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Story World Design – Reflections on World–Building Method

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Publication date:
2019

Document Version:
Other version

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Jon Wille, J. (2019). Story World Design – Reflections on World–Building Method. Abstract from Imagining the Impossible: World Building and the Fantastic Symposium, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.

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IMAGINING THE IMPOSSIBLE: WORLD BUILDING AND THE FANTASTIC SYMPOSIUM



3 December 2019

Imagining the Impossible: World Building and the Fantastic Symposium is co-hosted by the Imagining the Impossible Network and the Centre for Transformative Media Technologies, and focuses on the relationship between world building and the fantastic.

The symposium is made possible by the research network titled, *Imagining the Impossible: The Fantastic as Media Entertainment and Play*. Led by Associate Professor Rikke Schubart (University of Southern Denmark), the project is funded by the Danmarks Frie Forskningsfond/The Danish Independent Research Fund across three Danish institutions with international partners in the US, the UK, and Australia. The network asks why the fantastic has exploded in contemporary entertainment, how we create, design, and engage with the fantastic, and why the fantastic is important for human existence.

List of presenters

Imagining the Impossible team:

Amanda Howell, Griffith University

Angela Ndalians, Swinburne University of Technology

Anita Nell Bech Albertsen, University of Southern Denmark

Cristina Bacchilega, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

Jakob Ion Wille, The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts

Rikke Schubart, University of Southern Denmark

Stephanie Green, Griffith University

Invited researchers:

Christian McCrea, RMIT

Jessica Balanzategui, Swinburne University of Technology

Tara Lomax, University of Melbourne

Stephanie Harkin, Swinburne University of Technology

December 3, Tuesday -
Swinburne University of Technology, Building AMDC 502 (5th floor), Burwood Road



9.30–11 Theme I: Design & fantastic worlds

Angela Ndalianis, Swinburne University of Technology: "World building and Science Fiction: When fantasy becomes reality"

Jakob Ion Wille, The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts: "Some Reflections on Design and World-Building in Contemporary Danish Film Production"

Stephanie Green, Griffith University: "Lace Collars and Cowboy Cravats: World-building in Penny Dreadful"

11–11.30 Coffee Break

11.30–13 Theme II: Seeing and feeling fantastic worlds (genre, aesthetics, affects)

Stephanie Harkin, Swinburne University of Technology: "Gothic Liminality and Postfeminist Sensibilities in Night School Studio's Oxenfree"

Cristina Bacchilega, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa: "Maleficent: Mistress of Evil: Genre Play and Darkness in the Back & Forth between Fantastic Worlds"

Jessica Balanzategui, Swinburne University of Technology: "Haunted Nostalgia in Digital Cultures: Vernacular Creativity, Residual Media, and the digital gothic"

13–14 Lunch

14–15.30 **Theme III: Tropes, characters, and elements in fantastic worlds (e.g. beasts, characters, settings)**

Amanda Howell, Griffith University: "Genre Play, World-building, and the Making of a Monstrous Female Anti-Hero in *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night*"

Rikke Schubart, University of Southern Denmark: "Wrinkles and Face Work in *Terminator: Dark Fate* (2019): Reflections on Linda Hamilton's Face and Character Development in a Sci-Fi Franchise"

15.30–16 **Coffee**

16–17.30 **Theme IV: Story expansion & fantastic worlds**

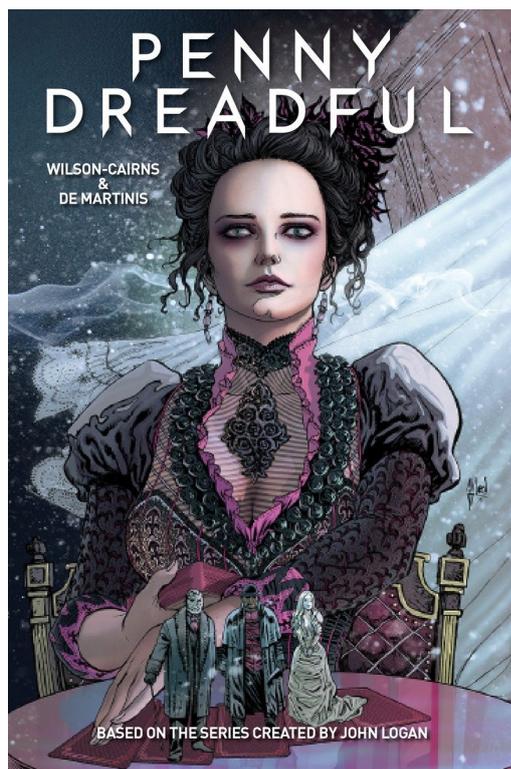
Christian McCrea, RMIT University: "The Videogame Fantastic: Science-Fiction World-Building and Adapting To Technological Change"

Anita Nell Bech Albertsen, University of Southern Denmark: "Transmedia Worldbuilding and Mash-up Cosmology in the *Penny Dreadful* TV Series and Comic Book Series"

Tara Lomax, Melbourne University: "Assembling Fantastic Worlds: The Transtextual Aesthetics of World-Building in the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*"



PAPER ABSTRACTS AND SPEAKER BIOS:



Anita Nell Bech Albertsen, University of Southern Denmark.

Transmedia Worldbuilding and Mash-up Cosmology in the Penny Dreadful TV Series and Comic Book Series

A crucial element of building fantastic worlds is the construction of cosmologies (mythology, religion and culture), adding aspects, depth and complexity to an imaginary space and its inhabitants – that is its characters. This paper examines the transmedia worldbuilding and storytelling in the Penny Dreadful TV series (Showtime 2014-16) and Comic book series by focusing on the merged and interfigural nature of the characters of this continuing series. Many characters in the TV series are of literary origin. Furthermore, they are woven into a complex cosmology that blends a great deal of mythological source material – for example Egyptian and Christian mythologies with classical gothic elements. This mash-up cosmology is further elaborated in the comic sequel *The Awakening* (2017) and *The*

Beauteous Evil (2018) contributing to build up and expand the Penny Dreadful universe and its complex mythology (an amalgamation of Christian theology, elements from Egyptian mythology and nineteenth century spiritualism) by merging it with elements from Jewish folklore. Penny Dreadful's cosmology, however, is closely tied to its transmedia characters rather than the storyworld and its Victorian London-setting itself.

By analyzing the mash-up cosmology of the Penny Dreadful universe, this paper seeks to discuss the relationships of fantastic worlds and transmedial characters, which are fictional figures whose adventures are told in different media platforms, each one adding details to their story, as they are rewritten, altered or extended. An interesting question is why characters has remained a minor issue in many theories of transmediality (Jenkins 2003, Long 2007, Dena 2009, Scolari 2009), that seem to have been developed mainly around the concept of world-building rather than character-building. In contrast, characters are more prominent to other storyworld-centered approaches such as the cognitive narratological Text World Theory (Werth, Paul 1999; Gavins, Johanna 2007). Through this discussion I seek to argue that there is a different logic of construction of transmedia storytelling, centered in characters than in world-building.

Anita Nell Bech Albertsen is an Associate Professor of Danish Literature at the University of Southern Denmark where she teaches courses in Danish literature, Literary theory, Media studies and Creative Writing. Her research interests include narrative theory, e.g. text world theory, anti-narration and cognitive theory. Her recent publications include articles in Danish on televisual documentaries and narrative theory and, in English, 'The Contaminant Cobweb: Complex Characters and Monstrous Mashup' in *Identity and the Fantastic*, eds Rikke Schubart, Amanda Howell, Stephanie Green and Anita Nell Bech Albertsen, *Refractory: A Journal of Entertainment Media*. Vol 28 (2017):

<http://refractory.unimelb.edu.au/2017/06/14/bech-albersten/>



Cristina Bacchilega, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

Maleficent: Mistress of Evil: Genre Play and Darkness in the Back & Forth between Fantastic Worlds

Maleficent 2 presents itself as a Disney fairy-tale film but also as an epic fantasy. This paper asks questions about genre play in *Maleficent 2*, first of all, whether it succeeds or not, and if it does not—as many reviewers note—what does this mishmash signify? Relevant queries are: which genre-specific expectations and emotions does the film seek to mobilize in audiences? How does the film's use of color and costuming, or the film's character development of Maleficent work to evoke fairy-tale or epic intertextual links? And how is the film's genre play related to the adaptation industry's anxieties and Disney's swallowing of other top fantastic-worldbuilding studios?

Serving to ground these queries is my analysis of the representation of and relationship among the three different worlds coming into contact with each other in *Maleficent 2: the Kingdom of Ulstead*, that Prince Philip is meant to inherit; the magical Moors, where Aurora is Queen and which Maleficent protects; and the nest-like island-world where the Dark Fay or Fae live in hiding. Border crossing, which is showcased in the film's very first scene, has its own stories to tell about world building and race & gender relations as envisioned in the film's plot and genre investments.

Cristina Bacchilega is a Professor at the University of Hawai'i-Mānoa where she teaches fairy tales and their adaptations, folklore and literature, and cultural studies. She co-edits *Marvels & Tales: Journal of Fairy-Tale Studies*; her most recent publications are the book *Fairy Tales Transformed? 21st-Century Adaptations and the Politics of Wonder* and essays in *Narrative Culture*, *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, *Routledge Companion to Fairy-Tale Cultures and Media*, and *The Fairy Tale World*. With Anne Duggan, she co-edited the 2019 "Thinking with Stories in Times of Trouble" special issues of *Journal of American Folklore*, *Marvels & Tales*, and *Narrative Culture*; also out in 2019 is *The Penguin Book of Mermaids*, which she co-edited with Marie Alohalani Brown.



Jessica Balanzategui, Swinburne University of Technology

Haunted Nostalgia in Digital Cultures: Vernacular Creativity, Residual Media, and the digital gothic

This presentation provides an overview of the monograph I am currently developing, *Haunted Nostalgia in Digital Cultures: Vernacular Creativity, Residual Media, and the digital gothic*, the first book-length examination of a popular mode of online vernacular creativity that has crystallized in the 2010s which I designate "the digital gothic." The book examines the key genres that constitute the digital gothic, illuminating how they harness their collaborative, mundane online contexts to incite eerie frisson and the uncanny. This mode of online gothic cultural production ranges from the folkloric scary storytelling practice known broadly as "Creepypasta" – which has been responsible for some of the 21st century's most iconic monsters, including the Slender Man – to simulated historical archives like Richard Littler's "Scarfolk", ghost stories delivered via social media such as Adam Ellis's viral epistolary Twitter tale "Dear David", and the uncanny outsider video art of the early YouTube era, such as Eric Fournier's "Shaye Saint John". I will address the digital gothic's preoccupation with folkloric and related types of pre-digital vernacular cultural production and argues that this mode deploys a range of narrative and aesthetic strategies to showcase the ontological value of residual, obsolete, superseded, and untimely media technologies in the networked digital era.

Jessica Balanzategui is a Lecturer in Cinema and Screen Studies at Swinburne University of Technology. Jessica's research examines childhood, history, and national identity in global film and TV; vernacular storytelling and aesthetics in digital cultures (particularly the "digital gothic"); the impact of technological and industrial change on screen genres; and intersections between cultural institutions and entertainment industries. Jessica's work has appeared in refereed journals and edited collections and her book, *The Uncanny Child in Transnational Cinema: Ghosts of Futurity at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*, was published in 2018 with Amsterdam University Press/The University of Chicago Press.



Stephanie Green, Griffith University

Lace Collars and Cowboy Cravats (or Salons and Saloons?): World-building in Penny Dreadful

Produced by Sam Mendes and John Logan, the original three-season television series *Penny Dreadful* (Showtime/Sky, 2014-16) takes famous supernatural characters and settings from nineteenth and early twentieth century popular fiction, evoking the idea of a haunted past to create stories of a world on the brink of unimaginable change. Its retwisting of characters, stories and settings through themes of fear, desire and obsession exploits the hybridity of 'pulp' fictional genres, such as the penny dreadful and the cowboy adventure novelette. This allows for 'a new kind of story invention' (Albertsen 2017) within a self-contained fictional world of seemingly unlimited transmedia narrative possibility.

Martin Dines alludes to the way that the penny dreadful conveyed 'the sensuous pleasures of the disorderly city' as a cheap, showy fictional world which seems 'more real than real life' (2017, 101). In this discussion I will explore the way that the series uses representations of historical motifs and tropes, including costume and design elements, to situate its stories in a world that is at once strange and familiar. The series is wrought through the decadence and incipient modernity of fin de siècle literary London and the grand, dangerous landscapes of an American wild west, as we are transported directly back in time, not from the nineteenth-century fin de siècle itself, but from popular screen culture (Loutit 2016; Crow 2016).

Stephanie Green lectures in writing, literature and culture in the School of Humanities, Languages and Social Science at Griffith University (Australia). She is the author of a recent collection of prose poetry *Breathing in Stormy Seasons* (2019). She is co-editor of and contributing author to *Hospitality, Rape and Consent in Vampire Popular Culture* (Palgrave-Macmillan 2017) with David Baker and Agnieszka Stasiewicz-Bieñkowska; 'As if': women in genres of the fantastic, cross-platform entertainments and transmedial engagements', a special issue of *Continuum* (2019) co-edited with Amanda Howell, and Rikke Schubart.; and 'Identity and the Fantastic'. *Refractory: A Journal Of Entertainment Media* Vol 28 2017, co-edited with Rikke Schubart, Amanda Howell and Anita Nell Bech Albertsen 2017.



Stephanie Harkin, Swinburne University of Technology

Gothic Liminality and Postfeminist Sensibilities in Night School Studio's Oxenfree

The videogame Oxenfree (Night School Studios, 2016) exhibits a hybrid of fantasy genres including fantastic realism, the supernatural, horror and the gothic. Focussing on the game's gothic workings, this paper draws on anthropological studies of rituals to identify the text's transgressive articulations of liminality; a core coordinate of the gothic. In his foundational ethnographic study, Arnold van Gennep (1960 [1909], p. 11) identifies three stable stages that comprise of the rites of passage: preliminal (separation), liminal (transition) and postliminal (reincorporation). These stages have been frequently appropriated toward understandings of human development (specifically adolescence) and narrative formulas, particularly the linear structures of coming-of-age, or Bildungsroman texts. Liminality is prevalent to gothic fiction, for the liminal represents suspended and unregulated space that is separate from normative and monitored institutions; central to the gothic's secluded and ambiguous settings. Gothic heroines are also frequently liminal subjects themselves, navigating the uncertain and relatively unrestricted space between childhood and adulthood. I frame Oxenfree as transgressive of van Gennep's trajectory, while also situating its protagonist Alex as a "postfeminist gothic heroine," empowered by her liminal status.

A videogame's simultaneous restrictions and affordances to a player's agency articulate the gothic's contradictory feminist values, where its heroines are at once imperilled victims (resonating with the second-wave's attention to women's "victimisation") and self-determined agents (resonating with postfeminism's celebration of empowerment). I argue that the postfeminist gothic heroine is both self-determined though not exempt from ongoing gendered endangerment. Meanwhile, the game's cyclical (non)conclusion, where its heroine is sent back to the beginning of the game, disrupts the linear rites of passage and the traditional, ideological fate of female heroes. This is because Alex never conclusively re-enters society where subjects are expected to uphold a normative gender role. Instead, she remains infinitely liminal.

Stephanie Harkin is a PhD candidate with the Centre for Transformative Media Technologies at Swinburne University of Technology. Her research focuses on representations of girlhood in videogames.



Amanda Howell, Griffith University

Genre Play, World-building, and the Making of a Monstrous Female Anti-Hero in *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night*

Both the Western hero and the anti-hero of the Spaghetti Westerns that emulated and ironically commented on Hollywood's generic entertainments were men of great solitude and few words. Our understanding of them, as a consequence, tended to be dependent on their setting, their relationship with their environment. The landscape, whether the verdant frontier of

Hollywood's imaginary 19th century or the blasted wastelands of Sergio Leone's Dollars trilogy--musically framed by lushly Romantic orchestral scores or the weirdly visceral hoots, huffs and shrieks of Ennio Morricone's compositions--were in many ways their objective correlative. In the case of Hollywood's hero, the grandeur of audio-visual setting in studio-era features spoke to the Western hero's function as nothing less than the (moral, masculine) embodiment of Manifest Destiny—America's God given right to expand its dominion across the continent. By contrast, the Spaghetti Western cored out that myth. Leone's *Man With No Name*, for instance, represented a cobbled together mythology of his own, a marginalised mode of heroism—or anti-heroism—un-anchored from grand nationalist agendas, violent, pragmatic, individualist, yet in its own way honorable. What, then, do we make of the world of the Girl With No Name who haunts the margins of *Bad City* in Ana Lily Amirpour's 2014 film, *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night*? Working from the assumption that her heroism, no less than that of her male predecessors, is intimately tied to and imaged by the world that has been audio-visually constructed for her, this discussion will reflect on its character in terms of world building, genre quotation, and play.

Amanda Howell teaches screen studies in the School of Humanities, Languages, and Social Sciences. An expert in contemporary American cinema, television, and screen cultures, she convenes on-campus courses in Hollywood Cinema and World Cinema and OUA courses in Classic Hollywood and Auteur cinemas. Her academic publications focus on gender, genre, and screen aesthetics and are recurrently concerned with 'body' genres: action, war, horror, and the musical. Her most recent major publication is the Routledge monograph, *A Different Tune: Popular Film Music and Masculinity in Action* (2015), which looks at how contemporary screen representations of masculinity have combined American cinema's long-standing investment in violence-as-spectacle with similarly body-focused pleasures of contemporary youth music.



Tara Lomax, Melbourne University

Assembling Fantastic Worlds: The Transtextual Aesthetics of World-Building in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

Fantastical storyworlds are often constituted by multiple texts and media platforms. The expansiveness of fictional worlds facilitates dynamic narrative and aesthetic relations between these texts and mediums, which can be conceptualised as a transtextualisation of form and style. In this context, fictional storyworlds should not only be characterised by narrative expansion and dispersal across media, but also through the aesthetic dialogue between media. The concept of transtextual aesthetics addresses the intersection of medium specificity and transmedia world-building by examining the nature of cinematic style and mise-en-scene in fantastical storyworlds. Using the Marvel Cinematic Universe as a case study, this paper asks what it means to be 'cinematic' in a transmedia storyworld, and how can world-building be examined using the concept of transtextual aesthetics?

Tara Lomax is a PhD candidate in Screen Studies at the University of Melbourne. Her research focuses on the networked conditions of franchise cinema and the relationship between creativity and industry in contemporary Hollywood cinema. She has published numerous articles in anthologies and journals on world building and storytelling, franchises, the Marvel and Star Wars universe.



Christian McCrea, RMIT University

The Videogame Fantastic: Science-Fiction World-Building and Adapting To Technological Change

This paper will focus on videogame science-fiction as a means to understand the widespread vernacular idea of 'world-building' as both production system and consumption practice. Videogame 'worlds' are usually discussed in game studies literature as narrative and/or transmedia constructs. Through the term 'world-building' - understood in videogame production vernacular as backgrounds, environments, narrative and art explorable by players - I will explain how my research will focus on 'worlds' as a lens to read videogame production and consumption, using their in-game art, production materials and evidence of ongoing investment by players, to give them meaningful historical agency.

Videogame science-fiction has familiar dimensions; intergalactic fantasies of exploration, dystopian tales of confrontation, action excused by the different and inhuman. But the practice of world-building also has a particular historical role in videogames - explaining and embracing the step changes in technology that games involve. This talk will touch on four history examples of fantastic world-building becoming part of the adaptive process of gameplay as a way to explore these intersections.

Christian McCrea is a researcher writing on science fiction, film, videogames, animation, and the popular digital arts. He is a lecturer in Media and Communication in the School of Design at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. He has written many articles in journals and magazines, and his book on David Lynch's *Dune* was published in 2018.



Angela Ndalianis, Swinburne University of Technology

World building and Science Fiction: When fantasy becomes reality

In this paper, I will explore the unique capacity that world building in science fiction cinema has to traverse the boundaries of fantasy and enter and shape the real world that we inhabit. Focusing on the films *Blade Runner* and *Minority Report*, I will outline the dramatic impact that both films' fantasyscapes had on real-world design in the fields of architecture, design and technological innovation. In particular, analysis will centre on the approach developed by Alex McDowell, production designer on the film *Minority Report* (2002), which is where he first implemented his influential world building approach. Of all the genres that fall under the fantasy umbrella, why is it that science fiction fantasy can have real world impact?

Angela Ndalianis is a Research Professor and Director of the Centre for Transformative Media Technologies at Swinburne University of Technology. Her research focuses on entertainment media and the history of media technologies and how they mediate our experience of the world around us. She has published numerous articles and her books include *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment* (2004), *Science Fiction Experiences* (2010), *The Horror Sensorium: Media and the Senses* (2012) and the edited books *The Superhero Symbol* (2019), *The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero* (2009) and *Neo-baroques: From Latin America to the Hollywood Blockbuster* (2016). She is currently involved in the Danish-funded research project *Imagining the Impossible: The Fantastic as Media Entertainment and Play*, which is led by A/Prof Rikke Schubart.



Rikke Schubart, University of Southern Denmark

Wrinkles and Face Work in Terminator: Dark Fate (2019): Reflections on Linda Hamilton's Face and Character Development in a Sci-Fi Franchise

"I wanted people to go, 'Wow, that's not the old Sarah Connor, that's the old Sarah Connor.'"

Linda Hamilton, 2019

In this presentation, I discuss the performance of actress Linda Hamilton as Sarah Connor in *Terminator: Dark Fate* (2019) and aging in a sci-fi franchise. I draw on world-building, social gerontology (Gilleard and Higgs 2013), and identity as performance (Goffman 1955, 1986). The presentation examines how Hamilton's performance as an aged Connor challenges the negative gender stereotype and Hollywood's norm of female beauty as "ruined" by signs of aging (Ginn and Arber 1993). It discusses how face is complexly linked to character development in a sci-fi franchise, where characters may travel in time or be rebooted. The paper is part of a larger project on fantastic trauma and women (Schubart 2017, 2019).

The First part introduces social gerontology, performance, and character building. The notions of aging as third and fourth age (Gilleard and Higgs 2013) places responsibility for "good" aging with the individual. This part also discusses our philosophical concept of aging as "aging-as-slow-decline" or "aging-as-accident" (Malabou 2012). Next, identity as performance is, according to sociologist Erwin Goffman (1955), aided and supported by other subjects. A "ruined" face and thus stigmatized identity (1986) must be "covered up" by an individual trying to "pass" without being noticed for her failure to do appropriate "facework." The Second part tracks Connor in the Terminator franchise as performed by Hamilton, Lena Heady, and Emilia Clarke. This part discusses the development from damsel-in-distress (*Terminator*) to muscular action heroine (*Terminator 2: Judgment Day*), to fugitive mother (*Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*), and granddaughter (*Terminator: Genesys*). The Third part focuses on *Dark Fate*. How does Hamilton embody an aged Connor? How does the character challenge negative stereotyping of aging women as ugly, fat, passive, and evil (Behuniak 2011, Kotwasinska 2018, Henneberg 2010)? This section turns to "good" and "bad" aging (Jerslev 2017, 2018) and the engagements of aging fans (Jerslev and Petersen 2018). The fourth part examines paratextual discourses in industry articles, reviews, and social media regarding aging and actresses. It compares age debates about Hamilton with debates about Carrie Fisher in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015) and Jamie Lee Curtis in *Halloween* (2018). It briefly addresses the female cyborg in *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017).

Rikke Schubart is associate professor at the University of Southern Denmark. Her research is on emotions, gender, and the fantastic. Recent publications are *Mastering Fear: Women, Emotions, and Contemporary Horror* (Bloomsbury, 2018) and *Women of Ice and Fire: Gender, Game of Thrones, and Multiple Gender Engagements* (Bloomsbury, 2016, edited with A. Gjelsvik). She recently published articles in *NordLit* on Charlize Theron as middle age witch, on Gal Gadot and Wonder Woman in *Continuum*, and she co-edited (with A. Howell and S. Green) a special issue of *Continuum* on women in the transmedia fantastic.



Jakob Ion Wille, The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts

Story World Design – Reflections on World-Building method

Story Worlds are usually thought of as fictional worlds associated with fantastic genres as fantasy, science fiction, super-hero adventure, horror or fairy tales often delivered through trans-media channels. In reality most artwork or at least artworks with any affiliation to narration from painting, poetry and photoplays suggests fictional or non-fictional diegetic worlds. When it comes to story world building this can either be perceived as an activity in the mind of the “reader” or real-life activities by fans extending popular fiction through fan art, fan fiction, role play and cosplay. From a production point of view story world building and design are often affiliated with the usage of new digital pre-visualization and virtual production technologies in big scale media productions.

This paper discusses how methods of story world building or design as an approach towards content development in the context of visual media however still needs to be mapped and tested. Traditionally, film and visual media production is perceived as a process where content is written to be prepared for shooting and finally edited. Though every production forms its own structure the general concept or metaphor is the assembly line moving content through the different faces from pre-production to post-production. When working in world building, the waterfall approach of traditional film and media production is challenged by development methods of neighbouring media such as video games and theatre benefiting from open iterative approaches, co-creation and devising. This paper draws upon a series of workshops conducted at The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, School of Design and The National Danish Film School, which were designed to collect knowledge on story world building methods for creative development of format free of media agnostic content.

Jakob Ion Wille is Associate Professor at The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, School of Design where he is also Head of the Production Design master program, and Game & Production Design Bachelor program. He has been working as a scriptwriter, script consultant and consultant on exhibition design. He is currently involved in a research project *Imagining the Impossible: The Fantastic as Media Entertainment and Play*.