Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* in Cyberspace: Charting the Worldmaking Practices of Online Fandom

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Abstract

In this paper, I posit that narrative theories on storyworlds, and particularly on fictional situations, can help us chart the worldmaking practices that shape online fan fiction – that is, the ways in which fan writers use narrative resources to evoke storyworlds. I illustrate this with a discussion of immersion in fan fiction. First, fictional situations are examined through the lens of immersion theory, and redefined as mental constructs that result from the interaction between text and reader. In light of this, fan writing can be reinterpreted as a form of worldmaking. Worldmaking practices are very difficult to chart, however, because fan fiction is radically intertextual, transmedial, and (inter)subjective. A fan writer's idea of the source world may be based on a whole range of texts, just as readers may rely on a wide range of texts when they work to comprehend a fan fiction text. The communication between fan readers and writers does not break down, however, because fans share a basic idea of the fictional universe. I argue that this is also true for 'narrative frames,' or the remembered counterparts of fictional situations. This is supported by Umberto Eco's work on intertextuality, and Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca's research into transmedia storytelling. Finally, I demonstrate one use of the narrative frame concept in a small case study about emotional immersion, for which I will analyse Wendi's 'A Lesson Hard Learned'.

Key Words: Jane Austen fan fiction, storyworlds, worldmaking practices, postclassical narratology

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0. Introduction

Jane Austen has a fan base, and a creative one at that. According to fannish lore, janeites have written stories about their idol's fictional universe since the 1920s – recounting what happened after Emma Woodhouse's wedding, for example, or what might have happened after Mr Bennet's death. This would make the Austen fandom one of the first to produce 'fan fiction': fiction written by and for fans, which is founded on the characters, settings, concepts, or plots of antecedent texts. A lot has changed since the 1920s, however. Because Austen's popularity boomed in the 1990s, fan writers can now draw inspiration from numerous adaptations, secondary texts, and other products of 'Austenmania'. Because of the advent of the Internet, moreover, they have access to a large and diverse community of fellow-fans, who can advise them, review their writing, and influence their interpretations. Arguably, this has changed the worlds that Austen

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fics represent, the ways in which those worlds are evoked, and the ways in which they are experienced. In this paper, I posit that recent studies of storyworlds, or the worlds evoked by narratives, can help us chart the ways in which fans use narrative resources to evoke worlds. In what follows, I will demonstrate this with a discussion of immersion in fan fiction. In essence, I will bring narrative theory to bear on two phenomena that are key to fan fiction: fictional situations and what I call 'narrative frames'. A fictional situation is, quite literally, a set of circumstances, conditions, and events that exist at a specific time and on a specific location in the storyworld[2]. This complex tends to revolve around characters and their actions. Mr Darcy's first proposal, for instance, is the epicentre of a larger situation, which involves everything from Elizabeth Bennet's dislike to, say, the fact that there are servants nearby. A narrative frame is the remembered counterpart of such a situation – in this case, the basic idea that fan writers and readers have of the circumstances of Mr Darcy's proposal. In what follows, I will first examine fictional situations through the lens of immersion theory, and define fan writing as a form of worldmaking. I will then characterise narrative frames as memory structures, and place them in context. Finally, I will demonstrate the concept's usefulness in a small case study about emotional immersion, for which I will analyse Wendi's 'A Lesson Hard Learned'.

1. Fictional Situations, Postclassical Narratology, and Fan Writing as World-making

It's well beyond the scope of this paper to review every theoretical discussion of the storyworld and the process of worldmaking[3]. I will only discuss theories which have deepened my understanding of fictional situations and our memories of them. When we are lost in a novel, film, or other narrative, we tend to assume that fictional situations have the substance, the feel, and the internal logic of text-independent ones. Several studies of cult texts suggest that this assumption is key to fandom. Sara Gwenllian-Jones has argued, for instance, that many fan activities are inspired by the simple fact that cult texts hold the 'promise of fulfilment': they suggest that there is more to the storyworld than what the text represents[4]. In narrative theory, the reading experience 'through which a fictional world acquires the presence of an autonomous, language-independent reality populated with live human beings' is known as immersion[5]. Marie-Laure Ryan has argued that immersion depends on the co-operation between text and reader. A text will only appear to describe a world when readers add structure and fullness to its semantic domain, through the import of data from their cognitive, experiential, and cultural backgrounds[6]. At the same time, however, readers will only feel immersed when the text allows them to project, or 'recentre' their consciousness to the fictional world[7]. Marco Caracciolo has clarified this process with the work of psychologist Rolf A. Zwaan. He argues that, when readers try to comprehend a passage of narrative text, they actually run a mental simulation of the fictional situation on the

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neuronal pathways which they use for actual perception[8]. When the passage has particular features, such as markers of focalisation, the reader is more likely to feel immersed[9].

These theories suggest that texts are like musical scores or playscripts, which structure the reader's imaginary performance. I believe it is useful to approach fan fiction texts in a similar way. Since the 1990s, several studies of fan fiction have emphasised that fan writers are no slaves to their source text, or 'canon'. Fan fiction texts do not simply give out on the source world; they evoke a transformed version of it[10]. I go one step further still, and argue that fan fiction texts create *reading experiences*, rather than mere worlds. This nuance adds a dimension to several fan fiction studies. Deborah Kaplan has argued, for instance, that fans use variable focalisation and other narrative techniques to create a dialogue between mainstream and fannish interpretations of the characters[11]. Some writers use first-person narration, for example, to present the 'bad guy' in a different light, and to encourage reader identification[12]. I argue that these strategies also create a particular reading experience: readers are drawn into the very heart of the fictional world, and encouraged to imagine the writer's version of a character's thoughts, feelings, and experiences. I argue, in short, that what Kaplan identifies as distinct narrative techniques are also conventional ways of structuring and customising the reader's experience[13].

2. Canon, Narrative Frames, and the Textual Analysis of Fan Fiction

In 2011, I started working on a research project which revolves around the idea of worldmaking. I believe that fan fiction texts are shaped by world-making practices. These are particular strategies, or conventional ways of using narrative resources, which influence the ways in which readers imagine and experience the fic's storyworld. What is more, I believe that writers of fan fiction can structure the reader's experience in ways that regular authors can only dream of, because they can take advantage of genre-specific and medium-specific resources. These include the audience's knowledge of the source text and the narrative possibilities of the Internet. This is suggested by previous studies of fan fiction. In *The Democratic Genre*, for example, Sheenagh Pugh remarks that fan writers can use a lot of 'shorthand, allusion, and irony' because their audience is familiar with canon[14]. In my research project, I use narrative theory to refine findings like these.

The closer you examine the concept of 'canon,' the more elusive it becomes. As I have already noted, the term 'canon' refers to a fan writer's source text, or rather, to 'the events presented in the media source that provide the universe, setting, and characters' of fan fiction[15]. This canon is not necessarily bound to one text. Fans of *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, may base their idea of Austen's universe on the novel, but also on screen adaptations, websites about the Regency period, conversations they have had with other fans, and, indeed, on details and interpretations they've picked up in fan fiction[16]. When fan writers build up a

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storyworld in fan fiction, they may draw inspiration from any or all of these paratexts; when fan readers work to comprehend a fan fiction text, they may rely on yet another set of texts. It is remarkable, then, that the communication between fan writers and readers does not break down. This suggests that writers and readers share a basic idea of the fictional universe. I believe that the remembered counterparts of fictional situations, which I call narrative frames, are also structured by this shared core of meaning. This intuition is supported by research into intertextuality and transmedia storytelling. First, narrative frames bear a family resemblance to Umberto Eco's 'intertextual frames'. This concept is in turn rooted in the frame system theory of Marvin Minsky. An artificial intelligence theorist, Minsky posited that interpreters process new situations with the help of remembered frameworks, which he calls 'frames'[17]. He compares these knowledge structures to networks 'of nodes and relations,' which comprise two strata[18]. The 'top levels' contain elements which are always involved in the situation; the 'lower levels' are comprised of 'slots,' which tend to be filled with default data, but which can be completed with specific data in the process of comprehension[19]. This information may concern people, objects, events, and even expectations or presumptions, as long as they meet the conditions that are encoded in the slots[20].

In accordance with this model, Eco's intertextual frames are substantial memory structures that contain information about stereotypical fictional situations.[21] He discusses four frame types, which cover everything from the standardized plot of a detective novel to a prototypical Western duel.[22] He stresses, however, that these frames are not necessarily shared by every reader, because everyone's cultural background is different[23]. This model can be applied to the fictional situations of canon, such as Mr Darcy's first proposal, but also to 'fanonical' situations. In fandom, the 'fanon' comprises events which are 'created by the fan community in a particular fandom and repeated pervasively' in fan fiction and meta-texts[24]. In the Austen fandom, for example, Mr Bennet dies in several fics, leaving his family destitute. I argue that such events, and the situations they define, are remembered as narrative frames. These frames depend on the cultural background of fans, but there seems to be a middle ground between knowing and not knowing them. When a fan writer accepts the 2005 adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*[25] as canonical, for instance, Mr Darcy's proposal will take place in a folly in Rosings Park, rather than Hunsford parsonage, simply because the film does not stay true to the novel. However, the 'top levels' of the frame stay the same: it still contains such categories as Mr Darcy, Elizabeth, and a proposal, even though they are filled out with alternative data.

Because narrative frames are less generic than intertextual ones, they also resemble 'transmedial worlds'. This concept was developed by Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca to analyse the storyworlds of transmedia narratives, or narratives that unfold 'across multiple media platforms'[26]. They define the concept as follows:

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> *Transmedial worlds are abstract content systems from which a repertoire of fictional stories and characters can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms. What characterises a transmedial world is that audience and designers share a mental image of the 'worldness' (a number of distinguishing features of its universe). The idea of a specific world's worldness mostly originates from the first version of the world presented, but can be elaborated and changed over time. Quite often the world has a cult (fan) following across media as well.[27]*

Although Klastrup and Tosca are interested in entire worlds, rather than fictional situations, their definition resonates interestingly with my discussion of narrative frames. The narrative frame of Mr Darcy's proposal, for example, may be actualised in a wide range of ways. A fan writer may create a situation in which Elizabeth accepts Mr Darcy for economic reasons, or in which one of the servants interrupts the proposal. Klastrup and Tosca's notion of worldness, moreover, resembles the idea of fixed 'top levels'. While they assume that there 'is only one acceptable version' of the transmedial world[28], however, I believe that fan communities may tolerate several 'defaults' of the same narrative frame. Fans may be familiar, for example, with the different versions of Mr Darcy's proposal, and switch 'glasses' whenever a fic cues one rather than the other.

   I want to conclude this discussion with a brief analysis of Wendi's 'A Lesson Hard Learned'[29]. This short story was posted on the Derbyshire Writers' Guild in 2011, with a 'high angst' warning in the subject line. As is common in fandom, this warning indicates that the story contains content which may make the reader feel anxious or sad. In what follows, I will demonstrate that 'A Lesson Hard Learned' achieves this by playing to the reader's narrative frames. More specifically, I will argue that 'A Lesson Hard Learned' invites readers to imagine something which may be distressing to them, in a way that is made possible by the genre of fan fiction. However, I will also stress that this strategy is part of a larger complex of practices. 'A Lesson Hard Learned' builds on an unspecified version of Mr Darcy's first proposal. Not long after Elizabeth's refusal, Mr Darcy has a nightmare, in which he has become a very bitter man. When he hears that Elizabeth has died, he realises that he has made a mistake, and that he still loves her. He wakes up in cold sweat, and is determined to become a better man. The following excerpt is taken from the beginning of the dream sequence:

> Years past his prime, the gentleman's chocolate brown hair was now streaked with silver, being nearly white at the temples. If any prior acquaintances could have had the opportunity to see the gentleman now, they would note that he was still quite attractive.

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> At second glance, they might notice the deep creases in his brow
> and around his mouth. It is likely that they would recognize that
> life had not been as kind to him as it could have been, for these
> lines were the obvious result of an almost constant frown. But
> there were none who cared to look, and he told himself on a daily
> basis that he cared not.[30]

In this passage, the author uses a technique which David Herman calls 'direct hypothetical focalisation'[31]. The narrator uses an observer who isn't actually there to convey a particular observation. This technique is not specific to fan fiction. However, what makes this case special is that the narrator draws a parallel between the storyworld and the actual world. In a way, readers who are familiar with *Pride and Prejudice*, in any of its versions, *are* prior acquaintances, because they have an idea of what Mr Darcy was like in his prime. In this passage, then, the text takes readers by hand, and encourages them to mould their individual memories of Mr Darcy into a particular shape. This emphasises the contrast between what happens in the dream sequence of this fic, and what happens in the source text, and invites readers to feel a sense of anxiety and loss. This seems to be confirmed by at least one reader comment to this story, in which a responder draws attention to the contrast in question.[32] This example suggests that the concept of narrative frame can help us chart worldmaking practices.

3. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have outlined a theoretical framework that can help us chart the complex worldmaking practices of online fandom. The centrepiece of this framework is the concept of narrative frame. In essence, this is a shared idea of a fictional situation. Narrative frames are grounded in mental simulations of fictional situations, but informed by the reader's 'fancultural' background. This background knowledge derives from a particular configuration of source texts and paratexts, which may include fan fiction. While the basic structure of a narrative frame is fixed, it may be filled out with different, 'standard' sets of information, and actualised in an infinite number of ways. I believe that this concept offers a useful starting point for the analysis of genre-specific ways of worldmaking. While it is impossible to link specific textual cues to particular images in the reader's imagination, it is possible to detect patterns that relate to the shared core of narrative frames. In my case study, for example, the text encourages readers to mould their individual ideas of Mr Darcy into a particular shape, adding emphasis to the contrast between what happens in the fic and in the source text. This contrast has been noted by at least one responder. We should bear in mind, however, that practices such as these function in a highly specific socio-cultural context. In reader responses like the one I've paraphrased, readers put their reading experiences into words and tailor them to conventions about what's acceptable,

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what's worth mentioning, and so on. It is likely, then, that 'A Lesson Hard Learned' does not just play to the reader's individual experience, but also to a collective experience—that it creates a community feeling. This social dimension seems to be important, but it is rarely considered in studies of immersion. Perhaps, then, the study of immersion in fan fiction can reveal new frontiers of research for postclassical narratology.

Notes

[1] Veerle Van Steenhuyse is a Ph. D. fellow of the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO).

[2] In this paper, 'fictional situations' are situations which are evoked by narratives, just like storyworlds. I am aware that narratives are not necessarily fictional, just as works of fiction are not necessarily narrative. I've decided to use 'fictional situation' to avoid confusion with Franz K. Stanzel's 'narrative situations,' or ideal types of narrative communication. For additional information on narrative situations, see Manfred Jahn, 'Narrative Situations', in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, eds. David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan (London: Routledge, 2005), 364-5.

[3] For such a survey, I refer the reader to David Herman, *Basic Elements of Narrative* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 118-27; David Herman, *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 9-22; and Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 89-114.

[4] Sara Gwenllian-Jones, 'Starring Lucy Lawless?', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 14 (2000): 11. Viewed 21 Oct. 2011, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/713657674>. Cf. Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), 137-8.

[5] Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 14. Cf. Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), 98-9.

[6] Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 91.

[7] Ibid., 103.

[8] Marco Caracciolo, 'The Reader's Virtual Body: Narrative Space and its Reconstruction', *StoryWorlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 3 (2011): 119. Viewed 13 December 2011, <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/storyworlds/v003/3.caracciolo.pdf>. For a similar argument, see Catherine Emmott, '"Situated Events" in Fictional Worlds: The Reader's Role in Context Construction', *European Journal of English Studies* 2 (1998): 175-7, 186. Viewed 31 Oct. 2012,

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<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=52b131a6-c298-4921-bca8-ccce80c2a4d9%40sessionmgr15&vid=2&hid=10>.

[9] Caracciolo, 'The Reader's Virtual Body,' 120-2. Cf. Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 130-4.

[10] See, for example: Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992), 23.; Juli J. Parrish, 'Inventing a Universe: Reading and Writing Internet Fan Fiction' (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2007), 70. Viewed 17 September 2008, <http://etd.library.pitt.edu/ETD/available/etd-08072007-170133/unrestricted/Parrish2007.pdf>.; Angela Thomas, 'Fan Fiction Online: Engagement, Critical Response and Affective Play through Writing', *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy* 29 (2006): 227. Viewed 24 February 2009, <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=2&hid=6&sid=e9c496b4-b257-43f5-99e4-f63c103d6c5a%40sessionmgr3>.

[11] Deborah Kaplan, 'Construction of Fan Fiction Character Through Narrative,' in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, eds. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2006), 151, 138.

[12] Ibid., 139.

[13] Notably, a number of narrative scholars have reinterpreted 'classical' narrative techniques in a similar light. David Herman has recontextualised Gérard Genette's categories of narrative temporality (see Herman, *Basic Elements of Narrative*, 128-30). Manfred Jahn has discussed Stanzel's narrative situations in the context of worldmaking (see Manfred Jahn, 'Frames, Preferences, and the Reading of Third-Person Narratives: Towards a Cognitive Narratology', *Poetics Today* 18 (1997): 441. Viewed 20 Apr. 2009, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1773182>.)

[14] Sheenagh Pugh, *The Democratic Genre: Fan Fiction in a Literary Context* (Bridgend: Seren, 2005), 32.

[15] Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson. Introduction to *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2006), 9.

[16] For a characterisation of this meaning structure, see Cornel Sandvoss, 'The Death of the Reader? Literary Theory and the Study of Texts in Popular Culture', in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, eds. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 23. For more information on the influence of interpretive conventions, see Busse and Hellekson, Introduction, 7, and Louisa Stein and Kristina Busse, 'Limit Play: Fan Authorship between Source Text, Intertext, and Context', *Popular Communication* 7 (2009): 197. Viewed 7 Mar. 2010, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15405700903177545>.

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[17] Marvin Minsky, 'A Framework for Representing Knowledge,' in *Frame Conceptions and Text Understanding*, ed. Dieter Metzing (New York, de Gruyter, 1979 [1975]), 1-2. Please note that, since 1975, the frame concept has been analysed into a number of others. For an overview, see Catherine Emmott and Marc Alexander, 'Schemata', in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, eds. Peter Hühn et al. (Hamburg: Hamburg University Press, 2011), par 2. Viewed 25 May 2012, <http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php?title=Schemata&oldid=1075>.

[18] Minsky, 'A Framework for Representing Knowledge,' 1-2.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Umberto Eco, *Lector in Fabula: De rol van de lezer in narratieve teksten,* trans. Yond Boeke and Patty Krone (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Bert Bakker, 1989 [1979]), 105-7.

[22] Ibid., 108-9.

[23] Ibid., 110.

[24] Busse and Hellekson, Introduction 9.

[25] *Pride and Prejudice*, directed by Joe Wright, starring Matthew Macfadyen and Keira Knightley (Focus Features et al., 2005).

[26] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 95.

[27] Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca, 'Transmedial Worlds - Rethinking Cyberworld Design,' in the Proceedings of the *3rd International Conference on Cyberworlds* (Tokyo, Japan: 18-20 November 2004), 409. Viewed 13 Oct. 2011, <http://www.itu.dk/people/klastrup/klastruptosca_transworlds.pdf>.

[28] Ibid., 410.

[29] Wendi, 'A Lesson Hard Learned,' posted on Dwiggie.com [The Derbyshire Writers' Guild], last updated on 22 April 2011. Viewed 7 July 2012 <http://www.dwiggie.com/toc/index.php?id=E&page=all>.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Herman, *Story Logic*, 311-2.

[32] Comments to 'A Lesson Hard Learned'. I have decided not to cite the responder for ethical reasons.

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