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Lectio praecursoria:

Imaginative, Immersive and Interactive Engagements.
The Rhetoric of Worldbuilding in Contemporary Speculative Fiction

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Hanna-Riikka Roine (PhD in spe) defended her doctoral dissertation Imaginative, Immersive and Interactive Engagements. The Rhetoric of Worldbuilding in Contemporary Speculative Fiction on the 27th of August 2016. This essay is a slightly edited version of the lectio praecursoria given by Roine before the defense. The dissertation has been published in the Acta Electronica Universitatis Tampereensis 1695 series (Tampere University Press 2016, ISBN 978-952-03-0195-8, ISSN 1456-954X): <https://tampub.uta.fi/handle/10024/99583>.

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I

Speculation. It is a process of contemplating and considering a subject or an idea. Although it is often seen as an endeavour directed towards the future or the unknown frontiers, it is also a matter of exposing something from the present, of adopting a different perspective to something familiar, of making things appear by introducing a new context. It can be about anything, say cats or gender.

As a form of bringing ideas up for discussion, speculation has everything to do with the relevance and appeal of fiction. It is usually thought to follow the model of a situation where someone asks someone else for a purpose to engage in a thought experiment, beginning with structures like “imagine if”, “what if” and so forth. Imagine if gender was defined in non-binary terms, as it is in Ursula K. Le Guin’s classic *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). What if cats spoke in a language like ours – as they do to one of the characters in Haruki Murakami’s *Kafka on the Shore* (2005). Such speculations are deemed central to the genres of science fiction and fantasy and connected with their ability to challenge us with abstract ideas and questions. However, they have not always been connected with worldbuilding.

Speculative fiction has been described to “translate ideas into worlds” (Philip K. Dick, qtd. in Ryan 24). The true power of speculative fiction therefore does not simply lie in the invention of a speculative premise or beings, but in the way they are worked through. I introduce speculative worldbuilding as a rhetorical and communicative practice, where the abstract and remote ideas are brought to the domain of the concrete and possible.

By and large, the relevance of any good work of fiction can be summarised as expanding our capacity for understanding ourselves, each other, and the world. However, in treatises of speculative fiction, the experiences of worldness or imagined places are rightly seen central to the genre. An ontologically oriented analysis might suggest that the appeal of speculative fiction lies in “creating” and exploring an imagined world. This is a feature captured by J.R.R. Tolkien in his seminal essay “On Fairy-Stories”: the desire of fantasy to both make and glimpse Other-worlds (135). The more cognitively informed theory might emphasise “making sense” of the strange worlds and see the relocation inside them as a necessary by-product of the sense-making process.

In my point of view, speculative, fictional worldbuilding is a double-layered process. This approach resembles science fiction scholar Darko Suvin’s classic theory on the co-presence of cognition and estrangement, which allows science fiction “both relevance to our world and the position to challenge the ordinary, the taken-for-granted” (8–9). What I would like to emphasise is that fictional domains, which are often taken to be distant from our experience of mundane reality, are actually in a deep dialogue with the *userly engagement* taking place in the here and now.

Speculative fiction invites its users to engage with the worlds imaginatively, but also enables them to recognise the artificiality of these worlds, to reflect on the fact that they are real-world constructions made for a purpose. Consider the summer television hit, *Stranger Things* (2016): its homage to the works of Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, Stephen King and the like makes its constructed nature obvious, but at the same time, it enables and guides our imaginative engagement in a meaningful way.

II

In my doctoral dissertation, which engages with multiple media from literary fiction to digital games, audio-visual media and fanfiction writing, I tie together our mundane actions and interactions and the speculative experiments. The users both imagine the world along with its particulars and possibilities and reflect on their engagement with an artistic object (cf. Polvinen). Speculative fiction, which engages the users with a model of reality that is in some sense systematically different from our own (see McHale 26), often makes us pay attention to its constructed nature. This is illustrated in the ease by which role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* “liberated” classic elements (such as orcs) of Tolkien’s works for a larger use, or the way in which elements like the Starship *Enterprise* can “evolve” within transmedial franchises.

The analysis of speculative fiction must, therefore, consider the paradox of both/and: the worlds *both* exist *and* do not exist at the same time. The abstract and remote meet the domain of concrete and mundane, both in the sense of a work in its materiality and in the sense of a particular way a general idea is worked through. This way, the omnitemporal theory of quantum mechanics can be harnessed to form the principles of specific societies (like in Hannu Rajaniemi’s novel *The Causal Angel*), or the boundaries between human and non-human be captured in the actual performance of ambivalent characters (like in the digital role-playing game *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*).

From the viewpoint of rhetoric, another relevant relationship lies between representations of “what is” in a world and imagining “what might be” – or “what can never be” – in a world. Such considerations enable us to discuss the relationship between the shared, material nature of fiction and our imaginations. They can also alert us to various cultural, social and otherwise created boundaries along with the ways they are both reasserted and transgressed. My take on rhetoric is an amalgam of two approaches: my concern is with communication, and with ways of emphasising ideas and engaging the users in working them out.

Although I use the single term – users – to refer to readers, players, viewers and fans, I do not mean to imply that our experiences of various media are similar in all different cases. When it

comes to fanfiction, for example, the shared experience of being a fan while both reading and writing is crucial (see Roine, “What is it that Fanfiction Opposes”). For their part, games can effectively make use of the rhetoric of failure, which basically means the ability to make claims about how things do not work: no matter how hard the player tries to make things right, the attempts are either doomed to fail or the player has to give up some of her ideals, for example. Jesper Juul (113) has further suggested that failure in games is connected with the experience of *complicity*, a type of experience unique to games, stronger and more personal than simply witnessing a fictional character performing the same actions. For example, in *Mass Effect 3*, the final instalment of the digital role-playing trilogy, the player has to make various thorny decisions despite acting in the heroic role of the playable character, Commander Shepard (see Roine, “How You Emerge from This Game”).

As a term, user is designed to focus on the *agency* of readers, players, viewers and fans of speculative fiction. In the field of science fiction, in particular, users often take part in the discussion about the aesthetics and the poetics of the genre. Farah Mendlesohn (1) has noted that science fictional texts are often written by people who are active critics, and that the texts can also be produced by the same fan base that supports the market. The approach emphasising the userly engagement is especially important in the frame of digital media, where we are positioned as the users of various resources. We explore, navigate, and concretely *use* those resources.

Taking such features into account is still relatively strange for the research on fiction. However, they point out that the recognition of elements used in world-construction and the experience of imaginatively immersing into the worlds are not incompatible. Furthermore, they bring out the fact that the roles of user and author, or critic and fan, are becoming more and more intertwined in contemporary culture. The rise of digital media has also considerably changed these roles. For example, this autumn’s novelty, *No Man’s Sky* (2016) is based on a practically infinite, procedurally created galaxy which gets generated in front of the player’s eyes.

III

Theoretically, my dissertation attests to the benefits of creating a dialogue between speculative fiction and narratology. Worldbuilding has been neglected as a communicative and rhetorical practice partly because the preferences of critics ultimately turn the concepts from neutral tools into instruments of aesthetic judgements. In general, the objects of study inevitably refine the theory. The concept of world, for example, usually instantiates a very specific kind of worldness found in literary mainstream. Worldbuilding is a transmedially available and realisable part of the aesthetics of the speculative fiction genre. Through the analysis of the forms and uses of speculative worldbuilding, it is therefore possible to widen our understanding of what fiction in general is about and what its appeal may be.

Speculative worldbuilding is unique in the way that it enables the different uses or aspects of imagination to come together. Worldbuilding in speculative fiction not only engages the user in imagining fictional characters, events and such, but also in a more “rational” process of making comparisons between actual outcomes and possible events. However, in its distinctly fictional form, it enables the usage of double perspective, where a rather different sense of familiar and strange are employed.

The dynamics between concrete and abstract and between what is and what could be are once again highlighted. The contemporary logic of using ready-made, shared elements and pieces in order to engage us with imagining new installments is embodied both in transmedia franchises and fanfiction writing. Imagining something as *otherwise* is important for speculative fiction in general: consider my two first examples, cats and gender. However, fanfiction makes use of the shared understanding of what there is in a world along with the shared strategy of imagining what there

could or might be. The ruling question is rather “why not?” than “what if?” An illustrative example is Eliezer Yudkowsky’s (under the pen name Less Wrong) popular fic “Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality”, which modifies the original story in order to explain Harry’s wizardry through the scientific method.

The rhetorical potential of speculative worldbuilding lies in this doubled nature which both engages the users to imagine alternatives and possibilities and hands them tools to consciously reflect on the ways they do this. This potential is dismissed in the approaches which discuss worlds simply as models of physical places, or paint the picture of fiction as a dry run of real-life skills and actions. The interplay that we should pay attention to is not the one that is between “real world” and “imagined world”, but between “what is” and “why that is” or “how it might be otherwise”.

Speculative worldbuilding can, therefore, engage us with imaginings of what is not, but also discuss the ways we maintain our understanding of what is. As a practice, it is capable of seizing both the readily mutable aspects of “what is” – such as characters, events, actions and consequences – and the more general model our understanding of “what is” is based on. In this, speculative fiction does not so much estrange us from the mundane world or from our actual experience of it, but from the ways we build sense into it.

The possibility to recognise and reflect on the ways the alternatives are imagined contributes to the emergence of critical and active users. The understanding of what there is and what there could be can actively be taken into the users’ own hands. Various fan theories on the possible future developments of their favourite franchises provide a popular example: such as the rather well-known theory on *A Song of Ice and Fire* character Jon Snow’s true parentage along with the fanfiction and art based on the theory (see Pallotta). Fans can, therefore, use worldbuilding as a communicative and rhetorical practice too, but typically they use it for rather different purposes than authors or designers have done.

IV

One of the contemporary phenomena that concerns speculative worldbuilding across media is that of franchised entertainment. The rapid proliferation of the large environments which have been called, among other things, transmedial worlds (see Klastrup and Tosca), is often seen as economically motivated. At the moment, the Walt Disney Company more or less dominates the entertainment industry. It has chosen to put films such as *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015) back at the heart of its business. From this standpoint, the decision of making a female character Rey the protagonist in *The Force Awakens* is basically a strategy to target girls as well as boys with the advertising (see *The Economist* 27). Judging by the numbers of little girls dressing up as their favourite character, Rey, (see Flaherty and Rackman), this has proven a very successful strategy indeed.

Although the understanding of the economic logic of franchised worlds is valuable, they should also be recognised to be among the new contexts in which the paradox of both/and has appeared during the past decade. They are also part of the progression where digital media has significantly changed the ways the audiences engage with works of fiction. Rather than explicitly promoting the realms of fiction and mundane as something separate, the process of change in the conventions of storytelling illustrate the way these realms have begun to intermingle even further, despite the fact that they have never been strictly separate.

Augmented reality games like extremely popular *Pokémon GO* (2016) have once again intensified the discussions of whether our “own reality” is not enough and whether the players of games like these lose their touch with the “real world”. Such concerns are not new for anyone interested in speculative fiction: why would you escape from reality, are you afraid of it? Why don’t you concern yourselves with the real problems?

My dissertation suggests that speculative fiction is not about turning away from reality, but a way of engaging with it and discussing it. The stereotype of a reclusive fan does not correspond to reality: the rise of digital media has made the active invocation of worldbuilding and the use of its rhetorical affordances more available than ever before. The contemporary transmedial environment is based on conversation, and as a practice of communicating ideas by means of representational artefacts, worldbuilding provides us with an analytical tool to discuss this environment.

Speculative fiction is fundamentally about ideas, and engaging ourselves in the working through of a variety of such ideas can be both an enjoyable and a revolutionary practice. Speculative fiction not only makes it possible to entertain different ideas and to get our minds around something intangible, but also to share our experiences of our encounters with both the familiar and the strange. It does not simply carry us away from reality, but allows us to discuss and wonder about it as it is.

Speculative fiction may, therefore, affect our understanding of what is, but this is only one side of the coin. On the other side lies that which we cannot understand, and speculative fiction is constantly reminding us that the other side is actually much larger than the fraction of reality we know.

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