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16. The Worlds Align

Media Convergence and Complementary Storyworlds in Marvel’s *Thor: The Dark World*

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Abstract
The Marvel Cinematic Universe is the most ambitious experiment in cinematic world building to date. The MCU is like other blockbuster adaptations in that it adapts preexisting narrative material, but it is also distinct insofar as it doesn’t adapt a finite story featuring a stable set of characters. What is being adapted from Marvel Comics is not stories but rather an approach to world building. The MCU embraces a logic of *transfictionality*, defined as an intertextual relation that “uses the source text’s setting and/or inhabitants *as if they existed independently*” (Saint-Gelais 2005, 612). The comics are positioned as complementary to yet diegetically separate from the films. Convergences between these complementary storyworlds reward fans’ knowledge and encourages multiple close viewings of the films.

Keywords: Marvel; Media convergence; Storyworlds; Thor; Transfictionality.

“*Every 5000 years the worlds align perfectly, and we call this the Convergence. During this time, the borders between worlds become blurred.*”

– Thor, in *Thor: The Dark World*

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), as represented in an ongoing series of live-action films produced by Marvel Studios beginning in 2008, is the most ambitious and influential experiment in cinematic world building to date. The MCU is similar to other blockbuster series, like *The Lord of the Rings, The Hobbit,* and *Harry Potter,* in that it adapts material that previously
existed in another medium (in this case, comic books are the primary source of inspiration, though Marvel characters had been transmedial for decades before their cinematic incarnations). All of these franchises also take advantage of media convergence in order to spread their brands across multiple platforms, thereby appealing to the broadest possible audience. But the MCU is also significantly distinct from these properties insofar as it doesn’t adapt a finite story revolving around a stable set of characters. Where the *Harry Potter* films adapted the *story* told in J.K. Rowling’s novels, the MCU adapts the ongoing *storyworld* created over decades of Marvel Comics publishing. Specific narratives may be loosely adapted (e.g. *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* borrows its title and certain narrative elements from the comics storyline of the same name), but, in general, the stories told within the MCU are original. As the MCU progresses with each film, the stories differ more and more from their comic book inspirations in order to jibe with the world as established in previous films: for example, in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* Tony Stark and Bruce Banner invent the artificial intelligence Ultron instead of Hank Pym, partly because the latter had not yet been introduced in the MCU.

What is really being adapted from comics, then, is ultimately not stories at all but rather an approach to world building and media franchising. One of the goals of this chapter is to explicate the precise nature of the relationship between the MCU and its comics counterpart and what makes it unique in cinematic culture. This relationship is not adequately explained by the traditional logics of adaptation or transmedia storytelling alone; rather, the Marvel Cinematic Universe primarily embraces a logic of *transfictionality*, which Richard Saint-Gelais has defined as an intertextual relation that “neither quotes nor acknowledges its sources. Instead, it uses the source text’s setting and/or inhabitants as if they existed independently” (2005, 612). The Marvel Comics Universe is thereby positioned as both complementary to and diegetically separate from the films. The resulting convergences between these complementary storyworlds, combined with the interactivity built into serialization as a narrative mode, rewards fans’ “insider” knowledge of the Marvel Comics Universe and encourages multiple and close viewings of the films themselves, particularly in their home video versions.

Consideration of the entire MCU is beyond the scope of a single chapter. While *The Avengers* is arguably the key text of the MCU to date, serving as the convergence point for its four previously established character-centric franchises (*Iron Man*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *Thor*, and *Captain America: The First Avenger*), *Thor: The Dark World* is a more productive case study for unpacking the company’s position regarding media convergence. More so
than any other installment in Marvel’s ongoing experiment in serialized filmmaking to date, *The Dark World* both enacts and embodies the key elements of the studio’s transfictional strategy. More than merely demonstrating processes related to media convergence, *The Dark World* turns said processes into narrative, demonstrating a high degree of industrial self-reflexivity. Before looking at that film specifically, however, it’s necessary to define the key concepts as they pertain to Marvel Studios.

**Marvel, Thor, and Transfictionality**

As defined by Saint-Gelais, transfictionality refers to instances in which “two (or more) texts […] share elements such as characters, imaginary locations, or fictional worlds” (2005, 612). Some additional clarification, however, is required to differentiate this from other manifestations of intertextuality, like adaptation. In sharp contrast to the model of transmedia storytelling proposed by Henry Jenkins, in which narrative pieces that are deliberately spread across different texts and media can be assembled to form a unified story (2006, 95-96), transfictional texts thwart attempts at intertextual coherence. When read in conjunction with one another, contradictions are evident: try as one might, the jigsaw pieces don’t fit together. What distinguishes transfictional relationships from adaptations or other kinds of intertextual links between texts is that their storyworlds must be both related and incompatible (Dena 2014, 487). Saint-Gelais introduces the example of Sherlock Holmes, whose popularity (and public domain copyright status) has resulted in a character that appears in multiple incompatible storyworlds related to each other only by his presence. Each iteration—regardless of author or medium—shares and participates in the broader transfictional entity that encompasses multiple iterations of the character without the narrative burden of being “canonical”. Saint-Gelais offers that “The solution here may be to consider transfictional versions as counterparts, i.e., as inhabitants of distinct possible worlds, bearing close relationship to their original, even though it might seem counter-intuitive to assign original and version to separate worlds” (2005, 612).

Thor is a transfictional character, perhaps to an even greater extent than any other Marvel character. Prior to his transformation into a superhero, he had appeared in centuries’ worth of mythology stemming from various cultures. His debut in Marvel’s *Journey into Mystery* #83 (August 1962) constituted a pop-cultural appropriation of Norse mythology, modified to fit the conventions of the superhero genre: notable additions included a
“mild-mannered” alter-ego and the ability to fly. Otherwise, the comic book version of Thor bore many similarities to various mythological versions and increasingly so as the story progressed: the comics eventually eliminated Thor’s human secret identity and love interest in order to more closely resemble Norse mythology (Arnold 2011, 157). The version of Thor “created by” Stan Lee and Jack Kirby for Marvel Comics is heavily indebted to previous mythological versions, but still sufficiently distinct as to constitute a transfictional counterpart. Norse mythology is thus related to these comics by virtue of Thor’s presence in both; but they are also incompatible because a reader can’t simply use mythology as the Marvel Thor’s backstory, though they will inevitably find some overlapping elements. The appropriate stance to assume as a reader is to use the mythological Thor as a pool of potential knowledge that may or may not apply to Marvel’s Thor: in other words, to treat them as complementary storyworlds.3

This also describes the relationship between the MCU and its comics counterpart. Knowledge of comic book canon allows viewers to make hypotheses about what might happen next in the film universe. While recent trends in adaptation studies suggest that the source material/adaptation dyad should be understood laterally rather than hierarchically (Hutcheon 2006, 169), in this case, the primacy of the comics is a significant part of the MCU’s world-building strategy. Not only would the Cinematic Universe not exist without the prior existence of the Comics Universe, but the idea of the viewer’s (potential) prior knowledge of the latter seems to be a key component of how Marvel Studios films address their viewers. In particular, unexplained or background phenomena—often referred to as “Easter eggs” in this context—represent clues as to the future direction of the story. This is more complicated than foreshadowing, since the expectations set up in this way are both ambiguous and unreliable. For instance, the appearance of an unnamed purple alien in the middle of The Avengers’ credits sequence has almost no narrative value without recourse to the comics’ complementary storyworld, which tells us his name (Thanos) and goal (to destroy the universe using the Infinity Gauntlet, which grants its wearer godlike powers). Viewers thus hypothesize that the MCU is building towards a version of story. Subsequent events in the MCU—Thanos’ failed attempt to possess an Infinity Stone in Guardians of the Galaxy, the announcement of the two-part The Avengers: Infinity War to be released in 2018 and 2019—provide additional support to this hypothesis. Another example is the MCU’s version of The Mandarin, an Iron Man villain first foreshadowed by the presence of an Afghani terrorist organization called the Ten Rings (a transformation of the comic book Mandarin’s ten power rings) in Iron Man. Iron Man 3 finally
saw the introduction of this super-villain to the MCU as the viral video-producing leader of the Ten Rings. The marketing of the film, especially when combined with viewers' extratextual knowledge of the comic book character, proved to be an elaborate misdirect: a plot twist at the end of the film's second act reveals the cinematic Mandarin to be a washed-up actor working under the instruction of the film's true villain. In both cases, the large body of Marvel Comics acts as a pool of potential knowledge about the MCU that viewers are expected to draw from in order to contextualize otherwise unexplainable narrative material or to anticipate future visits to the serialized storyworld. Serialization as a narrative mode also encourages repeated exposure to texts as viewers or readers await the next installment; the time between entries is filled up by acts of rewatching, hypothesizing, interpreting, and a “sense of interactive production between creator and reader” (Gardner 2012, 60). The transfictional relationship between Marvel's complementary storyworlds provides much of the fodder for these activities as viewers acquire and exchange knowledge about comic book continuity and how it might manifest in the MCU.

Though this essay focuses on Marvel Studios, transfictional world building—that is, world building characterized by the creative transformation of and continued engagement with another preexisting storyworld—is a popular, if often unacknowledged, narrative strategy. *Star Trek* is an excellent example of a franchise reboot that uses the existing continuity established in the 1960s television series as a complementary storyworld, allowing savvy viewers to make informed guesses about the narrative direction while also being surprised by changes to canon. Television superhero series like *Smallville* and *Gotham* thrive on making references to the complementary storyworlds of films and comics featuring DC Comics characters and delight in delaying or challenging the expectations that result from having knowledge thereof.

Nevertheless, Marvel Studios remains unique for its unprecedented scope, spanning seven individual franchises (including *The Avengers*) across twelve films between 2008 and 2015, with an additional five franchises and ten films scheduled for release between 2016 and 2020. It is based on this impressive output that Matthias Stork claims that the MCU is primarily a cinematic creation, and not a transmedia construction. While the films were designed to cultivate the Marvel brand and open revenue streams in other (media) outlets, establishing an economically inflected trans-film structure, they did not create any explicit transmedia narratives (Stork 2014, 85).
This is not strictly true; while the cinematic texts are certainly distinct from the comic book canon, the MCU does embrace transmedia storytelling in combination with its transfictional world building. For instance, Marvel publishes comics that function as “preludes” to MCU films (e.g. Thor: The Dark World Prelude); they include short films on home-video releases that tell narratives peripheral to the features (e.g. Hail to the King, an Iron Man 3 spin-off included on The Dark World’s Blu-ray); they broadcast weekly television series that allow for weekly engagement with the MCU (e.g. Agents of SHIELD); and they produce additional serialized television series that are released to Netflix (e.g. Daredevil). Marvel Studios thus mobilizes media convergence in complex ways, such that their storyworld cannot be fully understood using the frameworks of adaptation, transmedia storytelling, or even transfictional world building in isolation: indeed, theirs is the ultimate crossover. An analysis of Thor: The Dark World will demonstrate the degree to which Marvel is invested in convergence as a touchstone of their cinematic world-building strategy.

What is the Convergence?

In media studies, convergence is defined as “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want” (Jenkins 2006, 2). In Thor: The Dark World, the same term—albeit with a capital “C”—is used to refer to the moment at which the nine realms align, enabling individuals to travel between worlds or, as the villainous Malekith plots, to destroy the entire universe in one fell swoop. The terminological overlap suggests that the film is thinking through some of the potential consequences of digital convergence, while also articulating Marvel Studios’ approach to world-building within this media environment. According to Nicholas Rombes, this kind of self-reflexivity is a recurring tendency of digital cinema. He writes,

It is paradoxical how completely the tables have turned: for now it is film theory which has become domesticated, safe and predictable, while digital cinema makes possible new and potentially radical ways of storytelling, and introduces interface systems [e.g. DVD] that suggest a form of theory and critique (Rombes 2009, 13).
More concretely, he describes how films like *Scream* and *Bubble* have contributed to the mainstreaming of film theory, with their self-deconstructing narratives and, more broadly speaking, the proliferation of behind-the-scenes footage that attends digital cinema (such as that found on DVDs). *Thor: The Dark World* engages in these same practices, doing for media convergence what *Scream* did for the genre conventions of the slasher film: turning media theory into narrative action.

Since *The Dark World* is less obvious in its appropriation and narrativization of theory than *Scream*, the best way to proceed is to demonstrate how various aspects of media convergence manifest in the film one by one. A logical place to start is with the film’s convergence of science and magic, which is first made explicit in *Thor*: as the eponymous protagonist explains to scientist Jane Foster, “Your ancestors called it magic, but you call it science. I come from a land where they are one and the same.” As a world-building effort, this is necessary in order to expand the physical laws of the MCU as established in previous entries like *Iron Man* and *The Incredible Hulk*, both of which feature scientists that become superheroes through a combination of advanced technology and medical experimentation. Magic doesn’t seem to exist in that world, but the introduction of *Thor* necessitates a reconceptualization of the shared storyworld’s physical laws that are inclusive of magic, or, rather, that understand magic as an advanced form of science. In *The Dark World*, Jane plays an important role as the audience surrogate, travelling to the foreign world of Asgard and attempting to understand their magic in terms of her own scientific knowledge. A brief verbal dispute between her and an Asgardian healer about the designation given to a piece of technology—“Does a ‘soul forge’ transfer molecular energy from one place to another?” she asks—explicitly aligns the magical technology with its Earth equivalent, which Jane identifies as a quantum field generator.

The convergence of science and magic has long been a cornerstone of the superhero genre—Richard Reynolds writes that “the depiction of science as magic is crucial to the way in which the superhero comic mythologizes certain aspects of the society it addresses” (1994, 16)—but it takes on additional significance in a cinematic context. The distinctions between a “scientific” documentary-style approach to filming the world and a “magical” approach to playing with and transforming the world through film were most sharply felt in the wake of cinema’s emergence, the figureheads of each approach being *cinematographe* inventors the Lumière brothers and magician Georges Méliès, respectively. While film historians have devoted considerable efforts to nuancing this simplistic narrative, the science/magic binary has returned with a vengeance in the digital
era. As Laura Mulvey notes using language very relevant to the present discussion, “The convergence between the arts of reality and the arts of deception that brought about the birth of the cinema in 1895 prefigures the convergence between the cinema machine and digital technology” (2006, 34). Digital superhero cinema is an amalgamation of the arts of reality and of deception: the science of the Lumière’s and the magic of Méliès becomes the technology of Iron Man and the magic of Thor, which are ultimately “one and the same” in digital cinema.

This points directly to the MCU’s primary intervention in contemporary Hollywood: the convergence of discrete, character-based franchises into a unified “mega-franchise” first hinted at by Nick Fury after the credits of Iron Man (“You’re part a larger universe, Mr. Stark...”) and later realized in The Avengers. Stork describes the MCU’s franchising strategy thusly:

Per Marvel’s superhero movie logic, character properties in genre fare are to be featured synergistically, as part of a larger franchise experiment within Hollywood. [...] The Avengers is essentially the brand icon of Marvel’s cinematic universe and, as such, the final stage of the company’s endeavor to reframe the aesthetic, economic, and industrial dynamics of the superhero genre. (2014, 78-79)

As a post-Avengers installment in the MCU, Thor: The Dark World makes numerous references to the crossover event, reminding viewers that this is not only a sequel to Thor but to The Avengers as well. Narratively speaking, this occurs quite naturally, since the key characters are all affected by actions that took place in that film: for example, Dr. Selvig has gone insane after being mentally possessed by Loki; Loki is imprisoned on Asgard after his attempt to conquer Earth; Thor is uninterested in ruling Asgard because he feels a responsibility to Earth and the Avengers; Jane punches Loki “for New York”, a reference to The Avengers’ climatic “Battle of New York”; and Loki briefly shapeshifts into Captain America to irritate Thor. This is characteristic of Marvel Studios post-Avengers: similarly, Iron Man 3’s narrative is motivated primarily by the protagonist’s struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder after The Avengers.

As stated earlier, the Convergence is also a key component of the film’s narrative in general: it provides the ticking clock against which all the characters must race, whether to execute the villainous plot or to prevent its success. During the Convergence, the nine realms—Asgard, Earth/Midgard, and seven others—come into alignment with each other, similary to an eclipse. When this occurs, various physical anomalies occur, including gravitational
irregularities and the random appearance of portals between worlds. As Jane puts it, “The walls between worlds will be almost non-existent. [...] The very fabric of reality is going to be torn apart.” The Convergence isn't something that anybody orchestrates or deliberately brings into being: it is merely something that happens, a natural occurrence whose effects can be taken advantage of for either good or ill. If we read the Convergence as a metaphor for media convergence, it might seem as though the film's conceptualization of media falls into the trap of media theory and history identified by Lisa Gitelman in *Always Already New*: “Naturalizing, essentializing, or ceding agency to media is something that happens at a lexical level every time anyone says ‘the media' in English, as if media were a unified natural entity, like the wind” (2006, 2). *The Dark World’s* Convergence can be understood in precisely these terms, but the Aether is the film's analogue for media, insofar as it is what must be harnessed and deployed during the Convergence in order to produce the desired effects. Media and convergence aren't the same thing: convergence is a state of affairs that has come into being because of overlapping technologies and particular audience practices, while what we choose to do with media within that environment is a matter of individual, collective, or corporate agency.

If there is a commentary on convergence to be found in *Thor: The Dark World*, however, it surely lies in one particular consequence of the Convergence: the ability to travel between worlds. While travelling between media is properly the domain of transmedia storytelling, travelling between storyworlds is something that is done primarily by transfictional characters, of which Thor is a prime example. Thus, perhaps the film has something to say regarding Marvel Studios' preferred strategy for executing such transfictional leaps. In the film, the Convergence doesn't merely facilitate movement between worlds, but erases the walls that separate and distinguish them from one another. This Alignment of worlds is not a “good” or “bad” thing on its own—both Heimdall and Dr. Selvig call it “beautiful”—but this erasure of distinctions between worlds is represented as something that can have dire consequences. By extension, media convergence is portrayed as something with great potential—especially for viewers, which is the subject position from which Heimdall speaks of the Convergence's beauty—but that also needs to be tightly controlled.

Derek Johnson has argued that the successful transmedial marketing of comic book characters requires “the elimination of difference between the comic and audiovisual versions of its character properties” (2007, 67). For MCU films, however, this couldn't be further from the case. Indeed, in order to remain comprehensible, transfictional characters like Thor
and the storyworlds they inhabit need to remain clearly distinct from other competing versions and worlds. The tendency toward transmedia narratives in convergence culture can make the boundaries between these multiple storyworlds unclear, but transfictionality depends upon the continued existence rather than erasure of those boundaries. Moreover, the hypothesizing, close watching (and re-watching), and communal knowledge sharing discussed earlier as cornerstones of the MCU’s serialized narrative strategy are facilitated by these boundaries; without them, the MCU becomes another exercise in adaptation or transmedia storytelling, or risks requiring a chalkboard full of complicated diagrams, connections, and flow charts—such as that devised by Selvig in this film—in order to follow its narrative.

Indeed, this chalkboard directly parodies what the MCU could become if its storyworld were to align with Marvel Comics. This is signalled explicitly by the appearance of the words “616-universe” on the chalkboard, which refers specifically to the primary storyworld (known as “Earth-616”) within which most Marvel Comics take place. While the chalkboard—like MCU films in general—is replete with “insider” references that fans seek out and assign meaning to, this reference stands out because it refers not to the diegetic content of Marvel Comics but rather to the storyworld of the comics as a whole. For this reason, it doesn’t call on viewers to hypothesize about the future direction of the narrative but rather to reflect on the relationship
between these two distinct storyworlds. In this context, the implication seems clear enough: *The Dark World* equates the convergence of these two storyworlds with the destruction of the nine realms, which is precisely the fate that the transfictional hero fights to prevent.

**Easter Eggs, Home Viewing, and a Superhero Cinema of Complexity**

The “insider” references found on the aforementioned chalkboard are examples of “Easter eggs”: small details hidden within a text for the purpose of being found by eagle-eyed viewers. Easter eggs are “usually associated with video games” (Nooney 2014, 165), though they can also be found on DVDs, leading to hidden bonus features “to which those less ambitious or less familiar with computer gaming will not be privy” (Klinger 2006, 79-80). There’s also precedent for discussing messages hidden within the text itself—like the scrawling on Selvig’s chalkboard—as Easter eggs. Referring specifically to this type, Ross Hockrow instructs filmmakers that “Easter eggs make your film more valuable. Call them gifts that keep on giving—and reward repeat viewers with them” (2013, 99). Digital filmmaking and home-viewing seems to have encouraged filmmakers to increasingly insert such messages into their films, resulting in what Graeme Harper has dubbed the “cinema of complexity”, a defining feature of which is the necessity of repeat viewings:

Whereas to watch a film more than once was, in the past, mostly the domain of cult-film fandom, or was merely repetitive, DVD introduced the idea that traditional mono-directional, or sequential, cinema was just one component of the moving-image experience, and that repeat watching was not only acceptable but was almost required. Rather than a film having one life it might, in fact, have many. (Harper 2005, 97)

Though sales of DVD and Blu-ray are on a seemingly irreversible downward trajectory since the wide-scale adoption of streaming services like Netflix, Marvel Studios’ use of home video continues to fit the model outlined by Harper in 2005. More specifically, *The Dark World*’s Blu-ray encourages viewers to conceive of the MCU as a discrete and unified storyworld, separate (though related) to that of the Marvel Comics. In short, the strategies that define Marvel’s approach to filmmaking are also evident in their films’ post-theatrical afterlives.
Jonathan Gray writes that “paratexts are not simply add-ons, spinoffs, and also-rans: they create texts, they manage them, and they fill them with many of the meanings that we associate with them” (Gray 2010, 6). DVDs are an excellent case study for this phenomenon, insofar as they include the film itself but with the “added value” of additional material, including scenes deleted from the final cut, documentaries about how the film’s production, commentaries that allow filmmakers to address viewers directly, and so on. All of this material can contribute to the viewer’s understanding of a film; indeed, many have written about the power of DVD supplemental material to influence audiences’ understanding of films, emphasizing a desired interpretation while closing off others. How Marvel Studios’ films like Thor: The Dark World are packaged for home consumption can thus provide some insight on how the company wants their films to be understood. Gray claims that “DVDs fully illustrate how multimedia corporations can employ networks of paratextuality to brand their products and increase the salience and depth of their meanings across the synergistic spectrum” (2010, 102). In the case of Thor: The Dark World, the Blu-ray largely serves to reinforce the scope of the MCU, positioning the film itself as a single episode in a much larger story.

When a viewer puts Thor: The Dark World into his/her Blu-ray player, she must first select her preferred language (for the menu options). Once this simple action has been completed, the animated Marvel Studios logo and fanfare plays automatically, contextualizing everything to follow as a product of Marvel Studios. After this, two advertisements play automatically: first is the theatrical trailer for Captain America: The Winter Soldier, which follows The Dark World in the MCU chronology; second is a promo for “Phase One” of Marvel Studios’ cinematic output, which begins with Iron Man and culminates in The Avengers. The latter ad emphasizes the positive critical reception of each film and the “unprecedented” risk of crossing over multiple franchises, establishing Marvel Studios as a purveyor of high quality and ambitious entertainment. Thus, before the viewer has even had the opportunity to press play, she has already been given a primer on The Dark World’s place within a larger serialized narrative, an opportunity to reflect on the groundbreaking nature of Marvel’s world-building experiment, and a tease for its imminent next installment. These paratexts make it impossible for a viewer armed with this Blu-ray to approach the film as a self-contained narrative.

The selection of bonus material offered on the disc further emphasizes the interconnectedness of the MCU. The primary bonus feature is a short film titled All Hail the King that functions as a sequel to Iron Man 3. The
short elaborates on the events of that film, connecting the red herring “Mandarin” of *Iron Man 3* to the Ten Rings initially mentioned in *Iron Man* and teasing the existence of a Mandarin that would more closely resemble the original comic book version. The short thus backtracks to some extent on *Iron Man 3*’s refutation of the comics’ Mandarin in a way that encourages fans to anticipate a (potential) future appearance by the villain in the MCU. The disc also features an “exclusive look” at the then-upcoming *Winter Soldier*. Though these features relate more directly to Iron Man and Captain America than Thor, their presence on *The Dark World* home-video release functions to place the film in its chronological place after *Iron Man 3* and before *The Winter Soldier* in the larger MCU narrative.

Other features are more typical of a Hollywood blockbuster home-video release, including a short gag reel, deleted scenes, music featurette, a cast and crew audio commentary, and a 30-minute documentary about the relationship between Thor and his antagonist brother Loki. What’s surprising about these, however, is the lack of attention given to the film’s comic book roots. Aside from a small handful of references to superficial visual similarities between certain characters and their comic book versions, the focus is entirely on the cinematic universe as a discrete entity. When the comic book references contained in the film are unpacked, a transfictional stance is proposed. In the audio commentary, for instance, producer Kevin Feige explains what Marvel hopes to achieve in the scenes they hide after the credits in each of their films:

The best of the Marvel tags, for us, can do two things: it can tie up loose ends from the movie you’ve just watched, and it can set up something to come in the Marvel mythology [...] So people who know who Nick Fury is [in the comics] can get excited [at the end of *Iron Man*] but people who have no idea who he was but knew who Sam Jackson was would be curious and would want to know. In the same way we hope some people will know this is the Collector [in the post-credits tag in *Thor: The Dark World*], most people will simply know it’s Benicio Del Toro and do “What the heck is this, and where the heck is he?” and be curious enough to seek out those answers.

This search for knowledge first leads viewers to Marvel Comics; as described earlier, the gap between serialized releases forces curious viewers to hypothesize about future MCU releases based primarily on knowledge of its complementary storyworld. Only later, after *Guardians of the Galaxy*
is released, can viewers test those hypotheses against the film itself. Of course, that film will then provide more tantalizing hints about future possibilities in the MCU and the cycle of serialization repeats ad infinitum.

Today’s convergences—between analog and digital technologies across the entire contemporary media landscape—inform not only the conditions of production, marketing, and distribution of superhero blockbusters but, at least in the case of Thor: The Dark World, but their narratives as well. Marvel Studios has achieved unprecedented commercial success by connecting their franchises in a long-form serialized narrative that plays out within a single coherent storyworld. In this regard, Thor: The Dark World is merely emblematic of Marvel Studios’ output, another cog in its increasingly complex narrative machine; what makes it unique and valuable as a case study is its self-reflexivity regarding the role of media convergence in franchised storytelling. Though the conceptual frameworks of adaptation and transmedia storytelling continue to inform how audiences and critics overwhelmingly conceive of such works,9 transfictionality and the concept of complementary storyworlds are both more accurate and more useful in describing and understanding the relationships between the worlds of contemporary superhero films and their comic book counterparts and the ways in which audiences navigate them.

Notes

1. The influence of the MCU on other film studios, however, may render its uniqueness short-lived. Film blogs and trade publications regularly report on various studios’ attempts to transform their existing properties into “shared universes”, including Universal’s bid for a “Monster-verse” (beginning with Dracula Untold).

2. See: Roberta Pearson’s chapter in this volume, which fleshes out Saint-Gelais’ example of Sherlock Holmes.

3. In her contribution to this volume, Marie-Laure Ryan associates transfictionality with the expansion of a single storyworld through additional texts (e.g. adaptations, sequels, and the like). In my case study, however, the character rather than the storyworld acts as the central organizing principle connecting separate storyworlds through a transfictional relation.

4. These Netflix series follow the model of franchise convergence previously established by the MCU: four individual series will introduce the characters separately, followed by a fifth series in which they team up, Avengers-style. These will also be released between 2015 and 2020. See: http://deadline.com/2013/11/disney-netflix-marvel-series-629696/ (accessed 29 January 2015).
5. For instance, as of this writing, the Thor of the Marvel Comics Universe is a woman, which is easily distinct from the MCU version and totally contrary to the process of homogenization across different media described by Johnson. See: http://marvel.com/news/comics/22875/marvel_proudly_pre-sents_thor (accessed 5 August 2015).

6. The other key references here are to “The Fault” and “The Crossroads”, which hint at comics characters forthcoming to the MCU (namely Doctor Strange and the Inhumans).

7. Brookey and Westerfelhaus’s article about the Fight Club DVD’s seeming attempt to discourage queer readings of the film is emblematic of this trend.

8. Transcription from the Blu-ray’s audio commentary.

9. For instance, in the Afterword to the essay collection Superhero Synergies, Andreas Raucher writes that recent superhero movies like The Avengers take part in “media convergence, creating synergies like transmedia storytelling and concepts of world building that result in the adaptation of comic book narratives into story and game worlds across a variety of media channels” (2014, 239).

Works Cited


Media Cited


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