

# **Agency in Worldbuilding: A Transmedia Analysis**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines worldbuilding across various media, including fiction, tabletop role-playing games, movies and computer games. It explores how the worldbuilding process shapes the immersive experiences of participants and audiences, influenced by the depth and scope of worldbuilding and its method of presentation across the media. My research examines how the openness or limitations of world design impact the narrative and worldbuilding agency of creators and recipients of fictional worlds, and how the power dynamics between them influence the relationship between creators and consumers of such narratives. Furthermore, it investigates how the worldbuilding process differs in fanfiction, role-playing games, computer games, novels and films and what influences they have on the narrative experience. My paper also looks at the role of methodology in the design of worldbuilding and shows how techniques, strategies and emphases of worldbuilding adapt to the medium in which the fictional worlds are created. For example, tabletop role-playing games require a more expansive and adaptable worldbuilding approach, while novels offer a more structured worldbuilding. The method of worldbuilding in tabletop role playing games often involves improvisation and collaboration with players, demanding flexibility in the creative process. In addition, I examine how different media communicate their worlds: films often use visual elements for worldbuilding, forgoing the in-depth worldbuilding stories and legends found in other media forms. By examining the dynamic interplay between worldbuilding and the chosen media, my paper offers a comprehensive understanding of the dimensions of worldbuilding narratives in fiction, films, tabletop role-playing games and computer games, with the aim of contributing to insights into our engagement with fictional worlds.

## Introduction

What is worldbuilding?

Worldbuilding is the creative process of creating fictional universes. Drawing on Umberto Eco, Paolo Bertetti claims that “possible worlds are *cultural constructs*,” adding that possible worlds only have a semiotic and textual rather than ontological existence, and start out from a “real” world (48, original emphasis). Worldbuilding has been an integral part of literature since authors created fictional settings, a practise that can even be found in ancient works such as the *Iliad*. In this paper, I use Hergenrader's definition of worldbuilding, which goes beyond the mere “the process of creating a representation of a fictional world” and encompasses a comprehensive achievement: it is not just about setting, but also about elements that cover everything that makes up a fictional world—from geography and culture to customs and languages—with the aim to create a parallel reality that feels authentic and natural (17).

Worldbuilding can take place in and across different media, e.g. in fanfiction, tabletop roleplaying games, films, novels, video games and so on. It involves creating detailed settings, cultures, histories and mythologies in a fictional world that did not exist before to create a cohesive and comprehensive backdrop for a story in any medium. Fanfiction can expand on existing worlds created by other (canonised) authors, or create new parts of a world or entirely new worlds within existing (published) stories. In tabletop roleplaying games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, players and gamemasters work together to create a world while following the narrative thread of a story through verbal interaction. In films and novels such as *Game of Thrones*, *The Lord of the Rings* or the *Harry Potter* series, worlds are created through visual and textual elements (images, words, voices of narrators and characters). In video games, players can actively engage with the development of a game world and sometimes even influence it. The level of detail and scope of worldbuilding varies greatly from genre to genre, from medium to medium, and depends largely on the personalities and types of creators and audiences: professional or amateur writers, film directors, video game designers, gamers, board game players.

In the field of literature and visual forms of storytelling, there has been a remarkable increase in the practice of worldbuilding. As Hergenrader summarises: “sprawling fictional worlds are more common than ever before, and the stories set in these worlds appear in a variety of different narrative media” (3). This practise goes beyond the mere creation of settings for stories: it extends to the creation of entire universes. J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* paved the way for modern worldbuilding and inspired the contemporary wave of worldbuilding

in books such as Patrick Rothfuss' *The Name of the Wind* and Andrzej Sapkowski's *The Witcher* series. The construction of fictional worlds has become an almost indispensable feature of storytelling across contemporary media. Video games such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and *The Witcher 3* have played a revolutionary role in developing the techniques and strategies of worldbuilding in interactive entertainment. These video games allow players to participate in and even influence how the narratives unfold within their constructed worlds.

My paper examines how the depth of worldbuilding affects the narrative in different media. It considers factors such as openness and richness of detail and their impact on the agency of participants and the reception of these fantasy worlds across various media.

The questions I aim to answer are: How does worldbuilding shape and influence the experiences of the audiences of fanfiction, traditional tabletop role-playing games, movies, novels and computer games, and how do these experiences differ across media? What are the fundamental differences between the methods and reception of worldbuilding in different media and genres? To what extent do worldbuilders have creative freedom in the different genres and what limitations do they face? How immersive can a world be created using the possibilities available in each medium and genre? How does each medium affect the experience of cinema-goers, readers and gamers? To what extent can the audience actively participate in the construction, co-construction and expansion of a fictional universe?

My hypothesis is that the level of detail in worldbuilding is different in each genre, form and medium, and the level of detail affects the experiences of the audience. I assume that the openness or restrictiveness of worldbuilding affects both the agency of the audience and the interaction between authors and consumers of worldbuilding narratives. In my paper, I conclude that the process, nature and details of worldbuilding differ not only in their extent but also in their methods, practises and styles in fanfiction, tabletop role-playing games (such as *Dungeons and Dragons*), computer games (especially narrative-driven RPGs), novels and films, both in terms of creation and reception.

I will examine the methods of worldbuilding and argue that the approaches and focal points of worldbuilding adapt considerably to the medium through which a worldbuilding is realised. For example, tabletop role-playing games (due to the autonomous decision-making of the players) allow for a broader and more flexible approach to worldbuilding, while the novel form allows for a more structured approach. The methods of worldbuilding in tabletop role-playing games often involve the possibility of improvisation and collaboration between players, whereas novels present the reader with ready-made worlds. Films (such as the *Harry Potter* or

*The Lord of the Rings* series), on the other hand, often use visual elements for worldbuilding and forgo the detailed backstories found in novels.

My research employs a straightforward comparative approach. With enough experience, it can be extended in the future into various fields such as the sociology of reading and narratology. My current examination pays attention to works such as *Dungeon Master's Guide* by Mike Mearls and Jeremy Crawford and *The Lord of the Rings* series. I will also mention films such as *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* and *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, alongside video games such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, *Dragon Age: Origins*, and *The Witcher 3*. My analysis will also incorporate fanfiction such as the *Nurmengard* Trilogy by Roland Juhász.

My research is justified, on the one hand, by the overwhelming number of both amateur and “professional” worldbuilders (forum members, fanfiction writers and illustrators vs. published authors, professional film makers and video game designers) and by the multitude of worldbuilding works and products today: books, films, video games, board games, etc. On the other hand, it is justified by the scarcity of secondary sources in both Hungarian and English compared to other fields of study such as media, literature and film studies.

The MATARKA database of academic papers contains only two journal articles in Hungarian related to my field of research. One is an article by Áron Domokos (2019), which introduces the theory and practise of worldbuilding in science fiction and places it in the context of teaching literature in secondary schools. The other is a contribution by Tamás Dénes Soós (2015), who analyses the worldbuilding approaches and trends applied in the popular movies released by Marvel Studios. These works are very loosely related to my research. Although I am looking at both film and fiction in my paper, I am more interested in studying fantasy than science fiction.

The English-language secondary literature is of course much more extensive than its Hungarian counterpart, but even this is sparse compared to other subject areas. Moreover, the sources mostly focus on films: mostly on science fiction. The study of fantasy literature is very extensive, but it is difficult to sift through these sources to identify those that focus specifically on the practises and methods of worldbuilding, especially with a transmedia approach.

I have relied on the following works as my main sources. The book *World Building: Transmedia, Fans, Industries*, edited by Marta Boni, offers a comprehensive exploration of the topic across different media and perspectives (theories, economics, immersion, fan practises) with scholarly rigour. Paolo Bertetti's chapter “Building Science-Fiction Worlds” within the book, for example, although focussing on the science fiction genre, provides valuable

information on worldbuilding mechanisms and transmedia aspects. Another useful resource for those interested in the topic is Alain Boillat's scholarly monograph *Cinema as a Worldbuilding Machine*, which outlines the theoretical and methodological approaches behind worldbuilding using film studies. Christopher Robichaud's edited work *Dungeons & Dragons and Philosophy* is also useful for understanding the theoretical (philosophical) approaches. Trent Hergenrader's monograph *Collaborative Worldbuilding for Writers and Gamers* provides a systematic overview of the practise of worldbuilding and is an interesting read for both amateur writers (e.g. authors of fanfiction) and other members of the audience (gamers).

Hergenrader's book points to a major challenge that arises from the interdisciplinary nature of this field of research. The researcher in this field must not only be well versed in different media (film, literature, video games, etc.), but must also consider a dual audience. It is unlikely that a gamer will pick up academic books or journal articles on the subject, and those who do engage in academic research are less likely to also be enthusiasts of fantasy, worldbuilding, fanfiction and computer gaming.

When I referred to the scarcity of literature, I must clarify that I was referring specifically to academic books and journal articles. Outside of academia, there is plenty of material on worldbuilding: both in print (guidebooks, rulebooks, etc.) and in electronic form (forums, blogs, online articles, wikis, etc.). Academic research may treat these sources with suspicion. Nonetheless, I have drawn on some of them because the study of the field would be incomplete without sampling them at least. However, I have endeavoured to strike a balance between printed and online sources and between academic and popular sources.

## 1. Expansive Worldbuilding in Tabletop Role Playing Games

My first chapter is about how the process and possibilities of worldbuilding manifest in tabletop role-playing games. I examine how the process and practise of worldbuilding affects the experiences of participants (players), depending on the level of detail of worldbuilding and the mode of representation (narrative tools, symbolic objects, etc.). I consider the degree of freedom in worldbuilding in role-playing games and examine the practical or imaginative constraints that players face in worldbuilding. Finally, I examine the degree of agency worldbuilders have in tabletop role-playing games in comparison to the other genres studied, particularly with regard to the co-operative construction of fictional worlds and the co-operative narration of the events that unfold within them.

### a. Freedom and Limits of Worldbuilding

The purpose of tabletop role-playing games (henceforth: TRPG) is to provide a social experience and allow for virtually limitless creative expression by facilitating social interaction between players. These games have been widely popular since the late 1960s and took the world by storm in the 1970s. The first significant game was *Dungeons and Dragons* (henceforth: *D&D*). The essence of games like *D&D* lies in the creative collaboration between players to create a world through a narrative. Conversely, the narrative takes place in an imaginary world that is developed cooperatively over the course of the game:

Every DM [Dungeon Master] is the creator of his or her own campaign world. . . . The world where you set your campaign is one of the countless worlds that make up the *D&D* multiverse, a vast array of planes and worlds where adventures happen. . . . The world is yours to change as you see it and yours to modify as you explore the consequences of the players' actions. (Mearls and Crawford 4)

Boillat compares this type of play to a sandpit where children can build a story through creative co-operation: children create situations and bring their imagination to life with simple (even symbolic or purely representational) objects, experiencing and “writing” or narrating the story on their own or in the company of other children (276). An example of such a typical sandpit (or, more popularly, “sandbox”) game in online form is *The Sims* or *SimCity*, but *D&D* can also be considered one in a broader sense. While a concrete sandpit or sandbox draws spatial

boundaries for play in children's games, the metaphor implies that players set the rules of their localised world within these boundaries by experimenting with its physical laws and spatial architecture (Boillat 276).

Furthermore, the sandbox quality of *D&D* allows for a virtually infinite range of outcomes through the adaptive storytelling embodied in what is a verbally narrated game. TRPGs are much more flexible, at least as a collaborative gaming experience, compared to almost all narrative genres, including video games. In video games, the rules for worldbuilding are predetermined. Although different missions allow exploration of different parts of the game world, the framework is already set and created by the game designers, which limits the range of possibilities for gamers. In contrast, TRPGs such as *D&D* provide players with a basic framework. The narrative possibilities and the number of conflicts (and conflict resolutions) that arise from the interactions of the characters portrayed by the players are therefore only limited by collective decisions of the game master (henceforth: GM) and the players.

Essentially, an improvised and collaborative narrative emerges during the game from the joint contributions of the players and their cooperation with the GM. This not only leads to spontaneity and unpredictability in the course of the game, but can also lead to long campaigns with multiple play sessions. Boillat quotes Ryan Vu as saying:

Fantasy roleplaying games (RPGs) involve the generation of internally consistent “worlds” or narrative plate-form open to audience participation. . . . “Tabletop” RPGs are distinguished from most other games (including the countless video games they have influenced) by being noncompetitive; in place of the satisfaction of victory, *they offer immersion in genre worlds*, the acting out of fantasies inspired by fiction consumed in other media. (59-60; emphasis in Boillat)

The creation of the narrative thus depends on the availability of a comprehensive collaborative agency. A prerequisite for this is that the *D&D* rulebook lays out the basics and the decisions are left to the GM after the players have begun. However, the GM must also take into account the characters created by the players, as the characters essentially contribute significantly to worldbuilding or even transform the world with their background stories. In addition, the GM must consider the various roles that the players take on, which are described in the *Dungeon Master's Guide* as Actor, Explorer, Instigator, Fighter, Optimiser, Problem Solver and Story Teller, etc. (8-10).

## **b. Agency of Participants in Cooperative Worldbuilding**

The huge worlds of *D&D*, which are only loosely outlined in the rulebooks, offer players a great deal of freedom and thus a high degree of narrative agency. (Since worldbuilding takes place verbally, i.e. in a conversation between the players, narrative agency is practically synonymous with worldbuilding agency.) Unlike novels or films, TRPGs involve a large number of less elaborated plot elements, including fewer details in costumes, behaviour, setting or props. Improvisation therefore often plays a major role. A running joke is when the players ask about an unimportant character, such as a shopkeeper, and the GM, in their confusion, comes up with something funny for the name and backstory of that unimportant character, and the funny name or backstory may stick. As Merle and Crawford suggest:

Know Your Players: The success of a *D&D* game hinges on your ability to entertain other players at the game table. Whereas their role is to create characters. . . , breathe life into them, and help seer the campaign through their characters' actions, your role is to keep the players (and yourself) interested and immersed in the world you've created. . .  
(6)

The idea that a world should be developed in great depth and detail (as in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy with its languages, backstories or the family trees and eating habits of the hobbits etc.) is less crucial in *D&D*. If it were crucial, it would be a challenge for players to stay in character. Also, it would be difficult for anyone to master in TRPG a deep world like the one found in *The Lord of the Rings*. As long as the actions or ideas of the players do not clash too much with the basic rules and history of the world in which the campaign is set, the world can loosen up in one way or another.

The inherent looseness of the conventions associated with the genre thus contributes significantly to the narrative agency of the participants, i.e. the players and the various other roles that the participants may assume in a TRPG campaign. Scott D. Vander Ploeg and Kenneth Phillips note that *D&D* and similar games regulate the players with a massive amount of rules in the rulebooks: in fact, there are so many rules (such as the effects or interpretation of spells, the functions of non-player characters, etc.) that players choose to ignore them (147). (I must add: not all, but most or some of them.) The authors also note that the typical person interested in TRPGs, while usually feeling alienated from their social environment, nevertheless develops a crucial "sense of purpose" while participating as an active agent in worldbuilding

games: Consequently, TRPGs encourage independent thinking and goal-directed behavior because players are compelled to recognise the arbitrary nature of the rules in the game (147).

To this convincing psychological explanation I could add a more pragmatic and experiential aspect. In my own experience as a player, there are fewer opportunities for creative and entertaining solutions when the world seems too closed. Also, as the official RPGA tournament book emphasises, having fun is always the primary goal of game play (Petticord 2).

Even in the case of TRPGs, however, the worldbuilding agency of the players is not absolutely limitless. The experience created by the narrative can be influenced, for example, by the contrast between the visual and imagined worlds, which together form the look of the world for the group. The “Theater of the Mind” (henceforth: TOTM) principle also often applies to players’ experience in TRPGs, where the action takes place in the players’ imagination. The working of this principle is similar to reading works of fiction, when readers imagine the appearance of characters or the topography of locations: the story is like a play, their mind is the stage and the reader is a spectator. The metaphor goes back to David Hume, who described consciousness as a kind of mental stage or screen:

The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, repass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations. There is properly no *simplicity* in it at one time, nor *identity* in different, whatever natural propension we may have to imagine that simplicity and identity. The comparison of the theatre must not mislead us. They are the successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind; nor have we the most distant notion of the place where these scenes are represented, or of the materials of which it is composed. (I.iv.6; emphasis in original)

This principle, prevalent in various narrative formats such as radio plays is a very important ingredient in TRPGs, which also rely on descriptive language and storytelling techniques to create vivid images in the minds of the game players. As opposed to visual aids or props, TOTM encourages the players to actively participate in visualising the scenes based on the descriptions provided. This approach emphasises the power of imagination and immersion in the story. In TRPGs, players often have the choice between using battle maps or TOTM for combat. Some find that the visual impressions of locations provided by battle maps enhances combat, while others prefer the immersive experience of TOTM.

In some cases (e.g. a combat or exploring a labyrinth), the characters and objects in TRPGs can be physically represented in one way or another. This physical representation can take the form of figures, miniatures or improvised objects (erasers, books, soda caps, etc.).

Again, it depends on the creativity of the players or simply on what is available to them. The figures and miniatures are often reusable or “generic fantasy” elements that may not faithfully represent the visual nature of the world, and the objects (such as those listed above) are merely symbolic markers. But even these generic elements (like a tower or a fence that might be used in another game in another context) can merge in the minds of the players with the terrain or object described by the GM when they are serving their purpose as visual aids. But the opposite can also be the case: even objects can change the described elements if the players take them seriously just for fun. For example, if attacking snakes on the game board are represented by yellow and red candy snakes for fun (or for lack of a better solution), this could influence players to imagine giant snakes as yellow and red from that point on.

To summarise, TRPGs are a dynamic and inclusive form of worldbuilding that benefits from social interaction and creative expression. Creative freedom through collaboration and communication encourages the construction of narratives related to invented worlds and may even add a lot of detail to the imaginary world sketched out by its inventors. The construction of the game world, which resembles a sandbox, allows players to shape the narrative and contribute to the bare framework provided by the game designers. The narrative flexibility, the room for exploration and improvisation and the relative independence from set rules in TRPGs set them apart from other media. All of this creates space for collaborative narrative agency. While players must give up on high details such as elaborate background stories that they get in novels or stunning visual details that they get in movies, this lack is compensated for by ample room for adventure, creative imagination and a sense of togetherness.

## 2. Complex Worldbuilding in Fiction

In this chapter of my paper, I will provide an overview of the freedoms that authors of fiction have in worldbuilding, and explore whether and to what extent these freedoms differ from those available to TRPG players. I will also explore whether the recipients at the other end of the communication channel (readers, fans, more generally: the audience) have agency to contribute to the expansion of a created world, and if so, how much agency they have compared to TRPG players.

### a. The Potential of Fiction for Deep Worldbuilding

Fictional stories (in the present context typically: various sub-genres of fantasy or science fiction<sup>1</sup>) offer their authors almost unlimited freedom in terms of the possibilities of worldbuilding. Authors of fiction have ample space to build an imaginary world, to elaborate on the species that populate it, to describe their way of life and to depict their living conditions and the conflicts between them down to the smallest detail. Neither the medium nor the scope of the fiction limits them in this endeavour.

Tolkien spent decades writing *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. It is common knowledge (even among non-fans) that Tolkien created complete languages, mythologies, legends and chronologies of (fictional) historical events in a world whose depth remains unrivalled within the genre. The expansion of Tolkien's universe continues as his son continues to discover and publish writings, illustrations, letters, stories, poems, etc. that originated with Tolkien. These posthumous publications enrich the original stories with background, events and characters and deepen the already impressive fantasy world of Middle-earth.

George R. R. Martin's epic fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire* also builds and deepens the imaginary world, which consists of the fictional continents of Westeros and Essos, over the course of seven volumes and expands it as the story progresses. (While Tolkien's Middle-earth represents a fictional *time*, Martin's Westeros and Essos represent a fictional *topography*.) Martin's world is also astonishingly extensive: in the five published volumes, the story of the Seven Kingdoms is told in almost one and a half million words. Like Tolkien's world, Martin's

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<sup>1</sup> When henceforth I refer to them as "novels", I do it for the sake of simplicity, well aware that the category of the novel in English literary studies does not exactly cover these genres.

world is still under construction: Tolkien's world is being expanded in posthumous publications, while Martin's last two volumes have yet to be published.

The *Harry Potter* series, which consists of seven volumes, is equally deep and broad. J. K. Rowling has added three more books to the already extensive HP universe to date. In 2001, she wrote *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* (ostensibly a textbook at Hogwarts, later made into a film) for charity; that same year, *Quidditch Through the Ages* (a history book Harry reads for leisure in the fictional world of the novel, and which materialised outside the novel); and since then, *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, a collection of stories mentioned in the final instalment of the series.

Andrzej Sapkowski's *Witcher* series, which comprises 6 volumes and 15 short stories, also forms an epic scope.

In each of these cases, there are also spin-offs and transmedia adaptations: video games, graphic novels, board games, as well as film, theatre and musical adaptations, etc. As Dan Hassler-Forest argues, "transmedia work productively navigates the critical tension between hegemonic corporate franchises and the subversive practices associated with a resistant culture of appropriation" (379).

As we will see later, the deepening and broadening of their invented worlds in these adaptations does not always depend solely on the author, even if the authors have a say: at least Rowling did, for example in the design of the visual world and the cast of the film version of *Harry Potter*.

This epic length, which extends over many volumes in each of the worlds I analysed, seems to be an obligatory element in the works of fiction studied. As Sapkowski succinctly put it, "I began with short stories; you don't create universes in short stories, there is—literally and metaphorically—no place for them" (Handel). In other words, there is no room for worldbuilding in a short story or a novella, not even in a single novel: the space you need as an author to build a world is at least the length of a trilogy, maybe more.

In fiction, worldbuilding seems to follow a certain pattern, as it does not seem to demand (or necessitate or exceed) a certain level of detail. Authors of fiction can elaborate elements of worldbuilding in almost any amount of detail because their medium does not limit them in the way that the expected length of a feature film limits the work of a screenwriter and director. Nevertheless, as a rule, only elements that are relevant to the story are elaborated. And why? Because even in novels and novel series that leave a lot of room for worldbuilding, the constructed world is built around the plot. The world does not exist outside the plot. In this

respect, fiction is similar to TRPGs and video games, which also focus on plot and narrative. As Sapkowski puts it:

Later, when my stories started evolving into full novels, the necessity of some coherent background became imminent. And slowly, step by step, something resembling a universe started to emerge. But it's only in the background, so it plays a secondary role in the story. (Handel)

There are counterexamples, though: in Chapter Twenty-six of *The Name of the Wind* by Patrick Rothfuss, Kvothe (a character) asks a storyteller to tell the (several pages long) story of Lanre, which is also told to the audience, word by word, detailing the Creation War, an event in the world's (Temerant's) history. The actual plot of the novel is on hold while this piece of worldbuilding is delivered to the audience through the storyteller (Rothfuss, ch. 26).

The medium of fiction (a long prose narrative that inherently inherits the vast scope of the epic poem) does not limit the possibility of detailed worldbuilding as much as, say, a feature film, whose time constraints are much tighter. Nevertheless, authors of fiction may not fully exploit the (theoretically unlimited) possibilities of worldbuilding because space, culture, history, customs and settings play a secondary role compared to plot construction, and these elements of the narrative are considered crucial as long as they drive the plot forward or at least have some relevance to the plot.

### **b. The Agency of Worldbuilding in and Beyond the Novels**

Despite the fact that in the above examples the authors focus on the development of details of the world relevant to the plot, the scope of such novels offers the possibility of transferring longer (of course fictional) “historical” or “scientific” narratives, legends, songs, fairy tales and poems. The best and most famous example of this is Tolkien's worldbuilding method, but the *Witcher* series or the planned trilogy by Patrick Rothfuss, which begins with *The Name of the Wind*, also deal extensively with the history, culture or religions of the created world. All this creates the illusion of the completeness of the world outside the main plot. In other words, the reader gets the impression that there are detailed and extensive parts of the world that exist outside or beyond the parts of the world depicted in the story.

On the other hand, the detailed description of elements that are not closely related to the story and therefore unimportant to readers who read novels primarily for the story can lead to

frustration: “Why do I need to know this?” *The Lord of the Rings* has often been criticised for describing in such detail the smallest and seemingly insignificant elements and features of the world Tolkien created. One commenter on a fantasy forum expresses this by claiming that the novel contains lengthy details about “the history of every tree and hill [the protagonists] pass by”:

It’s obvious hyperbole. I’ve not met anyone describe Tolkien that way and literally meant it. They are, however; describing his particular writing style that focuses a lot on worldbuilding, scene setting and narrative pacing. Tolkien wrote very differently to how we usually get fantasy these days. Neither is bad or better than the other, they are just different. Tolkien was very slow and methodical, he would take his time to develop scenes and describe a lot of things most authors today wouldn’t feel necessary to expand on. Again, not bad, just different. Worst I can honestly describe Tolkien’s literature is that it can come off rather dry at times. (“What Do People Mean When They Say That Tolkien Describes Every Single Tree at Length?”)<sup>2</sup>

The authors of novels have godlike power over and knowledge of the worlds they have built and of the events that take place in them. However, do the recipients of fiction (readers, fans, etc.) also have any worldbuilding agency? If so, to what extent and where does it come from?

At first glance, there is neither worldbuilding nor a narrative agency for those at the receiving end. After all, it is the author who invents, writes and publishes a novel. The agency of the readers is limited to imagining the places, situations, events, conflicts and characters depicted in the novel according to the TOTM principle. Readers are free to imagine these details based on their tastes, preferences, imagination, past experiences and prejudices. Fans often go a step further: some fans might draw or paint pictures of the characters they have imagined and share them with other fans on forums, blogs and image-sharing platforms. Before the advent of the internet, it was unthinkable (or very rare) for a wider audience to be introduced to a fan’s imaginative depiction of well-known fictional characters such as Frodo, Gollum, Aragorn or Gandalf. Nowadays, researchers can easily find publicly shared representations of these and other protagonists, such as Harry Potter, Geralt of Rivia or Jon Snow. (It might be an interesting topic to explore how fans from different cultures and age groups imagine, depict and represent

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<sup>2</sup> The worldbuilding elements that seem to be “hanging in the air” can later be woven into a storyline by the author. A good example of this is the *Riyria Revelations* series. The legend is Kile, the father of gods, is told in several books in the series, seemingly only providing some worldbuilding flavor to the religious system of the world, as in the main plot the gods have no relevance, it’s focused on political takeover of nations and the conflict between humans and elves. The constant repeating of the legends is meaningless up until the last book where one of the supporting characters, Nimbus, is alluded to being Kile, aiding the protagonists on their journey (Sullivan).

visually familiar characters. Understanding the reasons for the differences and overlaps between fan representations posted online could also be part of such an investigation.)

It is impossible to get a complete picture of the world in a novel or series of novels, even if the authors later expand or deepen the world they have built in books that are only loosely connected to the series in question.

On the one hand, this leads to the creation of “official” companion materials or “guides.” A recent example is *The Harry Potter Wizing Almanac* (Bloomsbury, 2023), subtitled: *The Official Magical Companion to J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter Books*. Typically, these guides, which deepen or expand the world originally built by the author, are not created by the original authors, but by teams commissioned by the publisher or the film studio. Such teams often consist of several writers, artists and creative designers. As official publications, the expansion and deepening of the world follow the original concepts of the author (possibly in consultation with the original author), which means that the team follows predetermined principles and their worldbuilding and narrative agency is therefore limited. The recipient (the reader) is once again forced into the passive role of consumer, and in these illustrated publications the already limited freedom of individual imagination is considerably restricted.

On the other hand, readers can “unofficially” contribute their worldbuilding through fanfiction, such as *Harry Potter* fanfiction. *The Nurmengard Trilogy* by Hungarian author Roland Juhász continues the original *Harry Potter* series and expands on the worldbuilding of Hogwarts, adding the mystery of the “Fourth Tower” as well as the Eastern European wizarding world, as the story moves to the Durmstrang Wizing School, which was only briefly described in the books/movies:

The subsequent 12th educational decree, meticulously removed from almost all official documents, formed the basis of an unprecedented event: the expansion of Hogwarts with the addition of a new tower to the northern wing. This construction project was on the agenda from 1918 to 1920, under the directorship of Phineas Nigellus Black. Phineas Nigellus, perceived by general opinion as one of the most disagreeable headmasters of Hogwarts, received not a single complaint about his work until the infamous 12th educational decree.” (Juhász, Chapter 11; my translation.)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “Az azóta szinte minden hivatalos okmányból alapos gonddal törölt 12-es számú oktatásügyi rendelet képezte alapját egy példanélküli eseménynek: a Roxfort bővítésének egy újabb torony hozzátoldásával az északi szárnyhoz. Ez az építkezési program 1918-tól 1920-ig volt napirenden, Phineas Nigellus Black igazgatósága alatt. Phineas Nigellus az általános közvélekedésbe a Roxfort egyik legellenszenvesebb igazgatójaként vonult be, azonban munkásságára egy árva panasz sem érkezett az ominózus 12-es számú oktatásügyi rendeletig.” (Juhász, Chapter 11)

Incidentally, Juhász's book did such a good job of reproducing the characteristic plot twists and turns of phrases of Rowling's novel that rumours spread like wildfire among Hungarian fans, claiming that Juhász's book (which appeared on an online fanfiction forum before the release of the upcoming seventh HP volume) was a leaked version of the Hungarian translation of (as yet unreleased) *Harry Potter* volume. This rumour was even reported in newspapers and on RTL television, although the author repeatedly denied these claims.

In the context of fanfiction, however, at least two problems arise. One arises from the readers' perspective. Readers will either accept products of fanfiction as unofficial parts of the canon (possibly leading to the creation of an unofficial, alternative canon) if the writing is good enough and meets their expectations. Or they will not accept it because it is not in the original book, was not written by the original author, and does not have the blessing (and permission) of the original author, so it cannot be considered part of the canon.

The other problem arises from the perspective of reader-turned-authors, namely fanfiction writers. Such unofficial, alternative, underground, unauthorised texts remain completely separate from the original work, even if, as in the case of Juhász, they skilfully imitate and reproduce the worldbuilding and narrative strategies of the original author. Thus, there is no true collaborative worldbuilding.

There is a third, broader category or mode for extending the constructed world beyond the novel. This extension usually takes place in electronic media: blogs, social media, wikis. The largest platform of this kind is Fandom.com, the world's largest fan-created wiki platform. Here, fans of various games, novels, films, anime, videos, etc. jointly create wiki databases about these works, in which users can freely add or edit content (modelled on Wikipedia). For example, a Harry Potter encyclopaedia has been created on this site, which can occasionally provide assistance to the original author by offering interesting feedback from the audience. Authors can keep in touch with fans who are familiar with the world and ask them for advice to avoid logical inconsistencies in worldbuilding. (Even J.K. Rowling used fan wikis when she couldn't remember certain details in her novels.) In this way (if in no other way) fans can contribute to worldbuilding by helping to maintain the consistency of the world.

In this category (or genre), genuine collaboration takes place. What makes this interesting is that we witness not only horizontal collaboration among fans or consumers (such as Dungeons & Dragons players cooperatively and freely writing and expanding certain locations in the Forgotten Realms) but also vertical collaboration between fans and the original author. While fans cannot officially change, modify, or expand the world, they have some level of influence or at least feedback (in any case, upward communication) with the author.

In summary, compared to TRPGs, fiction (at first glance) gives authors much greater worldbuilding and narrative agency while readers have much smaller agency. TRPG designers only outline worlds, and players have unlimited worldbuilding and narrative agency during campaigns, allowing them to deepen and expand the world in any direction. On the other hand, novelists can work within virtually unlimited scope, and readers take a passive role, shaping characters and settings only in their imagination. However, on closer inspection, it is clear that novelists do not fully use their unlimited worldbuilding agency, as they need to focus on creating an exciting storyline. Nevertheless, there are community platforms where writers of fanfiction can share their works with other fans and receive feedback for the continuation of the story. Fanfiction works and platforms exist in a legal grey area: they are tolerated as long as they do not enter commercial circulation, but they are not official and not canonised works. However, there are community platforms such as wikis that can even reinforce the canonisation of original stories by collecting and organising all available information about the world that appears in them. They do this through horizontal collaboration among fans. But, as Rowling's case illustrates, fan encyclopaedias can even help authors to further expand the fictional world in subsequent volumes.

### **3. Visuality of Worldbuilding in Films**

In this chapter of my paper, I will examine how the level of detail observed in the genres studied so far manifests itself in the film genre. I will examine how the genre-specific elements and technical possibilities of film open up or limit the construction of fictional worlds depicted in films (in my case, novel adaptations). What narrative and other tools are available to filmmakers to build worlds? How does adapting novels impact the worldbuilding and narrative agency of filmmakers? What elements and procedures does film rely on for worldbuilding compared to novels and TRPGs? Assuming that visual elements significantly expand the creative agency of filmmakers, does that shrink the audience's agency? Is there still a factor that limits the narrative and worldbuilding agency of filmmakers?

#### **a. Agency in Visual Worldbuilding**

In the novels studied, the voice of a single, omniscient narrator narrates events to the reader either from a fixed (Harry Potter or Jon Snow) or from episodically shifting points of view (Frodo, Aragorn, Gandalf, etc.). In films, a central omniscient narrative voice occasionally appears. In the opening sequences of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, for example, the character Galadriel (Cate Blanchett's voice) narrates the prologue and gives the backstory of the Rings and the One Ring.

However, the use of the omniscient narrative voice often takes a back seat to other solutions and the narrating is taken over by one or more characters. One option is that events described by the narrator in the book are transformed into dialogue in the hands of the screenwriter. An example of this is when Gandalf mentions the origin of golf in a dialogue in the first episode of the film adaptation of Tolkien's *The Hobbit*.

Another option is when one of the characters in the movie tells the story or backstory in the form of a flashback or remembers the shared history that in the novel the omniscient narrative voice describes to the reader. An example of this is when Bilbo in the film *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* tells the story of the dwarves, why the dragon came, what dragons are like, etc. This latter option (and Galadriel's omniscient narratorial voice) is somewhat similar to the narration in novels. However, it does not appear in every movie and is rarely repeated more than once within a movie. It is also important to note that both the omniscient narrative voice and the narration from the mouths of individual characters are usually accompanied by

some kind of visual montage in the film, possibly showing the narrator and scenes from the story.

While in novels *voice* (whether of the third-person narrator or of the characters) is the only medium that conveys events to the reader's consciousness, and images are present only as word pictures or images in the reader's mind (once again, "theater of the mind"), films naturally rely just as much on *visual* elements for worldbuilding as human voice(s). If we also contrast movies with TRPGs, we can see that movies place the most emphasis on visuals of the genres examined so far. This is also true when comparing films with video games, especially when considering the big screen of cinema or 3D movies, which maximise the visual impact on the audience.

Thus, when considering narrative agency, there is no great difference between the narrative agency in novels and films (within the limits of their respective medium). Films have numerous means at their disposal to embody, dissolve or even refract the artificial narrative voice that appears in novels. In terms of the agency of visual representation, movies are also far superior to both novels and TRPGs. In novels, readers can only rely on their imagination, while in TRPGs, players can merely use a few figures or symbolic objects to evoke or represent items or beings in a given fictional world.

In which aspects and details does this strong and pronounced visual agency manifest itself? It is obvious that films can rely the most on visual elements when it comes to worldbuilding. For example, the costumes and sets in Peter Jackson's movie adaptations have the ability to convey details that are not explicitly described in Tolkien's book.

As for the costumes: "I looked at every Tolkien book there was. All of John Howe and Alan Lee's illustrations. They suggest, rather than say. So my role was to take that suggestion and say what they were wearing," said Ngila Dickson, costume designer for Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* (Warner Bros. Entertainment).

As for the sets, before Smaug destroyed the city, we were able to see moments from the lives of its inhabitants. Beside listening Bilbo's narration, we could also see worldbuilding elements such as buildings, streets, squares and clothing and get a glimpse of how the markets functioned. These specific details do not appear at all in Tolkien's book. If they did, the author would have to fill pages with descriptions. But even authors who create highly detailed worlds are, to varying degrees, compelled to subordinate the description of the intricate details of the world to the storytelling. This narrative constraint applies particularly Tolkien's *The Hobbit*: he intended it for children and had to take special care to ensure that only the most important details of the world were described in this relatively short book.

To summarise: in films, visual storytelling has the advantage that the details of worldbuilding can be presented quickly and easily. Unlike novels, where the description of these details can take up several pages and require a lot of time to read, films can summarise such information in a few seconds using techniques such as camera pans, so that the viewer is involved and the narrative does not seem dry or boring. Films offer a quick and easily digestible form of worldbuilding through visual elements that often reinforce various aspects of the story, including character development. Unlike novels, where character development relies on dialogue, action and description, actors can give further depth to the fictional characters.

## **b. A World of Many Voices**

In light of all this, one might think that films have the greatest agency both in worldbuilding and in narrating the events of the constructed world. However, filmmakers can be faced with certain circumstances and challenges that can both support and limit their worldbuilding agency.

One such circumstance is the limited time available for worldbuilding. This brings us to the crucial point at which we must distinguish (similarly to novels) between the agency of filmmakers (real people: directors, set designers, screenwriters, etc.) and the worldbuilding agency manifested through abstract cinematic elements (narrative devices, visual elements).

A novelist can work on their world for years, even decades. Tolkien spent his entire life quietly building the world of Middle-earth. In addition to the trilogy and the preceding *Hobbit*, he expanded and deepened Middle-earth in various genres: he wrote legends, mythological stories, fairy tales and poems, produced drawings, paintings, maps and character sketches, compiled dictionaries and grammars for the languages of Middle-earth, created family trees and chronologies and much more. Filmmakers, on the other hand, usually have to complete the final cut within one to two years after the script has been approved and the project is funded. While hundreds or even thousands of people contribute to a film, expanding creative agency and coordinating the work of many collaborators, factors such as budget constraints, release dates, unforeseen shooting conditions, etc. can limit or challenge the filmmakers' agency. These factors often result in compromises in the depth or detail of the cinematic depiction of the world.

While films excel at visually conveying details in a matter of seconds that would take pages to describe in novels, their narrative scope is much smaller. Novels that span hundreds of pages or develop into series and TRPG campaigns that drag on for years stand in contrast to

the typically two-to-three-hour running time of movies. However, directors often use this limited time strategically, trying to expand their time frame (hence, their worldbuilding agency). For instance, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy spans 9 to 11 hours (in various versions), and even the much shorter novel *The Hobbit* became a (lengthy) trilogy on screen. Time constraints and the influence of streaming platforms have popularised television series such as *The Witcher* and *Game of Thrones*. The *Harry Potter* films are not quite as extreme, but the final book was still split into two films. Even though the screen time of these movies and series *almost* matches the reading time of the novels they are based on and make a good use of visual elements, significant sacrifices are made that limit the filmmakers' worldbuilding agency, if not their narrative agency. This often results in non-essential elements being relegated to the background, as with the visual worldbuilding of Diagon Alley in *Harry Potter*: in the film, there is no time to enter shops (unlike in the books), but they are at least visible in the background.

In novels, films and TRPGs, different voices shape the narrative, including characters and players in the latter case. Unlike original novels, which are usually the work of a single creator (the author), all films (not just adaptations) are created through the collaborative efforts of a diverse team. While the primary agency for narrative and worldbuilding lies with the screenwriter and director, other team members often contribute ideas that enrich the director's vision of the world. The collaborative agency and expertise therefore goes beyond what a single author of prose fiction can achieve.

However, the audience here cannot interact directly with the world (except through "unofficial" means such as wikis, blogs, fan forums, unofficial fan films, trailers, etc.). The reason that movie viewership surpasses that of novels and TRPGs is likely due to the immersive audio-visual experiences that movies provide. Let's admit it: consuming movies (since we get all the visuals ready-made) requires the least investment of energy and time, even if we sit through a trilogy in the cinema.

In summary, it can be said that although films work with the broadest spectrum of narrative and visual tools (image, dialogue, music, costume, etc.) compared to the media examined so far, it cannot definitively claim superiority in worldbuilding and narrative agency. Filmmakers also have to make compromises due to, for example, time constraints. Hence, a current trend is to deepen and expand the world using complex methods (CGI, elaborate sets and costumes, numerous extras, shooting on location, as seen in Jackson's filming in New Zealand) and extending time the frame (movie trilogies, TV series). While movies provide a detailed and "realistic" experience, the audience remains a passive consumer whose agency is limited to choosing their drink with their popcorn before the movie.

#### **4. Combining Breadth and Depth in Story-driven RPGs**

In the concluding chapter, I will explore how story-driven computer games (specifically, role playing video games played on platforms such as Xbox and PlayStation) introduce unique approaches and require players to use particular tactics in worldbuilding. Here, player interaction plays a prominent role and offers players the highest agency compared to other media. Similar to TRPGs, players actively shape the narrative, and, notably, role playing video game (henceforth: RPG) licenses in particular enable the direct reuse of settings, characters and costumes from films.

##### **a. Discovering a Slice of the World**

Laurent di Filippo quotes Erving Goffman as saying: “games . . . are worldbuilding activities” in which people encounter “locally realized” events and act according to the relevance of the situation (234).

In RPGs, there is opportunity for both superficial and deep worldbuilding, depending on the possibilities offered by these types of games for exploring the details of the world. The players often follow a main storyline, similar to novels and films, and explore elements of the world that are related to the plot. There is also the option to deviate from the main storyline and discover certain parts of the world through interactive stories in quests. Shorter stories within quests, similar to novels and films, introduce worldbuilding elements distinct from the main storyline. In *The Witcher 3*, for example, the side quest called “In the Heart of the Woods” deals with the origin and characteristics of the creature Leshen. In many games (e.g., *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, *The Witcher 3*, *Dragon Age: Origins*), players can also collect books/codex entries that provide in-game worldbuilding materials. Completing quests by discovering hidden locations expands the game world and gives players (a sense of) agency in worldbuilding.

In Open World Design RPGs, players can have genuine agency as they explore vast landscapes during quests, allowing them to discover new geographical areas or constructed places such as mazes. Exploration can be encouraged and facilitated through built-in mechanisms such as maps, magical tools, treasures, etc. These tools and side quests stimulate the player’s curiosity and spirit of adventure. It is crucial that the scope of worldbuilding be substantial (similar to TRPGs) so that the world does not feel empty and “lifeless”.

## **b. The Framework and Limits of the Interactive World**

This gives the player a certain degree of narrative agency, as they decide when to take on which quests and what assistance to seek. It is up to them how they perform during a mission, and if they fail, they decide if they want to try again. Players have opportunities to modify the world to some extent.

This almost, but not quite, rivals the agency of TRPG players. The player's narrative agency in RPGs is constrained by the limitations of worldbuilding agency. While the worldbuilding within a given setting can be very detailed, it is only as detailed as the creators of the game have designed it. And while players can shape their character and influence the world, the number and framework of these decisions are predetermined. There is a finite number of quests, characters and skins, limiting the player's choices to pre-programmed options. In *Dragon Age: Origins*, for example, players can choose an origin story with minor world-altering effects: a character that would not exist in another playthrough now exists with a social circle. While players can make certain decisions throughout the story, affecting both player and non-player characters as well as the fate of the world, these choices are predefined, and their impact can be carried over into the next instalment of the game series.

Even though the player's role in the interactive narrative of the first game does not seem to be very extensive, it is clear that the player's influence has led to changes in certain elements of the world when integrated into subsequent parts. Furthermore, by pursuing side quests, the player gains a deeper and more independent understanding of the constructed world than in novels, where progress is limited to a single-threaded narrative.

Additionally, like films, RPGs come with pre-packaged visual elements (design, skin, etc.), which reduces the freedom of the audience's imagination compared to novels and TRPGs. However, unlike films, RPGs put performance pressure on the players, who earn points and strive to reach a higher rank compared to other players, often unknown to them, especially in a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (henceforth: MMORPG).

Social interactions have shifted: young people rely less on the physical presence of peers and more on virtual interactions such as chat and social media. However, even platforms such as online communities of players who have never met in person and MMORPGs that connect mutually unknown players cannot replicate the direct and immediate face-to-face interaction among people sitting around a table.

In summary, RPGs grant players greater agency than films and novels. Through interactive quests and predefined choices, players shape and expand an immersive world. They also engage in virtual interactions with other players. While their (real or perceived) worldbuilding agency surpasses that of novel and film audiences, it remains limited by finite options. Players benefit from visual elements that are similar to those of films and allow independent exploration of locations and quests, but their worldbuilding agency is constrained by predefined visual elements.

## Conclusions

In my paper, I explored the current trend of worldbuilding as a phenomenon that transcends different media and genres. I examined the degree of freedom and creativity involved in worldbuilding across various media, considering factors such as decision-making, creative imagination, interaction with the world, the medium containing the world, the creator shaping the world and interaction with other recipients. I have focused on worldbuilding and narrative agency to understand how these activities give freedom to people who engage with stories set in created worlds. Through the comparative analysis of worldbuilding and narrative agency across genres, I have reached the following conclusions:

In tabletop role-playing games, the primary goal of worldbuilding is to create a world where players can freely explore and find interesting things wherever they go. However, these elements are often not extensively detailed, either because they are improvised during gameplay or created as filler (i.e., additional episodes or elements that could be removed from the game without significantly affecting the overall experience). Many game masters emphasise try not to overcomplicate worldbuilding, as it may never be finished or may fall apart when players deviate from the carefully written path/story. Settlements can exist “just because”, and groups/guilds may lack significant history. Even in the official *D&D Dungeon Master’s Guide*, certain parts of the world, such as the Faerie Realm or Shadowfell, are only briefly described and only the most basic elements are mentioned. The main goal of worldbuilding here is to provide players with simple templates (dwarves = small and love rocks, nature; magic = mystical, no need to overthink), from which the game master and players can collaboratively create an adventure (Mearls and Crawford).

In books or novels, worldbuilding tends to concentrate on elements that are crucial to the story or characters and provides detailed information. For instance, in the *Harry Potter* series, a significant amount of information is shared about a specific segment of the British wizarding world. However, details about the rest of the world remain unknown because the narrative did not require their mention. Readers cannot stray from the main plot to explore how the American wizarding world functions, for example. Additional information is only accessible through sources external to the main stories, such as J.K. Rowling’s related writings (e.g., *Quidditch Through the Ages*).

In computer games, especially in narrative-driven RPGs, I see a fusion of these two approaches. Players have some freedom to go anywhere and make decisions, but without improvisation (such as by the gamemaster in TRPGs), the world can easily become flat and dull

if there is nothing interesting behind those choices. Additionally, worldbuilding outside of the main storyline is often optional and player decisions are pre-coded, preventing concerns about players straying from their roles or being overwhelmed with too much extra information. *The Elder Scrolls* series, for example, allows players to collect around 100 books that describe various aspects of the world, including those that are not accessible in the main story.

In my observation, films tend to use visual elements that describe the world in more detail due to time constraints. Key elements of the story are briefly mentioned in dialogues or montages, while the sets and costumes do the rest of the work. Again using *Harry Potter* as an example, workings of the magical world in the films are often represented by visual elements in the background: such as the wizards' outdated clothing or Harry's first journey through Diagon Alley, where the quirky buildings or alchemy shop signs in the background provide insights into the nature of the world and the possibilities of magic.

The extensive and diverse nature of my research, which spans genres, media, languages and periods, allows for almost unlimited possibilities for further investigation. Given the relatively limited literature in this field compared to traditional fields such as literature and film, my introductory and comparative overview serves as a foundation that can be expanded in numerous ways. Methodologically, I can engage with genre theory, the sociology of reading or media studies. It is possible to explore the strategies of world creation within a genre or across genres and to examine the actions of the audience from a sociological or theoretical perspective. Examining interaction with created worlds from the perspective of the audience, whether from a sociological or theoretical perspective (using various film or literary theories such as narratology), offers the potential for a deeper understanding of our transmedia relationship with fictional worlds and helps to make our relationship with the real world more creative and enjoyable.

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