

## **Building *The Ark*: Text World Theory and the Evolution of Dystopian Epistolary**

### **Abstract**

Told through a series of interrelated documents (including emails, text messages, newspaper clippings and blog posts), Annabel Smith's (2014a) interactive digital novel *The Ark* epitomises the contemporary hybridity of the dystopian genre. Designed to be fully immersive, the story can be engaged with across media, enabling readers to 'dive deeper into the world of the novel' (Smith, 2014b: n.p.) and challenge how they experience dystopian texts. Taking a Text-World-Theory perspective (Gavins, 2007; Werth, 1999), I examine the implications of this challenge, investigating the impact of transmedial storytelling on world-building and exploring the creative evolution of dystopian epistolary more broadly. In analysing both the eBook element of *The Ark* and certain facets of its companion pieces (which take the form of a dynamic website and a smartphone app), I investigate the creation of the novel's text-worlds, considering the process of multimodal meaning construction, examining the conceptual intricacies of the epistolary form, and exploring the influence of paratextual matter on world-building and construal. In doing so, I offer new insights into the conceptualisation of 'empty text-worlds' (Gavins, 2007; Lahey, 2004), extend Gibbons' (2017) discussions of transmedial world-creation and argue for a more nuanced understanding of dystopian epistolary as framed within Text World Theory.

### **Keywords**

epistolary; Text World Theory; empty text-worlds; multimodality; transmediality; dystopia; paratext; world-building; characterisation; *The Ark*

### **1. The Death of the Letter and the Evolution of Dystopian Epistolary**

The 'death of the letter' has been notably prefigured in contemporary culture, with the rise of digital technologies and the prevalence of synchronic messaging superseding postal communication (see Stanley, 2015; Garfield, 2013). The role and functionality of written correspondence has subsequently shifted, with formats such as the 280-character tweet or the disappearing messages of *Snapchat* testing 'the porous boundaries of the

letter’ (Stanley, 2015: 242) and signalling the adaptability of twenty-first-century epistolarity. Modern approaches to ‘letterness’ (Stanley, 2015) have consequently moved away from the limitations of print culture with electronic modes of correspondence challenging the definitional characteristics of letter-writing itself. Prototypical features such as ‘the time/space distance basis of letter-writing’ and the physicality of the medium have been particularly affected, with traditional stylistic features (such as the inclusion of opening salutations, signatures and formal syntax) evolving correlatively alongside broader processes of language variation and change (Stanley, 2015: 242; see also Danet, 2001; Horst and Miller, 2012 and Ling, 2008).

The mutable nature of the epistolary genre holds particular significance, then, for the development of the epistolary novel, a form typically associated with the late seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries (Bray, 2003). Digital instantiations of epistolary in particular have flourished as a result of technological advancement, with fictional narratives mirroring the real-world adaptation of ‘epistolary intent’, that being ‘the intention to communicate, in writing or a cognate representational medium, to another person who is “not there” [...] and doing so with the hope or expectation of a response’ (Stanley, 2015: 242; see also Stanley, 2011, 2013; Stanley et al., 2012). Under this remit, electronic methods of correspondence such as instant messaging or blogging can be viewed as epistolary by design and narratives comprising such forms can similarly be categorised within the periphery of the epistolary novel. As evidenced by the development of new epistolary forms such as ‘Twiction’ (fiction composed of interconnected tweets) or ‘E-pistolary’ (narrative comprising email exchange) (Gheorghiu, 2014), the parameters of what constitutes an epistolary novel have therefore changed, with contemporary definitions encompassing the broader spectrum of document-based narrative (see Kauffman, 1988, 1992).

The development of digital epistolary practice is of particular interest to this article which aims specifically to address the evolution of dystopian epistolary and the role and function of contemporary and futuristic media representation in speculative fiction. With many dystopian worlds inhibiting writing (as in Orwell’s [1949] *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or Dalcher’s [2018] *Vox*), and others presenting future worlds that are so advanced that the concept of paper-based correspondence has become obsolete, the ‘compositional deixis’ (Stockwell, 2002) of documented communication is in itself world defining.

Indeed, as Bower (2014: 5) argues, ‘the epistolary represents what is already a representation’ (emphasis in original), with the epistolary novel contextualising the workings of a given world from the perspective of one or more internal correspondents, whose depicted consciousnesses are partially fashioned by narrative form.

Multiple dystopian worlds are fully conceptualised through an epistolic frame with novels such as *Ella Minnow Pea* (Dunn, 2001) being comprised solely of traditional letters, whilst others such as *Super Sad True Love Story* (Shteyngart, 2010) or *Illuminae* (Kauffman and Kristoff, 2015), incorporate alternate methods of visual communication, such as diary entries, emails, or social media into their wider narrative structure. Annabel Smith’s digital novel, *The Ark*, which takes the analytical focus of this article, clearly falls into the latter category, depicting a range of multimedia documents that through their design alone significantly impact upon reading experience and interpretation.

First published in 2014, *The Ark* tells the story of life locked inside a doomsday bunker – nicknamed ‘the Ark’ – which has been created to restore and protect Earth’s vegetation, after an event described only as ‘The Chaos’ triggers world-wide ecological decay. Told from the perspective of several of the Ark’s inhabitants (as well as those with whom they communicate in the outside world), the novel reflects the paranoia, fears and motivations of a community trapped for fifty years underground. Presented as a series of interconnected communications, retrieved from the Ark in the year 2093, the novel is both narratively and visually epistolic, with the relationship between text and image being central to a reading of the novel. Each page experiments with visual design, drawing on a wealth of graphic features to effectively represent a variety of textual media, ranging from coded and encrypted emails through to medical reports and death certificates. Taken together, the documents simulate the experience of leafing through a real-world historical archive, which when paired with the novel’s transmedial elements promotes an engaged reading of the text that is bespoke, interactive and fully multimodal (Gibbons, 2012, 2017).

Conceptualised as ‘a novel for the 21<sup>st</sup> century’ (Smith, 2014b: n.p), *The Ark* moves away from traditional methods of storytelling, transcending ontological boundaries as a result of reader-led cross-media mapping. Designed to be read on an e-reader, the novel is most interactive on an iPad, with links appearing in-text to external online material, such as illustrated video tours of the bunker, deleted scenes and bonus

content, all of which are encompassed by *The Ark's* companion website. The novel can be similarly paired with a complementary smartphone app, allowing readers to upload their own material to the Ark by contributing their personal images, videos and fanfiction to the archive. Such materials actively expand the narrative world 'by filling its gaps, constructing a prehistory or posthistory, and so on' (Doležel, 1998: 207; see also Gibbons, 2017; Ryan, 2008), and inviting readers to construct a narrative that is, in part, their own. It is this latter practice in particular which is of interest to this article, as I move on to analyse the process of world-building, as experienced across *The Ark's* multimodal and transmedial narrative modes.

In order to account for the linguistic intricacies of the novel itself, the transmedial expansions of the website and companion app, and the interpretative factors of the reading experience, I analyse the network of *The Ark* from a Text-World-Theory perspective (Gavins, 2007; Werth, 1999). *The Ark*, and indeed transmedial texts of its kind, pose particular challenges for Text World Theory, both with regard to its ontological structure and in relation to how we map reading experience in Text-World-Theory terms. Through an examination of the *The Ark's* text-worlds, this work sets out to address such challenges, considering the process of multimodal meaning construction (building on the work of Gibbons [2011, 2012, 2016, 2019]), examining the conceptual intricacies of the epistolary form, and exploring the influence of paratextual matter on world-building and construal. In doing so, I offer new insights into the conceptualisation of 'empty text-worlds' (Gavins, 2007; Lahey, 2004), extend Gibbons' (2017) discussions of transmedial world-creation and argue for a more nuanced understanding of dystopian epistolary as framed within Text World Theory.

## **2. The Text-worlds of *The Ark***

Moving away from the generativist linguistic tradition, which placed analytical focus on language in terms of decontextualised sentences rather than as naturally occurring discursive phenomena, Text World Theory draws an indissoluble link between semantics, pragmatics and cognitive experience, considering the entirety of a language event. As such, a typical Text-World-Theory analysis 'always begins with an examination of the real-world situation, the discourse-world, in which the text has been produced and received' (Gavins, 2012: 354). The discourse-world represents the pragmatic space

surrounding a language event, detailing the spatio-temporal location of discourse participants – typically an author and a reader in the case of fictional narratives – and the linguistic, social and cultural knowledge they bring to bear on the discourse itself.

Such knowledge, which is ‘text-driven’ (that is, determined by the language of the discourse proper), aids the mutual negotiation of the ‘text-world’. Text-worlds are rich conceptual spaces comprising ‘world-building elements’, those features which detail the spatio-temporal parameters of a particular world, as well as the objects and entities, termed ‘enactors’ (Emmott, 1997), with which they are populated. Against the backdrop of these elements, ‘function-advancing propositions’, typically conceived of in terms of systemic functional grammar, as transitivity processes (Halliday, 1985), propel a discourse forward. Following the creation of a text-world, ‘any number of departures from its initial world-building parameters may occur during the discourse process’ (Gavins, 2016: 629), triggering the conceptualisation of ‘world-switches’ (which identify alterations in space or time) or ‘modal-worlds’ (which signal changes in attitude) (see Gavins, 2007).

Throughout my analysis, I place particular emphasis on how we conceptualise the text-worlds of *The Ark*, arguing that given the nature of epistolary narrative, the text-world level of the novel is initially backgrounded. With information in epistolary narratives being solely presented through the form of preconceived documents, ‘the act of writing is always distanced from the correspondent’s life’ (Chatman, 1978: 171), even if only minimally. Chatman (1978) argues that this is a result of the necessary ‘delay’ between the moment of actualised experience and the moment of writing, which marks epistolary as an ‘enactment’ rather than as an expression of concurrent living-writing practice. The text-world level is consequently only ever presented through the written introspections of each internal character-writer and, as a result, is always at least one step further removed from discourse participants.

The combined lack of world-building information and the immediate distancing of epistolary discourse itself results, in Text-World-Theory terms, in the creation of ‘empty text-worlds’ (Gavins, 2007; Lahey, 2004). According to Gavins (2007: 133), empty text-worlds are ‘normally text-initial but ultimately immaterial’ as the reader makes a conceptual leap from the discourse-world, beyond the text-world to the world of the act of narration. Typically, this conceptual shift is triggered by either a text initial

world-switch or immediate modalisation as seen in Stockwell's (2002: 146) analysis of Keats' 'When I Have Fears that I May Cease to Be' or Lahey's (2004) examination of MacCaig's 'After', which is comprised solely of direct speech (see also Neurohr, 2018). As noted by Werth (1999: 221), direct speech functions to 'change the basic time signature of the text world', and, following Gavins' (2007, 2013) augmentation of Text World Theory subsequently cues a temporal world-switch. In each of the above texts, the text-world level is therefore effectively skipped over, with the text-world having to be fleshed out retrospectively (if at all), either as a result of further world-switching, which prompts the reader to move back to the text-world level, or conversely through readerly inferences which allow the reader to 'assume the existence of a text-world' (Lahey, 2004: 26). Such inferences are a matter of world's logic, for as Werth contends '*there is always both a discourse world AND a text world*' (Werth, 1999: 87 emphasis in original; Lahey, 2004). It is perhaps pertinent then to consider empty text-worlds to be 'minimal' in their construction rather than actually 'empty' given that some world-building information must exist in order for them to be instantiated at all.

To return to epistolary fiction, the enactment of written communication can be similarly seen to automatically cue a world-switch, as the reader is launched directly into the worlds of a represented event. This event is naturally removed in space and time from the moment of recorded communication with the reader inferring the action of writing as the logical precursor to the finished document they perceive. Typically, the fictional practice of writing is only ever assumed, unless attention is drawn to the composition by the character; letter writers might pause for instance when interrupted by other characters or apologise for a delayed reply. As the events described in epistolary are always focalised from the perspective of a character-writer, it follows that such characters must be embodied and must therefore occupy a specific spatio-temporal location – a text-world (see Lahey, 2004: 26). The logic surrounding the act of writing itself subsequently highlights that all epistolic texts present initial empty text-worlds, with the moment of transcription being backgrounded in construal (Norledge, 2016).

In the case of *The Ark*, which comprises various multi-authored documents, the concept of empty text-worlds is even more nuanced. Typically, empty text-worlds have only ever been applied to texts with a singular narrative voice, with the empty text-world reflecting the embodiment of that individual enactor. However, with the presentation of

alternating character-writers in this novel, we arguably infer multiple empty text-worlds, as each enactor logically occupies a distinct temporal and spatial position. Each new document presented triggers a spatio-temporal world-switch, engendered by the semiotic cues (language, pictures, sound etc.) of the artefacts themselves. We are introduced in each represented document to a new narrative event recorded by a specific enactor who occupies a unique empty text-world. These enactors are usually identified by their being named as the sender of a particular communicate, through a typographical signature, the capture of a screen or username or through readerly inference. Their spatial locations are very rarely fleshed out beyond a broad assumption of their being inside or outside of the Ark and there are little to no additional details about their pragmatic writing environments.

If we take the first few pages of the novel as an example, which comprise three distinct documents – a newspaper article, an ‘apparition’ memo which deletes five minutes after it is opened, and a standard memo – the empty-text-world-to-text-world relationship in *The Ark* (represented in Figure 1) becomes clear. Figure 1 maps only the skeletal ontological structure of the narrative proper, that is, only those world-switches between documents, as opposed to the full world structure of each document’s metanarrative.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Figure 1: The empty-text-world-to-text-world relationship as mapped in relation to the opening three documents of *The Ark*.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the novel opens with a ‘NewsBlipp’ from ‘The Australian’ dated June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2093 with the headline ‘Chaos Cult Bunker Unearthed at Mount Kosciuszko’ signalling the finding of the Ark. The moment in which the article is written constitutes the empty-text world shown to the left of Text-World 1. The article is presented without a corresponding author yet logically we can assume a journalist. This journalist exists in a separate text-world from that which is described in the article itself, a world for which we have no world-building information. One might assume, based on schematic knowledge of present-day printing, that the journalist is writing within days of the published article, and is likely to be local to Australia given the title of the newspaper press, but this can only be inferred.

Following the article, we then turn to a new document which presents an ‘apparition’ memo, cueing a world-switch, in this case a flash-back to the year 2041. The memo is composed by Aidan, the project manager of the National Arboreal Protection Facility, and has been sent to all employees of the Ark. Aidan is writing in a distinct time-zone from both the text-world presented in the memo (only slightly in this instance given the assumed immediacy of digital communication), and from the journalist who composed the opening article. He therefore occupies a separate empty text-world as shown to the right of Text-World 2. We then encounter another world-switch, flashing forwards this time to April 13<sup>th</sup> to read Aidan’s welcome message to the inhabitants of the Ark in Text-World 3. This message is open access and is sent from a different enactor of Aidan to the Aidan in Empty Text-World 2; we cannot assume he is occupying the same spatial parameters and he physically exists in a separate time-zone hence the conceptualisation of Empty Text-World 3.

The relationship between the empty text-worlds of the Ark and the text-worlds cued from the language of the documents is arguably bidirectional with one informing the other as the reader’s knowledge of the fictional world develops. For instance, in reading that the memo in Text-World 2 is an ‘apparition’ we garner some knowledge of Aidan’s intent in writing the document from his pragmatic position in Empty Text-World



2. This knowledge is then foregrounded when reading the standard memo detailed in Text-World 3, inviting the reader to question Aidan's choice to shift media in Empty Text-World 3.

In order to populate the initial empty text-worlds of *The Ark*, the reader must consequently navigate the multiple documents which make up the simulated archive, processing not only the language of each individual document but also the characters intentions in composing them. As the reader engages with the plot of the novel, they must therefore simultaneously track the format and privacy settings of each media output, as indicated by both linguistic and visual semiotic cues; analyse why they have been chosen for each particular message, as determined through inferencing and the retrospective enrichment of each empty text-world; and decipher who amongst the other characters has access to their content, achieved through the bidirectional 'togglng' (Stockwell, 2002) between worlds. The multimodal documents subsequently serve a 'deeper structuring function' (Brown, 2015: 34), priming the reader's conceptualisation of each language event and, via processes of incrementation, enriching the text-worlds they create.

### **3. From Dailemail to Headless Horsemen**

Understanding the nuances of Smith's multimodal design is key to a reading of *The Ark*, with each interaction type having its own style and visual characteristics which are each suggestive of futuristic user interfaces. The typography of each document is unique with typography in itself visualising 'textual "difference"', signalling different 'voices, ways, styles and modes of writing' whilst representing 'the material side and the technologies of writing, from the fountain pen, the typewriter and book print to the digits of electronic and multimedial hypertext' (Hallet, 2009: 138–139). The register of the messages aligns with the style of each inferred technology, ranging from the formal professionalism of medical documents through to textspeak, projecting a sense of realism and developing characterisation through their design.

To complement their image structure each document also projects a bespoke product name such as 'Kaos Chronicles' (a service akin to *Tumblr*), 'Articulate' (a voice recording software), 'Headless Horsemen' (a form of encrypted email) and 'Blipps' which are the equivalent of modern-day text messages. According to Brown (2015: 34), 'the presence and naming of communicative systems contribute to the "particularity of

description” that characterises the realist novel (Watt, 2001 [1957]: 56) for, as he continues, ‘when a character answers her or his iPhone in a contemporary novel or when a historical fiction describes a network of horse couriers, this immerses readers in a story world and helps them determine its similarity to or difference from their own’. Arguably, the same holds true with dystopian narratives, with the coining of futuristic language and media adding a layer of authenticity to a speculative world, contextualising unfamiliar text-world practices and indicating the potential temporal distance between that of the fictional world and the reader’s real-world present (see Stockwell, 2000, 2006). Several of the media outputs in *The Ark*, for instance, are comparable with communication systems in my experiential environment with ‘Blipps’ (text-messaging), ‘Dailemail’ (email), and the search engine ‘Matthew 7.7: Seek and you shall find’ (*Google*) having clear equivalents in 2019. However, the systems themselves are unfamiliar and the similarities drawn here are based purely on my own discourse-world knowledge and interpretation.

Such deductions are fundamental to a reading of the narrative, with the messaging styles guiding text-world creation and priming text-world events as initially outlined in section 2. Building on this analysis, the following discussion subsequently draws together the linguistic and visual elements of *The Ark*. Consider the following exchange which occurs during Part 1 of the novel and details an underhand operation between Aidan and his associate Rudolph. At this moment in the narrative, Aidan has taken the decision to prematurely lock down the Ark without the authorisation of SynBioTech, the company orchestrating the rehabilitation project. The chief executive officer of SynBioTech, Kirk, has consequently been trying to unseat Aidan, circulating official ‘LetterLike’ emails to the inhabitants of the bunker detailing the immediate removal of Aidan from the project. Following a string of complaints from the Ark’s employees to SynBioTech, Aidan’s mental state is revealed by the company to be ‘volatile’, ‘antagonistic’ and ‘unpredictable’ (Smith, 2014a: n.p.), labels he attempts to undermine via an orchestrated media leak as detailed below in Figure 2.

The linguistic message depicted in Figure 2 comprises the directive ‘org a media leak, ostensibly from w/in SynBioTech’, which sets out Aidan’s plan and primes action in the text-world. The adverb ‘ostensibly’ indicates the action is to be a deception. When paired with the graphic design of the message, which indicates the communication is a

‘Gopher’, a form of untraceable email (emphasised by the maze-like tunnel design), Aidan’s scheming in the empty text-world he occupies becomes all the more apparent. Smith’s manipulation of futuristic communication is therefore particularly effective, for as noted by Dugdale (2013: n.p.), ‘creating characters with secrets has become trickier [...] since the arrival of social media and Google’, and yet it is through such modern epistolary modes that character secrets in *The Ark* are embedded and revealed.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

Figure 2: An encrypted ‘Gopher’ message between Aidan and Rudolph detailing plans for a media leak.

The messages themselves also affect the temporal ‘rhythm’ (Bal, 1997: 99-111) of the narrative with the ‘quick exchange of messages [...] [suggesting] a near-isochronic relation between the duration of events in the story world and the time it takes the reader to learn about them in the text’ (Brown, 2015: 48). As such, the deceptions and countermoves of characters in the novel create a sense of ‘narrative urgency’ (Simpson, 2014), as the reader pieces together the text-world in line with the experiences of the characters themselves.

The pages immediately following Aidan’s initial directive clearly exemplify the novel’s urgent narrative rhythm as the ‘logic and consequences’ (Moylan, 1986) of his decision come to light. The next page in the novel, for instance, depicts a newspaper article with the heading ‘National Arboreal Protection Project Manager Fired’ in which it is detailed that ‘an anonymous source from within SynBioTech revealed that Mr Fox [Aidan] had a history of substance abuse’, claiming that ‘evidence had recently come to light that Fox [had] become addicted to the drug Mdp<sub>2</sub>, more commonly known by its street name, friek’ (Smith, 2014a: n.p.). Given the contents of the previous email exchange, the reader is able to effectively negate the contents of this ‘NewsBlipp’ as they

are aware that the information was in fact planted from within the Ark itself. ‘Perfect’ comes Aidan’s reply (again through an encrypted ‘Gopher’), ‘take a clearskin urine sample out of the archive, put my label on it and give it to Alex for testing – say I insisted’ (Smith, 2014a: n.p.). This information adds a further level of unreliability to the narrative, with Aidan’s instructions here to present a ‘clearskin urine sample’ as his own, implying that his system is in fact compromised. Aidan’s plan then comes to fruition in the proceeding open-access ‘Dailemail’ (reproduced in Figure 3), in which Alex (the Ark’s medic) reveals Aidan’s ‘clean’ results, (inferably following Rudolph’s completion of Aidan’s directive in the text-world), restoring complete faith in his leadership and at the same time encouraging inhabitants to disregard any future information that comes from SynBioTec.

[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE]

Figure 3: A traceable ‘Dailemail’ from the Ark’s medic, Alex, detailing the results of Aidan’s urine test.

The unreliability of Aidan’s character is consequently emphasised through his media choices, through the actions we infer occur at text-world level beyond the boundaries of the documents presented and the ways in which Aidan’s interactions are presented through both text and image. For Smith this sense of unreliable narration and a readerly uncertainty about whose version of events to trust was very important to her production of *The Ark*. In an interview with Angela Meyer, she notes:

I wanted the reader to feel continually wrong-footed by the shifts in narrative voice and by the gaps created by the narrative form. I wanted them to be always wondering what was going on outside the margins of the documents; what was

being left unreported? To that end, I was very careful about both when certain pieces of information were revealed, who they were revealed by, and in what type of communique. (Smith 2014c: n.p.)

As astutely noted by one *Goodreads* reviewer, ‘The reader of [*The Ark*] is consequently caught in a game trying to decide which character is presenting the most accurate state of affairs’, a game which to be played fully requires reader interaction with both the multimodality of the epistolary novel and the transmedial aspects of its narrative experience, which I move on to examine in section 4.

#### **4. *The Ark* as Transfictional Dystopia**

In bringing together several multimedia platforms and a range of digital discourses, *The Ark* operates as an interactive ‘transmedia network’ (Gibbons, 2017) with the multimodal epistolary novel at its core. As defined by Jenkins (2006: 21), transmedia storytelling:

is the art of world making. To fully experience any fictional world, consumers must assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels, comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience.

*The Ark* relies on this ‘hunter gatherer’ premise, with readers of the text being invited to explore an array of multimedia features (including sound files, performance pieces and complementary artwork) alongside the digital narrative so as to fully experience the worlds of the novel.

These additional narratives allow readers of *The Ark* to expand and enrich their experience of the text, engaging creatively with its fictional worlds, should they wish. The features are not, however, imperative to a reading of the novel proper which can stand alone as a complete text in its own right. As such *The Ark*’s transmedial content can be conceived of as ‘paratexts’ (Genette, 1991, 1997). Paratexts, which serve to accompany a narrative, fall under what Genette (1997: 161) refers to as the prefatorial situation of communication, ‘using the word *preface* to designate every type of introductory (preludial or postludial) text, authorial or allographic, consisting of a discourse produced on the subject of the text that precedes it’ (emphasis in original). Of particular interest then is the effect of paratext on reading experience, on ‘how a text is

read’, and how paratextual elements ‘[attempt] to direct [a] book’s reception’ (Richardson, 2008: 12). In affecting the presentation, reception and consumption of texts, paratexts are ‘hermeneutically privileged and powerful elements [...] they guide the reader’s attention [...] and communicate such information as to give a text its first contours’ (Stanitzek, 2005: 32). Authorial introductions, for example, might point out key themes or plot points, footnotes can draw attention to otherwise overlooked ideas and ‘a strong recommendation on the book jacket might predispose us to read a narrative with a favourable mindset or, conversely, to be doubly disappointed when the narrative fails to match the expectations created by the blurb’ (Abbott, 2002: 31). To this end, paratextual information can predetermine, aid and develop world-construction, prime particular readerly perspectives and encourage, or in some cases dissuade, immersive reading experiences.

The role and function of paratexts have consequently been the central focus of much research in literary criticism as well as discussions in film studies and the digital humanities. Appel and Maleckar (2012), for example, consider the impact of paratexts on narrative persuasion, and extensive studies have been undertaken with regard to the paratexts of fanfiction (Leavenworth, 2015); new media (Stanitzek, 2005) and video games (see for example, Carter, 2014; Consalvo, 2007). Individual paratextual elements such as footnotes (Grafton, 1997; Zerby, 2002); book jackets (O’Connor and O’Connor, 1998); blurbs (Cronin and La Barre, 2005; Jackson, 2000); and dedications (Gifford, 1988) have also received notable attention. However, the specific linguistic workings of these paratexts often go unnoticed, with literary criticism focusing more on the thematic nuances and socio-historical insights offered by the additions than on the language of the paratexts themselves. Throughout this section, I aim to redress this balance, considering how readerly engagement with the language of paratext, as presented through the transfictionality of *The Ark*, impacts upon readerly processes of world-building and incrementation.

#### **4.1. Imagine the Story as Your Own**

On opening *The Ark*’s companion website, an action which is necessary to purchase and download the novel itself, the reader is greeted by a futuristic welcome message, foregrounded in white font against a pure black background. The message is divided into

six individual sections, each headed with a corresponding icon that reflects the thematic nuances of the novel itself. Given the size and the black and white contrast which foregrounds this paratext, it is arguable here that most readers will choose to engage with this narrative before purchasing the novel, as in Stockwell's (2009) terms the 'newness' and 'brightness' of the paratext generate a strong 'textual attractor'. The central positioning of the text on the website homepage strengthens this attraction, and given the book is not available to purchase through alternate sellers, readerly engagement with this particular paratext, prior to a reading of the novel proper, is highly likely.

Not only the text's design but also its language draws the reader in, inviting a sense of projection through the frequent use of second-person address and a series of repeated, parallel constructions, each opening with the mental cognitive verb 'imagine'. The complete text of the paratext is reproduced below:

Imagine a world in which every tree has been burned or cut down. Imagine that somewhere, seeds have been stored, from which, one day, the earth can be replanted. Imagine yourself as the guardian of those seeds.

Imagine an animal living underground: no sky, no sun, no moon, no stars. Even the air is recycled; every breath already breathed. Now imagine yourself as that animal, twenty-five others alongside you.

Imagine a bunker with only one door to the world outside. Imagine that without your knowledge, without your consent, that door has been locked. Imagine having no escape.

Imagine everything you do and everything you say being recorded. Imagine those recordings being used as evidence against you. Imagine having no lawyer, no law.

Imagine being utterly cut off from the world outside. No telephone, no news, no radio, no email. Imagine having no idea if the people you love are alive or dead. Imagine every note, every comment, every conversation being archived.

Imagine fifty years from now, that archive being excavated, pieced together to tell a story. Imagine the story as your own.

Welcome to the Ark

(Smith, 2014b: n.p.)

The reader is directed fourteen times throughout this initial paratext to ‘imagine’, with each repetition triggering a further embedded epistemic modal-world. In each instance, the verb takes a sentence initial position, acting as an imperative and instructing the reader to perform the mental cognition process, to ‘imagine’. In doing so, the reader is encouraged to take up the perspective of narratee as a result of the ‘apostrophic’ second-person address (Herman, 1994, 2002) – a ‘you’ which transcends the ontological boundary of the text to address the reader.

A particular world-view is subsequently primed with the creation of each modal-world, as the reader enriches their paratextual conceptualisations with a series of world-building elements (‘an animal living underground’; ‘a bunker with only one door’; ‘burned or cut down’ trees), which collectively build a clear image of a world in a state of collapse. These world-builders are somewhat vague, exemplified by the use of the indefinite article, ‘a bunker’; ‘an animal’, and the consistent use of superordinate categories over hyponyms (e.g. ‘animal’ or ‘trees’ rather than specific species or genus), allowing the reader the scope to imagine such elements as suits their preferences.

The world conceptualised equally has no clear temporal or spatial parameters, with the closing temporal deictic markers ‘one day’ and ‘fifty years from now’ being the only helpful indicators. Even then, however, the proximal deictic use of ‘now’ in the penultimate modal-world (‘imagine fifty years from now’) is defamiliarising, as the ‘now’ in question is not the actual reader’s respective ‘now’ as it is in the second section (‘Now imagine...’), but a projection of the speaker’s origo which is temporally unspecified in relation to real-world time. Similarly, the ambiguous adverb ‘somewhere’, combined with the use of distal demonstratives (‘that animal’; ‘that archive’; ‘those recordings’), create an indefinite spatial location that holds no relative anchor to my discourse-world, enhancing the bespoke experience of conceptualising ‘a world’ (note the indefinite article here) that is to be imagined as my own.

Interestingly, although mostly indefinite, many of the world-building elements presented in the paratext are also negated (‘no sky’; ‘no sun’; ‘no moon’; ‘no stars’; ‘no lawyer’; ‘no law’), as are several of the function-advancing propositions (‘without your knowledge’; ‘without your consent’). Each of these elements, which in themselves trigger world-switches (see Gavins 2007), has a distinct conceptual texture and exist separately from the originating paratextual text-world. This results from the negated structure of the



utterances that require a different form of cognitive processing. In line with other cognitive models of discourse, Text World Theory posits that negated discourse must be first positively conceptualised in the mind of the reader before it can be processed negatively (Gavins, 2007: 102). For example, in the negated text-world created from the negative construction ‘no sky’, a conceptualisation of the sky as existing must first be realised before its negated state can be understood. In this way, ‘the contents of this text-world are foregrounded in the reader’s mind, since they must first be brought into focus in the discourse in order then to be negated’ (Gavins, 2007: 102). The lack of each of these elements is consequently a ‘felt absence’ (Stockwell, 2009), emphasising the oppressive quality of the text-world itself and adding to an inferred dystopian or apocalyptic environment.

I contend, then, that these inferences, and the conceptualisation of paratextual worlds more broadly, shape and predetermine text-world construction for the main narrative of *The Ark*, priming a particular world-view and establishing feelings of unease and suspense before the reader even opens the text. From engaging with the opening ‘welcome’ alone the reader has a partially established range of world-building information which, through processes of incrementation, maps across as part of their discourse-world knowledge to influence a reading of the text itself. For instance, on an initial reading of the novel’s opening page (introduced in section 2) which details a ‘NewsBlipp’ dated June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2093 with the headline ‘Chaos Cult Bunker Unearthed at Mount Kosciuszko’, readers who have previously engaged with the paratext will be able to immediately contextualise the spatio-temporal boundaries of the events described by the article. They can deduce that the bunker which has been ‘unearthed’ is the same bunker which they were asked to imagine in the paratext, the bunker which was established and locked fifty years prior to the article’s publication in 2093. On reading that ‘seventeen people have been recovered’ from the bunker, they may also note that in the paratext they were asked to imagine ‘twenty-five others’ alongside them, suggesting that several members of the initial cohort have died. This is clarified later in the article itself which stipulates that ‘of the original 26 people who moved into the bunker in 2041, only four remain’. Interestingly, given the paratextual prepositional phrase ‘alongside you’ – ‘imagine [...] twenty-five others alongside you’, one of those twenty-six could be

perceived as an enactor of the reader, creating an even stronger tie between text and paratext.

The inherently negative images of isolation, entrapment and darkness inspired by the paratext can also be incremented into the text-world, given the specific parallels drawn between the bunker in the novel and that which the paratext invites the reader to imagine. What appears to be a joyous event for the fictional readers of the ‘NewsBlipp’, then, with the recovery of the seed banks promising regeneration for the readers of *The Australian* in 2093, is in fact much darker from a real-world readerly perspective. The text-world constructed is effectively framed by the paratext, as are any subsequent conceptualisations of life inside the Ark following the world-switch on turning the page to 11<sup>th</sup> April 2041 when the original inhabitants enter the facility. If the reader has engaged with more of the website’s content or explored the app prior to reading, this paratextual frame will be even richer. The sense of *The Ark*’s ‘worldness’ (Klastrup and Tosca, 2004) is therefore heightened following interaction with the novel’s transmedial elements, with each narrative addition refining and expanding our knowledge of the fictional world itself.

## **5. World-building across Narrative Modes**

Dystopian narratives themselves offer refracted representations of real-world anxieties, presenting worlds that are at once familiar, being connected in some way to the ideal reader’s real-world present, whilst remaining somewhat estranging and displaced (Norledge, 2019, forthcoming). *The Ark* is very much both of these things, presenting a world which is notably futuristic yet grounded in real-world socio-cultural practice. Through the conceptualisation of various ultramodern technologies, embodied by the visual design of the novel, *The Ark* consequently projects a hypothetical vision of global collapse through a highly contemporary social lens. As argued throughout this article, it is the combination of transmedial storytelling and the novel’s multimodal epistolic core that creates such a lens, reflecting Smith’s interest in exploring new technologies which she contends ‘allow books to be more than books’ (Smith, 2014d: n.p.) and gauge whether or not transmedial and multimodal elements actually add anything to reading experience. Based on a reading of this novel, I argue that they do.

Within this analysis, I placed particular analytical focus on the construction of epistolic text-worlds, extending contemporary discussions of the epistolary genre and presenting an original cognitive approach to the conceptualisation of document-based narrative. In doing so, I applied and advanced Lahey's (2004) conceptualisation of 'empty text-worlds', proposing that epistolary fictions present characteristically backgrounded text-initial text-worlds given the necessary distinction between the act of composition and the act of narration undertaken by a particular character-writer. I argued for a more nuanced understanding of epistolic text-worlds based on this premise, demonstrating how texts such as *The Ark*, which comprise various multi-authored multimodal documents, cue the creation of multiple empty text-worlds. These worlds, which are fleshed-out retrospectively, prime and colour text-world construction as readers learn to unpack the subtle world-building cues indicated by a character's choice of media. Taking into account the evolution of the genre to include mixed media, I propose a more intricate relationship exists between the epistolary as a formal structuring device and the use of epistolary elements more broadly as tools for world-building and characterisation.

*The Ark* hinges on the relationship between text and image, with each document serving as a further world-building element and enriching the initially empty text-worlds of the novel. The transmediality of the text takes this one step further, promoting immersion in the worlds of *The Ark* and encouraging the reader to quite literally imagine the story as their own, with the materials they upload adding to the embodied archive of Smith's hypothetical future world. The paratexts of *The Ark* (both those created by the author and of other readers throughout the world) frame and/or shape each reading of the text, priming particular readerly responses and expanding the text-worlds we create. Paratextual cues must therefore be taken into account when analysing the broader experience of reading a particular narrative, with such elements clearly impacting upon readerly processes of interpretation and construal.

Taken together, the innovative methods of storytelling demonstrated in *The Ark* subsequently move dystopian epistolary beyond the journal excerpts of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Orwell, 1949) or the emails of *Super Sad True Love Story* (Shteyngart, 2010), towards a more interactive and immersive reading experience. Working across narrative platforms, the novel presents a bespoke reading for each individual with each potential reader expanding the fictional experience for future generations. Alongside analogous

multimodal works such as Kauffman and Kristoff's (2015) *Illuminae* or Horowitz's (2015) dystopian satire *The Pickle Index, The Ark* champions an evolving form of dystopian storytelling, experimenting creatively with how to tell of future worlds in a way that is believable, tactile and emotive, to tell of the future using language and narrative methods that reflect that future.

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