds. Philosophical writings on fictional worlds consider mainly questions of language, with most of their examples taken from literature, thereby neglecting imaginary worlds that are audiovisual in nature; Media Studies, then, must pick up where they have left off.

Of course, scholarly work exists examining such things as *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955), *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, and the worlds of video games. However, most approaches tend to be, at their core, either medium-oriented (looking at a particular medium, and its form) or narrative-oriented (where the focus is on story, or content), or some combination of these. While the first approach considers the windows through which the world is seen, the second comes only a little closer by examining stories set in the world, rather than the world itself. Over the years, however, Media Studies approaches have been drawing ever closer to the *world* as an object of study. The notion of “media franchises”, for example, appeared in the early twentieth century and dealt with more than a single medium or story, but it was more concerned with the commercial impetus behind the production of the world, which in earlier franchises was generally built around characters (for example, the studio film franchises built around Tarzan, Andy Hardy, Ma and Pa Kettle, Superman, and so on). Some of these franchises began to be transmedial as well, appearing in comic books, serials, animated shorts, radio dramas, and feature films.

Going beyond the idea of franchises, Marsha Kinder's notion of a “supersystem of entertainment”, introduced in her book *Playing With Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle* (1991), began to acknowledge the transmedial nature that worlds often have, though it did not focus on the worlds themselves:

A supersystem is a network of intertextuality constructed around a figure or group of figures from pop culture who are either fictional (like TMNT, the characters from *Star Wars*, the Super Mario Brothers, the Simpsons, the Muppets, Batman, and Dick Tracy) or “real” (like PeeWee Herman, Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, Madonna, Michael Jackson, the Beatles, and most recently, the New Kids on the Block). In order to be a supersystem, the network must cut across several modes of image production; must appeal to diverse generations, classes, and ethnic subcultures, who in turn are targeted with diverse strategies; must foster “collectability” through a

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proliferation of related products; and must undergo a sudden increase in commodification, the success of which reflexively becomes a media event that dramatically accelerates the growth curve of the system's commercial success.⁷

Like the idea of a franchise, the supersystem is mainly defined by commercial concerns, and the figures at the center of a supersystem do not need to have an entire world built around them. The “several modes of image production” requirement rules out purely literary worlds, while commodification and commercial success rule out other types of worlds. The notion of a supersystem does acknowledge that a “network of intertextuality” is needed, which worlds usually provide, and that these phenomena are often transmedial ones. However, not all supersystems qualify as worlds, and probably the majority of imaginary worlds would not be considered supersystems according to Kinder’s criteria.

In *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (1997), Janet H. Murray moved closer to examining imaginary worlds by noting how they were being encouraged by new media and the changes in consumption due to them. Describing nonlinear, continuing stories which she calls “hypertextual”, she writes:

Probably the first steps toward a new *hypertextual* format will be the close integration of a digital archive, such as a Web site [sic], with a broadcast television program. Unlike the Web sites currently associated with conventional television programs, which are merely fancy publicity releases, an integrated digital archive would present virtual artifacts from the fictional world of the series, including not only diaries, photo albums, and telephone messages but also documents like birth certificates, legal briefs, or divorce papers. ... The compelling spatial reality of the computer will also lead to virtual environments that are extensions of the fictional world. For instance, the admitting station seen in every episode of *ER* could be presented as a virtual space, allowing viewers to explore it and discover phone messages, patient files, and medical test results, all of which could be used to extend the current story line or provide hints of future developments. ... In a well-conceived hypertextual, all the minor characters would be potential protagonists of their own stories, thus providing alternate threads within the enlarged story web. The viewer would take pleasure in the ongoing juxtapositions, the intersection of many lives, and the presentation of the same event from multiple sensitivities and perspectives.⁸

Murray’s prediction has come true, and what she describes is significant in that it reflects the shift in audience attention from the central storyline to the world in which the story takes place, where multiple storylines can interweave in a web of story. This idea is taken a step further in Lev Manovich’s notion of the

“database narrative” discussed a few years later in his book *The Language of New Media* (2001). In a section entitled “Database and Narrative”, Manovich writes:

As a cultural form, the database represents the world as a list of items, and it refuses to order this list. ... Some media objects explicitly follow a database logic in their structure whereas others do not; but under the surface, practically all of them are databases. In general, creating a work in new media can be understood as the construction of an interface to a database. In the simplest case, the interface merely provides access to the underlying database. ... *The new media object consists of one or more interfaces to a database of multimedia material.* If only one interface is constructed, the result will be similar to a traditional art object, but this is an exception rather than the norm.

This formulation places the opposition between the database and the narrative in a new light, thus redefining our concept of narrative. The “user” of a narrative is traversing a database, following links between its records as established by the database’s creator.⁹

Here, the database viewed through one or more interfaces sounds very much like an imaginary world seen through various media windows; but “database” is defined much more broadly, and the ordering of data into a coherent *world* is not required.

Both Murray and Manovich conceive of multimedia works as generating spaces through which users can explore the content of imaginary worlds, each containing narrative (or at least informational) elements which add detail to the imaginary world. The distribution of stories over and across a variety of media is the idea behind what Henry Jenkins calls “transmedia storytelling”, described in his book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006).¹⁰ In a sense, imaginary worlds have always promoted convergence culture, since individual worlds have appeared through multiple media windows ever since those windows became available. Jenkins looks at how stories spill over from one media window to another and interconnect with other narratives set in a world:

A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best—so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction. Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained so you don’t need to have seen the film to enjoy the game, and vice versa. Any given product is a point of entry into the franchise as a whole.¹¹

In another section of the same essay, Jenkins discusses cult movies and what makes them different from other films, writing:

Umberto Eco asks what, beyond being loved, transforms a film such as *Casablanca* (1942) into a cult artifact. First, he argues, the work must come to us as a “completely furnished world so that its fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were aspects of the private sectarian world.” Second, the work must be encyclopedic, containing a rich array of information that can be drilled, practiced, and mastered by devoted consumers.

The film need not be well made, but it must provide resources the consumers can use in constructing their own fantasies: “In order to transform a work into a cult object one must be able to break, dislocate, unhinge it so that one can remember only parts of it, irrespective of their original relationship to the whole.” And the cult film need not be coherent: the more different directions it pushes, the more different communities it can sustain and the more different experiences it can provide, the better. We experience the cult movie, he suggests, not as having “one central idea, but many,” as “a disconnected series of images, of peaks, of visual icebergs.”¹²

The need for a “completely furnished world” emphasizes the world’s importance, and its encyclopedic nature is another way of describing it as a database narrative. Eco’s last point quoted here, that cult films do not have a central idea but many ideas in a disconnected series, further seems to be emphasizing the need for world-building beyond mere storytelling. Finally, Jenkins comments on the shift from story to world as well:

More and more, storytelling has become the art of world-building, as artists create compelling environments that cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or even a single medium. The world is bigger than the film, bigger than even the franchise—since fan speculations and elaborations also expand the world in a variety of directions. As an experienced screenwriter told me, “When I first started, you would pitch a story because without a good story, you didn’t really 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.” Different franchises follow their own logic: some, such as the *X-Men* (2000) movies, develop the world in their first installment and then allow the sequels to unfold different stories set within that world; others, such as the *Alien* (1979) films or George Romero’s *Living Dead* (1968) cycle, introduce new aspects of the world with each new installment, so that more energy gets put into mapping the world than inhabiting it.¹³

Later in 2007, Jenkins would add a related comment in an article on his website:

Most often, transmedia stories are based not on individual characters or specific plots but rather complex fictional worlds which can sustain multiple interrelated characters and their stories. This process of world-building encourages an encyclopedic impulse in both readers and writers. We are drawn to master what can be known about a world which always expands beyond our grasp. This is a very different pleasure than we associate with the closure found in most classically constructed narratives, where we expect to leave the theatre knowing everything that is required to make sense of a particular story.¹⁴

Recognizing that the experience of a *world* is different and distinct from that of merely a *narrative* is crucial to seeing how worlds function apart from the narratives set within them, even though the narratives have much to do with the worlds in which they occur, and are usually the means by which the worlds are experienced. David Bordwell has also noticed the growing popularity of world-building, writing:

Less widespread, but becoming very striking in recent years, is what we may call “worldmaking”. More and more films have been at pains to offer a rich, fully furnished ambience for the action. ... The minutiae accumulate into a kind of information overload. ... Layered worlds, complete with brand names and logos, became essential to science fiction, but the tactic found its way into other genres, too. Perhaps because 1970s location filming turned Hollywood away from spotless sets, filmmakers sought richly articulated worlds that were grimy. ... *Star Wars* signaled the marketing potential of massive detailing. Lucas remarked in 1977 that inventing everything from scratch—clothes, silverware, customs—created a “multi-layered reality” ... Story comprehension was now multidimensional: a novice could follow the basic plot, but she could enjoy it even more if she rummaged for microdata in the film or outside it.¹⁵

Other works, like Jesper Juul’s book *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (2005), Edward Castranova’s *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games* (2005), and many of the essays in Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin’s *Third Person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives* (2009), discuss imaginary worlds and world-building, albeit from different angles and for different purposes. The attitudes and ideas found in these works, and in the above-mentioned works of Kinder, Murray, Manovich, and Jenkins, are growing in the field of Media Studies; and certain subfields within it, like video game studies, encourage thinking about worlds as entities in and of themselves, instead of merely as backgrounds in which narratives occur.¹⁶ One author,

Michael O. Riley, has already used this approach in his book *Oz and Beyond: The Fantasy World of L. Frank Baum* (1997), where he writes in the book's prologue:

No study, however, has examined his fantasy solely from the standpoint of his Other-world or examined that Other-world as a whole. Understandably, because Oz is what Baum is best remembered for, the tendency has been to concentrate on his masterpiece, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, or to deal with his Oz series without giving much emphasis to his non-Oz fantasies. Yet, Baum's Other-world includes much besides Oz, and Oz itself was not a static creation; it developed and changed over the course of the books in the series. Therefore, considering Oz only as an inert, unchanging imaginary world can lead to confusion and sometimes misunderstanding. ... My approach will be to examine each of Baum's relevant fantasies (whether book-length or short story), to analyze the glimpses of his Other-world, and to piece together a picture of the way in which that world emerged, was changed, was modified, or was enlarged from its beginning until Baum's death. I will also point out how that world and its development reflected the circumstances of Baum's life and his experiences of America. For the purposes of this study, all his works of fantasy are of equal importance, and there will be little attempt at critical evaluation of the books because some stories that critics count among his weakest from the standpoint of plot, characters, and theme are among his strongest from the standpoint of the development of his Other-world.¹⁷

Riley is right in suggesting that new criteria are needed for the examination of a world; the criteria used in more traditional literary criticism are not world-centered and constitute a different focus, one that leaves out much that is important to an analysis of world-building. In this book, then, I hope to combine approaches like Riley's with that of MacDonald, Tolkien, Jenkins, and other authors, into an integrated examination of imaginary worlds from a Media Studies perspective, looking at the history of their development and their structures, as well as other areas like internarrative construction, transmedial growth and adaptation, self-reflexivity, and authorship.

A focus on the worlds themselves, rather than on the individual narratives occurring within them or the various media windows through which those narratives are seen and heard, becomes more interesting the larger the world is that one is considering, and can provide a more holistic approach to analysis, especially when the worlds in question are transnarrative and transmedial ones. An examination of the experience of subcreated or secondary worlds also helps explain the disparity between the popular and critical reception of films like those of the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy. Whereas critics tend to be more interested in traditional categories like acting, dialogue, character development, and story for their critiques, audiences are often more concerned with the overall experience,

especially of the world that they are being asked to enter vicariously. As Eco's comments (quoted earlier) on cult objects suggest, imaginary worlds invite audience participation in the form of speculation and fantasies, which depend more on the fullness and richness of the world itself than on any particular storyline or character within it; quite a shift from the traditional narrative film or novel. As Louis Kennedy wrote in *The Boston Globe* in a 2003 review of the *Matrix* franchise entitled "Piece of Mind: Forget about beginnings, middles, and ends. The new storytelling is about making your way in a fragmented, imaginary world":

... these movies aren't about the things we have spent our lives thinking movies are about—much less what older forms of storytelling, from theater to novels, are about. They don't care much about character development or plot. They don't care about starting at point A and moving neatly and clearly to point B, with the action motivated by and enriched by the believable, carefully portrayed needs and desires of the humans who enact it.

But what they do care about, and deeply, is creating a world—a rich, multifaceted, and complex environment that the viewer can enter and explore in a variety of ways. ... We can critique the makers of the "Matrix" series, Larry and Andy Wachowski, for lots of things, but we should not fall into the trap of calling them bad storytellers. They aren't storytellers at all. They are worldmakers.¹⁸

There is no doubt that franchised entertainment, and entertainment in general, is moving more and more in the direction of subcreational world-building. Science Fiction and Fantasy have been major mass-market publishing genres for several decades now, and digital special effects technology has renewed both genres in cinema. Many of the top-grossing movies of all time take place in secondary worlds (such as Middle-earth, Hogwarts Academy, and the *Star Wars* galaxy). Video games worlds have become tough competition for the worlds of film and television, not to mention those of novels and comics. And subcreated worlds often span all of these media simultaneously.

For the writing of this book, I have had to find more generalized language that reflects the transmedial nature of so many worlds. The term "author" is used to include writers, filmmakers, game makers, and so on, whereas "audience" includes readers, viewers, listeners, and players. The media objects in which worlds appear, such as books, photographs, films, radio plays, comics, and video games, are collectively referred to as the "works" set in a world, which the audience "experiences" (by reading, watching, listening, playing, and so on). Thus, general statements can be made about a world and its use without being limited to specific media and media-related activities.

Imaginary worlds have been referred to in a number of ways, many of which appear throughout this book as well; as "subcreated worlds", "secondary worlds", "diegetic worlds", "constructed worlds", and "imaginary worlds". While these

terms are sometimes used interchangeably, each term emphasizes different aspects of the same phenomenon. Tolkien's term "subcreated world" indicates the philosophical and ontological distinction between creation and subcreation (and the dependence of the latter on the former), while "secondary world" refers to a world's relationship with our own world, the "Primary World". The term "diegetic world" comes from narratology, and "constructed world" from popular culture, while "imaginary world" is perhaps the broadest and least technical term, and it appears the most often in this book, as a kind of default, unless a more specific term is required.

I have tried to acknowledge the wide range of worlds in different media by a variety of examples throughout this book, while at the same time I have taken many examples from those worlds that are the most widely known, including Tolkien's Arda (in which Middle-earth is found), the universes of *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*, and other popular worlds like those of Oz, *Myst*, and *The Matrix*. In addition to being the most familiar and accessible, they are also among the largest and most detailed and developed worlds, and therefore rife with examples of much of what I will be discussing.

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 1 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 2 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 especially 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 3 then examines the various infrastructures that are used both by authors and audiences to hold a world together, keeping track of all the relationships among thousands of elements, and also how these structures might relate to each other.

I have already mentioned how imaginary worlds are often transnarrative, transmedial, and transauthorial in nature, and these concerns are taken up in the rest of the book. Chapter 4 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 5 focuses on a particular kind of situation in which subcreation is itself a theme, resulting in self-reflexivity and subcreated subcreators. Chapter 6 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 7 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 1440 imaginary worlds produced across three millennia, along with the names of their authors and the works in which they made their first public appearance.

Imaginary worlds are diverse, dynamic, and often ongoing projects, and this book could easily have been many times the size that it is. Much remains to be done in the realm of subcreation studies, and hopefully this book can provide some framework for thinking about imaginary worlds, as well as a point of departure for those who will venture off, like the early explorers in traveler's tales, into explorations of how worlds grow and function and reflect our own world. And since our own Primary World has become a highly mediated one, with much of what we know about it coming through media rather than just direct experience, an understanding of how secondary worlds are experienced and imagined by people may also tell us something about the way in which we form a mental image of the world we live in, and the way we experience it and see our own lives intersecting with it.

WORLDS WITHIN THE WORLD

It was toward that point in space that I directed my thoughts, and, completely permeated by the reading and study of my Starian books, I crossed the Heavens faster than the speed of light; no longer did anything Terrestrial occupy my thoughts; I believed that I really was on a planet in the solar system of Star.

—Charles Ischir Defontenay, *Star (Psi Cassiopeia)*¹

And then finally when you get far enough along in a thing, you feel as though you're living there—not just working at a painting, but actually working in that valley. You're there.

—Andrew Wyeth, painter²

Texts, media, are not just referential paths leading to worlds: to read a text or to look at a painting means already to inhabit their worlds.

—Thomas G. Pavel, literary theorist³

To give oneself over to a painting, novel, movie, television show, or video game is to step vicariously into a new experience, into an imaginary world. This can be as true for the author of the work as it is for the rest of the work's audience. And when such works are well made, they can pull their audience in so skillfully that not only is one's imagination stimulated without much conscious effort, but the whole experience is a pleasurable one. Storytelling may be a part of it, but less often acknowledged is the draw of the world itself, especially when that world is substantially different from our own. Whether through verbal description, visual design, sound design, or virtual spaces revealed through interaction, it is the world (sometimes referred to as the storyworld or diegetic world) that supports all the

narratives set in it and that is constantly present during the audience's experience. And that experience may or may not include narrative; enjoyment of a world can be done for its own sake, for example, by interactively exploring the islands of *Riven* (1997), poring over floor plans and technical specifications in *Star Trek: The Next Generation Technical Manual* (1991), paging through the bizarre images and unreadable text of *Codex Seraphinianus* (1981), or contemplating Naohisa Inoue's paintings of his world called Iblard. To invite an audience to vicariously enter another world, and then hold them there awhile is, after all, the essence of *entertainment*, which traces its etymology to the Latin roots *inter* meaning "among", and *tenere* meaning "to hold".

How imaginary worlds work (when they are successful) depends on how they are constructed and how they invoke the imagination of the audience experiencing them. Worlds, unlike stories, need not rely on narrative structures, though stories are always dependent on the worlds in which they take place. Worlds extend beyond the stories that occur in them, inviting speculation and exploration through imaginative means. They are realms of possibility, a mix of familiar and unfamiliar, permutations of wish, dread, and dream, and other kinds of existence that can make us more aware of the circumstances and conditions of the actual world we inhabit.

The Philosophy of Possible Worlds

The notion that "things could have been otherwise than what they are" is the idea behind the philosophy of possible worlds, a branch of philosophy designed for problem-solving in formal semantics, that considers possibilities, imaginary objects, their ontological status, and the relationship between fictional worlds and the actual world. Possible worlds theory places the "actual world" at the center of the hierarchy of worlds, and "possible worlds" around it, that are said to be "accessible" to the actual world. These worlds are then used to formulate statements regarding possibility and necessity (that is, a proposition is "possible" if it is found in one of the worlds, and "necessary" if it is found in all of them). One philosopher, David Lewis, has even defended the extreme position that all possible worlds are as real as our own world, at least to their inhabitants.⁴

In the 1970s, philosophical ideas from possible-worlds semantics, speech-act theory, and world-version epistemology made their way into literary studies, to be used in the analysis of fictional worlds.⁵ They also helped legitimize the notion that fiction can contain certain kinds of truth. One idea emerging from these writings is an appreciation for the fact that imaginary worlds can be represented at all. Philosopher Thomas G. Pavel calls realism "a remarkably courageous project" and writes:

We confidently regard our worlds as unified and coherent; we also treat them as economical collections of beings, our fits of ontological prodigality

notwithstanding. Since coherence and economy may not stand up to scrutiny, we most often start by refraining from close examination. The worlds we speak about, actual or fictional, neatly hide their deep fractures, and our language, our texts, appear for a while to be transparent media unproblematically leading to worlds. For, before confronting higher-order perplexities, we explore the realms described by compendia and texts, which stimulate our sense of referential adventure and, in a sense, serve as mere paths of access to worlds: once the goal is reached, the events of the journey may be forgotten.⁶

Over the next few decades, a number of books applied possible worlds theory directly to the making of fictional worlds, most notably Nelson Goodman's *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978), Thomas G. Pavel's *Fictional Worlds* (1986), Lubomír Doležel's *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds* (1998), and Marie-Laure Ryan's *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* (1991) and *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (2001). Goodman's book is concerned with how the worlds of science, art, and other practices are made and related to each other, and the conflicts and truth-value they contain, with fictional worlds touched upon mainly in the last chapters. Pavel's book narrows its focus to fictional worlds, their philosophical underpinnings, and their ontological status and relationship to the actual world, but is still cast in more general terms for the most part. Doležel makes the connections to literary theory more firmly, using more specific analyses and examples from literature. Like Pavel, he rejects philosophical notions that deny fiction's truth-value, or that do not allow for its unique position between actuality and unreality:

The assertion that fictional texts have a special truth-conditional status does not mean that they are less actual than imaging texts of science, journalism, or everyday conversation. Fictional texts are composed by actual authors (storytellers, writers) using the resources of an actual human language and destined for actual readers. They are called fictional on *functional* grounds, as media for making, preserving, and communicating fictional worlds. They are stores of fictionality within the world of actuality, where the products of the writers' imaginations are permanently available to receptive readers. However distant—historically, geographically, culturally—they may be from the world-creating act, readers have a standing invitation to visit and use the immense library where imaginary realms are preserved.⁷

Doležel further develops the integration of possible worlds theory into narrative theory, looking at the functioning of one-person narrative worlds and multi-person worlds, the narrative modalities that shape the action occurring in them, and the way texts bring fictional entities into being.

Ryan's books go even farther with the application of possible worlds theory to narrative theory, and her work overlaps the most with Media Studies. In *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, Ryan considers how texts create worlds and immerse audiences in them, including the effects of the interactivity found in hypertext and video games and other forms of participatory interactivity in mediated realms, and even the "world" metaphor itself. Ryan considers immersion and interactivity and how they relate to each other as well as to literary texts, and much of the discussion has to do with the worlds in which texts are set and the reader's reconstruction of them during the reading process. She also considers different types of fictionality; in the second chapter of her book *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*, Ryan identifies a series of accessibility relations that can exist between a fictional world and the actual world, looking at how they can share objects, chronological compatibility, natural laws, analytical truths, and linguistic compatibility. She shows how worlds can be devised that share some of these properties while not sharing others, devising a list of genres based on what is shared and what is not.

While the philosophy of possible worlds is a necessary starting point, it tends to lean more toward the abstract and the conceptual nature of imaginary worlds than practical particulars, and is more concerned with status and modes of being than with experience and design (although here Ryan is an exception, as her concerns coincide more with those of Media Studies). According to Doležel, fictional worlds are a particular kind of possible world, and are different from those of logic and philosophy; they are inevitably incomplete, heterogeneous in their macrostructure (worlds are composites of multiple domains), and constructs of textual poiesis (created by authors through literature or other media).⁸ And, according to Nelson Goodman, "Fiction, then, whether written or painted or acted, applies truly neither to nothing nor to diaphanous possible worlds but, albeit metaphorically, to actual worlds. Somewhat as I have argued elsewhere that the merely possible—so far as admissible at all—lies within the actual, so we might say here again, in a different context, that the so-called possible worlds of fiction lie within actual worlds."⁹

Ryan is the most explicit in her descriptions of textual worlds, first summarizing how the concept of "world" involves a "connected set of objects and individuals; habitable environment; reasonably intelligible totality for external observers; field of activity for its members",¹⁰ and then going on to describe the process by which a world emerges from a text:

In the metaphor of the text as world, the text is apprehended as a window on something that exists outside of language and extends in time and space well beyond the window frame. To speak of a textual world means to draw a distinction between a realm of language, made of names, definite descriptions, sentences, and propositions, and an extralinguistic realm of characters, objects, facts, and states of affairs serving as referents to the

linguistic expressions. The idea of textual world presupposes that the reader constructs in imagination a set of language-independent objects, using as a guide the textual declarations, but building this always-incomplete image into a more vivid representation through the import of information provided by internalized cognitive models, inferential mechanisms, real-life experience, and cultural knowledge, including knowledge derived from other texts.¹¹

Ryan refers mainly to written texts made of words, but her description could easily be enlarged to include imagery and sound as well (the transmedial nature of imaginary worlds is discussed in Chapter 6).

The philosophy of possible worlds provides a philosophical foundation for fictional worlds, and its application to narrative theory has helped to emphasize the role of the world in which a story takes place. However, in addition to focusing almost exclusively on narrative-based worlds, most philosophical writings look mainly at questions of language, taking their examples from literature, with far less examination of audiovisually-based worlds and their representation (for example, Goodman touches upon pictorial representation, mostly in contrast to linguistic representation, and only more recent works like Ryan's consider newer media like video games). Certainly, text is easier to deal with, since it is linear and made of discrete units, allowing quotation, dissection, and analysis to be done more easily than similar analyses of imagery and sound. Imagery and sound can both convey large amounts of information in a simultaneous fashion, and neither can be adequately described in purely verbal terms. Imagery and sound differ from text in their referential and mimetic abilities, and provide a much different experience for an audience, or for an author constructing a world; so practical concerns must be added to philosophical ones. For that, we must turn to a consideration of imaginary worlds from the point of view of building them and visiting them, found in the writings of authors who were both theoreticians and practitioners of world-making.

Imagination, Creation, and Subcreation

In the eighteenth century, the empirical philosophy represented by Hobbes, Locke, and Hume was the dominant force behind the conceptualization of the mind as a storehouse of information and a blank slate or *tabula rasa* to be written on by the senses. Imagination was seen as merely a function of memory, the recollection of decaying sensory data that was to be brought forth to mind after its objects were gone. For some philosophers, like William Duff and Dugald Stewart, imagination might be able to combine or associate ideas, but it was not seen as a truly creative force that could produce something new.¹² Poets like William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge began to challenge these ideas with a conception of imagination that was active and creative, and even present

from the first moments of perception. Coleridge saw the active mind as one way in which human beings were made in God's image:

Newton was a mere materialist—*Mind* in his system is always passive—a lazy Looker-on on an external World. If the mind be not *passive*, if it be indeed made in God's Image, and that too in the sublimest sense—the image of the Creator—theré is ground for suspicion, that any system built on the passiveness of the mind must be false, as a system.¹³

Thus, for Coleridge, imagination was a divinely-appointed attribute, and as a result, even something of a sacred duty. As he wrote in a lecture of 1795:

But we were not made to find Happiness in the complete gratification of our bodily wants—the mind must enlarge the sphere of its activity, and busy itself in the acquisition of intellectual aliment. To develope [sic] the powers of the Creator is our proper employment—and to imitate Creativeness by combination our most exalted and self-satisfying Delight. But we are progressive and must not rest content with present Blessings. Our Almighty Parent hath therefore given to us Imagination that stimulates to the attainment of *real* excellence by the contemplation of splendid Possibilities...¹⁴

The contemplation of possibilities, rather than the recollection or reconstruction of sensory data, meant a different type of imagination from that which was traditionally conceived. In his examination of imagination, Coleridge went on to make a distinction between these two types of imagination, based on their subject matter and function:

The IMAGINATION then I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate: or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.¹⁵

The Primary Imagination is what allows us to coordinate and interpret our sensory data, turning them into perceptions with which we make sense of the world around us. The Secondary Imagination “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates” the concepts and elements of the world around us so as to recreate something new

with them. So the use of the Primary Imagination occurs, for the most part, unconsciously, as we conceptualize the world around us and our place in it, while the use of the Secondary Imagination, by contrast, is conscious and deliberate, not done merely out of habit or necessity but as a creative act.

But the Secondary Imagination needs limitations to function properly and usefully. Used to its fullest extent, the Secondary Imagination can result in the construction of an entire imaginary world, be it a city, island, country, or planet. Such a world, though, as a whole, cannot be just a random jumble of made-up things if it is to be believable enough to engage an audience. In "The Fantastic Imagination", the Introduction to *The Light Princess and Other Fairy Tales* (1893), Scottish author George MacDonald began to examine how Secondary Imagination is necessarily shaped by laws when it is used to form an internally consistent world:

The natural world has its laws, and no man must interfere with them in the way of presentment any more than in the way of use; but they themselves may suggest laws of other kinds, and man may, if he pleases, invent a little world of his own, with its own laws; for there is that in him which delights in calling up new forms—which is the nearest, perhaps, he can come to creation. When such forms are new embodiments of old truths, we call them products of the Imagination; when they are mere inventions, however lovely, I should call them the work of Fancy; in either case, Law has been diligently at work.

His world once invented, the highest law that comes next into play is, that there shall be harmony between the laws by which the new world has begun to exist; and in the process of his creation, the inventor must hold by those laws. The moment he forgets one of them, he makes the story, by its own postulates, incredible. To be able to live a moment in an imagined world, we must see the laws of its existence obeyed. Those broken, we fall out of it. The imagination in us, whose exercise is essential to the most temporary submission to the imagination of another, immediately, with the disappearance of Law, ceases to act. ... A man's inventions may be stupid or clever, but if he does not hold by the laws of them, or if he makes one law jar with another, he contradicts himself as an inventor, he is no artist. He does not rightly consort his instruments, or he tunes them in different keys. ... Obeying law, the maker works like his creator; not obeying law, he is such a fool as heaps a pile of stones and calls it a church.

In the moral world it is different: there a man may clothe in new forms, and for this employ his imagination freely, but he must invent nothing. He may not, for any purpose, turn its laws upside down. He must not meddle with the relations of live souls. The laws of the spirit man must hold, alike in this world and in any world he may invent. It were no offence to suppose a world in which everything repelled instead of attracted the things around it; it would be wicked to write a tale representing a man it called good as

always doing bad things, or a man it called bad as always doing good things: the notion itself is absolutely lawless. In physical things a man may invent; in moral things he must obey—and take their laws with him into his invented world as well.¹⁶

Once an imaginary world's initial differences from the actual world are established, they will often act as constraints on further invention, suggesting or even requiring other laws or limitations that will define a world further as the author figures out all the consequences of the laws as they are put into effect (how laws form an underlying logic that shapes a world is the subject of a section later in this chapter). MacDonald's work would also inspire another author, who produced one of the most successful secondary worlds ever created: J. R. R. Tolkien's Arda, in which lies the lands of Middle-earth. Like MacDonald, Tolkien also theorized about what he was doing.

Following Coleridge and MacDonald, Tolkien further refined and combined their ideas, applying them to the building of imaginary worlds. In his 1939 Andrew Lang lecture, a more developed version of which appeared in print as "On Fairy-stories" in 1947 and again in a revised version of 1964, Tolkien discussed authorial invention and extended the idea of Primary and Secondary Imagination to the worlds to which they refer. He referred to the material, intersubjective world in which we live as the Primary World, and the imaginary worlds created by authors as secondary worlds. Tolkien's terms carefully sidestep the philosophical pitfalls encountered with other terms like "reality" and "fantasy", while also indicating the hierarchical relationship between the types of worlds, since secondary worlds rely on the Primary World and exist within it.

As a philologist, ever careful with words, Tolkien realized that the ontological differences between the Primary World and secondary worlds were enough that a similar distinction should be made when referring to their creation. Like Coleridge, Tolkien saw Imagination as a Divine attribute shared by humans, and creativity and the desire to create as one of the main ways human beings were created in the image of God (an idea also found in Nikolai Berdyaev's *The Destiny of Man* (1931), in which he wrote, "God created man in his own image and likeness, i.e., made him a creator too, calling him to free spontaneous activity and not to formal obedience to His power. Free creativeness is the creature's answer to the great call of its creator."¹⁷). Since human beings are created in the image of God, they also have a desire to create, but the creative activity by which a secondary world is made differs in both degree and kind from God's *ex nihilo* ("from nothing") creative power used to bring the Primary World into being. Thus, Tolkien termed the making of a secondary world "subcreation", meaning "creating under", since human beings are limited to using the pre-existing concepts found in God's creation, finding new combinations of them that explore the realm of possibilities, many of which do not exist in the Primary World.¹⁸ Thus, "subcreator" is a specific kind of author, one who very deliberately builds

an imaginary world, and does so for reasons beyond that of merely providing a backdrop for a story.

“Subcreation”, as a noun, refers to both *process* and *product* and suggests their inseparable nature, just as Tolkien saw language and idea as inseparable. For Tolkien, language was the main means of subcreation, which was made possible by the separation of the adjective from the noun:

When we can take green from grass, blue from heaven, and red from blood, we have already an enchanter’s power—upon one plane; and the desire to wield that power in the world external to our minds awakes. It does not follow that we shall use that power well upon any plane. We may put a deadly green on a man’s face and produce a horror; we may make the rare and terrible blue moon to shine; or we may cause woods to spring with silver leaves and rams to wear fleeces of gold, and put hot fire into the belly of the cold worm. But in such “fantasy”, as it is called, new form is made. ... Man becomes a subcreator.¹⁹

Subcreation, then, involves new combinations of existing concepts, which, in the building of a secondary world, become the inventions that replace or reset Primary World defaults (for example, new flora and fauna, new languages, new geography, and so forth). The more one changes these defaults, the more the secondary world becomes different and distinct from the Primary World. It is not surprising, then, that secondary worlds will in many ways resemble the Primary World; not only because it is the source of material, but also because it is this familiarity that lets us relate to a secondary world, especially to its characters and their emotions. Secondary worlds, then, have the same default assumptions as does the Primary World, except where the author has indicated otherwise.

Like MacDonald, Tolkien was also interested in a secondary world’s effects on those who enter it, and how such effects take place. Starting with the audience’s state of mind and Coleridge’s ideas of “willing suspension of disbelief” and “poetic faith”, Tolkien suggested that it was a new form of belief, not disbelief, that was needed:

That state of mind has been called “willing suspension of disbelief”. But this does not seem to me a good description of what happens. What really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful “subcreator”. He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is “true”: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside. ... then disbelief must be suspended. ... But this suspension of disbelief is a substitute for the genuine thing...²⁰

Tolkien goes on to call this necessary belief “Secondary Belief”, which is the additional belief pertaining to the secondary world in question, rather than merely a suspension of our knowledge as to how that secondary world exists in the Primary World; that is, we imagine what the world would be like if it really existed, instead of simply ignoring the fact that it is only a story told in a book (or in other media). Secondary Belief relies on a secondary world’s completeness and consistency, topics discussed later in this chapter.

In its broadest sense, subcreation covers more than just ideas, conceptual inventions, and imaginary worlds; it could also include the physical works of human beings in the world, since things like automobiles, violins, turpentine, scimitars, and chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream did not exist in the Primary World before human beings invented them. However, this sense is far too broad to be useful here, and Tolkien’s use of the term typically restricted it to the development of secondary worlds. Likewise, every story is set in a world; but some storyworlds have a closer resemblance to the Primary World, or are more integrated into the Primary World, while others are more isolated or detached from the Primary World. Some worlds are more detailed and developed, while others rely heavily on existing Primary World defaults, with only a minimal amount of invention. Thus, fictional worlds can be placed along a spectrum based on the amount of subcreation present, and what we might call the “secondariness” of a story’s world then becomes a matter of degree, varying with the strength of the connection to the Primary World.

Degrees of Subcreation

Just as fictional worlds are a subset of possible worlds, secondary worlds are a subset of fictional worlds, since secondary worlds are necessarily different enough (and usually detached or separated in some way) from the Primary World to give them “secondary” status. To qualify something as a secondary world, then, requires a fictional *place* (that is, one that does not actually appear in the Primary World); but a *place* is not always a *world*. The term “world”, as it is being used here, is not simply geographical but *experiential*; that is, everything that is experienced by the characters involved, the elements enfolding someone’s life (culture, nature, philosophical worldviews, places, customs, events, and so forth), just as *world*’s etymological root word *weorld* from Old German refers to “all that concerns humans”, as opposed to animals or gods. Often, this kind of world does involve geographic isolation, as in the “lost worlds” found in literature; islands, mountain valleys, underground kingdoms, or other places that are uncharted and difficult to find or travel to. In order for a world to be “secondary”, it must have a distinct border partitioning it from the Primary World, even when it is said to exist somewhere in the Primary World (or when the Primary World is said to be a part of it, as in the case of the *Star Trek* universe containing Earth). A secondary world is usually connected to the Primary World in some way, but, at the same time, set apart

from it enough to be a “world” unto itself, making access difficult (the ways that secondary worlds are connected to the Primary World is examined in a section later in this chapter). The secondary world’s remoteness and the difficulty of obtaining entry into it make the world more believable, because it becomes like any other place that the audience has heard of but is not likely to have experienced in person due to its remoteness or lack of accessibility, such as Tibet, Tuva, the depths of the African or Amazonian jungles, the interior of a volcano, or the bottom of the ocean. Lack of accessibility can also be due to lack of information; for example, Lake Wobegon does not appear on maps due to incompetent surveyors, according to its history.

The nature of the borders separating a secondary world from the Primary World depends on the secondary world’s location and size, and points of entry for passage between the two are often very limited. The parameters of secondary worlds vary greatly, from whole universes to small towns or villages that fully encompass its characters’ world. Moving down from the large end of the scale, we find multiverses or parallel universes that contain or are somehow connected to our own; entire galaxies that are separate from our own but still in the same universe (like the *Star Wars* galaxy); series of planets, which may include Earth among them (as in the worlds of *Dune* or *Star Trek*); Earth itself, but with alternate histories or imaginary time periods (like Robert E. Howard’s Hyborian Age or J. R. R. Tolkien’s First, Second, and Third Ages) or Earth in the future (as in *The Matrix* series); imaginary continents of the real Earth (like Robert E. Howard’s Thuria, George R. R. Martin’s Westeros, or Austin Tappan Wright’s Karain Continent); imaginary countries set in real continents (like Leo McCarey’s Freedonia, Meg Cabot’s Genovia, Lia Wainstein’s Drimonia, Samuel Butler’s Erewhon, or Norman Douglas’s Crotalophoboi Land); and finally, imaginary cities, settlements, or towns (like Edgar Rice Burroughs’s Ashair, Paul Alperine’s Erikraudebyg, or Lerner and Loewe’s Brigadoon). A single city or town can qualify as a world unto itself if it is secluded enough from its surroundings so as to contain most of its inhabitants’ experiences; Ashair is set deep inside a volcano, Erikraudebyg is surrounded by mountains, and Brigadoon only appears once in a while and its inhabitants are not allowed to leave. Obviously, many fictional cities are less isolated; 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.

A world’s “secondariness” depends on the extent to which a place is detached from the Primary World and different from it, and the degree to which its fictional aspects have been developed and built (including such things as how many stories are set there, whether the place has been mapped, and how much its

history has been developed). For example, Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869) could not really be said to contain a secondary world, since its main action is set in the Primary World, in Russia, during a real historical period, even though it includes fictional characters, events, and places (such as characters' homes and estates). On the other hand, even though L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) begins and ends in the Primary World (in Kansas), the majority of its action takes place in the land of Oz, which clearly is part of a secondary world. However, what about the Los Angeles of 2019 depicted in *Blade Runner* (1982)? While Los Angeles is part of the Primary World, the city depicted in the movie contains a great deal of invention not found in the actual Los Angeles and is a place very different from the Primary World. *Blade Runner*'s Los Angeles is as much a constructed environment as Oz, yet it depicts a Primary World location, set in an alternate version of 2019 (released in 1982), in which replicants, artificial animals, flying cars, and gigantic buildings not only exist but are common. Such examples demonstrate that rather than having a strict delineation between Primary and secondary worlds, we have something of a spectrum connecting them, just as "fiction" and "nonfiction" are not as mutually exclusive as they may first appear.

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; from those closest to the Primary World, to the secondary worlds that are the farthest from it (that contain the highest degree of subcreation). On the Primary World end of the spectrum would be nonfictional autobiography, which claims as its subject an individual's actual lived experience, as told by that individual. Here, we have actual events involving actual characters and actual places; but in even the most careful autobiography, some reconstruction of events occurs (either consciously or unconsciously) due to imperfections of memory, and thus an element of fiction enters into the world depicted.²¹ Biography and historical documentary, which recounts events and experiences of others, adds more speculation into the mix; and openly speculative documentary, which questions its own material and often foregoes the truth-claims found in traditional documentary, may even suggest multiple versions of events or possibilities.

Moving down the spectrum, historical novels (or films) leave the realm of documentary, creating fictional versions of actual events, characters, and places. For example, in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Napoleon invades Russia, Moscow is burned, and the French are eventually forced to retreat; but on a smaller scale, characters and places (like Pierre and Nicolai, and their estates) are invented, and even Napoleon has fictional actions and dialogue attributed to him. While such novels may try to remain true (at least in spirit) to history, they will necessarily invent some characters and places as well, though often in a way that disrupts the continuity of the Primary World as little as possible. As we move further down the spectrum, the notion of "historical", or even "realistic", applies less and less, as stories increasingly replace or reset Primary World defaults, even though the

stories are still ostensibly set within the Primary World. Here we find what we might call “overlaid worlds”; for example, the stories involving Spider-man (a.k.a. Peter Parker) are set in a version of New York City in which Spider-man and the super-villains he fights remain conspicuously in the public eye, both in person and in the media. In such cases, fictional elements are overlaid onto a real location, but without separating a secondary world from the Primary World.

In all of the cases mentioned so far, story events occur in places that are a part of, or are closely associated with, the Primary World. Such fictional locations are designed to be typical of the kinds of places that they represent; for example, Tara in Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (1936) is designed to be a typical Southern plantation during the Civil War era. Characters who live at or visit Tara are not really leaving the Primary World, they are still in the midst of it. Nevertheless, fictional places can be designed to be set apart, even detached, from the Primary World, so that there is more of a distinct boundary between them; although such a boundary, too, is a matter of degree. As places are set farther away from populated and well-known areas, their remoteness and inaccessibility begin to isolate them from the Primary World, making them into separate or secondary worlds. Uncharted islands, desert cities, hidden mountain kingdoms, underground realms, and other planets are also often populated with inhabitants who never leave them, and who do not know of the Primary World as we know it. Customs, languages, cultures, and even flora and fauna can diverge from those of the Primary World, and become almost completely independent of them. The greater the amount of such invention occurs in a world, the more “secondary” it becomes when compared with the Primary World.

Detachment or separation from the Primary World can also occur temporally; worlds set in the ancient (or even imaginary) eras of the past, or in the unknowable future, can also be made to differ from the known Primary World (as hinted in author L. P. Hartley’s claim that “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.”²²). For stories set in the future, greater temporal distance usually results in more Primary World defaults being changed; stories set in the near-future can be similar enough to the Primary World to be merely overlaid worlds, whereas far-future stories usually depict an Earth very different and alien from our own.

Secondary worlds that differ the most from the Primary World contain the most subcreation, and are thus the kinds of worlds most discussed in this book, and to which its focus will be narrowed: secondary worlds that are geographically distinct from the Primary World (even when they are said to exist somewhere on Earth), and those that are used for stories whose action occurs mainly within a secondary world, even though those stories’ characters may come from, return to, or otherwise visit the Primary World. These worlds, in their isolation and uniqueness, are complex entities, wide-ranging in their variety, sometimes made for no other reason than to create vicarious experiences for their audiences, and interesting in their own right apart from the stories that they often contain.

Thus, before embarking on examinations of these worlds, it will first be useful to examine how they are related to, and differ from, the stories that occur in them.

Story vs. World: Storytelling and World-building

Worlds often exist to support the stories set in them, and they can even have stories embedded in them, for example, in “environmental storytelling” as described by theme park designer Don Carson.²³ Yet, while the telling of a story inevitably also tells us about the world in which the story takes place, storytelling and world-building are different processes that can sometimes come into conflict. One of the cardinal rules often given to new writers has to do with narrative economy; they are told to pare down their prose and remove anything that does not actively advance the story. World-building, however, often results in data, exposition, and digressions that provide information about a world, slowing down narrative or even bringing it to a halt temporarily, yet much of the excess detail and descriptive richness can be an important part of the audience’s experience.²⁴ World information that does not actively advance the story may still provide mood and atmosphere, or further form our image of characters, places, and events. A compelling story and a compelling world are very different things, and one need not require the other. For example, as Oz scholar Michael O. Riley writes of L. Frank Baum’s works, “stories that critics count among his weakest from the standpoint of plot, characters, and theme are among his strongest from the standpoint of the development of his Other-world.”²⁵ At the same time, it is usually story that draws us into a world and holds us there; lack of a compelling story may make it difficult for someone to remain vicariously in a secondary world.

Since stories involve time, space, and causality, every story implies a world in which it takes place. Worlds can exist without stories, but stories cannot exist without a world. As Doležel describes it:

Fictional semantics does not deny that the story is the defining feature of narrative but moves to the foreground the macrostructural conditions of story generation: stories happen, are enacted in certain kinds of possible worlds. The basic concept of narratology is not “story,” but “narrative world,” defined within a typology of possible worlds.²⁶

Yet, while a story takes place in a world, it need not show us very much of that world (though stories set in a secondary world are set there for a reason, typically tied to the uniqueness of the secondary world; the story simply could not be set in the Primary World, or else it would be). A world can have multiple stories set in it, and need not be dependent on any particular story for its existence. However, story and world usually work together, enriching each other, and if an author has been careful in the construction of a story, the world will appear to exist beyond the immediate events, locations, and characters covered in the story.

Therefore, while all stories are set in some kind of world, what I will refer to here as a “traditional” story is a narrative work in which world-building generally does not occur beyond that which is needed to advance the story, as opposed to narrative (or even nonnarrative) works whose worlds are deliberately built beyond the immediate needs of whatever narrative material may be present.

World-building is often something that occurs as a background activity, allowing storytelling to remain in the foreground of the audience’s experience. At times, however, world-building may overtake storytelling. Due to secondary worlds’ differences, subcreative works often exhibit an “encyclopedic impulse” for explanatory interludes; points at which the narrative halts so that information about the world and its inhabitants can be given. Descriptions of landscapes, peoples, customs, backstories, and philosophical outlooks are given either by the main character directly to the audience if a story is told in first person, or experienced by the main character and the audience together (with the main character as a stand-in for the audience), with expository passages in which other characters introduce lands and peoples. In worlds designed primarily for entertainment (like James Cameron’s Pandora in *Avatar* (2009)), for satirical purposes (like Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon*), for the purpose of scientific speculation (like A. K. Dewdney’s *Planiverse*), or for thought experiments of a philosophical nature (like those of Alan Lightman’s *Einstein’s Dreams* (1992)) or a political or social nature (like Thomas More’s *Utopia*), exposition regarding the peculiarities of a secondary world can completely overtake narrative, reducing it to little more than a frame story or a means of moving through and joining together the various descriptions of aspects of the world. In many video games, narrative also becomes a way of providing a context for the games’ action; in particular, adventure games and games with a three-dimensional environment often emphasize exploration and navigation of the game’s world, making them an important part of the player’s experience.

Nor does a subcreated world have to be built along a single, main storyline at all. If the encyclopedic impulse for explanatory interludes is taken a step further, a series of fragments can form an aggregate picture of a world and the culture and events within it. In her novel *Always Coming Home* (1985), Ursula K. LeGuin describes the Kesh, the people who live in the Valley, through a variety of narrators and an assortment of brief stories, fables, poems, artwork, maps, charts, archaeological and anthropological notes and brief essays, all without a main character or central storyline (a woman named Stone Telling comes closest to being a main character, but her story only covers a fraction of the book). There are even extreme cases in which documentation takes the place of narrative completely, for example, Luigi Serafini’s *Codex Seraphinianus*, a profusely illustrated 360-page book written in an untranslated made-up language that is designed to look like a scientific treatise describing the flora, fauna, inventions, and civilizations of an unnamed imaginary world. With an unreadable text, one can only browse and speculate, with each page adding to the experience of the world depicted (see Figure 1.1).

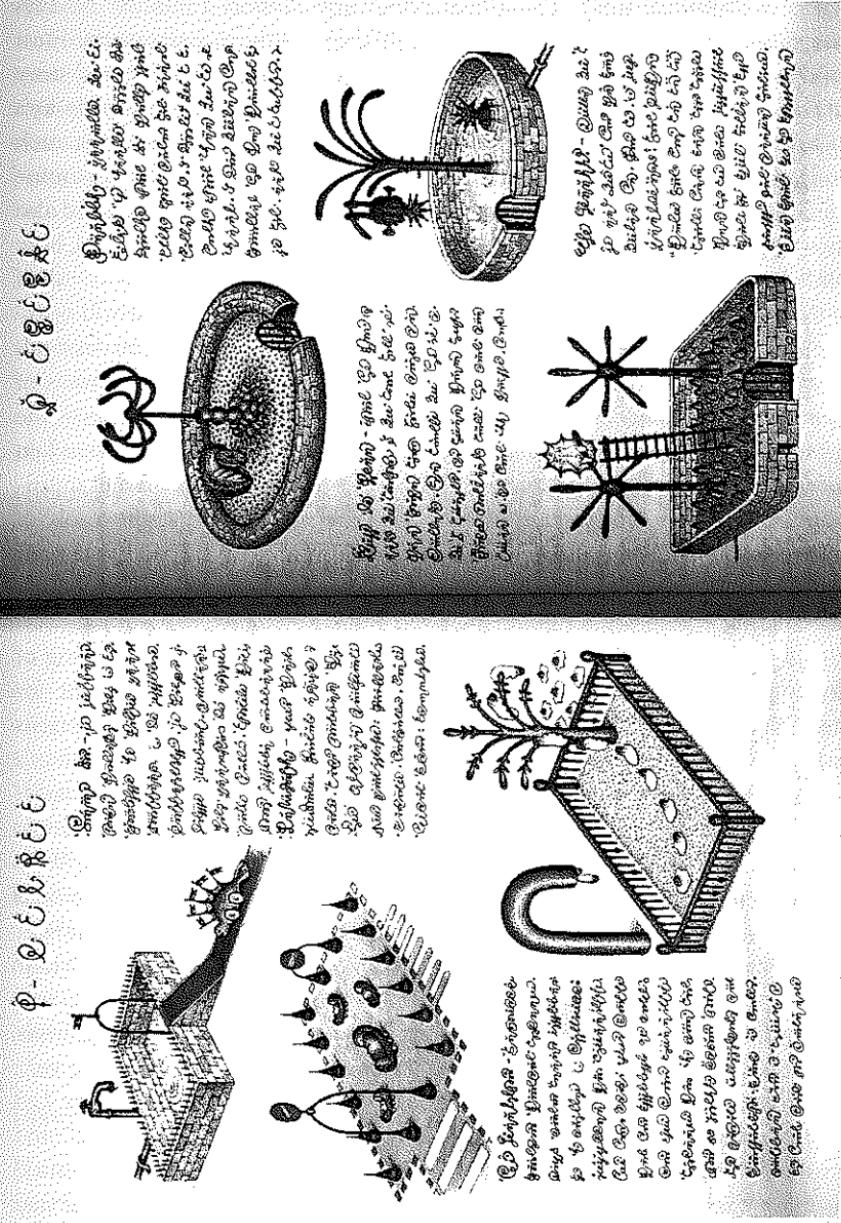


FIGURE 1.1 An example of world documentation without narrative: typical pages from the enigmatic *Codex Seraphinianus* (1981) by Luigi Serafini. (Image courtesy of Luigi Serafini, *Codex Seraphinianus*, Milano, Franco Maria Ricci, First Edition 1981.)

The political, social, and philosophical thought experiments in the worlds mentioned earlier are also examples of how the subcreator of a world has more strategies available for the embedding of worldviews into a work than does the author of a traditional story. Traditional stories give authors a number of ways of integrating ideologies and worldviews into their work; in perhaps the most commonly used method, characters embody different points of view, and story events cause these views to confront each other. For example, in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), the brothers Dmitri, Ivan, and Alyosha each embody different philosophical outlooks that come into conflict and determine the direction of the story. The way actions and consequences are connected also imply a worldview; whether criminals pay for their crimes or go unpunished, how events lead one to the next, where characters' actions take them in the end—all of these things, when combined, indicate a particular view of how the world operates, or should operate. And stylistic choices form a work, make certain demands on an audience, and imply a worldview: consider the long, rambling sentences of William Faulkner compared to the short, staccato sentences of James Ellroy; or the long takes of a Miklós Jancsó film compared to the quick cutting found in so many contemporary action films; each imbues its material with different meanings and changes its effect on the audience. For most authors, the tools of traditional storytelling are sufficient for the expression of ideas embedded in their works; but some require tools and strategies that are only available through world-building.

World-building results in the subcreation of new things and the changing of assumptions regarding existing and familiar things that are usually taken for granted. Even simple changes in wording can change the default assumptions underlying a world. Instead of "the door closed", consider Robert Heinlein's use of "the door dilated".²⁷ It suggests not only a different architecture and technology, but also a society technologically advanced to the point where such doors are possible. *Why* such a door would need to be used raises other questions: Why a dilating door instead of a swinging one? Is it to save space? Such a door would probably be automated, instead of hand-operated, and even require a power source; if so, what does that say about the culture and people from which it arises? And so on.

Nor does invention end with technology; besides using characters to embody worldviews, a subcreator can invent new cultures, races, and species whose very existence can imply certain ideas or outlooks. In Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), the Gethen are an androgynous people who can become either male or female, allowing the author to comment on sexism and cultural biases in new ways. J. R. R. Tolkien's Elves are an immortal race who must stay in Arda (the world) until it ends, and they come to envy Men their mortality, allowing for extended commentary regarding Death and Immortality, the main theme of *The Lord of the Rings*. The culture and customs of Samuel Butler's Erewhonians are a satirical reflection of nineteenth-century Britain, though the

analogies are not made explicit. By changing the defaults of the Primary World, especially in playful ways that reveal and reverse audience expectations, secondary worlds can make strange the familiar by exploring alternatives to the ordinary.

That secondary worlds often differ markedly from the Primary World has led some people to consider them “unrealistic”, which is to miss the point of most secondary worlds. While secondary worlds may represent strange and fantastic alternative worlds, to automatically claim that they are “escapist” (with the term being applied pejoratively) is to do them an injustice. Tolkien himself dealt with such accusations, writing:

... it is plain that I do not accept the tone of scorn or pity with which “Escape” is now so often used: a tone for which the uses of the word outside literary criticism give no warrant at all. In what the misusers are fond of calling Real Life, Escape is evidently as a rule very practical, and may even be heroic. In real life it is difficult to blame it, unless it fails; in criticism it would seem to be the worse the better it succeeds. Evidently we are faced by a misuse of words, and also a confusion of thought. Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls? The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it. In using escape in this way the critics have chosen the wrong word, and, what is more, they are confusing, not always by sincere error, the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter.²⁸

When one considers that the stories set in many secondary worlds often include oppression, conflict, war, and dark times for their characters, it soon becomes clear that these are not worlds that someone would want to physically escape to, much less reside in.

Having examined how worlds are distinct from the stories set in them, and how “secondariness” is a matter of degree, we may now turn to the three main properties needed to produce a secondary world, hold it together, and make it distinct from the Primary World.

Invention, Completeness, and Consistency

If a secondary world is to be believable and interesting, it will need to have a high degree of invention, completeness, and consistency. Of course, no secondary world can be as complete as the Primary World, inconsistencies are increasingly likely as a world grows, and no world can be the product of invention to the point that there is no longer any resemblance to the Primary World. Nevertheless, unless an effort is made in all of these directions, the resulting subcreation will fail to create