7. **Battleworlds**

The Management of Multiplicity in the Media Industries

*Derek Johnson*

Boni, Marta (ed.), *World Building. Transmedia, Fans, Industries*. Amsterdam University Press, 2017

**DOE: 10.5117/9789089647566/CH07**

**Abstract**

While much attention has been paid to the formal and creative challenges of world building in which vast narrative spaces cohere from complex textual designs and transmedia relationships, this chapter looks beyond the construction of cohesive, branded narrative spaces to consider how those spaces, once built, become sites of struggle for stakeholders within the media industries. Worlds are not just spaces of narrative elaboration, but shared sites in and in relation to which media professionals enter into collaborative relationships with one another. In the process of working within the established parameters of a shared world, such producers engage in a process of position taking, engaging in power plays that assert creative authority over the shared realm and making claims to identity, distinction, and legitimacy in hierarchical relationships to one another. By conceptualizing media worlds in the frame of “world sharing”, we can recognize them as significant sites of cultural struggle for media workers laboring in precarious, for-hire economies (Caldwell 2008, Deuze 2007, Mayer 2011).

**Keywords:** World sharing, industry, multiplicity, management, media franchising

In a January 2015 online presentation promoting the newest comic book crossover event from Marvel Comics, Senior Vice President of Publishing Tom Breevort promised an experience intimately tied to the company’s longstanding investment in world building. At stake in the new *Secret Wars* would be the fate of the Marvel Universe itself—poised for destruction at worst and reformation at least—as characters, publishers, and readers
confronted and resolved the differences between the competing uses, interpretations, and iterations of Marvel’s intellectual property over the past 50 years. Breevort reinforced the idea that the Marvel Universe is no single world, but a “multiverse” of parallel worlds in which familiar characters and stories shared across each have nevertheless taken differentiable shapes. This “cosmology”, as Breevort put it, includes not just the narrative continuity shared across most of the company’s comic books since the 1960s, but also all the parallels worlds imagined in the course of time-travel storylines, alternative publishing imprints, and adaptations of comics in film and television. Through some science-fiction conceit, the upcoming Secret Wars hinges on the collision of these once cosmologically distinguishable worlds and the notion that not all would survive that impact, with shards of different universes competing for existence. From this collision, Breevort promised the formation of a new, hybrid narrative space called Battleworld: “the detritus left over [...] the melting pot in which the new Marvel universe [...] will be fermented.” As Editor-in-Chief Axel Alonso added, Battleworld would be “a place where we will be bringing new pieces to the board and taking old pieces off.” At the crux of Secret Wars, at least as Marvel hyped it, was both a recognition of the multiplicity at the core of Marvel’s decades-long world building efforts, and a sense of creative and corporate management of those potentialities, both productive and destructive. In his own attempt to summarize the presentation, the moderator posited: “it’s like Thunderdome: two universes enter, one leaves” (Secret 2015).

This chapter considers how many, if not most, shared media universes are in some sense industrially managed “battleworlds”. As shared, collaboratively authored works that emerge from contemporary media industries’ emphasis on branded intellectual property, media worlds have embraced the principle of multiplicity (Ford and Jenkins 2009) to smooth over and enable creative variation across many markets and wide networks of franchised production outlets (Johnson 2013). Yet, the inherent multiplicity of narrative worlds in the context of media franchising does not mean all iterations are equally embraced, supported, or legitimated. Instead, media worlds are subject to industrial logics that regulate and authorize some potentialities (and not others) as viable, valuable, or virtuous. That process admittedly may not be one of open industrial warfare, as a “battleworld” might immediately suggest, but it nonetheless constitutes worlds as sites of struggle and management among different creative traditions, competing stakeholders, and opposing strategies in media industries. In Media Franchising, I emphasized “world sharing” over world building in order to
point to the importance of collaboration, multiplicity, and the diversity of uses to which worlds might be put in industrial contexts (ibid., 109). Here, I push world sharing to the point where we might recognize world management—industrial “discourses, dispositions, and tactics” (Johnson, Kompare, and Santo 2014) that negotiate divergent uses of worlds and turn them to industrial needs. Media worlds are fields for industry battles waged through management.

To conceptualize world management, this chapter will first distinguish study of worlds in terms of “building” versus “sharing”. I argue that, while world building favors considerations of continuity and authored unity in the construction of media texts, a theory of world sharing encourages us to think in much more detail about negotiated industrial practices in which multiple uses and interests might be situated, opposed, or otherwise related. From there, this chapter locates world management both in the practices of media institutions and in the circumscribed agency (Havens and Lotz 2009) of people within them. Finally, it will consider specific strategies of reimagining and rebooting as part of the industrial management of embattled worlds, asking how the multiverse logics unpinning many contemporary media franchises reflect a managed multiplicity. Altogether, this chapter reveals media franchising as a site of struggle and negotiation within the cultural industries, finding that the worlds brought into being by franchising engage, resolve, and ultimately manage those conflicts and tensions.

From World Building to World Sharing

In the context of media franchising, in which narrative worlds constitute intellectual properties to be shared widely across different communities of production, it is not just the building of worlds, but also the multiplication of worlds that is the order of the day. Henry Jenkins’ earliest definitions of convergence culture recognized that “storytelling has become the art of world building, as artists create compelling environments that cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or even a single medium” (Jenkins 2006, 116). Later formulations of transmedia storytelling paid greater attention to this logic of “multiplicity” at the levels of creativity and production (Jenkins 2011; Ford and Jenkins 2009). Beyond single artists or centralized authors, creating worlds that could be used multiple times in multiple works across multiple mediums, worlds could be used in different, often competing ways by multiple industries and multiple creators.
World building involves the construction of a text as well as a context for its co-creation. While study of world building might focus on fictional realms like Westeros (Game of Thrones/A Song of Ice and Fire), the Galactic Empire (Star Wars), Middle-earth (The Lord of the Rings), or Panem (The Hunger Games), it also prompts us to consider the process of their construction by writers, production designers, cinematographers, editors, sound designers, participatory audiences, and more. While investigation of world building has focused at times on its continuity and the ontological wholeness, sometimes fixating on story and narrative concerns, several scholars have nevertheless pointed to the role worlds play as a context for creator and audience engagement. Matt Hills invoked the ontological unity of worlds in invoking “hyperdiegesis” as a quality of textual construction supporting the engagement of fan communities (Hills 2002, 137-138)—a term he revisits in this volume. Mark J.P. Wolf recognizes worlds as dynamic entities that support a multiplicity of authorship he calls “subcreation”, theorizing worlds in terms such as their completeness, capacity for invention, and immersiveness to support transauthorial, subcreative elaboration. As Jeffrey Sconce argues, the complex architecture and elaborate diegetic depth of world building works to calcify narrative formulas in a way that supports extensive, successive experimentation with them. Sconce cites Marvel Comics as a significant progenitor for forms of “conjectural narrative” in television in that depth, familiarity, and continuity of universe allowed the development of numerous “What If?” scenarios in which new, slightly altered and adapted versions of the Marvel world could cohere (Sconce 2004). I too have argued that franchised media worlds serve as “engines” to drive ongoing elaboration in cultural creation, as a context in which future creativity can unfold (Johnson 2013, 141). Overall, these reflections on world building recognize the potential for worlds to support a multiplicity of elaborative interpretation, often suggesting that this multiplicity of cultural production be assessed in significant part according to the world’s systematic capacity for co-creation. World building is thus an extremely useful way to understand the constructs and structures in which shared creativity might unfold.

Nevertheless, a theory of world sharing puts multiplicity of creative use—as well as struggles within the industrial context in which worlds circulate—more at the center of our concern. Going beyond the world as a structure for supporting co-creativity or subcreation, a perspective based in world sharing foregrounds everyday negotiation of that structure, particularly as embedded in social relationships and shared but unequal interests in that world across a multiplicity of different contexts. At question
would not be the unity of the world as a system for creation, but, instead, how that multiplicity might be defined by tension, opposition, and a lack of unified authority in that creation. As with all things shared, worlds present a case of negotiation and potential contestation. This is not to say that world sharing would look at co-creative/subcreative cultural production as a free-for-all with no sense of hierarchy; indeed, such a perspective would properly recognize that the terms of world sharing are strictly tied up in differentials of power and authority. As much as textuality and creativity, industry becomes central to a study of world sharing to provide context for these power relations and the terms by which worlds might be shared and subsequently contested.

World sharing and world building are not conceptually at odds in theorizing creativity in contemporary media culture and culture industries. Yet the former perspective turns away from questions of how multiplicity is supported to think more about how that multiplicity in practice renders worlds sites of cultural struggle for creators working in shared institutional relations with one another. How, for example, is power over a shared world negotiated? Who can exert control over a shared world? How? In what ways is shared access and agency in relation to a world differentially determined by gender, age, race, class, sexuality, or other identity markers? What role does ownership play? How do multiple creators navigate their unequal statuses, identities, and agencies? World sharing focuses our attention on the social and industrial negotiation of the tensions and oppositions implied by a multiplicity of different investments in and uses of the same creative context; it directly invokes the potential for cultural struggle by centering the incomplete authority and claim of any one party or institutional force to its creative possibilities.

Managed Multiplicity

As a site of potential tension and struggle, world sharing is carefully managed by the institutions in which it unfolds, as well as by the individual human agents negotiating those institutional contexts. In Making Media Work, Derek Kompare, Avi Santo, and I consider management not as the all-powerful strategies of executives and other “suits” atop industry hierarchies, but as a more productive and dispersed set of “discourses, dispositions, and tactics that create meaning, generate value, organize, or otherwise shape media work throughout each moment of production and consumption” (2014, 2). As discourse, management categorizes and organizes knowledge
within the media industries, deployed by workers at the top and bottom of industry hierarchies. Dispositions of management emerge through identities and self-perceptions that confer authority and justify positions within the industry. The tactical nature of management, finally, centers on the interpretation, improvisation, and negotiation of agency within the rules of institutions, where hegemony is negotiated and enacted. As managed in these forms by the media industries, the multiplicity of shared worlds becomes a significant site of struggle over authority, position, and the legibility of power within the practical, day-to-day operations of franchised cultural production.

At the discursive level, world sharing has been organized, made meaningful, and rendered valuable through the production of knowledge about authority within complex, collaborative, co-creative industry structures. Discourses of authorship, for example, play heightened managerial roles in imposing sense, order, and legitimacy on heterogeneous uses and interpretations of shared worlds. Author figures like Ronald D. Moore, executive producer and developer of the reimagined *Battlestar Galactica* television series, legitimize the industrial reuse of franchised properties, marking reinterpretation and reimagining of the world as different and inspired (Johnson 2013). Matt Hills (2013) has shown these discourses of franchise authorship to be a field of struggle, moreover, with those outside the privileged position at the center of shared worlds making their own claims to authority via “counter-discourses”. Discourses like authorship manage which of the multiple uses of the shared world are to be valued, which are to be considered suspect, and why.

The taking of positions in relation to discursively privileged authors simultaneously calls our attention to the dispositions that manage shared worlds. World sharers lay claim to specific identities, beliefs, and ways of experiencing the world in the course of managing positions in relation to that world. Considering the case of Zack Snyder (director of *300*, *Watchmen*, and *Sucker Punch*), Suzanne Scott argues that the performance of “fanboy auteur” personae models appropriate “correct” orientation to franchise co-creation (2013, 442). Snyder and others can deploy their fan identities in interviews and other moments of professional persona building to position themselves as ideally suited for projects that require recreation of an existing franchise (ibid., 445). Such dispositions allow producers to claim authority in the industry (underwritten by, yet in excess of, fan status) while granting power and industrial legitimacy to fan identities that are reverential and respectful. Examining the heavily branded worlds of television production, Denise Mann (2009) stresses how show-runners increasingly perform the
role of brand managers, talking to the press and otherwise building hype for a series (not just writing and producing). Professional authority, in this case, depends on getting out in front of the camera and demonstrating one’s organization, vision, overall creative disposition, and business acumen to coordinate production across television, online platforms, video games, and more. The management of world sharing is thus conducted at the level of professional identity and the performance of creative personae that reinforce authorial discourses and justify political economic lines of industrial authority. Disposition shores up the multiple, differential industrial positions from which worlds are shared.

The multiplicity of world sharing is lastly managed on a tactical front in which producers, executives, and other participants in the industrial process of creativity exert circumscribed agency. As examined by both M.J. Clarke and Trevor Elkington, the process of “double approval” might be productively considered as something managed through tactical maneuvers within media industries (Clarke 2013, Elkington 2009). To produce comic books, novels, and video games based on television series, outside publishers most often acquire licenses from television studios, effectively purchasing the right to share the related world. Publishers then contract the creative labor of doing so to for-hire writers and/or production studios. Creators must thus obtain approval for their labor on two levels: they must please the publisher while, at the same time, hoping that the publisher will be able to obtain subsequent approval for the work from the studio. The conditions of corporate ownership over copyrighted worlds are first managed in this instance by contractual practices that prescribe the relationships between studio licensor and publisher licensee, as well as quotidian communication and working relationships between executives in each office (or the lack thereof between licensor and for-hire creator, where lack of direct interaction maintains power imbalances). Second, at the level of production and creative practice, individual world sharers refine techniques to negotiate these constraints while still developing their own creative interests in the shared world. Practices such as “continuity mining” allow producers to share in co-creation of a franchised world in ways more likely to win approval, framing attempts at invention in relation to territory and themes already well explored.

Altogether, this framework of discourse, disposition, and tactic helps us conceptualize the dynamics of world sharing not just as defined by negotiation of tensions within industrial relationships, but also more specifically as a managed multiplicity that shapes and sets limits on the collaboration and co-creation that world sharing might support. Managed multiplicity reveals,
in part, a form of power that produces meaning, organization, identity, and practice within the broader set of creative possibilities enabled by the world.

Managing Battleworlds

This understanding of world sharing as managed multiplicity in an industrial context need not exclude concerns for media texts, however. Instead, we can consider how dominant creative practices and textual qualities serve managerial functions within industry strategies.

As worlds are shared among numerous production communities and contexts of production within the logics of media franchising, they are inevitably multiplied. The 21st century “reimagining” of Battlestar Galactica in a form disconnected from the continuity of the original 1978 series, for example, nevertheless involves some use of a shared narrative world, as key characters, events, and settings remain to be reinterpreted in an alternative, updated manner. The push toward a Battlestar multiverse, as opposed to maintaining a unified, continuous world, came from a number of factors, including industry desires to reach a different audience with edgier programming and needs for professional, creative, and network distinctions. Yet, as the mobilization of a franchise brand, full separation of one Battlestar world from the other would have proven counterproductive. While the decision to recast the Starbuck character as female aimed in part to subvert audience expectations (Kungl 2008), other plot points along the way, such as the second season arrival of Admiral Cain and the Battlestar Pegasus, reinforced the persistent connections between the two Battlestar worlds. A running theme throughout the series suggested that the characters all played familiar roles in an eternal cycle of repeated action, punctuated by eerie, repeated dialogue such as “all this has happened before, and will happen again”. These elements managed the multiplicity of world sharing by imposing specific relationships between the two television series that shared that world, differentiating them at some times and drawing them closer together at others.

Now that comic book films and other Hollywood blockbuster have grown increasingly invested in world-building strategies long utilized by comics, television and other serialized media, we can see similar tactics managing the multiplied use of shared worlds in the cinema. Hollywood’s embrace of media franchising as a strategic logic drives it toward repetition of the familiar—if not to avoid innovation entirely, to couch innovation in safe, risk-averse frameworks already proven to be marketable. Paradoxically,
media franchising demands that Hollywood produce more of the same while always finding new ways to differentiate that product; *Spider-Man* must lead to more *Spider-Man*, but each film must push, in some way, into unfamiliar territory to distinguish itself from previous entries. The film franchise “reboot” manages this strategic challenge; *Spider-Man* can be occasionally reset to zero to allow both new interpretations and restatement of the familiar. Moreover, as announced in 2015, the reboot practice can be used to move the Spider-Man character from a narrative world produced across multiple films by one studio (Sony) and transplant a new version of him into another ongoing world controlled by a different studio (Marvel) (Sony Pictures 2015).

The managed reboot, like the reimagination, is thus a tactic that allows for careful articulation of the relationship between shared, industrially iterative worlds. While reboots work by launching a new, alternate world within the overall shared universe, Hollywood producers have increasingly embraced “soft” reboots in which they try to have their cake and eat it too—doing something radically different to produce a new version of a world, while positing persistent value and relationship in relation to an old version. While the 2009 *Star Trek* introduced filmgoers to a reimagined, younger version of the *Enterprise* crew, it framed that new interpretation within a convoluted time travel/alternate reality premise initiated in the shared continuity in which all prior *Star Trek* productions had been situated. The villain Nero goes back in time from a point in the original *Star Trek* timeline, changes history, and enables the new film franchise to offer a new take on the world as history unfolds in a new way. At age 77, Leonard Nimoy reprised his role as Spock from the original timeline, effectively passing the torch to the characters inhabiting this new iteration of the world. Managing two iterations of a world by holding them in tension, the film works quite cleverly on an industrial level both to forge ahead with an appeal to the younger audiences courted by Hollywood, and to maintain some service to longtime fans.

*X-Men: Days of Future Past* uses a similar time travel and soft reboot tactic to manage the multiplicity of shared worlds in the context of media franchising. By this seventh film in 20th Century Fox’s *X-Men* franchise, filmmakers had exhausted many of the most popular characters and events from the comic book world, having killed top tier characters like Jean Grey and Cyclops and already adapted storylines like *The Dark Phoenix Saga*. The participation of many different filmmakers with different visions for the characters also muddled a sense of shared continuity within the world. While a reboot would have allowed Fox flexibility to draw from that material
anew and stave off potential creative or commercial stagnation, such a prospect would carry its own risks. Actors like Hugh Jackman still proved commercially marketable in the role of Wolverine, and the films overall continued to perform well at the box office. At the same time, competition between Fox and Marvel Studios (extending from historical licensing agreements that excluded *X-Men* from the unified “Marvel Cinematic Universe” developed by the latter) would have given a reboot added significance; such a move could be read as failure and inferior ability on Fox’s part, compared to the celebrated and tightly coordinated long-term continuity under construction by Marvel in its films. The soft, managed reboot of *Days of Future Past*, therefore, turned on its own time-travel narrative in order to introduce changes to the world in its past, culminating in a coda in which Jean Grey and Cyclops now live in the future, having experienced a completely different set of (now untold) events that did not lead to their demise. Future *X-Men* films are now free to go back to that new, unwritten past, with 2016’s *Age of Apocalypse* recasting younger versions of Jean Grey and Cyclops; but that new interpretation is framed as part and parcel of a multiverse persistently shared with the original films. While the production of the series has been marked by multiplicity, disjuncture, and divergence on many levels, this plot device manages that complex, uneven industry framework by imposing a new narrative unity.

The 2015 film *Terminator: Genisys* too employs narrative time travel to situate new industry adaptation within the shared world of the original films—just as the 2008 television series *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* did. As a narrative trope and tool of world sharing, time travel is a tactic that allows managed reboots to pass the torch from one generation to the next: the shared relationship between two worlds can be clearly organized in relationship to industry goals, audience targeting strategies. Potential tensions and oppositions between worlds in the same franchise universe are managed by framing within the text as well as the legacies, hierarchies, and relationships among them.

Returning to comics, Marvel’s *Secret Wars* crossover, and its invocation of a Battleworld, we see this same time travel/alternate worlds trope smooth over tensions and resolve the “battle” of world sharing in a way that serves a variety of industry interests. The “battleworld” of world sharing, strictly speaking, might be more accurately understood as the institutional contexts in which worlds are shared than the narrative universe that unfolds as creative managers put some pieces in new positions and take others off the table. In this case, we might be able to locate management not just in tactical forms of narrative construction, but also discursive and dispositional
practices surrounding that process. In promising that all its parallel worlds were about to collide in a violent, oppositional way, Marvel’s promotional rhetoric turned on a discourse of collective authorship and coordination to impose a sense of institutional order upon that collision, to some degree downplaying or even disavowing the multiplicity that produced so many different iterative worlds in the first place. Despite drawing on the wide use of Marvel properties across markets and histories, Axel Alonso explains, in the Secret Wars announcement video, that the story would be “the most coordinated event we’ve ever done. As everyone knows, we’re a big, big universe, a shared universe, and we’ve done a few events over the years. Every time we were planning an event—through AXIS, Original Sin, A vs. X— […] we’ve had to make decisions based on the fact that we knew Secret Wars was headed our way” (Secret 2015). The narrative battle between these worlds, he promises, does not represent any corporate opposition or contestation. Instead, it is positioned as a singular, almost inevitable outcome pursued by the various editors, writers, and artists working on other big events in recent years. Lest all that collective work suggest a potential for disunity, Alonso offers the figure of Secret Wars writer Jonathan Hickman to bring cohesion to this industrial world sharing, promising that his vision in the core mini-series event would shape the stories told in crossover titles written by other writers. The multiplicity of industrial creativity invoked by the collision of worlds is thus managed by discourses that reaffirm coordination and unity.

The Secret Wars video presentation also provides, on a corporate level, an opportunity for Marvel’s publishing division to articulate its value and position in relation to a shared media world. Unsurprisingly, given that the event served to hype the creative output of Marvel’s publishing division, Alonso and Breevort emphasize the centrality of the comic book industry to the multiplication of Marvel worlds across a wide range of media channels. While celebrating the savvy of Kevin Feige and other producers building the far more popular and commercially lucrative “Marvel Cinematic Universe”, Alonso and Breevort nonetheless take care to emphasize that “it all started on the comic book page” (Secret 2015). While many might assume that Secret Wars would remake the Marvel Universe in the image of the Marvel Cinematic Universe to take advantage of the greater cross-promotional opportunities offered to the former by the latter, the publishing division positions itself contrarily in this moment as arbiter over the whole of Marvel’s creative output across any and all media, with the moral authority to determine what preceding material was worthy of inclusion in a new Marvel universe and which other “pieces” should be taken off the board. Of course, Marvel publishing is in no position to wipe away the Marvel Cinematic
World Building

Universe, but, in positioning itself as having life-and-death powers over the future of worlds created at many different points in time and across different industries, the publishing division claims authority over a much bigger, more complex industry formation. With the 1992 animated *X-Men* television series highlighted as one of the worlds at stake in *Secret Wars* (Lovett 2014), Marvel publishers claim a position of authority even over parallel worlds developed outside of the direct purview of the comics division. Marvel publishing was the alpha from which they all sprang, and the omega that could bring them to a final end. Even if, or perhaps especially because, that same political economic industry power does not exist, *Secret Wars* gave Marvel publishing an opportunity to construct a corporate disposition to legitimize its moral authority over worlds now shared widely in the media industries.

**Conclusion**

The Battleworld conceit of *Secret Wars* is only one instance in which the shared worlds of media franchising are held in tension within the narrative itself. Alternate universes, and their convergence with one another, are by no means new to comic books, having served companies like Marvel for decades. *Secret Wars* is not fundamentally different in the respects examined here from *Crisis on Infinite Earths, Final Crisis, Convergence* or many other DC Comics events that have provided that competing publisher with an opportunity to make violent changes to a shared world in narratively justified ways. Indeed, we are now in a moment in which the alternate universe “what if?” strategies long embraced by comic books and television have become a central part of the cinema as well, with the time-travel-incursion plot becoming a dominant device for Hollywood studios seeking to iterate worlds anew while keeping them situated within a shared continuity and serialized narrative framework. At a narrative level, media franchising is producing meta-commentary about world sharing.

Taking stock of such examples, this chapter has argued that the juxtaposition of worlds we see here works in part to manage conflicts and tensions within the media industries. The “battleworld” of media franchising, in which producers and institutions with different outlooks, goals, and strategies nevertheless all draw on the same creative resources, make world sharing a contested and above all managed multiplicity, in terms of both narrative and practice. Shared worlds are battleworlds to the extent that they require negotiation and management of their shared status by the multiple producers and industries that exploit them. By thinking about the
sharing of worlds, not just their building, we recognize the tensions inherent in that practice and the management required to impose order, meaning, and authority on that contested process. Appropriately enough, those struggles may be “secret wars”, with the discourses, dispositions, and tactics deployed to manage multiplicity obscuring the existence of industrial and creative struggles as much as calling our attention to them—particularly in the case of alternate universe time travel reboots that neatly rewrite the narrative past. Yet, by focusing on how multiplicity is managed, we can better understand media franchising and world sharing as the realms of contestation that they are.

Works Cited


**About the author**