

Defining Participatory Worlds: Canonical Expansion of Fictional Worlds through Audience Participation

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Abstract

'Participatory culture' is a concept which gives consumers an active role in the production and design of commodities and content. Companies embracing user co-creation practices enable consumers to become contributors and producers of the products and services they care about. However, the approach taken by entertainment industries, IP owners of the most popular and beloved fictional worlds, generally gives little room for user involvement in the development and production of their entertainment franchises. These franchised worlds commonly become transmedia giants through commissioning works to professionals and subsidiary and/or external companies and by issuing brand licenses to third party organisations. Collaboration among these elites makes possible for franchise owners to control the intellectual property while increasing the revenue. Even though user participation might be encouraged to a certain degree, this call generally responds to a marketing strategy to strengthen the sales and the bonds between the company and the fan community. User narrative contributions to these imaginary worlds are merely treated as fan-fiction and are, in many cases, liable to be exploited by their franchise owners.

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Located at the other extreme of the user-agency spectrum, participatory worlds are shared and interactive worlds generally supported by independent ventures which allow and encourage audiences to contribute meaningfully and canonically to their development and expansion. Contributions may be shared in a variety of media modes, genres and formats and through different channels for collaboration and circulation. Similarly, participatory worlds often are spaces where audiences can challenge and divert the original authors' plans about the progress of the storylines and, even, the whole imaginary world. The nature of these spaces commonly goes beyond the 'traditional' notions of authorship, audience and participation advocated by the entertainment industries and the mainstream system of textual production. This paper attempts to give a more accurate definition of participatory worlds and demonstrate how audiences can contribute meaningfully to expand them.

Keywords

Co-creation, participatory culture, participatory worlds, transmedia franchising, audience participation, fictional worlds

As audience members, we experience our favourite fictional worlds through official and unofficial texts. These texts are representations of ideas based on story-worlds (for example designs, merchandising, discussions and fan stories). Some texts are considered official and usually are produced by the world owner and the third parties authorised to monetize the intellectual property (IP), while others are catalogued as unofficial material, commonly coming from works based on worlds already in the public domain and fan-produced texts inspired by copyrighted worlds. The constant supply of new content, official and unofficial, based on a fictional world leads to its expansion. This paper will explore the concept of participatory world, a practice which allows audience members to produce official and canonical content for fictional worlds.

In his book, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*, Mark J. P. Wolf dedicates slightly more than two pages to talking about participatory worlds. He states that “[a] participatory world [...] allows an audience member to participate in the world and its events, and make permanent changes that result in canonical additions to the world” (Wolf 2013: 281). This is one of the few explicit references to participatory worlds in academic literature, a concept that has often been associated with other practices and has neither been properly defined nor delimited. Participatory world is more than a concept, it is a practice and a model of production, which involves the negotiation and co-operation between audience members and producers. Indeed, participatory worlds allow audiences to take part in their development and expansion with contributions which may end in canonical changes and additions to the world. Wolf also suggests that role playing games and virtual environments are suitable scenarios for hosting participatory worlds (Wolf 2013). However, this paper will demonstrate that there are other spaces where they can operate. Although participatory worlds are different from other practices in producing and managing story-worlds, there is no comprehensive research which defines and analyses participatory worlds that can be used for this purpose.

Therefore, it seems necessary to determine what defines a participatory world. This is precisely the aim of this paper. The article attempts to build a foundation for future research by shedding some light on what participatory worlds are and are not in relation to some of the existing practices, and to show how audiences can contribute to the expansion of the worlds in some of these projects.

Wolf's definition outlines three key characteristics about participatory worlds: audience participation, world expansion and canonical contributions. The simultaneous use of these three characteristics makes participatory worlds different from other creative practices. First, in participatory worlds, participation is enabled through defined and enduring channels available to the world's audience for making contributions. These channels for participation allow audience members who wish to participate to submit their contributions to the producers/world owners for consideration. Second, world expansion refers to the enhancement of the story-world with new contributions. This paper mainly focuses on narrative fictional contributions since it is assumed that they demonstrate more clearly their impact in the expansion of the diegetic world. Third, when a contribution has reached canonical status, this means that it has been validated by the world owner to be part of the official narrative and world features. This effectively implies that to keep the coherence of the world participants would have to keep in mind the new canonical elements and events in future contributions.

This paper explores these three key elements to draw differences and similarities with other existing practices. The first section addresses audience participation. It identifies participatory worlds as a subset of interactive worlds and compares them with other collaborative projects, such as the 'networked book' *A Million Penguins* (2007) and the crowdsourced documentary film *Life in a Day* (2011). The next section centres on world expansion. It defines participatory worlds as shared worlds and shows how they can be expanded through audience participation. The third section focuses on canonicity and the distinction between participatory worlds and fan fiction. Each section discusses examples of two case studies, *Grantville Gazette* (2004a) and *Runes of Gallidon* (2008), in order to explain how the three aforementioned key elements operate within these participatory worlds.

Grantville Gazette is an e-zine rooted in Eric Flint's *1632 Universe*. The story-world, which combines alternative history and time-travel, introduces the US city of Grantville which is transported in time and space to Germany in 1631, into the middle of the Thirty Years war, with no way back. *1632 Universe* comprises several novels, anthologies, short stories, a role-playing game and the *Grantville Gazette*. The *Gazette*, which also has

a few printed issues, publishes stories from fans and established authors, which become part of the story-world canon. It has been running since 2003 and recently released its 69th issue (by January 2017).

Runes of Gallidon (runesofgallidon.com) was an Internet-based project running from 2008-2012, which featured a medieval, human-centric story-world. The project, created by Scott Walker, Tony Graham and Andy Underwood, welcomed user contributions produced in any medium and rooted in the world of Gallidon as long as they followed the rules of participation. These rules were basically oriented to secure the suitability and coherence of the proposed content with respect to the story-world, promote respect towards other authors' contributions and avoid any copyright infringement (*Runes of Gallidon* 2009). Contributions were posted on the official website under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike (CC BY-NC-SA) licence.¹

Audience participation

According to the Oxford Dictionary, participation is “the action of taking part in something”.² Audience participation relates to the capacity that audience members have to get involved in a determined activity or practice. In participatory worlds, this is enabled through the use of defined channels for participation. A channel for participation is the route that audience members should follow (including the platform they need to use) in order to submit their contributions. For example, *Grantville Gazette* asks participants to post their submissions on a forum, where other fans can read them and provide some feedback (Flint 2014). Authors are encouraged to use this feedback to improve their works. Subsequent versions of the works would also need to be posted on the forum. *Grantville Gazette* editorial board members will follow the discussions and the changes in the whole pool of unpublished stories posted on the forum, and decide which ones will be included in each monthly issue. The channel for audience participation in the *1632 Universe* is, therefore, associated with *Grantville Gazette* and mainly centres on the official forum.

An important characteristic of channels for participation is that they should be enduringly available for receiving contributions. Consequently, when a story-world presents a one-time opportunity to participate in the

¹ More information about the Creative Commons licences can be found in the official website: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>.

² More information: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/participation>, [accessed 20.01.2017].

world (i.e. a contest as part of a marketing campaign), it should not be considered a participatory world. An example of this is the contest launched by the producers of the TV mini-series *What Lives Inside* (2015), where audiences were invited to design a monster and submit their sketches to the producers prior to the completion of the show by using the official website. The selected ideas were reproduced on the screen, while the channel for participation had closed-down a few months before the show was released (Cicero 2015).³ Similarly, if the audience members cease to get access to a participatory channel in a participatory world, the world should no longer be considered as such.

Another important aspect of participatory worlds is that the opportunities for participation should be available to their audience as a whole. Everyone should be able to become a participant by following the rules for participation, gaining the necessary knowledge to contribute and getting access to the technological requirements.⁴

Besides, participatory worlds can be considered as interactive worlds. Interactive worlds are those which “change the audience member’s role from observer to participant” (Wolf 2013: 138). An audience member can participate in how (s)he experiences the world by making choices or taking actions which will bring tangible results. These choices and actions do not necessarily bring canonical changes to the world and may be pre-defined by the text and/or code beforehand. According to Wolf, “participatory worlds are a subset of interactive worlds, since while all participatory worlds are inherently open and interactive, not all interactive worlds allow the user to make permanent changes to the world, sharing in its authorship” (Wolf 2013: 281). For instance, a game such as a “choose your own adventure” book or a video game gives the player the chance to confront a puzzle in a limited number of ways. If the player chooses A, then the result will be AZ. When choosing B, the outcome will be BZ. Both solutions and outcomes are already pre-defined beforehand by the developers/producers/authors. Therefore, audience members are gener-

³ There are other examples which are mentioned in the next section. All of them have similar differences with respect to participatory worlds.

⁴ Although, theoretically, local practices of story-building and world-building such as role-playing games based on original worlds (for example, a group of friends meeting in a room to play a role-playing game and extend the world’s canon they created with new additions) may be considered as participatory worlds as long as every audience member has the chance to participate in the expansion of the world (this would mean that if the fictional world circulates outside of that room, the external audience would also need to have the chance to participate), it can be certainly said that this aspect (audience participation) places participatory worlds in close relation to the digital age.

ally not authors in the story-world but active participants shaping their own experience (or collaborative experience if performed with others). As Murray states:

authorship in electronic media is procedural. Procedural authorship means writing the rules by which the texts appear as well as writing the texts themselves. It means writing the rules for the interactor's involvement, that is, the conditions under which things will happen in response to the participant's actions (Murray 1997: 152).

This approach may be complicated by the different definitions of the concepts of interactivity and participation. For Manuel Castells, interactivity is "the ability of the user to manipulate and affect his experience of media directly and to communicate with others through media" (Castells 2003: 201). By contrast, Jenkins prefers to associate the technological characteristics with "interactivity" while leaving the social and cultural aspects to "participation":

Interactivity refers to the ways that new technologies have been designed to be more responsive to consumer feedback. One can imagine differing degrees of interactivity enabled by different communication technologies, ranging from television, which allows us only to change the channel, to video games that can allow consumers to act upon the represented world [...]. The constraints on interactivity are technological. In almost every case, what you can do in an interactive environment is prestructured by the designer. Participation, on the other hand, is shaped by the cultural and social protocols [...]. Participation is more open-ended, less under the control of media producers and more under the control of media consumers (Jenkins 2006: 133).

Participatory worlds are interactive worlds because they hold channels for audience participation. Channels for participation are windows for audience members to interact with the world and its elements by enabling them to contribute meaningfully with canonical additions to the story-world. In order to do that, world owners should assign a degree of agency and authority to contributors and open for them channels for participation. As Murray states:

The more realized the immersive environment, the more active we want to be within it. When the things we do bring tangible results, we experience [...] the sense of agency. Agency is the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices (Murray 1997: 126).

According to Hammer, “agency describes the capabilities one has in terms of taking action within a space of possibility” (Hammer 2007: 72). User-agency in participatory worlds relates to the interaction between participants and the rules and channels for participation but also to the possibilities they have to intervene in the diegetic world. Another characteristic is the user-authority, which refers to “the ability to enforce and judge the results of those actions” (Hammer 2007: 72). As Hammer explains, these two concepts are closely related but are different from one another:

One can have agency without authority, which might be the ability to try many things but without any means to impose one’s will if resisted. One can also have authority without agency, lacking the ability to initiate, but able to decide the results of others’ actions” (Hammer 2007: 72-3).

Channels for participation and rules concerning contributions are giving the framework where user-agency is determined. Differently, the authority given to participants is frequently residual. As we will exemplify later, world owners have the last word about which contributions are and are not acceptable for the story-world. Regardless, communities and individuals may influence and even force producers to reverse their decisions in much higher degree than in media franchises. There is a simple reason for that: participatory world owners have a closer relationship with their audience (and may even delegate some power to them) than IP owners of media franchises. However, in some participatory worlds, participants receive a degree of authority regarding their submissions and proposals, being able to decide the final form the contributions should have when published. In both case studies, *Runes of Gallidon* and *Grantville Gazette*, changes to the contribution can be suggested by the producers and other participants but it is the author who has the final word on whether the suggestions would be incorporated to the text.

Allowing audience participation is a characteristic that differentiates participatory worlds from many other fictional worlds. However, there are other creative practices of collaborative production between producers and consumers. For example, “networked books” are closely related to collaborative writing practices. Andrew Dillon states that “if we accept a definition of collaborative writing as the activities involved in the production of a document by more than one author, then pre-draft discussions and arguments as well as post-draft analyses and debate are collaborative components” (Dillon 1993: 84). A “networked book” is “an open book designed to be written, edited and read in a networked environment” (Vershow 2006). Vershow considers *Wikipedia* as the networked book par excellence. Instead of perceiving the networked book as a single online element produced by multiple authors

(for example, the wiki novel *A Million Penguins*) or created by selected professionals and commented on by the readers (such as *The Golden Notebook Project* (2008)), this concept may be approached as a container (an online platform) for many stories to be told. By using this approach, we would understand that many contributions may be stored on the same location as part of the same project, as *Wikipedia* does. *A Million Penguins* was a literary and social experiment developed between the publishing house Penguin and researchers from De Montfort University, which ran between the 1st February and 7th March 2007 and whose main purpose was to create a collaborative wiki novel (Spencer 2011: 50). Anyone interested could register and contribute to the “networked book” by adding, removing or modifying the content. According to Spencer, “the perception of open collaboration caused chaos [...]. With a degree of textual freedom for everyone, the archived wiki novel, its text divided into several strands, is almost nonsensical” (2011: 51-2). The constant friction for the control of the narrative among the participants and the editors was recorded in the form of tracked edits. Precisely these documented social interactions become part of the narrative. As Spencer notices: “the networked book is a form of social text and these interactions between authors are of value. In many ways, the process of its creation is equally as important as the archived novel” (2011: 52). That collaborative text may build or be based on a fictional world, which is shaped by the user contributions. Transposing this example to participatory worlds, it may be perceived that the official website of *Runes of Gallidon*, where all contributions are published, acted as the online container for different stories. Every contribution was added to the existing content of the website and, therefore, this would expand the story-world. This approach would not be applicable to *Grantville Gazette*, since the *1632 universe* is being expanded by different media and platforms (i.e. novels, anthologies, an e-zine and a role-playing game). Spencer argues that “[t]he networked book becomes a book about dialogue as the annotations that surround the book in its networked environment becomes part of the book and can be read as part of its text” (Spencer 2011: 15). Both *Runes of Gallidon* and *Grantville Gazette* host online spaces for debate and discussion in the shape of forums. Particularly, the latter has an active forum where feedback can be received from other community members. However, these comments and discussions cannot be read alongside the published content. Although they keep some similarities, networked books and participatory worlds are different creative practices.

“Networked books” focus more on the activity of producing a text collaboratively than the collective expansion of an IP. Currently, they are more social and creative experiments than practices to share and expand story-worlds. A similar case is the crowdsourced film *Life in a Day*. The movie

is a remix of videos recorded on a specific day, 24th July 2010, by thousands of participants who sent their contributions via YouTube as a response to an open call from the producers. The director, Kevin Macdonald, stated that some cameras were sent to least developed countries in order to reach a broader view about the world. He estimated that 75% of the total contributions were submitted via Youtube.com (Dodes 2011). The producers reviewed and selected excerpts from more than 80,000 submissions to compose a 95-minutes film.⁵ It can be questioned if the participants would qualify as audience members when they submitted their contributions before the movie was even in post-production.⁶ Participants become collaborators, as it could be with any other member of the crew, before being part of the audience. More interestingly, this raises the question as to whether a single collaborative work would present an example of world expansion or world sharing. These expressions are more related to world-building than world sharing since, as it will be explained later, participatory worlds are formed by multiple works from multiple authors.

World expansion

This section addresses the production of official content towards the expansion of story-worlds. As one of the key characteristics of participatory worlds, audience members can expand the worlds with canonical contributions. This approach mainly takes into consideration the production of narrative fictional content submitted by audience members through the channels for participation since they show in a more explicit manner how user contributions serve to expand a story-world. Other types of contributions such as technical input, user feedback and the circulation of content may help to improve the rules of participation, consumer experience, popularity and sales, but it will be more complicated to determine their impact on the expansion of the diegetic world.

Generally, entertainment industries are quite reluctant to allow audiences to participate in the creation of content for their story-worlds and only

⁵ Although it may be argued that this movie does not represent a fictional world, the example has been chosen for its popularity and with the aim of examining the practice, more than the project. Other fictional works made in collaboration between producers and potential consumers are Paul Verhoeven's film *Tricked* (2012) and David R. Ellis' movie *Snakes on a Plane* (2006).

⁶ It can be argued that contributors are not audience members since, in the moment when the collaboration took place, the work had not been completed. In this case, it may be better to talk about intended or prospective audience. The term "user" would only apply to the first example, *A Million Penguins*. For being a user or an audience member it is understood that a system, product or world should be in place.

practices like “modding”⁷ and beta testing are being considered by software and game developers. Customer feedback has been adopted by all industries as a practice to add value to their commodities and services. Customer reviews, social media, viral marketing campaigns and brand communities have been used to promote sales and test ideas. However, the industry has closed the door to user-contributions to develop and expand their franchises. Audience members’ fictional narrative contributions are considered fan-fiction. One of the main reason for this approach is the determination of entertainment industries to keep the full control over their IPs in order to profit from the same idea over and over again. The need to “grow” in order to maximise the revenue while restricting the risk has been made more visible since the 80’s and 90’s with the shift from a synergetic model of exploitation of the IP resources to the franchising model (Johnson 2013). Media franchising consists in opening the IP to third parties or, how Johnson describes it:

Franchising occurs where creative resources are exchanged across contexts of production, where sequels, spin-offs, and tie-ins ask multiple production communities to work in successive or parallel relation to one another. This makes franchising better conceived in the terms of world-sharing than world-building (Johnson 2013: 109).

Therefore, “franchised worlds” are shared worlds because the IP owner and/or creator shares the world with other authors with the purpose of generating more extensions⁸ and bringing more revenue to the franchise. World sharing helps world owners to create extensions to the fictional world more effectively by generating multiple sources of production and distribution of content. Media conglomerates do not allow audiences to participate but remain open to cooperation with selected professionals, companies or licensees who will share a common story-world, brand and/or trademark. In this context and broadly speaking, three general approaches can be mentioned, which

⁷ In computer science, ‘modding’ refers to a user’s practice consisting in making modifications to software and/or hardware.

⁸ Jenkins explains the concepts of “extension”, “synergy” and “franchise” by saying: “Industry insiders use the term »extension« to refer to their efforts to expand the potential markets by moving content across different delivery systems, »synergy« to refer to the economic opportunities represented by their ability to own and control all of those manifestations, and »franchise« to refer to their coordinated effort to brand and market fictional content under these new conditions” (Jenkins 2006: 19). When referring to participatory worlds, in this article, “extension” is used to refer to the official texts, created by the audience and the producers, which are produced to expand the story world.

may be combined to share a world with other participants (Blázquez 2016): (1) Authors who share the world with other selected authors – a model that, sometimes, implies a more informal and looser control over the IP, for example in *Thieves' World* and *Cthulhu Mythos*; (2) IP-owners who share the world with authors, licensees and companies, working within (synergy) and without the company boundaries (the model used by media franchises such as *Marvel Universe* and *Star Wars*); and (3) world owners who also share the world with the audience (participatory worlds i.e. *Grantville Gazette* and *Runes of Gallidon*). Since shared story-worlds are fictional worlds shared by a number of authors, we consider participatory worlds a subset of them: “[m] any worlds are shared worlds, built from the work of multiple contributors; so such worlds can be said to be participatory at least in one sense” (Wolf 2013: 281).⁹

The way that audiences can expand the participatory worlds with their contributions differs from one project to another. The stories published in *Grantville Gazette* expand the *1632 Universe* since they are added to the story-world canon. “Publishable” contributions are limited to written texts that follow the rules of participation. Once a story is selected for publication, authors are required to accept a purchase agreement. They retain the copyright of their works while granting *Grantville Gazette* the exclusive world rights for five years following publication and subsequent nonexclusive world rights. Both the copyright protection and the rules of participation may work as a barrier to interconnecting stories and characters since most published contributions expand the *1632 Universe* by focusing on minor events. Participants should book one or more *Grantville* characters (those who were transported in time and space from the contemporary USA to the 17th-century Germany) from a list of available characters, called “the grid”, so they can use them on their stories (Flint 2014). “The grid” is a resource available for contributors, a spreadsheet that specifies the main details of every *Grantville*

⁹ Some shared worlds are interactive worlds. Likewise, some interactive worlds are shared worlds. A game, a typical example of interactivity, can present a world produced by a single “author” (e.g. the card game *Citadels* (2000) by Bruno Faidutti) but also can present a world shared among different “authors” (e.g. *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974)). In the first example, the IP owner did not share the world with other authors. In the second example, the current IP owner, Hasbro via Wizards of the Coast, has built a media franchise allowing selected authors to create more products rooted in the universe. Similarly, shared worlds may be or may not be interactive. For example, *Thieves' World* (1979) is based on a story-world shared by several authors but the audience are simple readers who cannot participate in how they experience the world. In contrast, *Silent Hill* (1997) has also been shared with other authors and audiences can have an interactive experience of the world when playing the video game. However, none of these examples are participatory worlds, which are both, shared worlds and interactive worlds.

citizen who was transported to the Old Europe.¹⁰ If a participant wants to use a character booked or created by another contributor, (s)he must request permission. Perhaps this system has promoted the creation of isolated stories rooted in the story-world. Although some main events depicted in the novels may be used as a broad narrative context, the stories published in the *Gazette* are generally loosely connected with each other, describing unrelated events ranging from love stories between Grantville citizens and locals to the introduction of contemporary technology into the 17th century culture. When stories are strongly intertwined, this is usually because the same participant is behind the contributions.

In contrast, *Runes of Gallidon* used a system which encouraged participants, called “artisans”, to fill gaps between different stories, depict characters, places and objects, and reuse other authors’ characters and objects to create new contributions. Contributions ranged from illustrations and comics to short stories and novellas and each of them acted as an extension of the fictional world. All approved contributions were posted on the official website, but before that the participants were contacted to request their acceptance of the “Artisan Agreement”. The “Artisan Agreement” was a publishing agreement where the author allowed the world owner to publish and profit from the author’s work, but also enabled other participants to reuse the ideas presented in the text.¹¹ This model revolved around the differentiation between works and ideas. According to the “Artisan Quick Guide”:

works are complete projects: images, stories, etc. Your accepted submission is a work. You own the work you create. Ideas are elements within a work: a place, character, creature, sword, magic ring, ship, etc. The *Runes of Gallidon* creative community shares ideas (Runes of Gallidon NDa: 2).

On the one hand, works were protected under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike licence (CC BY-NC-SA), which allows everyone to copy, redistribute, remix, transform and build upon the material by using the same licence as the original, provided that the material is used for non-commercial purposes and the original author is given an appropriate attribution. On the other hand, the “Artisan Agreement” stated that ideas (fictional elements within the works) could be reused by other artisans, even for commercial purposes, to create new works (Runes of Gallidon NDb).

¹⁰ “The grid’ can be downloaded from this link: <http://1632.org/1632tech/grid.html> [accessed: 28.07.2019].

¹¹ The “Artisan Agreement” can be found here: <http://runesofgallidon.com/artisanagreement> [accessed: 20.01.2017].

Runes of Gallidon shared revenues with the contributors but also encouraged participants to seek alternative ways to profit from their works. By doing so, authors only needed to give a small percentage of the transaction to the project. Through this model, *Runes of Gallidon*'s world owner tried to encourage participants to create extensions more interconnected with each other since participants would not need to request permission to use ideas from other contributors. However, the outcome was quite different because most of the published contributions presented unrelated events. Both case studies suggest that the world expansion produced as a result of the audience's direct participation in the creation of stories tends to be formed by dispersed texts more than strongly connected storylines. Therefore, although participants are granted the opportunity to expand the world with their contributions, these extensions would probably open new narrative paths more than filling the gaps of previously published contributions.

Canon

The extensions produced by audience members in participatory worlds may become part of canon. By canon, it is understood the character features, settings and other world elements as well as the "body of work that establishes its own internal storylines and/or character history, [which are] deemed to be »official« by either the creator or publisher" (Chaney & Lieber 2007: 3). To be part of a canon, the world owner/creator should validate the content. This validation can be implicit (as part of the business logic or the rules of participation) or explicit (communications or direct mentions about it).¹² For example, Lucasfilm stated that all the content of the *Star Wars Expanded Universe* (which has been recently rebranded as *Star Wars Legends* and includes a wide range of assorted media), is not part of the *Star Wars* canon (StarWars.com 2014). The works that are official but are not part of a canon, such as those forming the *Star Wars Expanded Universe*, are considered non-canonical works. Although these works may be published under the same brand and legally share the same IP resources, generally it can be said that non-canonical but official works are part of an alternate universe, which differs from the official "path" chosen by the IP owner. For example, when asked about the *Star Wars Expanded Universe*, George Lucas stated in an interview:

¹² As it will be explained later, *Runes of Gallidon* used two categories to identify canonical and non-canonical content, called 'official' and the 'alternate history', respectively.

I don't read that stuff. I haven't read any of the novels. I don't know anything about that world. That's different than my world. But I do try to keep it consistent. The way I do it now is they have a *Star Wars Encyclopedia*. So if I come up with a name or something else, I look it up and see if it has already been used. When I said [other people] could make their own *Star Wars* stories, we decided that, like *Star Trek*, we would have two universes: My universe and then this other one. They try to make their universe as consistent with mine as possible, but obviously they get enthusiastic and want to go off in other directions (Starlog 2005: 48).

Sometimes, the IP-owner deliberately decides to use multiple universes, or multiverses, to develop "what if" stories. This has been explained by Jenkins in terms of continuity and multiplicity:

The media industry often talks about continuity in terms of canons – that is, information which has been authorized, accepted as part of the definitive version of a particular story [...]. Multiplicity, by contrast, encourages us to think about multiple versions – possible alternatives to the established canon (Jenkins 2010).

For instance, while most of the storylines published by Marvel Comics are located in a universe labelled as "Earth-616", there are other in-house publications which present alternative universes.

In addition to the official texts, we may also find unofficial texts based on a story-world. Unofficial texts are non-canonical works which have not been authorised by the world owner. In many cases, these texts are considered fan fiction works. Contributions submitted to participatory worlds differ from fan fiction since the latter is, by nature, non-canonical. Generally, fan fiction works are not-for-profit texts based on an existing IP and produced in the context of a fan community. Very rarely, fan fiction texts are authorised by the world owner who can even allow the monetisation of the work, such as the case of some *Star Trek* novels and short stories published commercially (Schwabach 2009) or the stories available through Kindle Worlds¹³. In these situations, the authorisation may place the text of fan fiction as part of the 'official' content (although they may not be authorised to use the brand name or the logo). Following this distinction, contributions submitted to

¹³ Some academics would probably argue that the contributions written for Kindle Worlds should not be perceived as fan fiction but as "user-generated content" (Jenkins 2007). Either participatory worlds and Kindle Worlds, the rules for participation and decision-making process rely on the producer/world owner. However, contributions submitted to Kindle Worlds and accepted for publication are not considered canonical.

participatory worlds should not be considered as an extension of fan-fiction activities, since they did not originate within the fandom¹⁴; participatory channels, rules of participation and decision-making process come from the world owner. From a broader perspective, participatory worlds give the opportunity to audience members to make their contributions canonical, which does not happen in the previous two examples, where fan fiction is non-canonical.

However, another interesting discussion may arise from cataloguing contributions to participatory worlds which are not accepted to be canonical. Are they fan fiction or official content placed in an alternate universe? There is no direct answer to this question. When contributions are submitted through the channels for participation, the official route to get audience members' submissions considered to be part of the world's canon, the classification may depend on the treatment that projects based on participatory worlds give to them. *Runes of Gallidon* had a channel for participation based on a web-form where participants included their contributions as attachments or links to the content (in the case of YouTube videos). All contributions were accepted to be published as long as they complied with the rules of participation. These rules involved requirements that the works submitted should be original and coherent with the story-world (no elves or orcs, for example, since it was a human-centric fictional world), and should avoid the use of copyrighted elements (such as characters from other worlds) or pornography in the texts (*Runes of Gallidon* 2009). Similarly, stories should not address important matters which affect the whole story-world (such as initiating a war or destroying a civilization). Submissions were reviewed by the producers and, if accepted, were posted on the official website and catalogued either as canonical or "alternate history". Canonical works were coherent with the story and events so far. When clashes were detected, authors were contacted to suggest some changes. When changes were not possible or authors were not willing to make any amendments to the contribution, the work was labelled as "alternate history". This label catalogued the work as part of an alternate universe. According to the website, the "alternate history" label was for:

Works that do not fit within the world of *Runes of Gallidon* (they conflict with established continuity, kill off major/popular characters, etc.) but are too good to ignore or pass up. These types of Works will fall into a category called,

¹⁴ In some cases, fandom may encourage the creation of the channels for participation. Eric Flint recognized that the main reason why he created *Grantville Gazette* was because of the large amount of fanfic he received (Flint 2004b).

»Alternate History«. This category is for Works that we want to share but which contain elements that do not or cannot integrate with the current ongoing stories of the world of Gallidon (Runes of Gallidon NDc).

This classification would be slightly more complex in *Grantville Gazette*. Similar to *Runes of Gallidon*, contributions submitted to *Grantville Gazette* have to comply with some rules in order to be considered for publication (Flint 2014). Participants should avoid high politics, the use of copyrighted elements in the story (unless the author is the IP-owner) and the use of other contributors' characters unless permission is given by them. Besides, new original *Grantville* citizens cannot be created. Participants must pick them up from "the grid". Another rule for participants is to be coherent with the story-world, its elements and the stories already published on it. For doing this, contributors can make use of the "story time-frames" spreadsheet, a document which keeps track of all the stories published to date and the diegetic period they cover.

As explained before, participants have to post their contributions on the forum so other community members may give feedback to their authors. Stories in their final form (after the feedback and modifications) remain on the forum where the *Grantville Gazette* editorial board can read them. The editor may decide to include some of them in a future issue of the e-zine and, therefore, would contact the author(s) to propose a purchase offer. All the published stories become canon. However, unpublished stories would remain on the forum where they may be picked-up in the future. This basically places the non-published works as prospective publications since the editorial board does not normally provide notification of rejections. Besides, this idea is reinforced since registration is needed to access the forum (the information is not publicly available). A submitted story may not be published today but it may be published in the future. However, if unpublished texts were available somewhere else than on the official websites (for non-commercial purposes), these texts may be considered fan fiction.

As the two case studies have shown, audience members' fictional contributions in participatory worlds are different from fan fiction. The consideration that non-published contributions obtain depends on each project. The channels for participation in both case studies use a submission-review-based model. The difference is that *Grantville Gazette* makes the review process more transparent to involve audience members, while in *Runes of Gallidon* this was made internally by the producers. In both cases, the producer has the authority to validate the contribution.

Conclusion

So far, the study of participatory worlds has been neglected in academic literature. While they can be seen as practices which combine the participatory tradition embedded in projects such as Wikipedia with the expansion of fictional worlds, the way participatory worlds operate is more complex than what this simple definition may suggest. Participatory worlds present a different approach to world expansion from other creative practices, with the use of audience members' contributions in the creation of canonical extensions, which involves the active collaboration between the producers and consumers of these worlds. This paper attempted to define participatory worlds by drawing a comparison with other relevant creative practices through the analysis of their three key aspects: audience participation, world expansion and canonical content.

Participatory worlds are interactive worlds, since they allow interaction with the world by using the channels for participation. These channels should be enduringly available to all audience members who wish to contribute. Participatory worlds are different from co-creation practices between producers and users such as some collaborative writing projects (the "networked book") and crowdsourced films. Two reasons were provided: the dubious role of contributors as audience members and the perception that participatory worlds are formed by multiple works produced by multiple authors based on the same story-world. This statement suggests that these collaborative projects are more related to the act of collaboration and/or world-building, rather than to world sharing. Therefore, participatory worlds have been defined as a subset of shared worlds. However, participatory worlds have also been distinguished from other practices of world sharing, such as media franchising. It was explained how audience members' contributions expanded the participatory worlds by using two case studies: *Grantville Gazette* and *Runes of Gallidon*. Additionally, it was acknowledged that fictional worlds can be expanded through official and unofficial texts. An important part of the unofficial texts is fan-fiction. Contributions submitted to participatory worlds differ from fan fiction in a number of ways, the most significant one being the canonical status of the works. Contributions submitted through channels for participation in participatory worlds may be part of a canon, while fan fiction is inherently non-canonical.

Although this paper approaches the definition of participatory worlds and presents a non-comprehensive comparison between them and other creative practices, more research would be needed in order to understand how they work as spaces to produce social value and fictional content, and to analyse the social interactions and complex negotiations which take place in them.

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