

13. Chasing Wild Space

Narrative Outsides and World-Building Frontiers in *Knights of the Old Republic* and *The Old Republic*

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As introduced in the iconic line that precedes the first film's opening crawl, Star Wars's galaxy far, far away is the foundation for the franchise's world-building efforts. It is the backdrop and context for the story told by any Star Wars film, novel, game, or other text,¹ and as such it functions as a narrative world or storyworld. David Herman describes a storyworld as the "mental model" of the larger world of a text, one that audiences construct from "textual cues and the inferences that they make possible."² In other words, the Star Wars galaxy is only partially represented by any particular text, and audiences use that partial representation to imagine how the rest of the galaxy works. However, it seems strange to call the Star Wars galaxy, itself an agglomeration of inconsistent and contested narratives, characters, and worlds, a singular storyworld. Marie-Laure Ryan's recent conception of the narrative universe as an accumulation of storyworlds seems more apt.³ This chapter therefore explores the space of the Star Wars galaxy as a narrative universe, arguing that it renews itself and its transmedial franchise through the mystery of outside spaces. The use of these outside spaces in Star Wars suggests a new modification or addition to existing theories of narrative world-building, and draws critical attention to the ethical and political dimensions of world-building processes.

A narrative universe relies on the creation of narrative space, including a dynamic process of expanding and exploring that space. Jan-Noël Thon explains this as the difference between the "represented space" and the "space of representation," where represented space is what the audience directly encounters and the space of representation is the larger space not

1 While obviously lacking medium-specificity, the term "text" provides a useful shorthand for the narrative objects that contribute to Star Wars's narrative universe. I use the term "audiences" for the receivers of texts in different media for the same reason.

2 David Herman, *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 1, 6.

3 Marie-Laure Ryan, "Story/Worlds/Media: Tuning the Instruments of a Media-Conscious Narratology," in *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2014).

encountered, but indicated or inferred.⁴ Represented space is constantly expanding through new stories that expose audiences to new content, leading them to continually revise their understanding of the narrative universe.⁵ In the case of Star Wars, the represented space of the galaxy is a host of familiar planets and characters that audiences have encountered through the franchise's various media texts. Each new franchise entry has expanded this by introducing new places and characters that add to the main story of the franchise, suggesting in the process that there is always more for writers and audiences to imagine and explore. Matt Hills calls this type of storyworld *hyperdiegesis*, "the creation of a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text, but which nevertheless appears to operate according to principles of internal logic and extension."⁶ Hills's emphasis on an "internal logic" here is significant: hyperdiegesis operates by establishing a larger space that presumably operates by the same or similar rules to the represented space.

Yet, there are also narrative spaces outside the galaxy—spaces mentioned or hinted at in various texts, whose content is unknown to the characters and not (yet) revealed to audiences. Star Wars maps, especially those of the video games, illustrate this point most vividly. For example, the map from the MMORPG *The Old Republic (TOR)* displays the available regions of the galaxy that the player can visit. At the far left of the map is a region called Wild Space, which lies beyond the border of the main galaxy and appears to have few stars and planets. Wild Space is a recent addition to the game's map and was unavailable and unmarked prior to the *Knights of the Fallen Empire (Fallen Empire)* expansion (2015).

TOR's galactic map structures the game's representation of its narrative universe. It is an example of what Marie-Laure Ryan calls "maps of narrative space," as well as an "intradiegetic map," a map that exists as an object in its storyworld.⁷ Crucially, this intradiegetic map affects the internal logic of the storyworld by dividing it into different territories. As Ryan explains, the boundaries of a map "structure storyworlds into differentiated zones obeying different rules," and they "forbid crossing, but they are generally

4 Jan-Noël Thon, *Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 47.

5 Thon, *Transmedial Narratology*, 62.

6 Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 137.

7 Marie-Laure Ryan, et al., *Narrating Space / Spatializing Narrative: Where Narrative Theory and Geography Meet* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2016).

not impermeable enough to prevent violations.”⁸ Within the boundaries of the galactic map, the lines delimit regions that operate by their own rules—they are controlled by different factions, contain different species, and present different challenges to the player. Outside of these boundaries are other spaces where these rules may not apply, and this is especially true of the spaces beyond the borders of the galaxy.

The drawing of a map is an act of inscription, the placing of boundary lines that distinguish between inside and outside. The space outside the line defines the inside, because the line creates an oppositional distinction; in other words, defining where a region is as opposed to where it is not. Caroline Levine identifies this in her reading of Derrida’s conception of narrative form: “Derrida shows how there can be no belonging—no inside—without a ‘constitutive outside.’”⁹ In this sense, the mapping of a storyworld or narrative universe always creates and relies on outside spaces where the established rules (the internal logic) either do not exist or operate differently. As Ryan suggests, these boundaries are not completely impermeable, and can be violated in order to expand and transform a narrative universe like the Star Wars galaxy. Wild Space, as we shall see shortly, does just this.

In *TOR*, the galaxy is both narrative space and play space, meaning that its boundaries define both the narrative universe and where the player can go within it. Johan Huizinga famously describes this as the Magic Circle: “All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course.”¹⁰ Recent scholarship has posited that the Magic Circle is porous, particularly in how players and communities move across its borders, but the in-game boundaries of the play space are almost completely impenetrable for the player, who can only select areas within the boundaries of the map, and in visiting those areas can only play in the provided space.¹¹ In this sense, Wild Space and other territories beyond the boundaries of

8 Ryan, et al., *Narrating Space / Spatializing Narrative*, 36.

9 Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 26.

10 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 2009), 10.

11 There are rare but possible exceptions to this with bugs, glitches, cheats, or modifications of the game that allow the player to reach areas that should be inaccessible. However, these are not the usual or intended player experience.

the game map are literally out of bounds and outside of play before they are introduced.¹²

Drawing these points together, outside spaces are represented beyond the borders of maps that delineate the galaxy. The mystery of such spaces lasts until they are later brought into the narrative universe, when it becomes clear which aspects of the galaxy's internal logic do or do not apply. I call this process the hyperdiegetic cycle, drawing on Hills's concept of hyperdiegesis mentioned earlier. The hyperdiegetic cycle renews the narrative universe by introducing new elements to its internal logic, transforming an outside space into an inside one by gradually making it identifiable and familiar. This cycle operates in two directions: the first, internally oriented, fills in narrative space that follows the narrative universe's internal logic, and the second, externally oriented, introduces outside spaces that transcend the narrative universe's logic. Hills hints at the latter type in his later revisiting of the hyperdiegesis when he suggests that familiar conventions of series are occasionally punctured by moments of temporary "disruption."¹³ I argue, however, that outside spaces are more than this: their disruption is lasting because their content is woven into the narrative universe's internal logic, forever changing the sense of what is familiar and conventional. Game expansions illustrate this: the introduction of the Empire of Zakuul in *Fallen Empire* fundamentally altered the narrative universe with a new, all-powerful threat, and changed gameplay with new mechanics and game modes.

The hyperdiegetic cycle constantly relies on this use of outside spaces as a frontier: a place of unknown and unexpected possibilities where the narrative universe is renewed and transformed through confrontation. The hyperdiegetic cycle thus draws on the foundational frontier myth in American popular culture, posited by Richard Slotkin in his seminal work *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier*. Slotkin argues that the frontier exists on the boundary between civilization and the wilderness beyond, and that, throughout America's history, the nation and its subjects were reborn through frontier violence. As Slotkin explains, "The first colonists saw in America an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of the church and nation; but

12 Game expansions often demonstrate this process by adding new spaces that were previously outside of play and unknown to characters and players (examples include *Fallen Empire* in *TOR*, *Mists of Pandaria* in *World of Warcraft*, etc.).

13 Matt Hills, "Defining Cult TV: Texts, Inter-Texts and Fan Audiences," in *The Television Studies Reader*, ed. Robert C. Allen and Annette Hill (New York: Routledge, 2004), 512.

the means to that regeneration ultimately became the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience.¹⁴

Crucially, there is no frontier without a notion of spaces outside of civilization: spaces that are different and threatening, that must be tamed and brought to order. The process of converting wild outside spaces into controlled inside ones is inherently violent, changing everyone and everything involved. The individuals who travel to the frontier are transformed by their experiences there, as they are marked by what they learn from encountering (or conquering) other peoples and places. At the same time, the inhabitants of outside spaces are violently subjugated by the colonizing culture. Finally, the internal logic of the narrative universe, including its peoples, cultures, and politics, are both renewed and altered by the introduction of new elements from outside spaces. While these elements are particularly evident in *Star Wars*, they hold pertinent insights for narrative world-building across transmedial franchises.

The same regeneration through violence that has driven American culture is at work in the frontiers of *Star Wars* and is central to the hyperdiegetic cycle of the franchise.¹⁵ While all of the dark areas beyond the edge of the map are outside spaces and potential frontiers, there are several that the franchise has specifically identified: the Yuuzhan Vong galaxy, the Unknown Regions, and the aforementioned Wild Space. These outside spaces have generated many mysterious, external threats to challenge and renew the galaxy, including the Yuuzhan Vong Empire of the novels and comics, the Killik and Ssi-ruuk of the novels, the Sith Empire and Empire of Zakuul of the *Knights of the Old Republic (KotOR)* games, and Grand Admiral Thrawn, most recently portrayed in the *Rebels* television series. Each of these threats forced the galaxy to encounter its various frontiers; together they reveal how outside spaces and frontiers have particular themes, aesthetics, and ethics.

14 Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 5.

15 This is partially due to the conventions that the franchise draws from other frontier genres, including the presence of Western tropes in *Star Wars*. See William H. Katerberg, *Future West: Utopia and Apocalypse in Frontier Science Fiction* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008) and Carl Abbott, *Imagined Frontiers: Contemporary America and Beyond* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015).

Wild Space

Similar to the romanticized Wild West in American culture, Wild Space is a frontier filled with unpredictable and unknown possibilities. In *TOR's Fallen Empire* expansion, it appears as a space outside the galaxy that the game's characters know little or nothing about. The expansion's story begins with chasing a threat into the undiscovered "depths of Wild Space" in a desperate bid for answers. The Sith Emperor has destroyed a planet, betrayed his people, and then vanished. Some time after his disappearance, a "mysterious army" from a previously unknown civilization invades the galaxy, conquering everything in its path. The Jedi and the Sith suspect these events are related and enlist the player to help search beyond the edge of the galaxy. They are quickly ambushed by a vast fleet of ships controlled by the unknown civilization, which is soon revealed as the Eternal Empire, Zakuul.

As part of Wild Space, Zakuul exhibits several characteristics common to outside spaces in narrative universes. The first of these is an aesthetic built on the concept of the infinite. This infinite aesthetic, as I label it, presents objects as boundless in number, space, or time, making them seem overwhelming or even divine. Zakuul has many examples of this, including its moniker, the Eternal Empire, its fleet, the Eternal Fleet, and its seat of power, the Eternal Throne. To pick one example, the Eternal Fleet is a virtually endless arrangement of ships, all identical and connected in one sentient network. Beyond its considerable firepower, the Eternal Fleet is visually imposing, seemingly occupying and controlling every space reaching in every direction. It is, in effect, the representation of outside space opposing the player and the galaxy. The infinite aesthetic is tied to the function of outside spaces in the hyperdiegetic cycle. Not bound by the definitions and borders of the main galaxy, outside spaces are theoretically infinite, and could consist of many other worlds, galaxies, or dimensions. They thus provide the narrative universe with an infinite frontier, including infinite threats, salvations, and possible expansions.

A second characteristic of outside spaces is their portrayal as unknown and mysterious places. Zakuul's invasion of the galaxy sets the stage for this perception—no one knows for sure where Zakuul came from or what its motives are. Zakuulian society centers on the Eternal Throne and Emperor Valkorion, an ancient and powerful figure with a hidden agenda. Upon encountering Valkorion, the player character and their companion immediately sense that he is actually the Sith Emperor they are hunting, though his secret control of an unknown empire comes as a complete surprise to

them. As Valkorion later muses to the player: “Emperor of the Sith was my first face, but it is merely one of many I have worn.”¹⁶ Valkorion wears many faces by transferring his consciousness to new bodies, which presents the potential for limitless expansion of his plots and provides limitless material for developers to spin into new stories for players to uncover. In this sense, Valkorion personifies the infinite aesthetic, constituting an infinite narrative frontier for the game similar to how Palpatine and his scheming have provided fodder for many stories related to the main franchise. Valkorion addresses this in his chiding of the player: “Given ten lifetimes, could you unravel all I have wrought?”¹⁷ The unknown contents of Wild Space and the mysterious motivations of its inhabitants thereby provide what Matt Hills calls a “defining narrative enigma or puzzle” that drives the story forward. As long as the enigma remains unsolved, the narrative will continue to circle around it, creating an “endlessly deferred narrative.”¹⁸ Wild Space and Valkorion are only two examples of how outside spaces and their characters can function as enigmas, but they are representative ones.

Outside spaces thus alter the narrative universe and its characters, as is evident in how Wild Space rewrites the identity of the player character. Prior to *Fallen Empire*, the player character has many names and identities determined by the player and the character’s class. A Republic Trooper, for example, has a very different narrative and identity from a Sith Inquisitor. Once encountering the Eternal Empire, however, the player character becomes the Outlander, regardless of what narrative choices and identities came before. All difference is subsumed into the single identity of the Outlander, determined by the spatial relations between outside (Wild Space) and inside (the galaxy). One could argue that this is because of the constraints of game narrative: giving every player character the same identity makes it easier to write a story by eliminating the possibility for divergence. But this design decision also reveals how individuals are transformed by encounters with outside spaces and frontiers. Characters who experience the frontier are marked as outsiders who are essentially different from others in the main galaxy. This trope is common in American frontier fiction, including prominent characters such as Hawkeye in James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*, a frontiersman who

16 “Chapter II,” *Star Wars: The Old Republic: Knights of the Eternal Throne*, developed by BioWare, published by Electronic Arts, 2016, Video Game.

17 “Chapter XI,” *Star Wars: The Old Republic: Knights of the Fallen Empire*, developed by BioWare, published by Electronic Arts, 2015, Video Game.

18 Matt Hills, “Defining Cult TV,” 513.

does not belong in the colonial settlements he originally comes from. Similarly to these characters, the player character is redefined as the Outlander because of their exposure to Wild Space and, through their exploits on the frontier, they play a role in reshaping the internal logic of the galaxy.

The frontier therefore presents a slippage between the outside and the inside, and this is precisely what transpires in the Outlander. At the beginning of *Fallen Empire*, the Outlander is brought before Valkorion, but manages to kill him with the help of Valkorion's son Arcann. This is all part of Valkorion's plan to extend his power by transferring his spirit to the Outlander's body. Outside space, personified in Valkorion, becomes a part of inside space, personified in the Outlander, and the boundaries between these spaces and characters start to blur. While this happens on the level of individual characters, it also happens with the larger narrative universe. As the player learns more about Zakuul and Wild Space, these spaces become more familiar and are assimilated into the internal logic of the galaxy. In this way, the hyperdiegetic cycle expands the narrative universe, changing it through encounters with outside space.

“If you had travelled far enough”

Having established an understanding of what outside spaces are and how they function as frontiers in the hyperdiegetic cycle, one can now turn to their effects. The original *KotOR* game was released in 2003; it precedes *TOR* and its expansions in both the franchise and narrative timeline. *KotOR* places players in the role of Revan, a Jedi knight who broke with the Jedi Order in order to fight a questionable war. After winning that war, Revan journeys with his apprentice to the Unknown Regions beyond the edge of the galaxy and returns changed, as explained by the character Carth Onasi in the game: “When they left after the Mandalorian Wars ended, they were Jedi. When they returned ... they were something else.” On the surface, Revan and his apprentice are Sith Lords typical of the franchise, but Carth's words suggest something more—like the Outlander, they were essentially changed, transformed by their experiences with outside space. What they encountered were the ancient, powerful secrets of the Sith Empire and the Infinite Empire of the Rakata, which they used to their advantage. This is never fully explained in the game, however, and these outside spaces remain a mysterious threat that shapes Revan, his apprentice, and the galaxy they attempt to conquer.

The *KotOR* games reveal the violence of the hyperdiegetic cycle and how it engenders a politics of fear. The transformation presented by the frontier is seen by characters as a threat to the galaxy—particularly to its greatest champions, the Jedi. In a climactic scene in *KotOR II* (2004), the Exile (the player character) confronts three Jedi masters who explain why they exiled her from the Order for following Revan to war. As Master Zez-Kai Ell tells the Exile, “You had become different somehow, changed.” As with Revan, the Exile’s experiences at the edges of the galaxy transformed her into an outsider and the Jedi feared that her mere presence would force a similar transformation on them: “And if you had stayed, you would have changed us, and that we could not allow.” Rather than confront outside spaces and their unknown contents, the Jedi chose to retreat within themselves and remain as they were. Change to the galaxy’s institutions, philosophies, and identities is suspicious and dangerous, and those that engender change must be expelled—like the Exile. This politics of isolationism demonstrates a xenophobia that is ultimately self-defeating, as Kreia, another character from the frontier of the galaxy, expounds in the same scene: “How could you ever hope to know the threat you face when you have never walked in the dark places of the galaxy, faced war and death on such a scale? If you had traveled far enough, rather than waiting for the echo to reach you, perhaps you would have seen it for what it was.” The fear of outsiders and outside spaces is the death knell of the Jedi and even the galaxy itself because it forecloses on the hyperdiegetic cycle and the possibility for growth. It is only by traveling “far enough,” by going outside the familiar and the conventional, that one attains the knowledge and perception needed to survive.

While isolationism within the hyperdiegetic cycle is untenable, the alternative of facing the frontier is always steeped in violence, conquest, and domination. As Slotkin argues with the frontier myth in American culture, this violence regenerates and makes one whole. *KotOR II* represents this in the Exile’s experiences on the edge of the galaxy, where she witnesses the cataclysmic destruction of an entire planet and hundreds of thousands of Jedi, Republic soldiers, and Mandalorians. The incredible violence and trauma broke her and led her to reject everything she knew before, turning away from the Force, the Jedi, and the galaxy to become a reclusive exile. The experience, however, also made her whole, as Kreia describes: “At last, you could hear. You were whole. And, at last, you saw.” Beyond the experience of one character, this process applies to the narrative universe as a whole when it encounters the threat of outside spaces operating by a logic different from its established internal logic. This encounter engenders a disruption, to use Hills’s language, that must be violently overcome. The disruption has

long-lasting effects and fundamentally changes the narrative universe by introducing new experiences, possibilities, and expectations for audiences.

The politics of fear and the violence of Star Wars's hyperdiegetic cycle point us to major ethical and political problems with the use of frontiers in narrative world-building. The portrayal of outside spaces creates excluded others who are always-already monstrous threats, objects to be used, and obstacles to be overcome. The fear of these spaces and outsiders portrayed by the Jedi in *KotOR II* is ever-present and channeled into endless, regenerative violence. In this sense, the hyperdiegetic cycle is founded on a colonial mythos that has a dark history of dehumanization, oppression, and genocide of peoples considered outside civilization. This is especially pernicious when it makes audiences uncritical of and complicit in the violence, such as when the player finally claims the Eternal Throne and conquers the galaxy in *TOR*. By fighting Valkorion, the player completes the cycle of violence, eventually internalizing and employing the same structures of power and domination against which they fought.

Despite being games, in which one would expect greater opportunity for audience agency and narrative emergence, the *KotOR* series presents this outcome as inevitable. One can play within this narrative, but never against it. In this regard, the potential for positive transformation and renewal through the hyperdiegetic cycle is foreclosed and the narrative merely reinscribes the violence that drives it. This situation is not unique to the *KotOR* games, but remains present and seemingly unchallenged in Disney-era Star Wars. Supreme Leader Snoke and the First Order, for example, demonstrate many of the same features revealed in Valkorion and Zakuul. Snoke is a powerful unknown whose identity, origins, and motives remain, thus far, a similar kind of mystery. He and the First Order are new threats to the galaxy's internal logic from the Unknown Regions that must be violently stopped. Opposing them will shape the galaxy and repeat the hyperdiegetic cycle, just as it has before.

However, there are potential ways out of this trap, one of which comes from within the franchise. The predicament of engaging in violence and becoming defined by it is explored in-depth in *The Clone Wars* television series that portrays the Jedi as they face a devastating war that blinds them to Palpatine's schemes. In the final episodes of the series, Yoda sets out on a journey to discover secrets that may yet save the Jedi. After facing a number of trials, Yoda arrives on the Sith world of Moraband to endure one last challenge in the series finale.¹⁹ In the episode's climax, Yoda faces the

19 Moraband is a nod to the *KotOR* series, in which the same world containing the tombs of ancient Sith is named Korriban.

dilemma of either revealing the identity of Darth Sidious or saving Anakin. Sidious tempts him to abandon Anakin: “Let him go, let him die, and you can stop all I will do!”²⁰ Yet, fighting in this way would merely extend the violence and make Yoda culpable, so he sacrifices the opportunity in order to save Anakin. Yoda’s decision suggests there is another way to fight and that there is perhaps a path other than violence. Yoda hints at this path at the end of the episode: “No longer certain that one ever does win a war, I am. For in fighting the battles, the bloodshed, already lost we have. Yet open to us a path remains, that unknown to the Sith is.”²¹ For the Jedi, this path is the ability to extend consciousness beyond death as Force spirits, allowing them to survive, pass on their knowledge, and eventually triumph as liberators rather than conquerors. Effectively, the Jedi thereby find a way out of the cycle of violence that plays into the Sith’s hands—a different way to fight that is not defined by the domination and brutality exhibited in the Clone Wars. A similar (likely less mystical) path is possible for the hyperdiegetic cycle, but finding it requires a critical reconsideration of how we perceive and use outside spaces.

Outside spaces play a significant role in world-building and it is crucial to develop an ethics in how we represent and use them in order to avoid inadvertently re-inscribing the colonial mythology of the frontier. I suggest that there is another meaning or approach to outside space—one that can help break the cycle of narrative violence evident in Star Wars. One can face outside spaces and learn from them in ways that are not violent, controlling, and xenophobic. Certainly, one should resist threats of conquest and domination whenever and wherever they manifest themselves. But outside spaces are not always-already evil threats and expansion through conquest does not need to be the dominant mode of the hyperdiegetic cycle. Instead, one could embrace the outside, the unknown, the strange, and the other, along with the insights and new possibilities they hold. Only by seeking such paths can we hope to unlock the transformative power of hyperdiegesis and outside spaces, and to build narrative worlds that are more inclusive, equal, and just.

20 *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*, “Sacrifice,” season 6, episode 13, Netflix, March 7, 2014, written by Christian Taylor.

21 *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*, “Sacrifice.”

