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WORLDS AND THEIR POTENTIAL

An Intertextual Approach to Worldbuilding

Faculty of Information Technology and Communication Sciences
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TIIVISTELMÄ

Pinja Paju: Worlds and Their Potential: An Intertextual Approach to Worldbuilding
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Tämä tutkielma käsittelee mielikuvituksellisten maailmojen (*imaginative worlds*) rakentamista näkökulmanaan intertekstuaalisuus ja erityisesti, kuinka intertekstuaaliset maailmaa rakentavat viittaukset vaikuttavat narratiiviin. Tutkielma pohjautuu maailmojen rakentamisen eri teorioihin ja yhdistelee niitä vastaamaan erityisesti fantasiapöytäroolipelien tarpeita kuitenkin niin, että tutkielmassa esiteltyä teoriaa voi hyödyntää erilaisten maailmojen analysoinnissa. Teoriaosuuden keskiössä on intertekstuaalinen referointi ja referoijat, eli kuinka maailmaa rakentavia elementtejä yhdistellään erinäisten intertekstuaalisten viittausten tekijöiden (kirjoittaja, lukija, kriitikko) toimesta. Nämä maailmaa rakentavat elementit, jotka voivat olla metatekstuaalisia, aika-avaruudellisia sijainteja, erinäisiä henkilöhahmoja tai narratiivia rakentavia, muodostavat jatkumon maailman ja sen ympäröivän narratiivin välille. Näin tutkielmassa muodostettu uusi teoria pyrkii vastaamaan yhteen mielestäni tärkeimpään maailmojen rakentamisen tämän hetkisistä kysymyksistä: miten ja millä keinoin maailmat vaikuttavat narratiiviin?

Tutkielma jakautuu siinä esitetyn uuden intertekstuaalisen maailmanrakentamisen teorian puolesta kolmeen osaan. Ensimmäiseksi tarkastellaan auktoriteettia tekstiin, eli kuinka tekstin tulkitsemiseen tai lukutapoihin voidaan vaikuttaa. Auktoriteetin todetaan olevan termi, jolla ei ole selviä rajoja, sillä jokainen kirjoittaja on pakosta intertekstuaalisten viittausten tekijä ja täten edistää omia tulkintojaan lukemistaan teksteistään. Auktoriteetin yhteydessä käsitellään myös, miten kirjoittajan, lukijan ja kriitikon roolit kohtaavat toisensa ja limittyvät toisiinsa.

Toinen osa tutkielmassa esitellystä teoriasta keskittyy maailmojen rakentamisen intertekstuaalisuuteen. Aihetta lähestytään tarkastelemalla fantasiapöytäroolipeliä *Dungeons & Dragonsia*. Sen yhdessä osoitetaan, miten intertekstuaalinen referointi linkittää pelin saduista fantasian genrekonventioihin sekä kirjallisiin esikuviin. Lisäksi tässä yhteydessä analysoidaan *The Adventure Zone* -podcastista tuttua maailmaa, joka ei välttämättä ole maailmaa rakentavien elementtiensä puolesta sisäisesti koherentti. Koherenssi syntyy maailmaan narratiivin kautta, täten linkittäen narratiivin ja maailman tiukemmin toisiinsa.

Lopuksi tarkastellaan potentiaalisia narratiiveja, jotka syntyvät, kun maailmaa rakentavat intertekstuaaliset elementit yhdistyvät ja luovat lukijan odotuksia tietynlaisille narratiiveille. Potentiaalia käsitellään sen kertymisen mekaniikan kautta ottaen huomioon lukijan merkityksen potentiaalin huomaamisessa ja siihen reagoinnissa. Lopuksi tarjotaan esimerkkinä tulkinta potentiaalista karnevalismiin *The Adventure Zonessa*.

Avainsanat: maailmanrakentaminen, intertekstuaalisuus, narratiivinen kirjallisuudentutkimus, Dungeons & Dragons, The Adventure Zone

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ABBREVIATIONS

AO3 = Archive of Our Own

D&D = Dungeons & Dragons

DM = Dungeon Master, the narrator of a *Dungeons & Dragons* game

NPC = non-player character

RPG = role-playing game

TTRPG = tabletop role-playing game

1 INTRODUCTION

From Middle-earth to Narnia, from the Marvel Cinematic Universe to homebrewed tabletop roleplaying game multiverses, imaginative worlds, which are the settings for literary narratives, fascinate both authors and readers alike. As the settings for narratives, they enhance their surrounding narratives' properties by highlighting certain themes or textual elements. One could even argue that in some instances, it is not the narrative that has the true power, but the world behind the narrative (cf. Ryan and Thon 2014, 1). After all, how else could one explain how fans spend their time learning constructed languages from a book series or how other fans study the world in enough detail to write fan-fiction spanning several hundred thousand words? Besides these extreme examples, more casual fans may analyse worlds very thoroughly either via fandom discourse or in their own fan creations. These discussions may be very apt in pointing out different properties of the worlds and/or their narratives while combining academic and humorous registers (cf. Hope 2017, 14-15). Worlds occupy a tremendous area in both fan and academic discourse, but so far, their study has been mostly limited to the level of world-as-construct or as stable structure with no narrative influence rather than the approach of world-as-process and the changes narrative introduces (cf. Roine 2016, 18-19). In this thesis, my approach is towards worlds *and* their narratives as one cannot truly exist without the other. Narratives and worlds are understood to influence one another, and narrative can be even seen as an element of worldbuilding. These ideas will be discussed with the case study of *The Adventure Zone: Balance*.

The terminology used in this thesis slightly differs from many of the general conventions. To begin with, worldbuilding here is the study of *imaginative worlds*. I believe the term *imaginary world* to be too involved with the expectation of the fantastical. Many worlds can be very like the real world, such as in urban fantasy with only the slightest twists of fiction. However, there is no practical use in differentiating realistic and imaginary worlds from one

another as both types use similar practices in creation of their worlds (cf. Wolf 2013, 25-28; Doležel 1998, 792-802). *Imaginative* covers all types of worlds found in literary texts, whether they are from a realistic or fantastic point of view or from any atypical medium. In addition, *transmediality* or the study of narratives woven through multiple media to form a greater narrative (Harvey 2015, 1) is also a major focus in this thesis. To differentiate certain types of worlds, *universe* is used to describe a (group of) imaginative world(s) that is a product of multiple narratives (from various media) around the same general setting. An example of this are all the possible game worlds stemming from the rules of *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*). Similarly, *multiverse* is used to describe a *D&D* world that has been formed as a combination of multiple planes or dimensions. Finally, elements of worldbuilding can refer to anything in the text that somehow affects the textual world. The most well-known elements of worldbuilding are characters and spatiotemporal locations.

In addition to these terms, the terms *author*, *reader*, and *text* need some definition. Each should be understood in the most general manner. *Text* can be any combination of word, audio, and visuality. An *author* creates text, while a *reader* consumes it. Of course, as later will be discussed, these roles do not exist in a vacuum and they can be combined (cf. Barthes 1970, 151-152). Related to these, *authority* is here used to determine who can claim the ownership of a text and has the perception to influence what is seen as canonical. Finally, *intertextuality* refers to a web of references between texts (Allen 2011, 1), whether directly or indirectly. Intertextuality can work both on the level of language, e.g. as parodic language, and on the level of literary conventions, e.g. as genre archetypes (cf. Allen 2011, 11).

While worldbuilding is more popular than ever both as a practice and academic discourse (e.g. Ekman 2015, Hergenrader 2018, Mercer and Haeck 2017, Roine 2016, Ryan and Thon 2014, Wolf 2013, Wolf 2017), there is also a very distinct need for new theory. In general, literary landscapes have changed from just the typical novel into multiple media. This has

brought alongside it a boom in transmediality and universes, such as the Marvel Cinematic Universe or the wizarding world that began with the *Harry Potter* novels. There have also been issues of how well the existing theory applies to some media, such as using models that have been tested with interactive text on a computer screen and trying to apply them to tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs). TTRPGs have narratives with endless possibilities and are not as limited in options as a computer RPG may be (Paju 2018, 7). Moreover, the blurring of traditional authorship, or who the text is attributed to, has started to cause more and more issues especially since readers have become authors by means of fan-fiction and other types of fan creation (Tushnet 2007, 63-67). Finally, worldbuilding has been mostly concerned with speculative fiction, understood as a broad genre encompassing fiction with supernatural, fantastical, or futuristic elements (as defined in *Collins English Dictionary*'s usage). But, while most imaginative worlds can be grouped under this umbrella, dismissing atypical genres will cause problems if theory of worldbuilding wishes to stay relevant.

A need for new theory is highlighted by series such as *Critical Role* or *The Adventure Zone* (for a preliminary study of some of these issues, see Paju 2018). As they are both broadcast *D&D* games, the medium is relatively new and thus has not been in the focus of earlier studies. While *Critical Role* has an intended audiovisual presentation, both series rely on spoken word. These types of oral performances have existed before as private games or as shared narratives woven around campfires, for example, but not as the material of worldbuilding theory. Moreover, as the worldbuilding in both series is based on the rules of *D&D*, which in turn are based on genre knowledge of fantasy, the intertextual nature of worldbuilding is highlighted. These transmedial and intertextual features of modern day TTRPG broadcasts make them especially useful for testing the limits of current theories of worldbuilding.

For the reasons mentioned above, this thesis creates an intertextual approach to worldbuilding through the discussion of authority, intertextuality, and transmediality in worldbuilding, ultimately examining how all these intertextual elements create expectations for a certain type of narrative or *potential*. The aim of this study is to update and combine previous theories of worldbuilding and change their focus from authorship into the study of the relationship between worlds and their surrounding narration. In addition, this thesis seeks to create a systematic approach for observing how worlds produce and affect narrative. In other words, how worlds create potential for diverse types of narrative through intertextual expectations and connotations.

For the sake of clarity of analysis, elements of worldbuilding are grouped into four categories (Paju 2018, 12-19; cf. Wolf 2013, 154)[1]. First, there are metatextual elements. These are elements such as (but not limited to) the genre of the text, its title, author(s), and visible links to other texts such as being part of a series or a commentary on another text. The second group consists of worldly locations and other temporal qualities as they cannot truly be separated (cf. Bakhtin 1937, 84). These are what are considered "traditional" elements of worldbuilding. This class includes all the geographical locations and historical aspects of the world as a setting. Linked to the second group is the third group: characters and other beings who interact with the temporo-spatial dimension. Finally, as a result of this interaction is born the fourth group: narrativistic elements. In *D&D* terms, these can be plot hooks in the forms of location descriptions or side quests that form from interaction with the world, mechanical rules such as unpredictability of dice, or even rhetorical devices such as a satirical approach.

There are three main questions this thesis attempts to answer. Firstly, how is worldbuilding intertextual and how does intertextuality affect worldbuilding? Secondly, is the

[1] Wolf also gives further categories for structuring elements of worldbuilding, but the main argument is that a world cannot exist without a physical location, a temporal quality, and characters who experience the world.

aim of (intertextual) worldbuilding coherence, or can incoherency be accepted as a part of worldbuilding? And thirdly, how does the world affect the narrative by creating expectations and potential for diverse types of narration? The path to answering these questions will begin with a concise overview of the current theoretical field in Chapter 2 before moving onto the first question. Intertextuality will be first approached through authority and then through how it is visible in the creation of a world. After that, the second question of (in)coherency will be answered with the example of the TTRPG series *The Adventure Zone*. The third question is answered in Chapter 4 with a discussion on what creates potentiality in the form of possible narratives and how it is read. Potentiality will be analysed through carnivalesque in *The Adventure Zone* as it is easily observed and useful in studying how narrative can be realised. Moreover, carnivalesque is quite a common feature of TTRPGs (Mackay 2001, 69-75) and thus provides a neutral environment for comparison and connection of the structural features of intertextual worldbuilding. The thesis will end with a brief discussion on how all these findings may affect the future theories of worldbuilding.

2 WORLDBUILDING AND INTERTEXTUALITY

This chapter will give a general overview of the current theoretical field. The first part of the chapter will discuss worldbuilding. It will be approached through the most recent and relevant theorists who are distinguished and analysed under three conceptual categories: authorly, readerly, and critical worldbuilding. Each will be discussed for their successes and issues.

The second part of this chapter will cover intertextuality and transmediality. Different types of intertextual referencing in relation to intention, directness, and observability are also discussed. The concept of transmedial storytelling is used in analysing how transmediality is embedded into the rules of *D&D* and the resulting narrative. Transmedial storytelling, or more accurately, transmedial worldbuilding also provides useful theoretical concepts for analysing how worlds may affect narratives.

The third and final part of this chapter discusses various issues in current theories that need further examination. The first is how authorial and readerly perspectives on worldbuilding should be combined. In addition, the problem of how the world and the narrative have been separated is discussed. The second, what the expanding understanding of literature with new media and texts for study means for previous theories. Third, how worlds have expanded into universes and franchises that have been only briefly touched upon by theorists of worldbuilding and transmedial storytelling (e.g. Jenkins 2006, Harvey 2015, Wolf 2012, Ryan 2015). Finally, the chapter concludes with a short remark on the problems of focusing only on speculative fiction.

2.1 Worldbuilding

The study of worldbuilding can be divided into three categories. The authorial tradition is the oldest and perhaps most prominent outside the academic discourse. The authorial tradition is

encountered commonly when the focus is on how the author constructs a fictional world. (Ekman and Taylor 2016, 10; Wolf 2013, 20-29.) Opposed to this view is the readerly tradition which focuses on cognitively orientated narrative study. The readerly field acknowledges the author as a creator of the world, but also how the reader participates in the creation process through their interpretation of the world. (Ekman and Taylor 2016, 10-11; Wolf 2013, 29-33.) The third category of critical worldbuilding is much more recent and less established. The focus of this tradition is mixing the authorial and readerly perspectives, but there is also focus on previously unstudied worlds and media such as in computer games. Moreover, the critical orientation is more likely to approach other theoretical fields such as transmedial or ludological studies. (Wolf 2013, 9-12; Ekman and Taylor 2016, 11-12.) However, pigeonholing theoretical texts into one of these categories is arbitrary. Most theories of worldbuilding have traces of both authorial and readerly perspectives. Moreover, the three viewpoints have moved closer to each other in the past decade or so. For the sake of categorisation, authorial tradition can be said to have been born in the early to mid-20th century at the latest, the readerly tradition with the rise of media studies, and the critical orientation in the 2000's or the 2010's (Wolf 2013, 6-13).

Before approaching the core canon of worldbuilding theory, there is another text of interest: Mikhail Bakhtin's "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel". In the essay, Bakhtin argues that *chronotope* or inseparability of space and time (1937, 84) – a notion vital to worldbuilding – is present in all literature. Moreover, chronotopes "are the organizing centers for the fundamental narrative events of the novel" (1937, 250), affecting how the world in the text is represented. Chronotopes are genre-differentiating features (Bakhtin 1937, 250-251) as different types of temporo-spatial representations of text affect their narrative qualities. Moreover, the real world is reflected into the text and the text is recreated by the reader through their contextual understanding (Bakhtin 1937, 253-254). Bakhtin's approach to textual worlds

thus already hints at the readerly tradition of worldbuilding. Moreover, Bakhtin notes that texts are perceived "in all [their] wholeness and indivisibility, but at the same time we understand the diversity of the elements that constitute it" (Bakhtin 1937, 255). This hints at an understanding of worlds where they can be either complete unities or interplays of elements, solidifying the two main perspectives of critical worldbuilding (Ekman and Taylor 2016, 12-16). However, the authorial approach to worldbuilding is present as well in the essay. The author "represents the world" from a chosen point of view to "deliver the story directly from himself as the author pure and simple" (Bakhtin 1937, 256). Even with this in mind, Bakhtin notes that the "complex problem of the listener-reader" and their "role in renewing the work" remains (1937, 257). Even before the core canon of worldbuilding theory emerged, these issues were noted. Bakhtin's perspective on worldbuilding also highlights the various issues different theorists have decided to approach in their own terms, as the discussion below shows.

The authorial tradition can be best summed up as descending from J. R. R. Tolkien's essay "On Fairy-Stories". Although the essay's focus is on the realm of Faërie and the types of stories it produces, some notes of importance stem from the text. The first is of humans as sub-creators (Tolkien 1939/1947, 122). It should be noted that Tolkien uses sub-creator as a product of Christian faith, whereas creator in this thesis carries no connotations to religion (Tolkien 1939/1947, 155-157; Wolf 2013, 13-14). This term is used to describe the power of imagination a human has in combining words and ideas that lead to fantasy or the beginning of Faërie, hinting at the power of the author. The second is the concept of a mixing pot (Tolkien 1939/1947, 125-127). By this Tolkien means that history carries with it elements that can be mixed together until they form a somewhat coherent unity. Tolkien also adds to this that "[t]here are many things in the Cauldron, but the Cooks do not dip in the ladle quite blindly" (1939/1947, 128). This stance settles Tolkien's idea of worldbuilding as heavily authorial: the author is the ultimate creator of a fantastical world that is created for the story. However,

Tolkien also emphasises intertextual knowledge as the basis of worldbuilding. The third major contribution by Tolkien is the inner consistency and believability of a secondary world[2] (1939/1947, 132). The section describes the dichotomy of believing and being in a world as opposed to not believing in and being outside of the world. This internal vs. external perspective will be of especial note later in my discussion regarding critical worldbuilding.

Finally, Tolkien also discusses fantasy at length (1939/1947, 138-145). Fantasy is described as a mix of imagination and achieving its expression with estrangement and wonder (Tolkien 1939/1947, 139). According to Tolkien, fantasy should be "left to words, to true literature" (1939/1947, 140) as text has the power to invoke imagination in a manner that other mediums cannot. This is because text does not create a "*visible and audible presentation of imaginary men in a story*" (Tolkien 1939/1947, 141, italics original). The problems of highlighting the fantastic will be further discussed later.

Continuing the Tolkien tradition in current times is Mark J. P. Wolf. Although he has noted the vastness of imaginary worlds and the transmedial expansion boom (Wolf 2013, 2-3), his focus is very much on the author. As Wolf's interest in worldbuilding stems from his own experiences as an author (Wolf 2013, 6), this is not surprising. However, Wolf expands on Tolkien's work and contributes many vital theoretical notions to this thesis. Moreover, Wolf gives a thorough overview of the history of imaginative worlds in literature from the Antique to the present day and how the presented worlds have evolved alongside literature. Among the many issues discussed in Wolf's book, the notions of coherency and authorship will be returned to in the next chapter with the analysis of how authority affects texts and what coherency means in relation to worldbuilding. While Wolf contributes much to current theory, he also rejects the intertwining of narrative studies and worldbuilding even while acknowledging that the two

[2] Using a numerical system for differentiating worlds can create issues whenever there are imbedded worlds in a text (such as worlds from imbedded narratives) and thus I will use the real/imaginative/imbedded differentiation.

cannot be completely separated, as a narrative cannot exist without a world while a world can exist without narrative (Wolf 2013, 7-13, 29). This intertwining of world and its surrounding narrative will be thoroughly discussed with the section on potentiality.

The authorial tradition is also very keen on making sense of a world with the help of maps, timelines, and genealogies (Wolf 2013, 156-172), although Ekman (2015, 20-22) at least argues that while maps can help enrichen the text, they are typically paratextual in nature and thus occupy a liminal space in relation to it. Maps, timelines, and genealogies ultimately reduce the world into a highly approachable form, although they do not give a full account of it. In addition to these three main tools, Wolf also gives nature as one of the prime ways an imaginative world can differ from the real world through flora and fauna or even physical laws (2013, 172-179). These are a backdrop for the changes that culture and its related categories of language, mythology, and philosophy (Wolf 2013, 179-194) bring forth and reflect on. Although there are sometimes conflicts with the stricter structures and more creative endeavours, revisions to the text can help create cohesion within the world (Wolf 2013, 194). These categories by Wolf also help to understand the multiplicity of worlds: they are not only physical locations or temporo-spatial qualities of a world and its history, but they also include the world's inhabitants and the narrative they ultimately create. Finally, as Ekman (2015, 23) notes, worlds also exist alongside their metatextual elements of which paratext is quite a common feature in the forms of maps. All this has led to my categorisation of elements of worldbuilding as metatext, location and temporo-spatial qualities, characters, and narrative (Paju 2018, 12-19).

While the authorial perspective on worldbuilding has been rather interested in a single author for a world, a new perspective has risen from ludological studies: collaborative worldbuilding. This collaborative aspect requires all contributors "to act as a team and exchange ideas as they work through complex questions about how worlds work" (Hergenrader

2018, 3). While this collaborative aspect of worldbuilding approaches the practices of readerly worldbuilding, the focus is still very much on the practice of creation rather than the practice of reading the world. However, the presence of multiple authors in such popular narratives as the Marvel Cinematic Universe already shows how important this kind of collaboration between authors is in large-scale projects. As Hergenrader (2018, 48) writes about collaborative worldbuilding in *Dungeons & Dragons*,

> The game's rulebooks and sourcebooks are not about storytelling as much as they are about providing material for players to create their own storytelling experiences. Players may design their own unique worlds from scratch, or they may use worlds that are part of the publisher's official campaign settings. In either case, information about the fictional worlds of *Dungeons & Dragons* (or any role-playing game) can be relayed via a variety of perspectives.

This transformative aspect of *D&D* is perhaps at its most visible in the narratives it creates. For example, *The Adventure Zone* begins as a ready-made adventure that soon evolves into a world completely different and unintended from the source material. The players have the power to change the game to suit their narrativistic needs. The world evolves around their decisions and becomes enriched by their narrative choices. Another group of players could play the adventure of *Lost Mine of Phandelver* much differently from the McElroys, yet the material remains largely the same. Therefore, a simple collaborative aspect to worldbuilding is not enough, but one must also understand the readerly implications of such practices.

Readerly worldbuilding, as the name implies, is focused on how the reader understands the world and how they construct it based on the narrative. To continue with the theme of *D&D*, the players have the rules as a framework (cf. Hergenrader 2018, 47-50), but they also construct their own ideas of the world based on their general knowledge as a reader and as a unique human being. Although Marie-Laure Ryan's theories of interactive worldbuilding were developed with digital environments in mind, they are also applicable to TTRPGs. To begin with, acknowledging that "the player is an author" (Ryan 2001, 190) and that the nature of worldbuilding is to offer exploration of a world and a study of its inhabitants (Ryan 2001, 194) suits the interactive and narrative-orientated nature of tabletop RPGs. With this shift from a

purely literary text towards other media and types of text, Ryan allowed for more peripheral texts to enter the field of worldbuilding.

Readerly worldbuilding has also approached worlds outside the scope of speculative fiction with theories about possible worlds and thought experiments. As Lubomír Doležel (1998, 785-787) argues, fictional worlds are formulated when large-scale and seemingly complete settings are used as tools to produce narrative. Furthermore, all entities in these fictional worlds, whether based on real life examples or not, are "no less fictional" than any other entity (Doležel 1998, 788). However, transmediality and intertextuality are already touched upon here, as "fictional entities and their actual prototypes are linked by *transworld* identity" (Doležel 1998, 788, emphasis in original). Brian McHale develops the theory of possible worlds by distinguishing *modeling of* and *modeling for* (2011, 140). As he describes,

> *[m]odeling of* involves manipulating signs in such a way as to capture a pre-existing reality, while *modeling for* involves manipulating reality in order to bring it into line with a semiotic template. (McHale 2011, 140.)

As understood here, *modeling of* is used for realistic worlds, while *modeling for* is more related to speculative projects. McHale's terminology distinguishes between different types of worlds located on a scale of realistic to fantastic, but it also brings the ends of the spectrum closer to one another. *Modeling for* should not be synonymous with innovation (McHale 2011, 141); instead, *modeling for* bases thought experiments on various questions that ultimately aim for comprehension through comparison. *What if* scenarios produce alternative reality models (McHale 2011, 143-145), while scenarios based on *what could be* produce models of possible futures (cf. McHale 2011, 150-153). Of course, not all *modeling for* worlds are covered by these two questions, but the theories of possible worlds help bridge the gap between the authorial and readerly traditions as they approach readerly questions from a formulistic perspective.

Building on both theories of possible worlds and the more structural authorial tradition, Ryan has described ontological rules for how worlds can be distinguished. According to Ryan (2017, 74-75) a world can be described based on three possible truth values and appointing those to various categories. This shifts the focus away from both speculative fiction and the discourse separating realistic worlds from more imaginary. Although Ryan's categorisation (2017, 80) is used with only a few of the possible world types in existence, already this acceptance of different types of worlds predicts how the focus in worldbuilding is shifting away from the most prestigious traditional fictive forms and towards previously unstudied types of worlds.

Critical worldbuilding, as defined by Stefan Ekman and Audrey Isabel Taylor (2016, 12), is defined by three main questions. The first, *what does a particular element do*, is related to the functions of elements of worldbuilding, thus relating to the authorial tradition. The second question of *how* is more readerly and requires mapping and intertextual referencing to "fully comprehend it" (Ekman and Taylor 2016, 12). Finally, the third question of *what is the effect* shifts the analysis from simple elements of worldbuilding into considering other related qualities of the text, highlighting the need for the intertwinement of worldbuilding with narrative interaction. These three questions will be used as the basis of analysis later with the world of *The Adventure Zone*.

In the era of critical worldbuilding, Ekman and Taylor have suggested two approaches to worlds. The first of *world-architecture* is more authorial and studies the world "from a structural, functional, and aesthetic point of view" (Ekman and Taylor 2016, 12). This type of approach suits the categorisation of multiple worlds but can be somewhat strict as it "transforms space into place" (Ekman and Taylor 2016, 13; cf. de Certeau 1984, 117-118) and can require formalistic analysis of functions as a basis for meaning. The second approach of *dynamic interplay* "takes into account the entirety of the world constructed" (Ekman and Taylor

2016, 14), approaching the world as an entity rather than a sum of its parts. This approach considers the sequence of elements as they are presented in the narrative and suits analysis of worlds that are formed by multiple narratives (Ekman and Taylor 2016, 15). These two approaches stem from de Certeau's differentiation of place and space. Place is "the order -- in accord with which elements are distributed in relationship of coexistence" (de Certeau 1984, 117), hinting at a stable world. In contrast, space is described as "vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables" and is "composed of intersections of mobile elements" (ibid.). The relationship between the two terms is that "space is a practiced place" (ibid.), or once narration touches a stable world, place turns into space.

While these two perspectives form the basis for different approaches for analysis, Ekman and Taylor remind that "a different understanding of just one element, or a small change in relationships between elements, can change the interpretation of the world as a whole" (2016, 16). Similarly, de Certeau notes that place can also come from a space as the narrative organises "the play of changing relationships between [them]" (1984, 118). While this thesis presents one possible usage of the dynamic approach of critical worldbuilding, the tools used here are only one of the possible infinite iterations that exist.

Hanna-Riikka Roine's dissertation bridges the gap between authorial and readerly worldbuilding by introducing the concept of the double perspective of seeing the world as *both* as something possible *and* as a structure or artifice (Roine 2016, 53). Although Roine's theories were not developed with TTRPGs in mind, the theory also applies to them in this perspective (cf. Roine 2016, 83). Although Wolf (2013, 48) argues that one must be "thoroughly immersed in the world" to catch "inconsistencies and [to try] explain and reconcile them with their own theories" and Ryan (2001, 199) similarly claims that a "permanent jet lag" forms from switching perspectives, Roine's (2016, 45-52) collusion of world-internal and world-external perspectives is much more suitable, since both viewpoints often exist alongside each other in

(tabletop) RPGs; a player can think like the character they are playing while being aware of the rules of the system, thus highlighting the need for both perspectives to coexist. Though both authorial and readerly theories have discussed these approaches to worlds, only Roine's theory supports the approach to a world that a TTRPG such as *D&D* demands; while the player is aware of playing the game, they also have a double perspective where they can "imagine the world and be aware of it as a construct" (Roine 2016, 52). Thus, Roine's main theoretical contribution to this thesis is the awareness of worlds as "something 'possibly existing'" and "artificial structures to be contemplated from the external perspective" (Roine 2016, 19), and the emphasis on the player's simultaneous immersion in the game and metatextual knowledge. In *D&D* this can be explained as a combination of metatextual knowledge of rules and how the world functions as well as role-play from the viewpoint of the player character, or quick switching from immersive role-play to asking clarifications of the game mechanics from the DM.

Finally, Roine (2016, 15) touches upon generic fantasy worlds that are "pseudo-medieval" with some magical elements. In these types of worlds, "actors engage in a conflict that is not only defined by rules, but also results in a quantifiable outcome" (Roine 2016, 15). This kind of typification suits most *D&D* worlds. In the case of *Critical Role*'s Exandria, the world is one of these conventional pseudo-medieval worlds that shifts slowly towards the modern era with the emergence of gun-powder and new types of weapons (Paju 2018, 13). As later analysis will show, *The Adventure Zone*'s world functions at first glance within similar parameters of pseudo-medievalistic fantasy with magic. However, the world is in constant change and process as characters interact with it (cf. Ryan 2001, 202). The world-as-construct is processed, and this very act of processing allows exposing the world's premises (Roine 2016, 58). In games, "[t]he roles of user and author -- are intertwined" (Roine 2016, 20), which eventually leads to the authorial power of the player (Ryan 2001, 205). However, one key

difference exists between many TTRPGs and other types of texts: TTRPGs are by necessity transmedial in nature. The game worlds exist in the universes created by the rules (Roine 2016, 192) and they further process the elements of worldbuilding given by the rule system. Because of this main feature of TTRPGs, one must turn to theories of intertextuality and transmediality to understand how TTRPGs produce worlds, how those worlds function, and why the rules guide the narrative in a certain direction.

2.2 Intertextuality and Transmediality

To understand how long intertextual referencing has been present in prestigious Western literary canon, one only needs to look at Saxo Grammaticus and the 13th century book *Gesta Danorum*. The story of Amleth, a prince of Jutland, is first presented in *Gesta Danorum*'s 3rd and 4th books. Later, this same folklore story was heard by a young English writer who adapted it into a quite popular play with a Danish prince called Hamlet. Even later, the same story has inspired many and can be traced all around the world in collective literary knowledge from the young to the old, whether presented in the form of an archaic play or with animated lions (cf. Beyad and Javanian 2018, Gavin 1996). In fact, weaving new narratives from known characters was even common during the Middle Ages (Jenkins 2006, 119). While the story of Amleth or Hamlet traces back at least 800 years, there are traces of even older stories circulating around than that. The Bible certainly retells the same stories, as the gospels of the New Testament prove, pushing the date of intertextuality back to at least the 4th century or some 1700 years old. Even more importantly, using comparative methods and dating trees has helped prove that some fairy tales are even as old as language groups themselves, and thus have been around for at least 2500 years, possibly even 6000 (Graça da Silva and Tehrani 2015, 7-10). Based on this, one can comfortably claim that literature is irrevocably tied to its intertextual roots.

As Allen (2011, 1) writes, "[w]orks of literature -- are built from systems, codes and traditions established by previous works of literature" which are also crucial to understanding the meaning of a text. This network between texts is called intertextuality. Although the idea of intertextuality is heavily built on the works of Ferdinand de Saussure and Mikhail Bakhtin, it was Julia Kristeva who coined the term in the sense of a network of references (Allen 2011, 2-3; Kristeva 1986, 37). As mentioned earlier, intertextuality functions on two levels: the level of language and the level of literary conventions (Allen 2011, 11). On the level of language, a text is read within a specific context and its meaning is shaped by which context it is read in (Allen 2011, 14). For example, a text may have been written in an ironic approach, but through the passage of time and possible translations, the text in question may lose the irony it once had. As for the level of literary conventions, genres are the prime example of an assortment of various conventions that exist in literature. These conventions, be they related to character or plot archetypes, gather connotations in certain circumstances. Once enough of these connotations exist and when certain literary conventions are heavily associated with one another, a genre forms based on all these expectations and intertextual references.

With all this in mind, one must think of the types of intertextual referencing that exist in terms of intention, directness, and observability (cf. Fitzsimmons 2013 division into obligatory, optional, and accidental intertextuality). Intention refers to whether an author intends to make an intertextual reference to another text or convention. Intentional references are made specifically for some purpose and are obligatory to the reader (cf. Fitzsimmons 2013), while unintentional references are more about how the author has been influenced by other texts and how their conventions are passed on without intention. Secondly, directness refers to how clearly an intertextual reference is made. Direct referencing can name origin texts, while indirect references are allusions to other texts. Indirect referencing may also be called optional intertextuality (cf. Fitzsimmons 2013). Thirdly, observability is the reader's chance of knowing

the intertextual reference. On occasion, the reader can spot obvious yet indirect referencing such as when conventions of Disney movies are referenced. At other times, observability is obscured by losing directness such as with the change of vocabulary or the meaning of words. Of course, observability is tied to general knowledge of the world and what an average reader might know. A specific reader can have either limitations or advantages to help with observation of intertextual referencing. Likewise, the reader can also make accidental intertextual connections based on their own known references (cf. Fitzsimmons 2013). Moreover, theories of intertextuality are highly useful when discussing transmediality "because they help explain the manifold ways in which texts shape one another" (Harvey 2015, 20).

Transmedial storytelling is defined by Colin B. Harvey as "capable of accounting for the multiple kinds of interrelated narrativization that can occur across media" (2015, 1). Transmedial storytelling is opposed to adaptations as those are more like "retelling existing stories, whereas transmedia storytelling tends to be characterised as telling *new* stories in different media" (Harvey 2015, 3). This wide definition accounts for all kinds of narratives that ultimately focus around a world or its alternative versions to create an overarching narrative, whether created by multiple large-scale companies or a single individual. The only requirement is for the narrative to be told by multiple media which participators "are asked to engage with" (Harvey 2015, 3). In transmedial projects, the concept of canon is especially important to distinguish authenticity of the transmedial narrative, and thus canonicity (or, at least the perception of it) dictates what is seen as true authorised part of the grand narrative (Harvey 2015, 3-4). Likewise, as Wolf (2012, 245) writes, worlds can "extend across multiple media, becoming transmedial" by either through adaptation or by growth. Adaptation, as Wolf defines it, is presenting a previously existing narrative in another medium "without adding any new canonical material to a world" (2012, 245) while growth by necessity means the emergence of new canonical material. Of course, as both are based on the modifications made on primary

canonical material, both adaptation and growth share quite a few features (Wolf 2012, 246). Even so, distinctions between the two became blurry when considering the case study text of this thesis, *The Adventure Zone*. Strictly following Wolf's terminology, the world of *The Adventure Zone* is adapted both from the rules of *D&D* and the related *D&D* starter kit adventure *Lost Mine of Phandelver.* However, as the second story arc of the show quickly makes apparent, the world in *The Adventure Zone* soon grows larger than its origins and modifies the world presented both by the rules of *D&D* and *Lost Mine of Phandelver* dramatically enough that one hardly remembers that the origins of the game narrative lie in official *D&D* material. Even with all this in mind, one also cannot ignore the fact that a written adventure module for a game is not a true adaptation of the rules of the game, but a transmedial expansion itself. Already, transmediality is imbedded into the structure of the rules of the game, not to mention how a transmedial transformation must happen from rules and mechanics into actual gameplay for narrative to exist. This transmedial approach will be returned to later in this thesis in section 3.2.1.

While this transmediality exists in the rules of *D&D*, Wolf (2012, 248) also notes that different media present worlds through different relations of basic elements: words, images, sounds, and interactions. While Ryan (2015, 3-4) notes that multimodal narration is not to be confused with transmediality, it is useful to analyse how a medium affects the presentation of the same narrative in different forms. A *D&D* game is heavily based on spoken word and interaction with it. While *The Adventure Zone* is reliant on these two basic ingredients, the show also takes advantage of the audial medium with additional sounds, namely music. In *Critical Role* this experience is taken further and presented to the viewer with the aid of images of both characters and representations of the world, for example in the form of battle maps. However, *The Adventure Zone* is not without this type of visual representation. Quite the opposite, the success of the adapted graphic novels based on *The Adventure Zone* podcast

proves that the narrative of a *D&D* game can be expressed without sound, although signs of interactivity remain in the metatextual representations of the DM Griffin in the comics, as seen in image 1.

IMAGE 1. Page 37 of *The Adventure Zone: Murder on the Rockport Limited!* Illustrations by Carey Pietsch. Published by First Second in July 2019.

However, although the characters interact with the DM, the audience remains an observer in this participatory process whether listening to the podcast or reading the graphic novel (cf. Wolf 2012, 262-264; Hope 2017, 122-123). This does not diminish the interactivity present in the game; quite the opposite, this differentiation of two types of readers of the text, the players and the audience, simply shows the evolution of the medium.

The close relationship that transmediality has with worldbuilding has already been noted. As Henry Jenkins writes, "[t]ransmedia storytelling is the art of world making" (2006, 21) and the reader assumes the role of a collector to understand both the overarching narrative and its world. Similar hunter-gathering happens while listening to *The Adventure Zone*. A reader completely unaware of the context can draw enjoyment from listening to the narrative, but familiarity with the rules of D&D and the McElroys' typical shenanigans will certainly help with making sense of what to expect and, furthermore, notice when tropes and conventions are re-examined. Some of the things presented in the narrative do not make sense for a reader who does not understand the rules of *D&D*. Likewise, even being familiar with the rules does not always help as the McElroys can and will disregard them for the sake of the narrative. Understanding the intertextual references the McElroys make in the podcast enrich both the world and the narrative of *The Adventure Zone* (cf. Jenkins 2006, 94-96).

As Ryan also argues, transmedial storytelling should rather be called transmedial worldbuilding (2015, 4-5). Ryan notes that there are two types of genres: plot-dominated and world-dominated (Ryan 2015, 5). In the plot-dominated genres, the world is merely "a container for the characters and their actions, and the plot could easily be moved to another type of world" (ibid.). In contrast to the world-dominated genres "the plot acts as a path through the storyworld that reveals the diversity of its landscapes" and thus are more likely for transmedial expansions to happen in (ibid.). This notion of *how* the world is used in telling the narrative points out to one of the issues of this thesis, namely how worlds predispose certain types of narratives. While I do not completely agree that when the focus is on the plot, the world can be changed through the rules of transposition without any major changes to the plot, this idea of two types of approaches helps with analysing worlds that do not perform according to genre expectations. For example, fantasy adventures often require the reader to pass through vast amounts of exposition and worldbuilding to make the setting of the story feel more

fantastic and thus believable. However, on occasion this type of worldbuilding may hinder the reading experience enough to call into question whether worldbuilding is necessary for that type of narrative. Ryan's disposition of storytelling versus worldbuilding allows for these atypical genre representatives to exist without being forced to a previous mould. In the case of *The Adventure Zone*, the focus of the game is clearly on the narrative instead of building the world. While it may seem quite odd to study the worldbuilding of a plot-dominated narrative, this actually provides a much more controllable case study than what the layers upon layers of worldbuilding of world-dominated narratives such as *The Lord of the Rings* would require.

For transmedial worldbuilding to be successful in creating worlds perceived as possible, there must be "sufficient consistency" in each instalment that creates the overarching narrative (Jenkins 2006, 113). Continuing Jenkins's work, Harvey states that transmedia storytelling may lead to fragmentary or seemingly incoherent worlds for those who are not already familiar with all parts of the overarching narrative. However, he defines a successful world as one a reader wants to engage with no matter the issues present in the text. (Harvey 2015, 46-50.) This transmedial perspective on worldbuilding provides ample room for texts that invoke the curiosity of any academic instead of only the most prestigious ones that have been so far studied. However, there is an issue with both Harvey and Jenkins's beliefs: both seem to believe that a world needs to be internally coherent. The world of *The Adventure Zone*, as the analysis in section 3.2.2 shows, challenges even the liberal view presented by both theorists.

2.3 Current Issues for Theory

The main issue for current theory is combining the authorial and readerly perspectives on worldbuilding without dismissing one while highlighting the other. Both the roles of the author and the reader need to be called into question to understand what exactly their relationship is and how they contribute to the creation of a world. Moreover, each tradition's contributions to

the current status quo of worldbuilding needs to be acknowledged while not dismissing the problems present in either tradition. Of course, no theory will cover every and any imaginative world. That still does not mean that the theoretical frameworks cannot discuss with each other to help approach the recent challenges to the literary landscape.

Another main concern for theory is the focus on how a world is created. This mostly stems from the differentiation between the authorial and readerly perspectives and has been noted increasingly in recent years, but there has been little focus on how the world affects the narrative. Of course, a more mechanical and formalistic analysis of a world can be used in presenting its distinctive features as a basis of narrative functions (cf. Ekman and Taylor 2016, 12-14), but I believe that a world and its narrative should not be separated. Studying worlds through their intertextual features and how those features create potential for certain types of narratives links the world back to the text instead of trying to separate the two (cf. Wolf 2013, 29). Moreover, although readerly worldbuilding has already studied how worlds are interpreted, there is still a need for a discussion on what motivates certain types of readings. This will be approached through the analysis of potential or how possible narrative emerges from expectations present in worldbuilding.

Another difficulty the current theories face is the expanding understanding of literature. Whereas previously prestigious printed texts were the primary focus of study (e.g. Tolkien's Middle-earth, Lewis's Narnia), literature has expanded to cover new and previously unstudied media. An example of the first would be the study of role-playing games (whether tabletop or computer), and an example of the second would be the study of films or television series. Moreover, not only have the media been explored more thoroughly, there has been a prominent shift in the roles of the author and the reader. Authorship is not respected without critique the same way it was even 20 years ago (see the discussion on J. K. Rowling in section 3.1.2), and on occasion, readers may dapple into authorship via fan-fiction or other means. As if these two

shifts in literary landscapes were not enough, there has also been a massive shift in the outcomes of narrative. Whereas traditionally a text has a single outcome, the use of computers has brought with itself a chance of several or even infinite outcomes of a narrative (cf. Ekman and Taylor 2016, 10-11; Ryan 2001, 210-211, 242-258). Texts have transcended their previous boundaries and may require multiple readthroughs with differing narrativistic choices to understand their complete form. For example, many visual novel games explore their plots through slightly differing retellings that only reveal the full story after many playthroughs. Whereas one ending may reveal the point of view of one character, another ending may tell the story of the objective truth.

Worldbuilding itself has started to become more concerned with the traditional limits of worlds. Whereas in the beginning theory was focused on a single text or textual unity such as a series, nowadays the prominence of transmedial worlds and textual universes cannot be forgotten. Worlds push into new territories as they are adapted and shaped through shifts in media or when they join other narratives that start building a textual universe. For example, the adaptation of the *Harry Potter* novels into the eight movies was not yet a direct shift into transmedial territory since the worldbuilding and narrative remained similar enough. However, the expansions of *Pottermore* and the *Fantastic Beasts* franchise certainly have been. In the beginning *Harry Potter* covered only the British wizarding world, but recently the wizarding world has become a creation based on the novels by J. K. Rowling, *Pottermore*, the *Fantastic Beasts* movies, and various other texts. Other universes are built similarly. The base rules of *D&D* lay out what the game world or multiverse is expected to be like. However, each game eventually develops into its own multiverse that has similar features to the other multiverses in the *D&D* textual universe. Universes are possible whenever a world separates from another in a distinct enough way. This may be a simple difference in the history of the fictive world but may also reach the natural laws the world is organised around. Moreover, multiple franchises

colliding may create a universe as has happened with Marvel films. The expanding properties of worlds have been noted by most worldbuilding academics of the 21st century, but they still need more study if worldbuilding wishes to answer the challenges brought on by the widening literary landscape.

Finally, we arrive at the problem of the fantastical touched upon earlier (Tolkien 1939/1947, 138-145). Although the scope of worldbuilding has widened from being focused on just the fantastic (cf. Ryan 2017), the theory has been developed mostly with speculative fiction in mind. Though this is not a problem in itself, different genres should be noted as well. Unfortunately, my thesis does not touch upon these other genres or more realistic worlds. However, I believe that the theoretical principles I introduce could be used in the analysis of more realistic worlds rather than those of pure fantasy. Intertextual referencing happens in all types of texts, as the next chapter will prove, and thus analysis for potential is possible in various contexts and for various types of potential, such as queer readings or carnivalistic humour.

3 INTERTEXTUAL REFERENCES AND REFERENCERS

This chapter covers my main theoretical arguments. Among them is the discussion of authority in the 21st century and how authority should be approached. Authority, understood in terms of the ownership of a text and the perception of its canon, is determined to be a shifting term with no clear boundaries, since all authors are intertextual referencers by necessity. Through these references, they link their text into the history of literature and define its place in the field. Moreover, the definitions of author and reader are called into question, as well as the role of the critic in relation to them. Authors are not only a function to collect cultural references, but they also are public personas and influencing agencies of their own.

The second part of this chapter covers the intertextuality of worldbuilding. The topic is approached through the example of *Dungeons & Dragons*. The discussion will begin with pointing the linking from fairy tales to genre conventions of fantasy and eventually the rules of *D&D*. After that I will discuss the podcast *The Adventure Zone*. In its analysis, I will focus especially on how worlds can be incoherent and still accepted by the reader. As the opposite is believed to be true, the discussion of how this happens with *The Adventure Zone* will portray how the incoherency of a world can become one of its narrative qualities, thus further conjoining worldbuilding and narrative while presenting worldbuilding as an element of narrative.

3.1 Authority

What is an author and how do we determine the authority of a text? Michel Foucault began the quest to answer this question half a decade ago, yet there still is no simple answer. Quite the opposite, the current literary landscape has muddled the concept of the author even further. Nowadays texts have creators in many more senses than can easily be described. A book often

has a single, named author, but are the writers of the adapted movie authors as well? If so, what about the actors who bring the characters alive and interpret them? Moreover, if the source material is expanded into transmedial works (as has happened with fantasy conventions from major works turning into the game *Dungeons and Dragons* which in turn has evolved into *The Adventure Zone*), is the extension an independent text or just a continuation of the original author's authorship?

As it soon becomes obvious, there are no simple answers to these questions. Once a literary text transcends its previous borders into other media or narratives, defining authorship becomes quite difficult as various parts of the text come from various sources. If this progress continues far enough, the original text may even become an archetypal text or a genre-reference (Wolf 2013, 37), the prime example of a certain set of typical conventions. This has happened with, for instance, J. R. R. Tolkien's works. As Foucault (1980, 134) writes,

> [t]he initiation of a discursive practice, unlike the founding of a science, overshadows and is necessarily detached from its later developments and transformations. -- [T]he work of these initiators is not situated in relation to a science or in the space it defines; rather, it is science or discursive practice that relate to their works as the primary points of reference.

The moment a new discursive practice is born, all following discourse then logically must refer to the original text whether by borrowing its conventions or by redefining the discourse by introducing new ones. (Aldred 2017, 216, 218-220; Wolf 2013, 273-279.)

Since even authorship is this difficult to define, one must think of authority in general terms rather than as a definite answer. Each text combines various elements from multiple sources, yet not all the authors of these textual elements can claim authorship of the finished text. Instead, authorship is usually given to the one(s) who created these unique combinations. Although a complete text may list even thousands of people as partial creators, being credited is not authority. Instead, authority means being able to determine the perception of canon. It is far more sensible to limit the analysis of authority to these most prominent creators. However, acknowledging the other participants for their contributions is necessary as they have affected

the text. In this manner, all contributors are credited but the concept of authorship is not outright destroyed.

3.1.1 Authorship and Worldbuilding

Authorship and its relationship with worldbuilding have been discussed by Jessica Aldred (2017, 216-223) and Mark J. P. Wolf (2013, 268-287). As they both agree, the author is no longer "a lone figure producing a work in isolation, for whom influences and potential consequences play no role in the shaping of a work" (Wolf 2013, 268). Instead, the more extensive a world (or a universe) is, the more likely it is for it to be the product of multiple authors. This is more visible in what Wolf refers to as open worlds (2013, 270), or worlds that are still in the process of being shaped and changed. These unfinished worlds are more likely to take influences from various sources (Wolf 2013, 270). This can be seen later in the analysis of *The Adventure Zone*. However, finished or closed worlds are not impervious to multiplicity of authorship. Once a world has been finished or closed, its authorship is claimed by a limited number of creators. That number is difficult to prove to be anything else than what the general audience agrees on. Furthermore, closing a world also means that there is no longer a possibility for new authors to emerge (Wolf 2013, 270).

Authorship and worldbuilding are further challenged by the concept of canonicity (Wolf 2013, 270-271). Canon, the consensus of what are the official parts of a story, is not always simple to define. Middle-earth is a prime example of how canonicity affects a world's authorship. J. R. R. Tolkien's texts have slightly differing canons of the world based on their order of creation and the status of completion. However, the core literature of Middle-earth is in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. The core canon is further disturbed by Christopher Tolkien. He has added to J. R. R. Tolkien's canons and continued them, thus blurring the canonicity and authorship of the world. Most readers would agree that Christopher Tolkien's

work is authorial because it is based on J. R. R. Tolkien's notes and through his torchbearer status (cf. Wolf 2013, 273-276). Occasionally he is even considered an author in his own right who has worked on Middle-earth, while at other times he is simply an editor of his father's work. In some instances, these two roles exist in the same work, further muddling Christopher Tolkien's status as an author. However, these works most influenced by Christopher Tolkien are yet to be accepted into the unquestionable core canon. *The Silmarillion* is closest to reaching core canonical status since most of the text has only minor influences by Christopher Tolkien, but more recent publications remain at the borders of Middle-earth's canon. (Aldred 2017, 218; Wolf 2013, 272-283.)

In addition to the opposing book canons, Peter Jackson's adapted films further challenge Middle-earth's authorship. *The Lord of the Rings* film series is a condensed version of the books, and while it misses some scenes present in the novels, the movies are close enough to the original to be in the same sphere of canon. *The Hobbit* films are a different matter. The differences between the films and the book are drastic enough for even the fandom to differentiate between the two canons. On *Archive of Our Own*[3] (*AO3*, as of January 4th, 2019), the Jackson movies have 16,314 associated works, while the book canon has 9,460 associated works. There is an overlap of around 7,500 works as some authors tag both canons, but the difference is notable enough. The two canons have prominent enough status, while the authorship of these two canons is difficult to dissect to say the least. All texts formed around Middle-earth come from J. R. R. Tolkien's original worldbuilding, but not all of them are written by him. Instead, his work has been added to, edited, and adapted. They have even been continued and rewritten as fan creations. The further from the source the texts come, the less authorial control J. R. R. Tolkien has in them even if the world of Middle-earth is copyrighted to him. (Aldred 2017, 218; Wolf 2013, 272-283.)

[3] https://archiveofourown.org/

Authority and canon are further challenged by different editions and issues of the books and their translations. Most texts have an edition, sometimes the first and other times a prestigious later edition, that presides over others. However, other editions and additions – and even parts that have been removed – are just as authoritative, not to mention revisions to noticed mistakes. Moreover, one must not forget how a text changes from a manuscript during the publication process. (McGann 1983, 51-63.) *The Lord of the Rings* can be found in its six book forms, the three volumes, or as the complete story. Some editions include the intended maps and appendices, while others have new related paratexts such as illustrations or commentaries. All these are official publications of the books, yet they all create slightly differing mental representations of the story and its world. In fact, the publisher and the publishing platform can affect the perception of the world even more than the text itself. An audiobook is shaped by the vocal decisions of the voice actor, while the visual representations and illustrations of the text may force all readers to perceive a character as is shown. Even typesetting can create differing reactions to the world. All these together have the power to change the perception of a text and thus its world.

As mentioned, translators have immense power to change a world and its perception (cf. McGann 1983, 55-58). For example, modifying a character's name changes their perceived personality. Similarly, the style of narration (e.g. degree of formality) affects languages with different linguistic coding. Despite this, translations are just as canonical as the original text. While the original author gains their authority from creating, translators gain it from modifying. The translator's authority is even visible outside of literary texts. If the reader cannot read the original, they must trust the translator to have been accurate in representing the ideas of the original text. On these occasions, the translator's influence is even greater than that of the original author's. (Wirtén 2004, 38-40, 56.)

Fanboy auteurs (Aldred 2017, 222) or, in my preferred terminology, fan-creators are somewhat like translators in their power to change the perception of an original work. Even with this in mind, they also have properties of original authors. The process of intertextual referencing is simply at its most visible in them. Fan-fiction presents the original world and the narrative in new ways. This could mean reimaginations of canon, unrelated scenarios, continuations or fill-ins, or combinations with other texts. In the case of fan-fiction, the writers explicitly take the role of the intertextual referencer. On *AO3*, they can tag all related fandoms, characters, and scenarios or conventions present in their text. In this manner, they state the elements of worldbuilding (e.g. characters) and the conventions they have used (e.g. coffee shop alternative universe) that are intertextual in nature. (Aldred 2017, 222; Wolf 2013, 279-280.)

The difference between fan creations and "original" fiction is miniscule. "Original" fiction is simply less likely to make its intertextual references as visible. Just as all fan-fiction reuses elements of worldbuilding or produces counternarratives, original authors use their knowledge of genre conventions, plot and character archetypes, and other elements of worldbuilding in creation of a world and its surrounding narrative. One might even argue that originality does not exist. After all, all elements of worldbuilding and narrative stem from another source or are re-examinations of them. Thus, all elements are only intertextual references themselves. (Barthes 1977, 146.)

3.1.2 Authors as Intertextual Referencers

If nothing is original but all is simply intertextual referencing, does that mean that the author is as dead as Roland Barthes claimed? Declaring that an author "can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original" (Barthes 1977, 146) implies that everything is only regurgitated. This, however, poses a problem. If authors only repeat and reimagine, why is it

possible to point out when certain conventions began to exist in literature? After all, one cannot presume (human) literature to have existed before the birth of the modern human or the solar system, which the stance above would imply. Describing literature as an imitation of Plato's world of ideas is highly problematic as the origins of narrative have the power to influence the result. The world of Middle-earth would not be the same without J. R. R. Tolkien's experience of religion and all his work in academia. Likewise, the Peter Jackson movies would not be the same without Jackson's first experiences of Middle-earth. Rather than kill the author outright, one may instead accept that authors "characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society" (Foucault 1980, 124). In other words, intertextual references create the author function and likewise, authors repeat the cycle of intertextual referencing onwards. This happens through the conventions they have learned and by borrowing elements of worldbuilding and narrative from others to create a text of their own. However, the author is not only limited to functioning as an intertextual referencer, but also includes the author as a public persona (cf. Ellis 2018, 13:49-19:17). One cannot dismiss how authors can impact their works through their acting as this public persona, whether it is to fulfil others wishes for an author to exist (whether that be a publisher or a reader) or to simply keep their text more relevant. Moreover, the author's public persona can be affected by other entities than their own self long after their death. For example, Christopher Tolkien affects the perception of J. R. R. Tolkien by editing his father's works (cf. Wolf 2013, 274-276).

If authorship then is in constant change and authors are only intertextual referencers, what happens to the originality of text? Perhaps nothing is original, since all ideas have been introduced before in some form. If there is something new, it is only an answer to earlier discourse. Many elements of worldbuilding are intertextual references, but the originality of text is in its unique combinations. Most importantly, originality is primarily an idea. Just because a text appears to be original does not mean that it truly is. For example, the *Harry*

Potter series seems highly original yet most of the elements of worldbuilding are direct borrowings. The perception of originality stems from the fact that *Harry Potter* brings together so many elements of worldbuilding that the world starts to feel different enough from the real world. Moreover, the prominence of Middle-earth in fantasy literature saturated the scene with high-fantasy narratives. Bringing a fantastic world to mirror the real world and to infuse it with modernity helps to make *Harry Potter* seem more unique in contrast to the earlier literary landscape.

A story may have the same building blocks as another, but their narratives separate them. Again, the narration styles between two texts may be identical, yet their textual elements separate them. The world of *The Hobbit* novel is different from the world of *The Lord of the Rings* books. Similarly, their adapted films differ from their source materials. Not everything in a text needs to be new or inventive for the text to be perceived as original. That happens once the text has enough unique combinations and indirect intertextual references. As mentioned, authors do not solely create original material. Rather, they reinvent previous texts and link their own into the continuum of literature. The number of original elements in a text can vary noticeably. Even so, every text must have some intertextual references to be understood. This level of linking begins at the level of language. This is done by using certain words or terms that are strongly associated with certain ideas. An example of this would be dragons. They are associated with fantastic worlds and heroic quests that end in their slaying. Furthermore, these terms perform genre conventions and narrativistic archetypes at a structural level. They help to enrichen the meaning of the collective text.

Intertextual references link a text to a history of other texts and help determine its place and position in the literary field (Foucault 1980, 127). Sometimes, a text directly refers to other texts such as by quotation. At other times, intertextual linking is only visible once the surrounding contextual culture is removed. For example, translated texts from distinct cultures

may indirectly refer to some known cultural phenomenon that is non-existent to the translated audience. By losing these connections, the text may even lose meaning. Sometimes, a translator may add notes throughout the text to explain it to a reader of different contextual understanding. In these instances, it is often because those intertextual links can only be understood if they are again made visible using these notes. Likewise, similar notes may be added to explain shifts in language that have occurred between the publication of the first edition and the revised edition. The notes may even offer insight on double meanings or wordplays. (Cf. McGann 1983, 56-58.)

The reader's knowledge of the world and of literary conventions affects how they read a text. The more aware the reader is of the web of intertextual linking, the more likely they are to access hidden levels of text. This may lead to finding the author's intended meaning, or it may lead to different readings. In any case, killing the author outright is not without its issues. One might not care for their interpretation of the text, but it should not be completely dismissed among all the readings. Only following the author's stated intention may erase some of these other readings found on the deeper levels. Instead of blindly subscribing to each view, a moderate position may be more fruitful. Authors can say whatever they want about their works, but it is up to the reader to decide whether they want to accept the author's perspective or not. (Cf. Barthes 1977, 146-148; Foucault 1980, 138.)

An example of this battle of authorial intent and the death of the author is the recent debacle with J. K. Rowling. Since the *Harry Potter* book series ended, Rowling has given explicit permission for fans to explore the wizarding world. However, Rowling has also tried to take back control of the wizarding world. This began almost immediately after the publication of the books. Rowling has presented various facts of the wizarding world on her blog, on Twitter, and on *Pottermore*, an encyclopaedic internet site with articles ranging from additional background information (such as lore on wand woods) to related narratives (such as

Quidditch game reporting). On occasion, these facts are easily accepted as canonical while other times they are bitterly fought against. The main reason for this is that these facts are not represented anywhere else than in paratext. In addition, Rowling has re-gained authorial ownership with the transmedial expansions of the 2010's. The play *Cursed Child* and the *Fantastic Beasts* franchise have introduced new authorised material for consumption. While some fans accept them, others completely reject them. This latter group claims that the wizarding world exists only in the seven *Harry Potter* novels. Any added facts, adaptations, or transmedial expansions are simply J. K. Rowling's attempts to reclaim lost authorship. (Brummit 2016, 112-114; McGann 1983, 39-41; Sarah Z. 2018, 6:16-7:37, 15:35-32:05; Ellis 2018, 9:18-14:33.) However, just because the new material is *authorised* does not make it strictly canonical. For example, J. K. Rowling's Twitter comments may sometimes derogate the existing idea of the wizarding world (for readerly commentary on one of these issues, see Reese 2019). This is the clearest example of why authorship does not always equal authority: the reader *always* has the power to either accept or disregard any material they wish to, more so when this material is a paratextual addition. The reader may stop reading at any point in the narrative, or they may read differently than was intended, or they may read all the texts and paratexts and even read commentaries of those paratexts that influence the meaning of the original text.

One final key point for consideration is that the role of the author "is not universal or constant in all discourse" (Foucault 1980, 125). As Wirtén writes, the history of authorship is some two or three thousand years old but guarding authorship can be linked to copyright and intellectual property. It has forced readers to respect authors in a different manner by stopping modifications to these works. In the pre-industrialised world, fairy tales and other types of collective narratives were considered common property. Those texts collected elements from different intertextual referencers through thousands of retellings. Once authorship of text

shifted from the collective to the single person, the experience of literature changed. Plagiarism and piracy became crimes with the introduction of copyright and quoting other texts must happen explicitly. Authors nowadays have legal rights to their works and own them for a certain amount of time. (Wirtén 2004, 16-20.) All this highlights the changes that have happened in literary circles. Authorship is neither unchangeable nor very clearly defined in any era (Foucault 1980, 125). This makes it possible to study untraditional authorship, among them multiple authors, expansions, transmedial works, or even fan creations. All these features challenge the idea of a sole author. They help to redefine authority and give credit to authors that have been previously dismissed.

The problem of authorship should not be allowed to affect the analysis of a text unless it is highly relevant. All texts are original in some ways and intertextual in others. Each text should still be treated as unique in their own way. Worldbuilding has approached the problem of authority by first giving all power to the original author. The readerly tradition's answer to this was to claim that the reader is the one to construct the world. My stance is somewhere between these two. The author does create these unique combinations, but they also reference all their literary knowledge. The reader is offered an intended narrative, but they have the power to read the text as they want to. Rather than give the ultimate authority to either one, it is far more useful to understand that these roles are not as clear-cut as previously thought.

3.1.3 Problematic Roles

Before approaching the intertextuality of worldbuilding, the roles of author, reader, and critic as introduced by Ekman and Taylor (2016, 10-11) need further inspection to understand why and how intertextual worldbuilding happens. Using this type of differentiation of roles forgets their dependent natures. A text cannot exist properly without the author and the reader. To begin with, these roles can be reversed. Authors can become readers, and readers may become

authors (cf. Barthes 1970, 151-152). In addition, the roles may be combined with each other. If these roles are to be kept, one must remember they are much more intertwined than has been previously noted.

Authors can act like readers by taking part in the process of intertextual referencing described earlier. In this process, they create links to other works and their readings of the referenced texts in their texts. (Cf. Barthes 1970, 173-174.) In addition, they can also read their readers' wishes. This latter process can be either explicit or implicit. Implicit author-reading is rather difficult to define. An example would be where the author publishes their story in several instalments with enough time between to become aware of the readers' reactions. Although the author may deny responding to the readers, accounting for the human element is difficult as the story may be modified from the original plan. The author may explicitly comment on the complaints and wishes of their readers. This may even lead to the modification of the text (e.g. test-showing a film and then re-cutting it). Explicit author-reading can be called fan-service. On occasion, it is a deviation from the main plot like an episode of a series that has nothing to do with the main narrative nor does it affect it. At other times fan-service can introduce relevant storylines e.g. by adding a secondary character's storyline or point of view. These are the main ways author-readers exist.

Not only can authors act as readers, but readers can also become authors. As has been previously suggested, fan-fiction relies on the concept of the reader-author and the perception of canonicity (Wolf 2013, 270-271, 279-280). Readers who decide to participate in the world become authors by writing about it. In fact, sometimes fan-fiction is successful enough to create its own canon. These are not only restricted to the epics available on fan-fiction sites such as *AO3*. Some forms of fan-fiction even touch upon stories in public domain. In Elizabeth Kostova's *The Historian*, vampire myths of Europe and ideas of vampires presiding in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* are combined with the legends of Vlad the Impaler (Beresford 2008, 78),

creating a new type of approach to vampires and a canon of its own. Fan-fiction illustrates the problems of authorship with adaptations, transmedial texts, and reimaginations. As was discussed with Tolkien's Middle-earth, determining the canonicity or authorship of the material is at times difficult to say the least. Add to this the modifications and interpretations a reader-writer introduces, and canonicity as a concept ceases to exist. For example, reimagining a fairy-tale element such as a red hood can carry a political agenda. In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, a red hood symbolises separation into a totalitarian society's rigid gender roles (Coad 2001, 54-55). Taken far enough, the end results of reimaginations may be nothing like the original. The second scenario of transforming fan-fiction into original text is more problematic. To begin with, the legality of such is questionable at best (Tushnet 2007, 60-61). In the case of satire or parody, worldbuilding can be borrowed without permission with few if any repercussions. However, this transformative aspect is also present in fan-fiction, although (typically) in a different manner. While fan-fiction is often frowned upon, drawing a line between a commentative fan-fiction or a parodying work can be difficult as persecution of one can lead to persecution of the other. Fictional commentaries may highlight the same issues as academic commentaries, but the presentation is different. Fan-fiction turned original illustrates how authors offer their experience of a world to the reader. The reader likewise experiences the world and rewrites the narrative to fit their experience. This phenomenon is further explored in section 3.3.2 with a discussion of how potentiality is read.

Finally, we arrive at the critic. Instead of being a separate role, I suggest that the concept of the critic must be conjoined with both author and reader. For example, an author may be their own critic. They may discuss their own texts and analyse them critically. In addition, Ekman and Taylor's criteria (2016, 10-11) hints at the reader-critic. By necessity, the critic must be a reader before they criticise the text. Criticism can be for pleasure, an academic practice, or both. Moreover, criticism often happens in the shape of a reader-critic-author. In

this instance, a critic publishes either their analysis of the text or writes a new, literary text that intertextually references the first one. In this manner, all these previously separate roles can become one in a single person. This further helps explain why all writing is intertextual referencing, and thus, why all elements of worldbuilding are intertextual in nature.

3.2 Intertextuality of Worldbuilding

Worldbuilding has been intertextual in nature ever since the very beginning. Already Tolkien's metaphor of the Cauldron of Story that to has "continually been added new bits" (1939/1947,125) recognises that worldbuilding is always intertextual as all elements of worldbuilding exist in some form in the surrounding textual landscape before they are used in a new text. Of course, as I argued in the previous section, these elements can be and are rewritten and re-examined, not to mention combined and then reconstructed. In fact, elements of worldbuilding do not only stem from literary texts; the real world can have just as big an impact on worldbuilding as any genre-defining imaginative world. There are countless examples of how literature has been used as commentary for real-world events, such as Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* criticising many contemporary phenomena. As the world and its surrounding narrative cannot be separated, this also means that the real world can seep into elements of worldbuilding and thus may become part of the text. Since I cannot answer whether a text can truly be separated from its context without losing meaning, a question remains of how much the real world affects fictitious worlds.

Intertextual worldbuilding also answers one of the main current issues in theory I outlined earlier: the focus on how a world is created and not how it affects the narrative. Although readerly worldbuilding has tried to answer why worlds are read as they are, this shift in focus not only allows for an understanding of how the world is created by all the participants of the process but how it also encourages certain types of narrative. While this section is concerned

more with the process in terms of authorial and readerly worldbuilding, the next chapter focuses on the transformative aspects of worldbuilding.

Another point for consideration is the relationship between intertextual references and referencers. The section on authority briefly mentioned how intertextual referencing forms links that may span through ages. At its core, this linking is more closely related to archetypes and literary functions rather than any distinct elements of worldbuilding (cf. Wolf 2013, 66-67). Whatever the distinction used (e.g. Propp's fairy-tale functions (Propp 1928, 25-65) or Aarne-Thompson-Uther classification of folk tales), some underlying structures seem to be present in literature. The archetypes and functions may be used in shaping the narrative and the world and thus they should be analysed in relation to worldbuilding. Of course, these underlying formalistic elements are not present everywhere. This is where interpretation affects worldbuilding. No matter what the degree of authorship is, how these elements are interpreted affects how they can or cannot be seen in a text (Barthes 1970, 4-6). The reader-author's reaction to the textual element and their interpretation of it will change the element to fit the new narrative. Moreover, the elements can be transformed through countless readings by countless readers, authors, or critics. For now, this chain of intertextual referencing can be left at the stage of pointing out where those links happen, but the chapter on potentiality will expand upon the aspect of interpretation.

3.2.1 Intertextual and Transmedial Worldbuilding

While the header above might make it seem like intertextual and transmedial worldbuilding are the same, there are a few obvious differences. Intertextual worldbuilding includes all referential linking that happens in construction of imaginative worlds, while transmedial worldbuilding only happens between media. It would be better to describe transmedial

worldbuilding as a subcategory or a conjoined category of intertextual worldbuilding as neither can exist without the other.

At its core, transmedial worldbuilding is focused on how a world is represented in different narratives and media. To study this linking that happens between narratives and media, it is time to turn to TTRPGs and especially to *D&D*[4]. There are three principles to worldbuilding with TTRPGs (Paju 2018, 24-25):

1. Worlds in TTRPGs function differently than worlds in other contexts and need to be analysed acknowledging that they have potentially infinite outcomes.
2. TTRPG worlds form in a transmedial and intertextual context where they have something borrowed (e.g. the rules of the game), but also original elements as introduced by the players.
3. Interactivity is central to these worlds. Players have the power to change the world through narrative, the choices they make, or by creating something of their own for the game.

The main principle of a *D&D* game is to explore the world and to affect it in some manner (cf. Ryan 2001, 194). The rules of the game "are adapted to the narrative instead of the other way around" (Tresca 2011, 202) and deviating from the DM's pre-thought plan is "being true to the spirit and intent of the game" (Shank 2015, 193). The game offers unlimited narratives and outcomes. The system is "but a framework that facilitates the *performance* of the players and gamemaster" (Mackay 2001, 2, emphasis in original). While the system offers some guidelines, the narrative and the world exist as superior.

Ryan (2015, 11-12) describes the interactivity present in TTRPGs as *truly productive interactivity*, a system where interaction with the text "leaves durable traces, so that the user's

[4] For an overview of the basic rules of *Dungeons & Dragons*, please refer to Appendix A.

contributions can be seen by other users". Mackay describes this phenomenon as a *shared world*, where "most things in the game world are created as a joint effort and trying to define the creator of a certain aspect in the game world becomes extremely difficult" (2001, 29). The players act as readers of the rules and interpret them in their portrayal of their characters and the narrative. Mackay's concept of a shared world links the worldbuilding of TTRPGs both to the readerly tradition and to the critical tradition.

TTRPGs no longer exist solely in the private sphere as they once did (Hope 2017, 1). Christopher Consorte (2009, 1) has noted on how episodic television and TTRPGs now coexist and mingle with one another, although there are some differences as TTRPGs focus on the spoken word, have improvised narration, and the players or actors "have a better chance of keeping the story moving in the direction they want" (Consorte 2009, 9). However, Robyn Hope (2017, 74-77) notes being observed can affect the narrative especially with livestreamed games, though the performance can also "be a rebellious activity" (Koskela 2004 paraphrased in Hope 2017, 76) that disregards readerly expectations.

There are four distinctive sources for the elements of worldbuilding in *D&D* that form a chain of intertextual referencing: genre conventions and other literary reference material, the rules of the game, the DM, and the players. As the game's nature is heavily focused on modifying the world to suit the players, all elements of worldbuilding go through multiple interpretations. Roine (2016, 196) writes of transmedial worldbuilding that "in many cases, it is not possible to distinguish the 'original' in the sense of an unconditional sequence of events or primary representation of a certain character". For this reason, these distinctive sources are more like generalizations of where the elements could stem from.

The first source of genre conventions and the general pool of literary knowledge is at the core of *D&D*'s worldbuilding. The ultimate focus is on fantasy pulp conventions and the Tolkienian tradition of fantasy (Roine 2016, 17; Tresca 2011, 60-65), which in turn have been

influenced by various (European) mythologies and folk stories. There is also direct referencing to some of the folkloristic elements especially with the creatures described in *The Monster Manual*. The game does not shy away from other genres, either. Although dragons and ghosts are folkloristically fantastic in nature, vampires and wraiths are more related to horror. There also have been some more direct references to prominent genre literature. For example, Tolkien's hobbits live on as halflings and *Conan the Barbarian* influenced the creation of the barbarian class. Overall, *D&D* references directly and indirectly multiple genres and prominent texts that impact the game's very core. (Mackay 2001, 73-76.)

The next distinctive source for elements of worldbuilding are the rules included in the three core books: *Player's Handbook, Monster Manual,* and *Dungeon Master's Guide*. The basic character-building elements are introduced in them, as well as the gameplay mechanics and how the narrative is supposed to progress. *Player's Handbook* has a step by step guide to how any type of character can be created to fit in the world with suggestions for various races, classes or occupations, and backgrounds. In addition, more options are available as authorised content on *Unearthed Arcana*[5] and as self-made or homebrewed additions. The gameplay mechanics affect how the world functions. They detail how characters can interact with their world via (un)successful dice rolls and by recording their skills as numerical values on the player character sheet. Finally, the rules also affect how the narration for the story functions both from the perspectives of the players and the DM. The DM is supposed to act as both the narrator for the story and take the place of all characters not played by the players. In addition to this, *Dungeon Master's Guide* points towards the possibility of creating a world of the DM's own creation (2014, 4). For the players, the rules are a guideline for how to approach the world and the narrative through roleplay. It must not be forgotten that the rules are in their fifth edition currently; the earlier versions have influenced the current one and linking between versions

[5] http://dnd.wizards.com/articles-tags/unearthed-arcana

may have hidden some of the previously visible intertextual links to genre knowledge and other texts.

The third distinctive source, the DM, was already hinted at above. As Michael Tresca (2011, 10) writes, "each game universe[6] is only as detailed as the amount of time and effort invested in it". As with any other creator, the DM references their intertextual knowledge in filling the world with history, spatiotemporal elements, and characters. For example, one of the continents of Matthew Mercer's Exandria is detailed in *Tal'Dorei Campaign Setting*. Although the background for *Critical Role*'s first campaign is described in a very encyclopaedic manner, already the introduction (Mercer and Haeck 2017, 3) reminds that the reader (and probable other DM) is given "the tools to create, introduce, and run [their] own adventures within" this shared world. Using Ekman and Taylor's terminology, the world is invited to progress from *world-as-construct* to *world-as-process*. Moreover, there are even plot hooks given in the descriptions of the locations that further highlight how, before interaction, the world remains unchanging and only starts evolving after being interacted with (i.e. the players starting the game). In fact, the interaction with the world can even go far enough that the world transforms from under the authorship of Matthew Mercer into a world that only vaguely resembles the one it started as.

The fourth and final distinctive source are the players, who must exist in a symbiotic relationship with the DM (cf. the relationship between an author and a reader). Their biggest contribution to the world is their own characters. While the DM can guide the creation of the characters, the players ultimately decide how they want to portray them. However, the DM also holds the power to subvert the player's expectations of their characters by introducing unforeseen consequences or other unknown factors into the equation. For example, in *The Adventure Zone* the revelation of the existence of Lup (Episode 59, 01:32:07-01:32:47),

[6] *Universe* is used here to describe collection of planes or dimensions that create a *D&D* multiverse.

Taako's twin sister, transformed Taako's characterisation and portrayal. Another power the players have is changing the world and its surrounding narrative as discussed above. The players may force the world to expand by travelling to blank spots on a map or they may change how the world functions by how they wish to play the game. Finally, the unpredictability of the players must be considered. While the DM may have plans for how the story should progress and may give some cues for the players, they decide whether they wish to follow those cues. They may transform the intended narrative by acting in the opposite manner from that intended, and thus their authorship of the world stems from the narrativistic portion of it.

All these sources and reinterpretations mean that, occasionally, elements of worldbuilding transform until they are entirely unrecognisable. Of course, there is also another major issue with this chain of references: the further it proceeds, the more likely the world is to become seemingly inconsistent. This, as the next section shows, is not always the case; worlds can be cohesive while being inconsistent, just like the world of *The Adventure Zone* is.

3.2.2 The (In)Coherent World of *The Adventure Zone*

> And without consistency, all the disparate and conflicting pieces, ideas, and designs will contradict each other, and never successfully come together to collectively create the illusion of another world. -- The more complete a world is, the harder it is to remain consistent, since additional material has to be fit into existing material in such a way that everything makes sense. (Wolf 2013, 34.)

Mark J. P. Wolf believes that to be a successful, a world will "need to have a high degree of invention, completeness, and consistency" (2013, 33). While I will not argue against the points of difference from the real world and completeness of worldbuilding, the persisting notion of inner consistency in worldbuilding must be thoroughly examined. Wolf claims worlds that lack inner coherence may seem "sloppily constructed, or even random and disconnected" (2013, 43). While most worlds certainly have a strong sense of inner coherence, there are worlds that may appear consistent at first glance but reveal to be incoherent with study. A prime example of this is the world of *The Adventure Zone*.

The Adventure Zone begins as a rather typical fantasy world with medieval (or in the very least, pre-industrial) overtones[7]. However, it does not take long for the world to become an incoherent mess of intertextual references. Not only do the McElroys completely tear down the fourth wall with numerous out of character or player's comments on how the show has listeners (e.g. Episode 19, 45:10) and referencing the rules of the game in character (e.g. Episode 62, 32:20), the world of *The Adventure Zone* makes very little sense. Although the world begins as pseudo-medieval, already the second story arc of "Murder or the Rockport Limited" brings a train to the landscape. Moreover, "Petals to the Metal" introduces car racing and "The Crystal Kingdom" has a science fiction style premise.

The further the story progresses, the less inner logic the world seems to have. In fact, that lack of inner logic eventually ties into the narrative. The blank spots and mysterious static noise in the characters' memories are revealed to be a result of feeding information to a Void Fish that erases it from common knowledge but lets those who have drunk from the Void Fish's tank remember it. As the narrative progresses, the characters are faced with a re-emergence of this static until the climax of the story reveals the existence of a second Void Fish called Junior or Baby Void Fish. The main characters find out about their travels through multiple worlds and how they settled in the current one.

At first glance, this background of travelling from one world to another seems to explain why some characters can intertextually reference real world events or why none of the player characters seem to question these references. However, it does not explain why the characters seem to be aware of the rules of the game as Taako's comment of "Barry, I rolled an eleven" (Episode 62, 32:20) implies. Moreover, although this backstory revelation explains the eccentricity of the characters, the world remains largely unchanged. There are still pseudo-medieval cities such as Phandalin, futuristic space-themed locations such as the moon base or

[7] Please refer to Appendix B for an overview of the show.

many of the worlds of the universe, a wild west town in the desert, a Las Vegas inspired city with car races, and a late 1800's to early 1900's coded train. All these locations exist comfortably with one another even though in the grand scheme of the world, they do not seem to affect one another. Even so, the incoherency of *The Adventure Zone* seems to somehow be coherent; the world exists as a mix and mash of different genres and elements of worldbuilding, the characters unabashedly intertextually refer to whatever they want, and the narrative adapts to whatever is thrown into the mix. This adaptive quality of *The Adventure Zone* brings forth two very important questions: does intertextuality always work towards a cohesive world, and what does coherence even mean?

The Adventure Zone presents a world that is unique enough in the context of *D&D* multiverses, while the world evolves in complexity alongside the narrative. When it comes to consistency, Wolf's (2013, 43) criteria of plausibility, feasibility, and being without contradiction come under scrutiny from multiple angles. One can somewhat accept a multiverse that has a town full of Tom Bodetts (Episode 10, 49:42-50:04) or has Clint McElroy existing as a janitor in one of the "Stolen Century" worlds (Episode 63, 12:45-13:56), so the criterion of plausibility does get filled. However, *The Adventure Zone* is not without contradiction nor are the explanations given for the world being as it is always the most feasible ones. In fact, inconsistency can be and is used as a source of humour (Wolf 2013, 43-44).

The strategies Alber (2009, 82-83) gives for making sense of impossible worlds also fit into making worlds more cohesive. Some events can be explained as *internal states*, such as everything tasting like Go-Gurt to Taako (Episode 7, 9:10-9:48). Likewise, the same example can be read *thematically* by expanding on the characteristics of Taako. Even an instance of Merle flirting with plants can be understood as an *allegory* for Merle's deep religious faith in Pan, the god of nature. The last two strategies of *blending scripts* and *frame enrichment* work alongside each other by combining the reader's previous knowledge and by adding new

perspectives to old material. In *The Adventure Zone*, these strategies can be understood with the example of depression and nihilism becoming a world-destroying force called The Hunger and with turning the bonds between people into a magical force that can stop such a devastating element. (Alber 2009, 82-83.) Even if all these reading strategies are used, consistency is something of a joke rather than the aim when it comes to *The Adventure Zone*. Since the world refuses to appear cohesive on the level of worldbuilding, the coherence must come from somewhere else instead.

While the worldbuilding fails to make the world of *The Adventure Zone* coherent, it does not mean that the narrative would be incohesive. Quite the opposite, the narrative maintains a light-hearted tone of silliness and unpredictability mixed into more serious themes of apocalypse and bonds between people. However, one quality explains this seeming disparity of world and its surrounding narrative: carnivalesque. Where gaps exist in the storytelling, "[i]mitation, quotation, parody, and other forms of meta-textuality" are used (Tosca 2009, 129), conjoining carnivalesque and intertextual referencing as ways to build a world. Moreover, as Mackay (2001, 69-75) notes, fantasy TTRPGs gravitate towards carnivalesque as they

> are a continuation of the carnivalesque into contemporary times. -- The role-playing game session, and even more specifically, the role-playing game convention, are clearly festive occasions, replete with all the requisites that Bakhtin identifies as indigenous to the carnivalesque --. (Mackay 2001, 72.)

In fact, due to fantasy TTRPGs being the common ground where anyone can become anything, carnivalistic spirit is present even in the rules and mechanics of the game. That means one may also expect carnivalesque to shift from the rules into the game world and ultimately its surrounding narrative. As Tosca argues (2009, 129-134), the carnivalistic qualities of direct quotations or explicit intertextual referencing furthermore provoke laughter and increase enjoyment, while player behaviour guiding schematas invite for a certain point of view or reading. Laughter brings forth emancipatory possibilities, further tying it to carnivalesque's nature of subverting norms. Thus, cross-mediality and intertextual referencing are typical

features of carnivalesque in the 21st century especially in TTRPGs and is highly imbedded into TTRPG worldbuilding.

As Rodrigo Lessa and João Araújo write, "[c]onsistency is something both authors and fans of reasonably realistic imaginative fiction usually strive for" (2017, 90). They also add that "the internal consistency of an imaginary world does not depend singularly on the compossibility of its various elements, but also on the internal consistency of each of them" (Lessa and Araújo 2017, 91). Seemingly, their understanding of world coherence seems to dismiss what previous theorists call *impossible worlds*, yet they also point out that some worlds "are intentionally designed to house inconsistencies" (Lessa and Araújo 2017, 91). Comedy and metalanguage are especially linked to these consistent inconsistencies. That notion of consistent inconsistency is at the root of *The Adventure Zone*'s coherence: once the reader gets used to the McElroys' style, they can introduce to the world whatever they feel like and the reader will accept it since similar instances have happened before. In fact, a reader who is well aware of the McElroys' other productions starts to expect and projects their expectations onto the world. This intertextual knowledge that the reader has is behind what is perceived as the third type of inner consistency, as Lessa and Araújo note (2017, 92-93). By having harmonious elements of worldbuilding that are compatible with one another while following the reader's expectations, the world may seem highly incoherent yet coherent at the same time (Lessa and Araújo 2017, 93).

The Adventure Zone is not alone in having the coherence stem from the narrative rather than the worldbuilding itself. There are multiple instances where gaps in worldbuilding can be filled with narrativistic decisions. For example, in *The Prisoner* (McGoohan 1967-1968) the reader is not presented with any answers but instead has more questions as the narrative progresses. This tradition of fragmentary worldbuilding stems from a much earlier practice in literature where parts pretend there is a whole that does not, in fact, exist. *The Prisoner* gives

no answers to the questions laid by its worldbuilding, but rather allows the reader to interpret the narrative in a way that suits them the best (cf. Morreale 2006, 219). Similarly, *The Adventure Zone* allows the world to exist as incomplete and with inner inconsistencies, but through the humorous approach of the narrative manages to make the world appear coherent while simultaneously maintaining its incoherent qualities.

In conclusion, coherence is not always a cohesive inner logic or a neat package of elements that all come together. For instance, absurdist/surrealist writers, parodies, and unreliable narrators bring forth the question about the coherence of a world due to its narrativistic qualities. However, this does not mean that the world would be *in*coherent. These narratives and their surrounding worlds simply function under their own rule system which may differ wildly from a rule system the reader expects. Incoherence generates narrative in the form of carnivalesque in *The Adventure Zone* because of the accepting environment. Ultimately, the players of the game decide what potential narratives are realised, based on their understanding of the rules of the world and the way they have read the narrative. These readings of potential are the focus of the next chapter.

4 POTENTIAL

This chapter will discuss how intertextual referencing creates expectations or potentiality for certain types of narrative. First, the process of creating potentiality is discussed as well as where it is most visible. After that, there is an explanation of how potential is observed and realised in the narrative. Finally, I will discuss potentiality for carnivalesque in *The Adventure Zone*. Since carnivalesque is has a strong effect on the narrative, it was chosen as a case study to illustrate the reading of potential. Contrasted to the introductory theoretical discussion, the case study will further illustrate how the theory can be applied in analysis.

Potential, in the sense used here, can be best described as a culmination of expectations for certain types of behaviour in the narrative. While potential does not equal realisation, it does influence the direction of the narrative. Furthermore, the more potential is accrued the more likely for the potential is to be realised and for it to multiply. As worlds create expectations through their representations, one instance of something happening makes it more likely to happen again. For example, if a dragon is mentioned early in the story, it will most likely be mentioned again. However, once potential has been realised, it can also create constraints for future narratives. For example, in the Marvel Cinematic Universe Thor's hammer can only be carried by those who are worthy. This both lays down ground-rules for its interactions but also presents a challenge for characters. This challenge also brings forth new possibilities for storytelling. If another character is able to wield the hammer, the narrative may be twisted into an unexpected direction.

The concept of critical mass is essential for potentiality. While critical mass is a blurry concept because of who is doing the observing, once enough potential is present in a text and it is read in an accepting environment, potential is realised as behaviour. Of course, the author has the ultimate power to decide whether they want to realise certain types of potential based on textual cues. While the author has this power, the reader remains free to observe even

unintended potential. This causes differences between readings. One reader may be more likely to observe carnivalistic humour, while another only sees immaturity. But first, there are some underlying common principles as to where potential stems from.

4.1 How Elements of Worldbuilding Create Potential

As established, all elements of worldbuilding have connotations (cf. Wolf 2013, 66-67; Propp 1928, 25-65; Aarne-Thompson-Uther classification). Since these connotations form already on the level of language, they are unavoidable and carry in to the text itself. On the level of the actual world, there are characters and especially character archetypes. While there are many theories to what archetypes exist, some generalisations can be made. Protagonists aim for what they think is right, a mentor may guide them along the way, and an antagonist tries to prevent the protagonist's success. All these archetypes have expectations for how the world (and ultimately, the narrative) should function. These roles can be combined with even more specific descriptive roles. For example, a dwarf king or a hobbit burglar can produce surprising character qualities that may end up reanalysing and rewriting previous character tropes (cf. Barthes 1970, 4-5).

On the level of narrative structure, one must think of both form and story archetypes (cf. Herman, Jahn, and Ryan 2010, 366-370). Form can give limitations to how the text should be realised, but certain forms are also more likely for certain types of potential. For example, a haiku can be expected to follow strict rules and leave much to interpretation, while epics offer more room for tales of heroic deeds. Both haikus and epics also have expectations in their forms. A haiku tends to relate to nature, while epics often carry the connotation of the hero succeeding in their endeavour. As to story archetypes, different genres can have different types of archetypes. In the case of fairy tales, Propp's functional analysis of "The Swan Geese" (Propp 1928, 96-99) showcases how narrativistic elements combine to form a fairy tale. As

another example, if the above-mentioned dwarf king and hobbit burglar were added to a quest-type fantasy, one could expect the narrative to discuss a quest from its very beginning until its very end. While J. R. R. Tolkien's decision to write *The Hobbit* as a children's tale limits the emotional depth the narrative reaches, fairy tale conventions settle the fantastic qualities of Middle-earth and enrichen its worldbuilding.

Finally, metatextual expectations can further influence the text's potentiality. Certain conventions are expected because of the medium, genre, writer, or even title and other paratexts, as Victoria Adams has noted. Medium influences how the narrative is told. For example, a narrator is not common in a television show while it is difficult to imagine a book without one. Genre presupposes that a text functions within certain parameters and performs genre conventions or rewrites them. An established author is expected to produce similar texts to their previous works. A title and other paratexts can force the text to be read in a certain manner. (Cf. Adams 2011, 21-24.) *The Hobbit* is presented as a children's fairy tale in its original book format. However, the movies are more akin to fantasy adventure for teens and up. While these two readings are not too different, the narratives have differing overall tones.

Of course, expectations do not equal potentiality. Potentiality forms from multiple similar expectations combining in favourable ways. While this formation process explains how expectations turn into potential and ultimately behaviour, one cannot forget that an important part of the process is related to observation or reading. This will be thoroughly discussed in the next section, but for now it is enough to note that different readers observed potentiality differently.

While critical mass remains a vague concept, potentiality stemming from worldbuilding may be realised as narrative behaviour. Critical mass occurs twice in the process: once when expectations form potential, the second time when potential forms behaviour. Whenever something is realised, the realisation feeds into worldbuilding to produce similar realisations

again. Potential feeds back into expectations, while the narrative feeds both potential and expectations. The world is more likely to gain elements that provide for the realisation of a similar type of potential. Similarly, the narrative most likely adheres to what has been realised before. This creates a self-feeding loop that drives both narrative and worldbuilding to function in harmony.

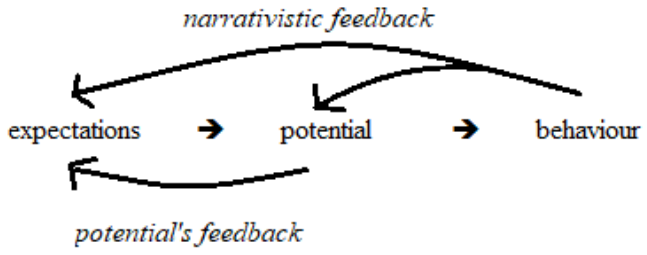

IMAGE 2. Potentiality's formation process.

In the case of *The Adventure Zone*, the analysis found later will show how carnivalistic potential is embedded into elements of worldbuilding and how potential is further realised into carnivalistic behaviour. As for now, the focus shifts from how potential accrues into how it is observed.

4.2 Reading Potential

When discussing how potential is read, one must always remember that it may or may not be realised. The author has the ultimate power to decide whether the world realises potential for certain types of behaviour. This power stems from the author's ability to decide what is appropriate for both the world and the narrative (cf. Bakhtin 1937, 256; Tolkien 1939/1947, 122, 128). This decision will guide the direction of narrative. However, before such a decision can be made, potential must first be read. Worlds may not only have one type of potential but can exhibit multiple plausible narratives at the same time. The author decides which of these narratives wins over other possible narratives.

As has been stated, different readers are more inclined to read different types of potential (cf. Allen 2011, 14). While this leads to the unique reading experience, it also affects the connotations of the imaginative world. An author may intend two characters of the same gender to only be close friends. If the author fails to develop romantic relationships between characters of differing genders with as much care as the main friendship, a queerly inclined reader may code the friendship with romantic undertones (cf. Dhaenens, van Bauwel, and Biltereyst 2008, 342-344). These two readings exist alongside one another. While the author may try and use their authority to insist the queer reading is not the intended one, the reader can cite all the instances that, in another narrative, would without a doubt be part of a romance. In this way, both the author and the reader's observations of potential are plausible and correct readings. Queer readings reconstruct narratives by observing potential from a different perspective than the author had (cf. Dhaenens, van Bauwel, and Biltereyst 2008, 342-344), highlighting how potential can be read very differently in regards to the same text.

The foundations for these reading experiences rely both on previous intertextual knowledge and personal expectations. An intertextually knowledgeable reader picks up textual cues and contextualises them in relation to similar literature. A reader well versed in vampire literature picks up on textual cues earlier than a reader from 1897 reading *Dracula* for the first time. As for personal expectations, readers orientate to texts differently. To begin with, readers sympathise with characters that are somehow familiar to them and often imagine narratives "based on people [they] have known and situations [they] have experienced" (Sklar 2013, 10-13). On occasion, imaginative worlds or their narratives do not function within the readers' ideals or beliefs or adhere to their morals. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the tone of the narration may suit the morals of a female reader of the 2010's even if they disagree with the world. The personal expectations of a reader further affect their orientation to the text; a reader looking for

more feminist themes in *The Handmaid's Tale* may not pay as much attention to class discussions present in the same text.

As discussed above, readers and their readings differ in myriad ways. For this reason, the rise of reader-authors in the form of fan-fiction is not at all surprising. In the case of the *Harry Potter* series, many reader-authors have observed what they believe to be faults in worldbuilding, but through exercising authority, they express their observed potential narratives (cf. Sarah Z. 2018, 18:06-19:10). For example, Eliezer Yudkowsky's *Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality* approaches the wizarding world through the perspective of logic and science. Prominent enough works may even influence their readers' perception of canon. While canon does not change in this process, readings of it develop through reader-authors' work. However, another reader-author may reimagine canon differently or perceive other faults in it (cf. Wolf 2013, 270-271, 279-280; see also discussion of reader-authors in 3.1.3). For this reason, the power of the reader must never be forgotten when discussing potentiality. Potentiality is subjective although objectively there are some features most readers will pick up on without influencing the narrative into a certain direction. While dragons always invoke the idea of the fantastic, the reader has the power to reimagine them. A given dragon may not follow common fantasy tropes, or it may subvert or even rewrite them.

4.3 Potentiality for Carnivalesque in *The Adventure Zone*

The reading of potentiality presented here approaches humour and its presentation in carnivalistic form as being imbedded as potential narrative in worldbuilding. As established in section 3.2.2, carnivalesque forms from transmedial and intertextual qualities of worldbuilding (Mackay 2001, 69-75; Tosca 2009, 129-134). Carnivalesque both functions as an example of how narrative potential generates narrative, but also as an easily observable and uncontroversial reading of *The Adventure Zone*. The potential for carnivalesque is created by a combination of

factors ranging from the metatextual to the textual. But first, a short primer on what exactly carnivalesque is and how it presents in TTRPGs.

In Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics* (1963, 122-124), carnival is defined by four distinct forms. The first is *free and familiar contact among people* when unlikely groups are formed. The second category of *a new mode of interrelationship between individuals* frees a person from all authority, thus inviting eccentric behaviours that are unsuitable for non-carnival life. Third, *carnivalistic mésalliances* unites opposites such as high with low and wise with stupid. Fourth, *profanation* includes blasphemy, debasing, and mocking expectations. Carnival is furthermore a place of changes and doubles where one moment one is crowned as a king and de-crowned the next (Bakhtin 1963, 124-127). This changing nature makes it possible for carnival to adapt into new contexts. Furthermore, being so close to laughter and parody makes it very approachable (Bakhtin 1963, 127-128).

Bakhtin expanded carnival into carnivalesque in *Rabelais and His World* where he touched upon on the idea of folk humour and its three distinct forms (1965, 5). First there are *ritual spectacles* or what is meant by carnival in *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*. As carnival spirit does not discriminate (Bakhtin 1965, 10), it is the great equalising agent among all people. Carnival laughter is "of all people", "universal in scope", and "ambivalent" (Bakhtin 1965, 11). Alongside ritual spectacles there are two more linguistic forms: *comic verbal compositions* and *various genres of billingsgate*. The first describes parodying language that is "infused with the carnival spirit" (Bakhtin 1965, 13), thus demanding "from their authors a certain degree of learning" (Bakhtin 1965, 14) or intertextual referencing. Billingsgate includes profanities and word-play, and is typically "abusive language, insulting words or expressions, some of them quite lengthy and complex" while also breaking the norms of official speech (Bakhtin 1965, 16-17). These two linguistic themes cover what is previously described with profanation while adding a touch of parody.

Carnivalesque also relates to the bodily grotesque, which is related to the idea of carnivalistic mésalliances and the degradation of the high, spiritual, ideal, or abstract (Bakhtin 1965, 19). This degradation is concerned "with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs" and thus "relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth" (ibid.). In Bakhtin's words, "the grotesque concept of the body forms the basis of abuses, oaths, and curses" (1965, 27) and "[e]xaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness are generally considered fundamental attributes" of the grotesque style (1965, 303). Bodily grotesque thus can either be the physical act itself or speaking of such acts.

Bakhtin's themes of carnivalesque will be discussed in the following categories: (1) unlikely groups that form from free and familiar contact, (2) freedom of action that stems from liberation from all authority, (3) carnivalistic mésalliances, (4) bodily grotesque, and (5) mockery and profanities as a combining category for the more linguistic aspects of carnivalesque.

As was discussed in section 3.2.2, carnivalesque suits fantasy TTRPGs. Carnivalesque in today's world is continued in role-playing conventions (Mackay 2001, 72) as TTRPGs allow for being what you are not in real life. The rules allow for the formation of unlikely groups and arguably even demand it, as a balanced *D&D* party has different types of player characters. Moreover, the rules also actively demand freedom of action. The players "[r]ead the rules of the game and the story of its worlds" but they also control everything, as the rules "are nothing without the spark of life that [the players] give them" (*Player's Handbook* 2014, 4), also tying to the idea of intertextual referencing. The players have an opportunity to tweak the game to suit their needs, thus following the carnivalistic principle of freedom of action. This freedom of action is described in *Dungeon Master's Guide* (2014, 5) as the DM being "a mediator between the rules and the players" that decides how the players' actions function within the

narrative. These can be decided by unpredictable dice rolls or by limiting what the players may do (ibid.). However, the rules of the game clearly favour the unpredictability of dice. These dice rolls may also lead to unexpected results. For example, if a fighter constantly throws natural 1s on a die and critical fails to attack an enemy, a carnivalistic mésalliance is created where the mighty fighter becomes a fool on the battlefield (cf. Shank 2015, 189). Combined with the character mechanics the rules present, carnivalesque is abundant in the rules of *D&D* and on the metatextual level of worldbuilding in terms of world-functioning rules they present.

The rules of the game also either limit or allow carnivalesque's presence. On the level of the narrative, there are only a few crucial factors. The first is the gaming system. As both Dormans (2006, n. pag.) and Shank (2015, 185-186) argue, the rules of the game determine what can occur. This ultimately affects the qualities of the narrative. The overall tone and the genre of the game stems from the gaming system (Paju 2018, 18-19). *D&D* is predisposed towards fantastic adventures. This does not limit laughter and thus carnivalesque the same way a gaming system based on horror would. Quite the opposite, fantastic adventures can and will create laughter, as even the preface to *Player's Handbook* (2014, 4) acknowledges:

> Playing games with your friends is a lot of fun, but D&D does something more than entertain. Playing D&D is an exercise in collaborative creation. You and your friends create epic stories filled with tension and memorable drama. You create silly in-jokes that make you laugh years later. The dice will be cruel to you, but you will soldier on. Your collective creativity will build stories that you will tell again and again, ranging from the utterly absurd to the stuff of legend.

The rest of this section will be a mixture of examples of carnivalesque in *The Adventure Zone* and a discussion on how carnivalistic potential is embedded in the series and ultimately the worldbuilding of the narrative. The course of analysis begins with the characters and their potential for carnivalesque. In relation to characters, I will also discuss the greatest metatextual influencers of the series, the four players. After this there will be a discussion on the temporo-spatial locations. The analysis concludes with a look at the presence of carnivalesque in the narrative.

Although human fighters, elven wizards, and dwarven clerics are rather typical tropes in *D&D*, one cannot deny that "the role-playing game convention" is "replete with all the requisites that Bakhtin identifies as indigenous to the carnivalesque" (Mackay 2001, 72). As noted earlier, TTRPGs provide the chance to be anything and anyone in an accepting and open environment. There is freedom even within these character archetypes. Taako is not a studious wizard but an aloof comic relief who uses magic aesthetically rather than functionally. Merle Highchurch flirts with plants and casts the spell *Zone of Truth* more often than healing spells. Magnus Burnsides is truest to the trope of human fighter, although even he subverts expectations. Magnus is kind and compassionate, loves animals, carves ducks, and constantly mentions his love for his dead wife Julia. These three characters have carnivalistic mésalliances in their character designs and combine into an unlikely group.

Other characters in *The Adventure Zone* can and will act in the spirit of carnivalesque. Notably liches subvert traditional expectations. *Monster Manual* describes liches, undead creatures made of arcane power, as having "any evil alignment" (2014, 202) and as "scheming and insane" (2014, 203). In *The Adventure Zone*, this only stands true half the time. Edward and Lydia's high fashion vogueing in Wonderland in "The Suffering Game" arc first provides this traditional evil lich. Even so, this evil being already subverts expectations of solemn and serious magic users as the liches have an obsession for fashion. However, the presence of Lup and Barry Bluejeans contrasts the evil lich with one that feeds on love and bonds to other people. Moreover, the characterisations of Lup and Barry create further carnivalistic mésalliances. After all, the very first thing Lup does as a lich is to dab[8] (Episode 65, 80:13-81:05). Even when the nature of liches is uncanny as they are undead creatures made of pure

[8] A move where the head rests against the elbow joint with both arms aimed in the same upward-and-to-the-side direction. According to *Know Your Meme*, "The Dab" started gaining traction in latter half of 2015 and 2016. It is usually associated with youth culture and sometimes used ironically.

magic, a lich in *The Adventure Zone* is more likely to act in the spirit of carnivalesque than in an uncanny way.

Finally, another undead character in *The Adventure Zone* deserves a mention. Kravitz, a grim reaper of the Raven Queen, both conforms to and subverts tropes whenever suitable. On the one hand, Kravitz is a traditional gothic figure of death and a dedicated follower of a goddess. He is presented as hard-working and an avid follower of rules. On the other hand, Kravitz uses a work accent of Cockney dialect (Episode 50, 7:10-7:34) and ends up dating Taako who he is supposed to arrest for necromantic crimes. While his serious side remains unchanged, Kravitz is shown to have more humane qualities and seems willing to bend and renegotiate rules whenever necessary. This dichotomy of both serious and silly present in the same character carries on throughout the show. The world is full of characters free to perform in humoristic and carnivalistic manner in *The Adventure Zone*.

On the metatextual level, one must not forget how the players affect the game. As Hope (2017, 50) notes about the McElroys, the three brothers Justin, Travis, and Griffin "tend to recoil whenever their father's [Clint's] character flirts with other characters – comedy that is largely contingent on their familial relationship outside of the game". One can presume this familial dynamic allows the McElroys to know exactly what is acceptable and how the others will react to their words. Despite this, the McElroys toe the line of acceptability constantly. They are unabashedly themselves first and performers second, tying in with Hope's discussion on the issues between the personas of the player and the performer. This free and familial contact between the McElroys provides an open and accepting environment where carnivalesque presides (cf. Mackay 2001, 72). While this environment makes carnivalesque possible, the potential can only be realised by players who want to act in the carnival spirit.

The likelihood of performing carnivalesque stems from the combination of the player's personality and their character. As no McElroy hesitates to partake in carnivalesque, the main

difference in frequency stems from the characters. Of the four McElroys, the most likely to play in the spirit of carnivalesque seems to be Justin. Even so, they all partake in carnivalesque though in slightly different manners. As previously mentioned, Taako as a highly intelligent character with an aloof personality makes for a great source of witty one-liners and comedic speech. In contrast, Clint's Merle provides ample ground for bodily grotesque and sexual humour. Magnus, played by Travis, is a character of carnivalistic mésalliances. The masculine hero rushing into dangerous situations combines with softer feminine qualities of love and crafts. Finally, Griffin's NPCs are less prominent than the player characters and thus have less potential for any kind of behaviour. Alike Travis, Griffin tends to produce carnivalistic mésalliances as well as unlikely groups. There are carnivalistic mésalliances created by the liches Lydia and Edward as well as Lup and Barry. Likewise, Kravitz continues along similar lines. Angus McDonald the boy detective transforms the trope of a gritty detective with the innocence of childhood. Garfield the Deals Warlock is implied to be both a necromancy cultist who grows bodies in his free time (Episode 58, 58:20-66:26) and possibly Garfield the comic cat because of a distinct lack of description of how he looks. These unlikely characters form unlikely groups and follow the truest spirit of carnivalesque.

The temporo-spatial dimension of worldbuilding in *The Adventure Zone* creates its own potential for carnivalesque. A world of medieval or renaissance coding is more likely to have carnivalistic properties than a modern world (cf. Bakhtin 1963, 130; Bakhtin 1965, 39). There are certain aspects of *The Adventure Zone* that are medievalistic in nature. The world consists of separate cities with their own cultures and expanses of little to no civilisation in between. This versatility of the world also creates hubs where carnivalesque is more likely to exist. In addition to a versatile landscape, technology and culture must be considered. While some technological advancements are present in *The Adventure Zone* (namely the bond-engine of the *Starblaster* and the headquarters of the Bureau of Balance), the world itself does not have too

many technological advancements. Weapon technology is pseudo-medieval with magical influences, as is most other technology of the world. Even the train present in "Murder on the Rockport Limited" is only from the industrialised era. In fact, the only modern technologies shown in *The Adventure Zone* are not from the world of the narrative but from the worlds from before. In relation to culture, there is a key aspect Bakhtin (1963, 128-132; 1965, 7-10) names: the dichotomy of the public and the private spheres. Carnivalesque is expected in the common ground of all people, which tend to be squares and marketplaces. Since much of the narrative is spent in these equalizing realms, one can expect carnivalesque to be more common there. However, a private sphere does not strictly inhibit carnivalesque. The metatextual elements, namely the players, decide what is appropriate. More so, the game itself happens in a public sphere even if the characters are in a private sphere (cf. Mackay 2001, 72). Since *The Adventure Zone* is found on the Internet, the common ground of the 21st century, one cannot dismiss the metatext's effect on the text and its world.

Finally, on the narrative level the storyline has both moments of epic fantasy and silliness. The members of the Bureau of Balance do not shy away from humour. This holds true to even the most serious of situations, namely the apocalypse. For instance, a fight against the Hunger is interrupted by a humorous moment of Taako and Magnus finally admitting to Merle that they stole his cousin's shoes (Episode 69, 12:02-13:11). Since the rules of *D&D* allow both absurdity and seriousness to exist in the same narrative, the players may freely choose between them. Likewise, the DM guides the players towards a grand narrative of legendary proportions. Despite all this, a reader familiar with the McElroys' usual shenanigans knows that even in the darkest of hours when the world is about to end, there is always room for a joke about a wizard called Taako finally learning how to make a taco and gaining enough inspiration from that to defeat a world-eating creature that has chased the group for a century (Episode 68, 28:00-29:27,

45:28-57:00). As for subverting narrative expectations, the most notable instance is in Episode 36 (15:40-16:47):

> TAAKO: Hey thug, what's your name? I'm about to tentacle your dick. [Giggling] Hey, hey hey. I'm gonna get you into some tent porn. Let me get that name real quick so I know how to credit you in my tentacle porn I'm about to make with your body.

With the comment above, the intensity of a battle scene turns into laughter. Not only does the comment subvert expectations, but it also mocks them and dabbles into profanity in the form of bodily grotesque. Taako as a character is highly likely to produce these types of mocking comments and use profanities in a humoristic context while subverting narrativistic expectations in a carnivalistic manner. In fact, Taako tends to mock himself by calling himself "a simple idiot wizard" (first instance in Episode 8, 7:40). The rules of *D&D* make this a contradiction, as a wizard requires a high Intelligence and thus cannot be "a simple idiot". This brings forth a carnivalistic mésalliance within this mocking and parodying comment. Taako also uses profanities inventively such as in the case of launching a magical missile attack with the words "abraca-fuck-you" (Episode 4, 59:25-59:40). Ultimately, these profanities and mocking language bring together all the carnivalesque present in *The Adventure Zone* stemming from the worldbuilding and present it suitably for the medium of the narrative, an audio podcast.

In conclusion, the rules of *D&D* both allow and call for free contact among all people, thus combining several types of characters into adventuring parties. Moreover, the players may play the game in any way they wish to. In the case of *The Adventure Zone*, the McElroys have chosen a humoristic approach which also creates potential for carnivalesque. While the temporo-spatial aspects of the world itself or the narrative have fewer instances that encourage carnivalesque, they also do not have any elements that would prohibit it. This allows potential to grow with each instance of realised carnivalesque in a snowball effect. As this reading of potential for carnivalesque shows, there are many possible sources where narrative potential

may stem from as well as how realised potential loops back into feeding worldbuilding. All this would not be possible without intertextual referencing that makes possible the birth of all connotations behind later narrative potential.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The type of mechanical analysis of worlds focusing on quantifiable qualities that has been presented here functions best with texts that have a strong inner coherency. While there are problem areas in current theories, inner coherency does not only relate to worldbuilding. Instead, inner coherency can be formed as a combination of both worldbuilding and narrative. Worlds that are more incoherent than coherent, such as with unreliable narration, still provide a challenge. However, the tools presented in this thesis will help with previous problem areas such as surrealism, parody, or satire. Considering the narrative properties, a world may be much more coherent than at first glance. Moreover, the tools presented here are also suitable for less fantastic worlds than have been the focus of worldbuilding before, although they are presented with a highly fantastical case study.

As discussed in the chapter on authority, the role of an author is not a constant but in constant change. In fact, the roles of author, reader, and critic should be questioned. The roles cannot exist without one another and in fact often combine with each other. Authors intertextually refer to previous knowledge by writing and re-writing various elements of worldbuilding. However, authority over text and its interpretations stems from the power to influence the text's perception. This can be acquired in a myriad of ways. Authorship in worldbuilding should be considered with this intertextual nature in mind. This is especially relevant in current times, as worlds can have multiple creators and slightly differing canons that influence one another. Moreover, the roles of other influencers such as editors, translators, and fan-creators deserve more study. After all, even minor influence can give great authority to the influencer.

The intertextuality of worldbuilding affects not only the world, but also the narrative. Expectations accumulate into potential, which may lead to the realisation of new developments in the narrative. This process is influenced by feedback from both potential and narrative

stages. This makes previously realised potential or narrative more likely to occur again. Expectations stem from intertextual knowledge, commonly from universal archetypes. These may occur on the level of the world, the narrative structure, or even metatext. Expectations accumulate until critical mass is achieved, leading to potential narrative behaviour. Of course, how this potential is observed decides whether it is realised. Different readers read texts differently due to personal expectations and previous intertextual knowledge.

The future of worldbuilding remains vast and filled with infinite possibilities. However, that future requires that theory and theorists broaden their scope and take into consideration texts that have been previously peripheral. Moreover, worldbuilding should also approach how narratives develop from worlds and how worlds develop from narratives. So far this part of worldbuilding has been left as a problem for another time. The tools presented in this thesis are just one feasible way of looking at worlds and their infinite potential narratives. Peripheral worlds, whether fantastic or mundane, will soon enough provide further challenges. For now, worlds can be approached mechanically. In the future, perhaps the worlds that are now seen only as warp for a narrative weave will be understood to be just as essential in telling a story as the narrative itself is.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: What Is *Dungeons & Dragons*[9]

Dungeons & Dragons (*D&D*) is a tabletop role-playing system that was first created in 1974 by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson. The fifth edition of the game was released in 2014. The core rules of the game are found in *Player's Handbook*, while *The Dungeon Master's Guide* and *Monster Manual* expand the rules and explain the game from the point of view of its narrator (the Dungeon Master or DM). As in other role-playing games, *D&D* has the players controlling a character of their own that interacts with a previously made world. The game is typically played around a single table with a single DM that guides a group of players (commonly three to six persons). While the game rules are laid out in the three books, only few other instruments are required. The first is a pen, and the second is a character sheet.

A character sheet (see Image 3 below) is a shorthand guide to a player character's skills and proficiencies. The upper part describes the basic facts of the character: name, class, race, background, alignment, level of the character, and the name of the player. Class describes the primary function of a character. For example, clerics are typically healers and rogues sneak ahead and disarm traps. Race in *D&D* describes what type of humanoid (or other creature) the character may be. Common races include humans, elves, dwarves, and halflings. Background tells what a character has done before the game and what skills and abilities they have from that life. Alignment describes if the character aims for good, evil, or neutral deeds in a lawful, chaotic, or neutral manner. The level of a character describes how proficient they are in their skills and how tough of a challenge they are to others.

[9] This appendix is copied and expanded from Appendix A found in my bachelor's thesis (Paju 2018, 26-28).

IMAGE 3. A typical player character sheet.

The left column of the character sheet includes ability scores and skills. These are numeric values associated with various character defining categories. In *D&D* these are Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Wisdom, Intelligence, and Charisma. The number of an ability score creates an ability score modifier, which affects skills associated with the ability. For example, a Strength score of 16 creates a +3 modifier. These modifiers are added to dice rolls to determine success. For example, if a first level character (+2 proficiency bonus, which

grows with gained levels) with an Intelligence of 16 (+3 ability modifier) had proficiency in history, their total bonus would be +5 to the roll.

The character sheet also records armour class and typical attacks (upper middle column), the character's resources and gear (lower middle column), and a short guide to the character role-playing guiding features (right column). When a character is created, they gain proficiencies in certain skills, ability score improvements, role-playing guiding traits, and special skills called feats by their race, background, and class.

IMAGE 4. A role-playing guidance section of a character sheet.

The role-playing guidance section is to define the character by other means than just through numbers or abilities. In this section, a player may choose to draw a picture of their character (upper left column) and describe their background and story (lower left column). The upper middle section has the same defining traits as the first character sheet. The upper right side of the sheet provides room for listing allies and organisations that are important to the character and any additional skills, languages, or proficiencies. The lower middle and right section is reserved for any items or treasure a character may carry with them.

In the game, a group of player characters called a party explore a previously made world. This world can be either ready-made or self-made. In this world, the DM guides the party through various missions or quests, where they may slay enemies or interact with non-player characters (NPCs) that the DM controls. Typically, the adventures link together to form a campaign that ends in a final battle against an almost unbeatable enemy. In this manner, the characters follow a typical fantasy quest structure from where they progress from nobodies to the heroes of the land. This progress is marked through levelling a character, which provides them more skills and abilities and gives them a better chance of success in their endeavours.

Appendix B: An Introduction to *The Adventure Zone: Balance*

The Adventure Zone is a podcast on the Maximum Fun network which is published every fortnight. The podcast features the McElroy brothers Griffin, Travis, and Justin and their father Clint who play *Dungeons & Dragons* and other tabletop role-playing games together. The first campaign of the series, *Balance*, aired from December 2014 until August 2017. The episodes are between 40 minutes (episode 62) to 2 hours and 45 minutes (episode 69) long, the typical episode being around an hour and twenty minutes. After *Balance* ended, a few interim games were played until the second large-scale campaign *Amnesty* began in April 2018 as a continuation of the games from January and February earlier that year.

Main Characters

Magnus Burnsides (played by Travis McElroy) is a human fighter/rogue. In his pre-adventuring life Magnus was a married carpenter who began his quest after the murders of his father-in-law and wife. Magnus is rash and often rushes in recklessly.

Merle Highchurch (played by Clint McElroy) is a dwarf cleric who follows Pan, the god of nature. He has an ex-wife and two children from pre-adventure life. Merle tends to aim for self-improvement and flirting with as many plants as he can.

Taako (played by Justin McElroy) is an elf transmutation wizard. Taako is a former celebrity chef and acts often aloofly. He ends up dating the Raven Queen's employee Kravitz, a grim reaper.

Story Arcs

"Here There Be Gerblins" (episodes 1 to 6) is the introduction to the series. The story arc is loosely based on the *D&D* adventure *Lost Mine of Phandelver*. In the arc, the group seeks for a lost treasure belonging to Merle's cousin. They soon find themselves in the middle of a

mystery involving the Bureau of Balance, a secret organisation that seeks to destroy powerful magical artefacts. The first of these Grand Relics, the Phoenix-Fire Gauntlet, is reclaimed by the party after it destroys the city of Phandalin. The party is inoculated by drinking water from the Void Fish's tank and learn of information that has been fed to the Void Fish to erase it from collective memory.

"Murder on the Rockport Limited" (episodes 10 to 16) is a mystery-type story arc. The party goes to reclaim a relic that is on board Rockport Limited, a train with a vault that cannot be breached. While aboard the Rockport Limited, the party solve a murder mystery with the aid of Angus McDonald, the World's Greatest Boy Detective, and eventually reclaim the Grand Relic they came for, the Oculus.

"Petals to the Metal" (episodes 18 to 27) is based on the conventions of race driving. The party is sent to Goldcliff, a booming city in the desert, to reclaim the Gaia Sash, a Grand Relic that creates plants, which is being used by a thief called the Raven. The party ends up taking part in a battlewagon race to the death to reclaim the relic.

"The Crystal Kingdom" arc (episodes 29 to 39) is a science-fantasy adventure. In the story arc, the Grand Relic called the Philosopher's Stone has begun to transmutate the Bureau of Balance's floating headquarters into pink crystal. The party is sent to stop the catastrophe in a crystallised laboratory and track down the rogue scientist behind the scenario. In the arc, the party first encounters Kravitz, a grim reaper employed by the Raven Queen, and learn of having multiple deaths each on their records.

"The Eleventh Hour" (episodes 41 to 49) happens in a Wild West type time-loop. The party is sent to a town called Refuge within a time-bubble to reclaim the Temporal Chalice, the next Grand Relic. The party must solve why the town is destroyed at the end of every hour to make it out of the time-loop. During the time-loop, the party learns they have a long sequence of missing memories. Magnus also learns that he was once a red-robe, an enemy of the Bureau

of Balance who were responsible for creating the Grand Relics but cannot quite comprehend the implications of this because of a mysterious static in his brain.

"The Suffering Game" (episodes 51 to 57) describes the party's struggles in Wonderland, a death-trap that lures in victims with the promise of glorious prizes. For the party, that prize is the Animus Bell, the Grand Relic of necromancy. Wonderland is eventually revealed to be a trap by two liches who feed on suffering. At the end of the arc, a mysterious red robe that has been following the party is revealed to be an old friend and the party learns that the Bureau of Balance is not what it seems. A second Void Fish's existence is revealed, and the party is inoculated and regain their lost memories.

"The Stolen Century" (episodes 60 to 66) covers the party's lost memories. The arc reveals how they began as explorers from another world and ended up escaping and fighting against the Hunger, an all-encompassing and all-destroying foe of reality. The episodes cover some years from the century that the party spent figuring out ways to defeat the Hunger. The arc focuses on how the relationships between the seven travellers from the original world developed during the century.

"Story and Song" (episodes 67 to 69) is the finale of the first campaign. In it, the party alongside their allies and foes try to stop the Hunger from consuming all the existing worlds of the multiverse. The campaign ends with a description of the world after the battle against the Hunger and how the two Void Fish swim in the space between multiverses together after leaving the party's final world behind.