Section 1

Theories of World Building
1. The Aesthetics of Proliferation

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Abstract
In this chapter, I will examine the various possible relations between text, world, and story. The cases to be discussed include: many texts that build one world (i.e. transmedia storytelling); a text that presents a world that contains many stories; a text that describes many ontologically distinct worlds, each containing its own story; a text that tells a story that involves many ontologically different worlds, stacked upon one another; a text that tells a story whose ontology comprises different realities, existing side by side; and the creation of a storyworld out of another world, through the borrowing and manipulation of semiotic material that creates this other world. In conclusion, I will ask if “worldness” can be considered a scalar concept, realized to different extents in narrative texts, and what it takes for a narrative to evoke a world to the imagination.

Keywords: Narrative proliferation, World vs. Plot, Transmedia, Cognition, Ontology

The theoretical emergence of the concept of world in narratology (storyworlds, fictional worlds), in media studies (transmedia worlds), in philosophy (possible worlds), and in cosmology (“many-worlds” models) has been accompanied, on the creative side, by a practice that I will call “the aesthetics of proliferation”. This aesthetic represents a radical break from the “textualist” schools that dominated literary theory from New Criticism to Deconstruction. With its emphasis on the signifier, at the expense of the signified, textualism regards the literary text as the gate to a meaning that was absolutely unique to it. It follows that the text was the only mode of access to its world; because textualism was reluctant to isolate a narrative level of meaning—a plot—from the global textual world, it implicitly adheres to a strict formula: one text, one world, one story.
The narrative turn that took place in the 80s can be regarded as a reaction to the radical textualism of New Criticism and Deconstruction. Narratology relies on a story/discourse dichotomy that grants equal importance to the signified (represented by story) and the signifier (represented by discourse). Stories are transmitted by texts, but, since they remain inscribed in our mind long after the signifiers have vanished from memory, their nature is much more mental than verbal. If stories can be emancipated from words, instead of the one text—one world—one story idea, one can now have many texts—one world—one story.

As narratology expanded from literature to other disciplines and media, it became more and more reliant on the concept of world. In its current narratological use, “world” is no longer the elusive sum of the meanings conveyed by a text, nor the sum of the ideas of an author, but the very concrete space projected by stories, literally, a “storyworld”. Since storyworlds can be shared by several stories, the emergence of this concept deals another blow to the one text—one world—one story formula. Contemporary culture, whether popular or highbrow, implements the full range of possible relations between texts, worlds, and stories. This proliferation can take several forms:

- Narrative proliferation: a world with many stories.
- Ontological proliferation: a story with many worlds.
- Textual and medial proliferation: many different texts converging around the same world, especially texts of different media.

Storyworlds

As a prelude to the discussion of the three types of proliferation, I propose to take a closer look at the concept of world. As the Czech narratologist Jirí Koten observes, the narratological concept of world can be traced back to two lines of ancestry. When we speak of storyworld, the influence comes mainly from cognitive approaches to narrative (Herman 2009), while, when we speak of fictional world, the influence comes from schools and disciplines interested in the ontological status of imaginary entities: philosophy of language, formal semantics, and, more particularly, possible worlds theory (Pavel, Doležel, Ryan 1991).

While the concept of world is intuitively very accessible, it is difficult to sharpen into a useful narratological tool. The nine definitions in the Oxford English Dictionary reveal two dominant themes: world as a planet (preferably the planet Earth, but there are also extra-terrestrial worlds),
and world as a *totality of things*, as “everything that exists”. Since storyworlds can encompass interplanetary travel, they are better described by the totality than by the planetary definition. A storyworld is not just the spatial setting where a story takes place, it is a complex spatio-temporal totality that undergoes global changes. Put more simply, a storyworld is an imagined totality that evolves according to the events told in the story. To follow a story means to simulate mentally the changes that take place in the storyworld, using the cues provided by the text.

The concept of storyworld offers a basis for distinguishing two types of narrative elements: *intradiegetic* elements, which exist within the storyworld, and *extradiegetic* elements, which are not literally part of the storyworld, but play a crucial role in its presentation. A good example of the opposition between intradiegetic and extradiegetic is a movie soundtrack. Film theorists have long been aware of the distinction between diegetic music—music that originates inside the storyworld, and is perceived by the characters—and extradiegetic music, which controls the expectations and emotions of the spectator, but does not exist within the storyworld. (See also: Justin Horton’s essay in this book.) In computer games, the storyworld is represented by images and dialogues, but the menus that offer the player a choice of actions, and the statistics that report the player’s level of achievement, are extradiegetic. Playing the game involves a constant movement in and out of the storyworld.

While storyworlds transcend the distinction between fiction and nonfiction (all stories project a storyworld, whether told as true or told as fiction), fictional worlds are constituted by their difference from the real world, a difference that lies in their mode of existence, or ontological status. The main source of inspiration for capturing this ontological status has been the philosophical concept of possible worlds. For possible worlds theory (also known as modal logic), a world is defined over a set of mutually compatible propositions. One way to conceive the mode of existence, or more precisely, the coming-into-being of possible worlds is to associate them with future states of the real world. Out of a common matrix of truth values that defines the world of the present, different future worlds can be created by changing the value of one or more propositions. In accordance with the central tenet of possible worlds theory, which claims that there can be only one actual or real world from a given point of view, one of these worlds will become actual, while the others will remain unrealized possibilities.

Another explanation for the existence of possible worlds situates their origin in an act of the mind, such as imagining, dreaming, hallucinating... or producing fictions. If one applies this conception of possible worlds to
narrative fiction, fictional worlds will be created by the mind of authors for the benefit of audiences. Readers, spectators, or players relocate themselves into these worlds through their imagination, pretending that they are actual (Ryan 1991). In the best cases, this game of pretense results in an experience of immersion in the fictional world.

Narrative proliferation

In narrative proliferation, multiple stories are told about the same world, so that passing from one story to another does not require ontological relocation. While, in most cases of narrative proliferation, the reader can expand the image constructed during previous visits to the same world and therefore finds herself at home in the storyworld from the very beginning of each new story, I will discuss an example that requires significant cognitive initiation: the novel *Cloud Atlas* (Mitchell 2004) and its film adaptation. Both the novel and the film consist of six separate stories, which take place at different times and in different locations. The first one concerns the journey of an American lawyer sailing from the South Pacific back to California in the early nineteenth century; the second one is about a young musician who writes down scores for a famous composer in the 1920s in Belgium (though the film sets the story in England); the third is set in California in the 70s, and tells about a young reporter who investigates a scheme by an energy company to build a dangerously flawed nuclear power plant to boost the oil industry; the fourth follows the misadventures of an elderly, eccentric book publisher who is committed against his will to a nursing home in contemporary England; the fifth tells about a dystopic future society in Seoul, South Korea, where human beings can be cloned, and the clones are used as slaves; and the sixth, set in Hawaii in a very distant future, depicts how mankind has regressed to a primitive state after a mysterious event called The Fall.

From an ontological point of view, *Cloud Atlas* projects a (nearly) unified world. The six stories take place in different places, at different times, and involve different characters, but they do not represent mutually exclusive possibilities. Even though they are not linked to one another by explicit relations of causality, we can imagine that the stories correspond to various moments in the history of the same global world, strung together like the beads of a necklace. The only exception is story 3, which is revealed in story 4 to be a novel and not an account of real events; but, when read for the first time, we take it as factual account and, indeed, the kind of events that it reports could very well happen in the same world as the other stories. The ontological connection of
the stories is hinted at by the dominant themes of the narrative: the repeated claim that “everything is connected” and the presence of an identical birth mark on the shoulder of the main character of each story, which suggests that these characters are reincarnations of the same individual, despite their widely different personalities. In the movie, the theme of reincarnation is reinforced by the fact that the same actors play different roles in different stories, a device that would not be possible in a novel.

An even stronger sign of ontological connection is a system of embedding that locates the text of each story as a material object within the next story. For instance, the text of the first story is the diary of a character named Adam Ewing. The hero of the second story, Robert Frobisher, discovers and reads this manuscript. Frobisher composes a musical work titled “Cloud Atlas” and writes a series of letters to his lover. Both of these media objects fall into the hands of Luisa Rey, the reporter of the third story. And so on until the last story.3

While from an ontological perspective all the stories of Cloud Atlas belong to the same world, from a cognitive perspective, each story projects its own storyworld. When the readers or spectators pass from one story to the next, they experience a world where nothing is familiar: neither the setting, nor the characters, nor the social environment, and readers must construct the storyworld from an almost blank state (I say almost blank, because we always import some information from our experience of the real world). The organization of the text on the discourse level does little to alleviate the cognitive burden of constructing six different storyworlds. In the novel, the stories are divided into two parts (except for the sixth story), and these parts are presented in the sequence 1-2-3-4-5-6-5-4-3-2-1. This pattern actualizes a structure known in computer science as a stack: the various elements are piled on one another, and they are processed according to the principle “first in, last out”. The stack principle means that, when readers reach level six, they must keep five half-told stories in the back of their mind. Only story six unfolds as an uninterrupted whole. Once story six is completed, it is popped from the stack and the text returns to story five, which is still reasonably fresh in memory. As the text returns to older levels, it becomes more and more difficult for the reader to remember what the story was all about.

It is fortunate that the medium of the book allows readers to return to earlier pages. The spectators of the movie do not have that luxury. In the film, the symmetrical stack structure is replaced with a chaotic organization. The stories are fragmented into many more elements than in the novel, and these fragments, which tend to become shorter and shorter as the film progresses, are presented in a seemingly random order. For spectators who
see the film without having read the novel—and this was my case—, it is very difficult to reconstitute the plot. When I left the theatre, I was totally confused, and the first thing I did when I got home was to look up the Wikipedia article to make sense of the film.

**Ontological proliferation**

While the various storyworlds of *Cloud Atlas* differ cognitively, but are logically compossible and could, therefore, be part of the same global world, we find the reverse situation in Tom Tykwer’s earlier film, *Run, Lola, Run*. The film represents a genre that David Bordwell (2002) calls “forking path” narratives. These narratives focus on a decision point, out of which several different futures develop depending on the character’s deliberate choice of action, or on random coincidence. In *Run Lola Run*, the decision point is a phone call to Lola from her boyfriend, Manni, who has lost a large sum of money he owes to a crime boss. He will face dire consequences if the money is not delivered within 20 minutes. The film explores three forking paths in which Lola tries different courses of action to get the money in time. In the first “run”, Lola tries to borrow the money from her father, a banker, but he refuses; then she helps Manni rob a supermarket, but she gets shot and apparently dies. In the second run, she robs her father’s bank, but Manni is hit by a car as he runs toward her to get the money. In the third run, Lola wins the money at the casino, but, in the meantime, Manni has recovered the money he lost, so everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.

The three worlds that fork out of the common decision point are clearly different from an ontological point of view, since they contain logically incompatible events, but, in all three branches, Manni has the same problem, Lola has the same goal, the setting is constant, and the network of interpersonal relations remains unchanged. As the clock is rewound and a different alternative is explored, the spectator is taken back to a familiar situation and no additional cognitive effort needs to be devoted to the construction of the background.

**Comparing narrative and ontological proliferation**

*Cloud Atlas* and *Run, Lola, Run* illustrate two basic forms of proliferation: a world that includes many stories for *Cloud Atlas*, and a story (or text) that includes many worlds for *Run, Lola, Run*. The case of a world with many
stories is found in many different genres and media: for instance, in TV soap operas, which represent the interleaved destinies of many characters and follow multiple plot lines; in novels of magical realism, which often consist of many little stories taking place in the same setting, rather than of a unified narrative arc; or in a film like *Babel*, which presents three different stories, one located in Mexico, another in Morocco, and the third in Japan. The spectator knows that these stories take place in the same world because they present common elements.

Another example of a world with more than one story comes from a structure that may be called non-ontological narrative embedding; in other words, the embedding of a story that refers to the same world as the framing story and extends its representation, rather than transporting the reader into a new world. For instance, in “Sarrasine”, the short story by Balzac that was made famous by Roland Barthes’ *S/Z*, the narrative begins with the description of a lavish reception in the Parisian house of a rich family. Among the guests is a withered old man who awakens the curiosity of a marquise. The narrator tells the story of the old man to the marquise in exchange for a night of love that he does not get in the end, because the marquise is too upset by the tale to keep her promise. Since the embedded and embedding stories refer to the same world, they complement each other and passing from one to the other does not require the crossing of an ontological boundary.

In contrast to “Sarrasine”, works such as *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Decameron*, or *The Arabian Nights* are not worlds with many stories, but rather texts with many worlds. These texts feature a framing story and many embedded ones, told by the characters of the framing story. Insofar as the embedded stories are presented as fictions, they do not refer to the same world as the framing story. For instance, the characters in “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” or “Aladdin and the Magic Lamp” are not part of the world in which Scheherazade tells stories to the Sultan to postpone her execution and there is no chance that Scheherazade could meet Aladdin, except in a postmodern parody. These examples illustrate the case of ontological proliferation: a text that sends its readers into many other worlds than the primary fictional world, where the embedding story takes place (see: Ryan 1991, chapter 9 on the two types of embedding).

**Textual and medial proliferation**

The third type of proliferation—many texts, one world, and, depending on the case, one or many stories—has been with us for a long time in the form
of adaptation, in which, roughly, the same story is told by texts of different media, and, in the form of what Richard Saint-Gelais (2011) calls transfictionality, in which storyworlds are expanded through new stories usually told in the same medium as the original, such as prequels, sequels, midquels, or the story of secondary characters. In both adaptation and transfictionality, the authors are generally different. More recently, a cultural phenomenon known as transmedia storytelling (Jenkins 2006) has combined these two forms, so that we now have “franchises” such as Star Wars, Harry Potter, or Lord of the Rings that include both adaptations and transfictional expansions using any of the media capable of narration, as well as some non-media objects such as T-shirts, Lego sets, and costumes that can be used by fans as “props in games of make-believe” (Walton 1990). The entertainment industry tries to persuade us that, thanks to transmedia, storytelling will never be the same again. Does this mean that transmedia storytelling develops a new narrative aesthetic? Or is it just a marketing ploy? If we regard aesthetic experience as a response to an intentional design, transmedia aesthetics would require a deliberate distribution of narrative content across different media. This is how Henry Jenkins conceives the phenomenon:

Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story. (Italics original) (Jenkins 2007)

For this ideal to be realized, transmedia storytelling should be planned top-down and the user should become familiar, if not with all the documents of the system, at least with a significant number of them, so as to be able to fill in the gaps and to fit them together into a larger picture. The vast majority of transmedia franchises do not, however, develop top-down, but, rather, exploit the success of a single-medium narrative that has already achieved popularity, by offering the public more and more stories that take place in the same storyworld. This is how the franchises of Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, A Song of Ice and Fire, and, to a lesser extent, Star Wars came into being. Rare are the transmedia projects that are conceived, from the very beginning, as acts of storytelling that involve many media. One of them is Alpha 0.7, a German project that augments a short TV series with a number of visual and textual documents available online (Ryan 2013); another is The Matrix (Jenkins 2006), which was planned by the Wachowski (then) brothers as a network that encompassed, in addition to the three films,
comics, computer games and short animé films. In both of these cases, the transmedia documents are optional peripherals that flesh out the world of a main document, known in the entertainment industry as “Mother Ship”, and many users will limit their exploration of the storyworld to the landscapes that can be seen from this ship. Those who are truly in love with the storyworld will, however, follow links to the peripheral elements to deepen their immersion. The transmedia buildup of Alpha 0.7 and The Matrix does not seem, however, to have significantly contributed to their success: Alpha 0.7 was a popular failure; as for The Matrix, the vast majority of its fans was not aware of the existence of the transmedia peripherals, except, perhaps, for the computer games.

Transmedia franchises may be sprouting like mushrooms (every best-seller seems to generate its own), but the art of orchestrating documents representing various media for a unified narrative experience remains to be mastered. Facebook commentator Brian Clark (2012) may be right when he claims that “there’s never been a big ‘transmedia hit’” (meaning projects conceived as transmedia from the very beginning). Yet, most developers and scholars of transmedia agree on one point: for a narrative idea to lend itself to transmedia treatment, its appeal should not lie in a linear story, because the temporal arc of stories has nothing to gain from fragmentation and dispersion across media (the fans of a story tend to want to stick to the same medium); rather, the narrative idea should reside in its world, because worlds can contain many stories, and they can be described by encyclopedic collections of documents addressing many senses.

**Worlds vs. stories as sources of interest**

Narrative aesthetics is traditionally conceived of as the art of creating stories that engage the reader’s interest through effects such as suspense, curiosity, surprise (Sternberg 1992), or through a dramatic contour of rise and fall in tension. All these features are temporal in nature. Yet spatial worldmaking, too long looked down upon as the trademark of lowbrow “genre fiction”, is increasingly being recognized as a legitimate form of art (DiGiovanna 2007; Wolf 2012).

Figure 1 represents a continuum from story-dominant to world-dominant texts. While the texts on the left emphasize story, or plot, they are not completely deprived of world, because the core constituents of stories are events and their participants. Since participants are existents, and since existents are objects with spatial extension, they must exist somewhere.
This means that there must be a world that contains them, but this world may be left largely implicit. Consider E.M. Forster’s example of a plot: “The king died, then the queen died of grief.” If this is a story, it offers little to the imagination. Readers will register the information that something happened in some abstract fictional world, but they will not be tempted to visualize the scene and to fill in the blanks in the story.

A narrative genre that minimizes world-creation is jokes. Not only are jokes too short to display a rich storyworld, the same joke can be told about different kinds of people: for instance, jokes that used to be told of certain ethnic groups are now told about blondes (assumed to be stupid), and jokes about lawyers are recycled by musicians into conductor jokes. The fact that the butt of certain jokes can be easily transformed from one category of people to another demonstrates that the appeal of these jokes lies in some properties of the story that transcends the particular embodiment of the characters. Another narrative genre that privileges plot over world is tragedy: the genre downplays particular social circumstances to focus on a network of personal relations that could happen anywhere, anytime. This is why Greek tragedy is best performed on a bare stage with no distracting props.

The case of world without story is much more feasible than the case of stories without worlds. A good example is the phenomenon of the micro-nation. The Internet contains many imaginary countries created for the pure pleasure of playing God. They have names like Bergonia and Talossa, and they are brought into being by documents that represent
an encyclopedic sum of knowledge. The creators of these micro-nations can play as many roles as they want: ethnographer, geographer, political scientist, linguist, cartographer, historian, and climatologist. But one role they do not play is that of novelist. Visiting these countries is therefore like reading all the descriptions in a novel and skipping the action parts.

While jokes and tragedy come the closest to the story pole, science fiction and fantasy are the closest genres to the world pole. In these genres, the plot serves as a trail that takes the audience through the storyworld and provides a glimpse into its distinctive natural features and cultural institutions. The greater the distance of a fictional world from ordinary reality, the more the interest of the reader or spectator will be directed toward the world, at the expense of the plot, because the invention of a world that differs from reality is a true feat of the imagination. J.R.R. Tolkien regarded it an act of subcreation that emulates, and therefore pays homage to the creative power of God (Wolf 2012).

The one-dimensional schema of figure 1 is misleading, because it suggests that the more prominent the world, the less interesting the plot, and vice versa, the more indeterminate the world, the more interesting the plot. This is certainly not the case, as we can see from the example of “The king died, then the queen died of grief.” Here, there is hardly any world, but this lack of worldness does not add to the appeal of the plot. The story is
very boring. On the other hand, there are great works of literature—here I think especially of the great novels of the nineteenth century—in which plot and world are both very developed and none takes second seat to the other. To represent this situation, we need a two-dimensional diagram, such as figure 2, in which the y axis represents “worldness” and the x axis represents “plotness” or “tellability”. The values attributed to various works should not be taken as absolute: they represent my own subjective experience. In addition, the contrast between story-dominant and world-dominant narratives can be represented as the set of tendencies shown in illustration 1.3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plot-dominant narratives</th>
<th>World-dominant narratives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Textual realization</td>
<td>One text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medial realization</td>
<td>Single medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative process</td>
<td>Individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relation to actual world</td>
<td>Close (realistic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representation of world</td>
<td>Incomplete representation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informational texture</td>
<td>Thin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of world</td>
<td>Container for plot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typical user experience</td>
<td>First steps in world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>What? Who?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spatio-temporal dominant</td>
<td>Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferred paratextual representation</td>
<td>Plot summary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Space and place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Encyclopedia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.3: Contrasting tendencies of story-dominant and world-dominant narratives. (World column inspired by DiGiovanna 2007)

Conclusion

The aesthetics of proliferation may seem, at first sight, to be a truly contemporary phenomenon, a practice inspired in part by the media explosion of the late 20th century, and in part by the typically postmodern concern for the diversity of perspectives from which reality can be described. At second sight, however, the aesthetics of proliferation has been with us for a very long time. Do you want multiple stories within a world? Look at the Renaissance epic *Orlando Furioso*, a text that the author, Ariosto, expanded with new episodes and new subplots throughout his lifetime. Do you want multiple worlds within a story? Look at the complex system of embedding of the *Arabian Nights*, or of Baroque novels. Transmedia storytelling? Think
of how the Bible, or Greek myths, have inspired painters, playwrights, poets, and composers for countless generations. In retrospect, it is the supposedly traditional aesthetics of textual autonomy and exclusivity—one text, one world, one story—that seems to be the exception rather than the rule. It is tied to modernism and to mid-20th century conceptions of the nature of literary language.

Yet, there is something distinctively contemporary about *Cloud Atlas*, *Run Lola Run*, and recent projects in transmedia storytelling such as *The Matrix* or *Alpha 0.7*. In older times, proliferation was spontaneous, bottom-up, multi-authored. Stories sprouted branches in many directions, like a rhizome, and storyworlds grew organically. Popular stories inspired transmedia adaptations without having been conceived for this explicit purpose. This remains the case today with the transmedia franchises that exploit the success of a monomedial work, such as the *Harry Potter* or *Lord of the Rings* novels, or with most novel-to-film adaptations; but, in addition to content that spreads itself spontaneously, we see more and more forms of proliferation that are programmatic, top-down, and pre-planned by development teams. There is something contrived and deliberately experimental about the proliferation of subworlds and stories in *Cloud Atlas*: they do not arise out of each other nor out of any kind of internal narrative necessity. It is as if the author had decided, “I’ll write a novel with a combination of worlds and stories that has never been done before.” As for transmedia storytelling, it has become a scheme to make people consume more and more media objects and demonstrate their loyalty to the brand. Storytelling becomes a game of how many media can be involved in a project, just as *Cloud Atlas* is a game of how many different worlds and stories can be crammed into a novel and how they can be interlinked.

The proliferation of texts around worlds, of worlds within texts, and of stories within worlds may be as old as narrative itself, but it is only in contemporary culture that it has been systematically explored, and elevated into an aesthetic.

Notes

2. By contrast, all the other stories mimic non-fictional genres: story 1 is a diary, story 2 a series of letters, story 4 a written autobiography, story 5 responses to an interviewer, and story 6 an oral narrative of personal experience told by the protagonist to his grandson. Stories 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6 belong to a first-degree ontological level, while story 3, as a fiction within a fiction, belongs to a second-degree level.

3. If story 3 is a novel, the fact that its heroine, Luisa Rey, can get hold of the letters and musical compositions of Robert Frobisher is a metalepsis, that is, a transgression of ontological boundaries, since fictional characters have no access to the real world. On the other hand, real-world members can read about fictional characters, so it is not a paradox that the fictionally nonfictional protagonist of story 4, Timothy Cavendish, can read the Luisa Rey novels.

4. Transfictionality also includes two other operations: one that changes the storyworld (modification) and one that transposes the story into a different world (transposition). Cf. Doležel, though he does not use the term of transfictionality. I do not discuss these operations here since I restrict my focus to the case of one world, many texts.

5. This formula holds for human-created works of art, but I don't want to exclude the possibility of an aesthetic appreciation of a randomly produced pattern, such as the shape of a rock.

6. I write “to a lesser extent Star Wars” because the franchise was conceived from the very beginning as spanning several films.


8. Cf. Henry Jenkins’s concept of “spreadable media”, which really means “media that facilitate the spreading of content”. See: Jenkins et al., 2013.

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Marie-Laure Ryan is an independent scholar based in Colorado. She is the author of Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory (1991), Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media (2001; second edition 2015), Avatars of Story (2006), and Narrating Space / Spatializing Narrative, with Kenneth Foote and Maoz Azaryahu (2016). She has also edited numerous collections, including the Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative (2005) with David Herman and Manfred Jahn and The Johns Hopkins Guidebook to Digital Media, co-edited with Lori Emerson and Benjamin Robertson. Her scholarly work has earned her the Prize for Independent Scholars and the Jeanne and Aldo Scaglion Prize for Comparative Literature, both from the Modern Language Association, and she has been the recipient of Guggenheim and NEA fellowships. She has also been Scholar in Residence at the University of Colorado, Boulder and Johannes Gutenberg Fellow at the University of Mainz, Germany. Her website is at marilaur.info and she can be reached at marilaur@gmail.com.