



TRANSMEDIAL UNIVERSES

CHARTING THE HEURISTICS OF MEDIA CONSTELLATIONS

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Charting the Heuristics of Media Constellations



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Contents

	Figure Credits	v
	Abstract	vii
	Acknowledgements	viii
	 Introduction: Gazing upon the Stars	
	<i>The Discovery of a Universal Trend</i>	1
1	Connecting the Dots	
	<i>The Playful Ontology of Media Constellations</i>	13
	What in the World? – Formative Universe Characteristics	15
	The Ontology of Sicartian Play	22
	Playing the Universe – Interrelations of Universe Characteristics	27
2	To Infinity and Beyond	
	<i>Additive Comprehension in and Beyond ASSASSIN’S CREED</i>	31
	Comprehension Revisited	33
	“I have so many questions” – Canalised Additive Comprehension	37
	Parallel Worlds - Problematizing Additive Comprehension	50
3	Colossal Cosmic Powers	
	<i>Agency in Transmedial Universes</i>	57
	The Mantles of Worldly Agency	59
	Killing by the Book – Agency in the IP Universe	62
	Collective Creation: Curated and Negotiated Universes	73
	 Conclusion - The Edge of the Universe	
	<i>Finding that Proper Restaurant</i>	85
	 Works Cited	91

Figure Credits

- Fig. 1 (p.1): “Assassin’s Creed II Third Person Ending.” *Assassin’s Creed II*. Ubisoft Montreal. 2015. Author’s Screenshot.
- Fig. 2 (p.1): “Assassin’s Creed II Direct Address.” *Assassin’s Creed II*. Ubisoft Montreal. 2015. Author’s Screenshot.
- Fig. 3 (p.38): Ubisoft Montreal. “Apple of Eden.” *Assassin’s Creed Wiki*. 21st April 2013. Screenshot. Accessed 27th July 2015.
- Fig. 4 (p.39): Kersch, Karl, Cameron Stewart, and Nadine Thomas. *Assassin’s Creed: The Fall*. Montreal: Ubiworkshop, 2011: 19/8.
- Fig. 5 (p.39): Ingres, Jean-Auguste-Dominique. “Napoleon I on his Imperial Throne.” 1806. Louvre Museum, Paris. *Wikimedia Commons*. Oil on Canvas. Accessed 27th July 2015.
- Fig. 6 (p.40): Ubisoft Montreal. “ACI Animus 1.28.” *Assassin’s Creed Wiki*. 21st June 2012. Screenshot. Accessed 27th July 2015.
- Fig. 7 (p.42): Ubisoft Montreal. “Abs. Room.” *Assassin’s Creed Wiki*. 21st October 2012. Screenshot. Accessed 27th July 2015.
- Fig. 8 (p.44): Monette, Michael. “Assassin’s Creed 2 Omega Glyph.” *supercheats.com*, n.d. Screenshot. Accessed 27th July 2015.
- Fig. 9 (p.47): “Assassin’s Creed IV: Black Flag Multiplayer Glitch.” *Assassin’s Creed IV: Black Flag*. Ubisoft Montreal. 2015. Author’s Screenshot.
- Fig. 10 (p.54): “Batman Suits Arkham City All Skins.” *clashofclanshackstrategy.com*. n.d. Web image. Accessed 27th July 2015.

Fig. 11 (p.55): “Continuum of subcreation and multi-author heuristics.” Author Creation.

Fig. 12 (p.61): “Overview of universal agency.” Author Creation.

Fig. 13 (p.64): “Assassin’s Creed I Cinematic Prompt Glitch.” *Assassin’s Creed*. Ubisoft Montreal. 2015. Author’s Screenshot.

Fig. 14 (p.64): “Assassin’s Creed I Cinematic Prompt Result.” *Assassin’s Creed*. Ubisoft Montreal. 2015. Author’s Screenshot.

Fig. 15 (p.64): Gopinadh, Gautham. “Assassin’s Creed Unity Eagle Dive.” *YouTube*. 14th March 2015. Screenshot. Accessed 27th July, 2015.

Fig. 16 (p.68): Kerschl, Karl, Cameron Stewart, and Nadine Thomas. *Assassin’s Creed: The Fall*. Montreal: Ubiworkshop, 2011: 7/1-4.

Fig. 17 (p.68): Kerschl, Karl, Cameron Stewart, and Nadine Thomas. *Assassin’s Creed: The Fall*. Montreal: Ubiworkshop, 2011: Appendix.

Fig. 18 (p.81): Freckenberg, Hans. “Der Ritter.” 1540-1543. *theslenderman.wikia.com*. 16th September 2011. Wood Carving. Accessed 27th July 2015.

Fig. 19 (p.81): Freckenberg, Hans. “Das Kind.” 1540-1543. *theslenderman.wikia.com*. 16th September 2011. Wood Carving. Accessed 27th July 2015.

Fig. 20 (p.84): “Continuum of explicated and negotiated possibility heuristics.” Author Creation.

Fig. 21 (p.87): “Subcreation and multi-author plotted against possibility.” Author Creation.

Abstract

In the current convergent popular media culture transmedial universes proliferate as profitable strategy. This thesis introduces transmedial universes as imaginary overarching settings linking together multiple narratives spread over different media. These entities require an active audience to be inferred from oblique references. Academic and industrial attention to these entities is solely directed to what I call ‘the essentialist take’ on universes. This sees universes as solely corporate constructs that are carefully thought out as a strategy to ensure that the active audience consumes multiple products. It is falsely presented as being the essence of transmedial universes. The predominantly economic focus ignores new forms of audience agency and other ways to link media together. What is lacking is an understanding of the formal characteristics of these universes, their possible interrelations and the heuristics required to study different forms. In this thesis I offer three heuristic models of transmedial universes that can structure holistic analyses of these complex media entities as a solution. This solution comes in the shape of the intellectual property, the curatorial and the concept universe.

By using play, as defined by Miguel Sicart, as epistemological tool different configurations of universe characteristics are scrutinised. The cases of ASSASSIN’S CREED, Batman, and Slenderman help to distinguish aforementioned heuristic models of the intellectual property, curatorial, and concept universe respectively. The evocation of universes and the interaction of the player with them shows the different structures possible and the most stand-out elements related to them, based on the freedom of play. The main difference between universes is found within the focus on either a subcreated, normative world or a multi-author negotiated multiverse. Additionally, what is considered possible within the universe can be a process of negotiation or an explicated certainty. As a phenomenon that will keep expanding like the products it entails, the analytical flight plan created here is a basic academic need.

Keywords: Transmedia, World building, Possible Worlds, Play, Subcreation, Forensic Fans, Convergence, Agency, Additive comprehension, Carnavalesque

Acknowledgements

Exploring the universe, let alone multiple variations of the universe, would be a foolish endeavour to undertake alone. Explorer of strange worlds *par example*, the USS Enterprise, has at least 428 members of crew. This thesis is more modest in scope, though. While it does partly venture ‘where no man has gone before,’ it remains firmly rooted on Earth and especially in Earthen popular media culture. This obviously results in a high amount of mandatory pretentious space puns, for which I apologise. Still, I am similarly indebted to many others on board this thesis ship.

In the official channels, four professors have contributed to this final product. Principally, I want to thank dr. Chiel Kattenbelt, my supervisor, for his patience, philosophical insights, and editing and writing tips. Before that, prof. William Uricchio set me on the right track by helping me find the overarching entity in my dispersed research interest. In a way, he showed me what universe I work in (Sorry). Next to that prof. Joost Raessens and the GAP-seminar group have helped me streamline my approach to play. Finally, ITU Copenhagen’s Hans-Joachim Backe deserves a thank you for his critical insights into transmedia.

Outside the official channels, this work has been long in the making. Functioning as a consolidation that has influenced most of my research at Utrecht University, many people have directly and indirectly contributed, whether through a passing remark or constructive criticism. My fellow students at ITU Copenhagen have inspired the more videogame aspects, while my BA colleagues have indulged, both formally and informally, in many of the other media. Thank you to my fellow RMA students for keeping up my motivation. Especially thank you to Esther van Ede for her help with formatting, something I am still hopeless in, to Alexander Hadziioannou for his critical comments and to my brother for the cover image. Finally, I really appreciated my family and friends’ patience for putting up with my near-obsessive dealing with this thesis. Together, you helped me chart this final academic frontier (again, I am truly sorry, but it must be done).

Introduction: Gazing upon the Stars

The Discovery of a Universal Trend

Kill the Pope to get the answers. With this assignment in mind the player of the 2009 game ASSASSIN'S CREED II (Ubisoft Montreal) sets player-character Ezio Auditore to the task of bringing the pain to Pope Rodrigo Borgia. This grants Ezio access to a hidden crypt below the Sistine Chapel inside which the deity Minerva appears (figure 1). Instead of addressing Ezio, Minerva turns towards the camera to look the player square in the eye. She ignores the more than confused Ezio and instead addresses 'the one in control' (figure 2).

The deity starts to foreshadow events from subsequent instalments from the ASSASSIN'S CREED franchise. She also unveils a great amount of backstory to the franchise's struggle between Templars and Assassins, which historicises the game's events outside of the Renaissance Italy setting of part two. Ezio, to whom Minerva's talk of solar flares and technological annihilation are black magic, can only choose what visualisation to look at for the information is clearly directed at the player. Deities, a primeval advanced civilization, an impending earthly cataclysm, a perpetual historical struggle between Templars and Assassins; all these elements contribute to the realization that the player's actions in this game are only a minor cog in a larger system. The mentions of ambiguous but apparently significant events, allegiances or characters, and the contextualisation of the game in an age-long struggle raise a larger universe setting that transcends this singular instalment and must be sought out to fully understand. Ultimately Minerva vanishes and Ezio, who is abandoned *in media res* in the depth of the Vatican, rather fittingly states "I have so many questions!"



Figure 1 Ezio and Minerva beneath Chapel.

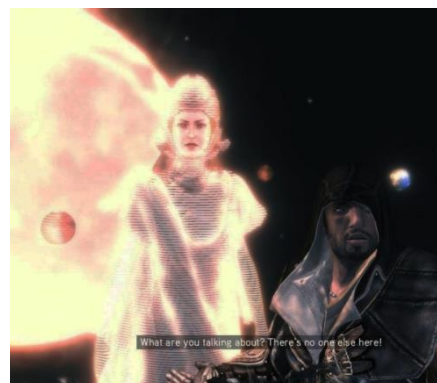


Figure 2 Minerva the Sistine addressing the player directly.

This evocation of a universe as exhibited in ASSASSIN'S CREED II is anything but a unique phenomenon. In fact, the quantity of mediated *universes* is at an astronomical high. The Marvel Cinematic Universe has eleven more films in the works, DC Comics is setting up a Justice League film universe, and the recently revived STAR WARS (Lucas 1977-present) universe promises many new feature films as well as multiple tie-in products. Communication professor Mark J.P Wolf would even argue that "franchised entertainment, and entertainment in general, is moving more and more in the direction of subcreational world-building" (2012, 13). By subcreated he means J.R.R. Tolkien's idea that a story world is spread over media with such a degree of detail that "inside it, what he [the reader] relates is 'true:' it accords with the laws of that world. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken" (Tolkien 1947, 52).

The predominance of this phenomenon in the current popular media culture can partly be explained through its economical merit. Comparative media scholar Henry Jenkins explains this by stating that "a world can support multiple characters and multiple stories across multiple media" (2006, 116). This ensures that an intellectual property can repeatedly be exploited and distributed to diverse audiences with a lower risk-level, with the further benefit that "each truly interesting element can potentially yield its own production lines" (idem, 117). Its economic merit has made world building into a ratified strategy in the media industry but as mediated entities, which, according to Wolf, "rank among the most elaborate mediated entities" (2012, 2), the discourse around universes proved unnecessarily limited and contested.

Universes, or more specifically, *transmedial universes*, can generally be defined by understanding their characteristics. They are autonomous entities that provide a setting - spatial and historical - to stories. Multiple stories can be set in a universe and spread over different media. These stories do not have to relate to each other next to being set in the same universe. During the talk with Minerva, for instance, a representation of Assassins in an Indian aesthetic is present. This relates to the comic *Assassin's Creed: Brahman* (Fletcher and Kersch 2013) which is clearly set in the same universe, but is never mentioned explicitly in the historically earlier set ASSASSIN'S CREED II. A backstory, technological explanations or unexplained occurrences, such as the *Brahman* reference, give rise to awareness of a larger universe that transcends the story of a single instalment. Occurrences of such elements allow for the evocation of a universe and the positioning of an instalment in it. Such elements are however not explicitly positioned in each instalment, Minerva's explications being an exception rather than the rule. Media scholar Dan Hassler-Forest states that "readers must use minute details from a story to create an image of the world" (2013, 119; my translation). This requires an investigative engagement from the audience who must construct an *imaginary* universe from minor details often scattered around different media. Although imaginary, access to the details to these worlds are governed by the designers of the franchise. Depending on how clear the oblique references to the universe are,

designers can control the freedom to imagine the world. Control over what to unveil can ensure that interested fans frantically search instalments to extend their image of the universe, inhabit it longer or solve mysteries that plague them. The transmedial nature has the added benefit that it enhances this design by spreading a loyal audience over different products for in transmedia, as defined by Jenkins, “artists create compelling environments that cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or even a single medium” (2006, 116).

These characteristics provide a general understanding of transmedial universes. Two constitutive elements of universes are a topic of heavy debate though. Academics clash about the foundational characteristics of *evocation* of and *interaction* with transmedial universes. Scholars disagree on how explicit the evocation is guided or instigated. Jenkins, for instance, refers to “additive comprehension,” meaning the gathering of narrative information after being made aware of a larger universe that is carefully orchestrated by the designers (2006, 127) and often solely in pursuit of profit according to game scholar Espen Aarseth (2006, 98). Conversely historian Michael Saler illustrates that readers of a text could infer a world based on what they thought was lacking, leaving them the burden of evocation (2012). Interaction with transmedial universes usually is discussed in matters of agency that determines who has the power to control the building blocks of universes. Jenkins speaks of the carefully orchestrated campaign of the MATRIX (Wachowski & Wachowski 1999) in which the one true version of the tale has to be followed. Alternatively, literary scholar Veerle van Steenhuyse believes that “fan communities may tolerate several ‘defaults’ of the same narrative frame,” which allows them to incorporate subjective or medium-specific changes into their conception (2013, 119). Apparently phenomena that touch on power struggles, medium specificity, and medium engagement are contested issues that define universes in different ways.

Yet, hardly any coherent accounts of these different conceptions of a universe that could explain these contestations exist. Game scholars Lisbet Klastrup and Susana Tosca accredit this to “the textual fallacy – the tendency to approach transmedial objects from a too literal point of view ... as a material entity or single text” instead of as world (2004, 412). Plenty of valuable publications exist on the economic considerations (Aarseth 2006) or physical embodiment in a universe (Dubbelman 2013) but not on universes’ transcending, imaginary nature and construction – an absence this thesis will address. Ironically, even Klastrup and Tosca, when discussing transmedial worlds in response to the textual fallacy focus solely on manifestations in videogames. Beating this textual fallacy, I present three holistic and heuristic models for transmedial universes and their constructive characteristics, namely the intellectual property, curatorial and concept universes. Next to providing tools to study these elaborate media entities, this will also shed light on the possible powers of the audience in the current media climate. Central in this is the critical perspective on a recent development in the current media culture

and academic debate that explains the heavy contestation: the rise of a take on universes that ignores the flexibility of many of these entities and is a falsely labelled essentialist.

The Brightest Stars – the Essentialist Take

A general description of transmedial universes describes multiple version. A recurring conception can be discerned in Jenkins' writings though. His approach does hint at the complexity but is ultimately limited in scope. Adding insult to injury, this limited approach is falsely labelled as essentialist – as if it explains how *all* transmedial universes work. In this section, I address the rise of this limited approach to universes as distilled from Jenkins and show this essentialist claim is faulty. Addressing main characteristics that limit understanding of universes allow me to highlight the aspects of universes not addressed by this approach.

Jenkins characterises current media culture as “convergence culture,” which was heralded by digitisation and dwindling viewer numbers (2006, 4).¹ Regardless of the start date, digitisation allowed media to converge, coming together in single technological entities like the computer or owned by a single corporation due to conglomeration of media owners. Through this corporate convergence media companies learned “how to accelerate the flow of media content across delivery channels to expand revenue opportunities, broaden markets and reinforce viewer commitments” (idem, 18). At the same time convergence relates to the roles of producer and consumer. The digital means of production but also the more migratory audience behaviour meant that consumers were “learning how to use these different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control and interact with other consumers” (ibidem). Convergence culture thus accommodates consolidation of different media under a single corporation and a more active and migratory audience. It is in this culture that Jenkins introduced an account of transmedial universes that severely canalised understanding.

Despite Jenkins' attention to new positions of power for consumers, as in his earlier writings, his model of transmedia is mostly top down.² His discussion of the MATRIX franchise

¹ The start of this culture is debatable, occurring according to some at the introduction of the World Wide Web in 1991 (Rose 2012, 14) while others see the occurrence of crisis talks in the industry around 2003 as indicative (Jenkins 2006, 4).

² Transmediality as pertaining to the corporate orchestration of media content as diluted from Jenkins' account is not necessarily the case. Transmedia scholar Max Giovagnoli for instance explains that transmediality became associated with the industry when Hollywood picked it up, with crossmediality being the more artistic variant. He also illustrates that the distinction is often lost, further convoluting the particular allegiance, if any, of the term (Giovagnoli 2011, 11). Implicit in Espen Aarseth's piece on crossmediality, conversely, an opposition between the artistic transmedia phenomenon and corporate crossmedial strategies can be identified (2006). Regardless of what term is used, universes are often described through reference to transmedia, with citation of Jenkins. If all the variations - corporate,

explains the concepts of world building and transmedia storytelling solely in corporate terms, making this seem like the only possible formation of universes. Transmedial universes function as a *response* to audience behaviour; as attempts to encapsulate audience behaviour like traditional entertainment norms did. As such, Jenkins' treatise approaches universes as solely corporate constructs that are carefully thought out as a strategy to ensure that the active audience consumes multiple products in pursuit of clues. Such tactics run rampant in the media industry based on the archaic assumption that audiences blindly follow the suggestions (Ward 2009).

Jenkins' approach to universes as economically motivated worlds is not the only possibility. The fans of the Sherlock Holmes or the Cthulhu franchises, as charted by Saler, appropriated stories written by a single author, inferred a universe from them, and collectively expanded them in magazines, discussion groups, and sometimes even original stories if the author allowed it (2012). Despite these alternatives, Jenkins economic perspective on universes is of course as valid a perspective on universe as others. Problems arise however due to the rampant and uncritical adoption of his version in both the industry and academia. Because of this, the focus on manifestations of transmedial universes as primarily economic strategies are seen as essentialist while they still hardly grasp the complexity of these constructs as a two-way phenomenon. By calling it essentialist I do not claim that Jenkins' take on universes explains the ontological characteristics of all transmedial universes, for it is merely one specific version. Still, I name Jenkins' approach *the essentialist take* on universes due to this economic, top down canalised focus being *presented and accepted* as the essence of universes, which is anything but true. Essentialism in this thesis is thus not hailed as an ontological category, but as to draw attention to this faulty moniker of a normative approach. Seeing this limited take as essentialist discredits many alternatives. By contrasting this essentialist take with alternatives that undercut the provided essence, I hope to prove this essentialist claim faulty. The essentialist take is thus an ironic moniker, hailed in order to highlight its faults. Communication scholar Roberta Pearson (2010, 86) argues that "fans have been at the forefront of historical transformations" and ignoring their role in the construction of these dominant media entities, as happens if this kind of essentialism is followed, will place academics at a loss when changes are finally wrought in the ever changing media climate. Therefore, to problematize this essentialist take, I set a course for alternative models to understand universes in order to understand the full complexity of these entities and possible new positions of power.

These models must deal with Jenkins' implication that in transmedia "each medium does what it does best" (2006, 116), which suggests a new phenomenological way of dealing with

artistic or otherwise – are grouped under the more-or-less corporate header explained by Jenkins, many of the nuances are lost and universes are reduced to a single media constellation.

media. *Transmedial* universes stand out because multiple media can be sought for related narrative content but also for their medium specific way of dealing with the autonomous universe. What passes as the essentialist approach actually limits or disregards these medial contributions to a large extent. For instance videogames usually play a larger role than other media, which shows a characteristic of canalisation in the essentialist take. Aarseth argues that “game productions are starting to rival movie productions in terms of cost, and therefore also the position on top of the [transmedial] cost chain” (2006). They are valued for their inherent simulation capability, which affords the construction and embodied interaction with universes, immediately creating awareness of a larger universe to set stories in. Open-World games such as SKYRIM (Bethesda Game Studios 2011) or FALLOUT 3 (Bethesda Game Studios 2009) thrive on the exploration of a top-down constructed universe for players to explore for hidden content. The relative freedom of the player in these playground or sandbox games is however still largely structured. Game designers decide what can or cannot be done; it is only up to the player to decide when. As game scholar and designer Miguel Sicart notes in his treatise on play, current era computer games limit the amount of play to such an extent that many games are less about playing and more about following set out paths (2014, 8). This full control over the actions of the player, while still affording a degree of agency, makes games ideal media to construct a universe with.

Summarising, the essentialist take presents several characteristics as the essence of universes, which already ignores different perspectives. This contrast can be seen in table 1. Clearly, it is not as essentialist as it claims to be. The freedom of play, in and beyond games, underlies different universe models.

Table 1 The limitations of the essentialist take.

Universe Characteristic	Essentialist Take	Disregarded Perspectives
<i>Construction</i>	Top Down	Dialogue or co-construction
<i>Power</i>	Corporate Economical	New audience positions
<i>Disciplinary focus</i>	Sole economic focus	User engagement approaches
<i>Medium Use</i>	Canalised Interaction	New ways media are used
<i>Engagement</i>	Structured	Experimental and social

Seeing other stars

I have made it my task to break through the fake essentialist approaches to transmedial universes through a critical reflection on an exemplary instance. Sole attention to the essentialist

take would maintain a traditional passive view of audience as consumers. This archaic idea is but one possibility however, regardless of claims of essentialism. I argue that alternative models consist of constructive characteristics and engagement possibilities, which can grant new insights into current audience practices.

An exemplary case to problematize can be found in ASSASSIN'S CREED (AC) (Ubisoft Montreal 2007-present). This is a franchise starting in 2007 with the first videogame instalment and has since [2015] produced twelve official sequels with another in the works, seven novels, five comic books, a Facebook game, three short animated films, one upcoming feature film and an extensive internet database/collaborative game. The series centres on the Animus technology which lets its user physically experience the memories of genetic ancestors. One of the series' appeals therefore is exploring historical places, such as Crusade-era Jerusalem, Renaissance Florence or Revolutionary France. The Abstergo organisation uses the memories of unwilling participants to discover Pieces of Eden. These are mind-controlling artefacts left behind by a lost prehistoric but technologically advanced civilization. Abstergo serves as a front for the 'Knights Templar' and strives to use these artefacts to create an organised society in their image. They are thwarted by the 'Assassins' who have vowed to safeguard the Pieces of Eden to preserve humanity's free will. Most of the franchise focuses on the Assassins, affording stealth gameplay for assassinations, facilitated by hiding mechanics and free-run possibilities. While the gameplay stays largely the same, each instalment does add new events and developments to the larger struggle between Templars and Assassins, which encompasses the entire human history. Reflecting on the past through this Templar-Assassin lens allows the franchise to incorporate ambiguous historical elements, turning the whole of history into a playground for the player to explore. Seeing AC as exemplary for the essentialist position can grant insight into formative characteristics in contemporary universe building, which extend well beyond this specific formulation. By distilling the formal characteristics of the transmedial universe built in AC, I give an outline of what transmedial worlds are believed to be, how their characteristics are engaged with, and how this constricts alternatives – why these approaches are *not* essentialist.

An analysis of AC will not yield any insights unless it is looked at in its holistic and dynamic approach to multimedia engagement. A recent remarkable rise of *play theory* explains media phenomena more and more, possibly qualifying as a turn (Raessens 2014, 109). Next to that, an academic trend of gamification can be identified, meaning that “games and playful experiences are understood as essential components of society and culture” (Fuchs, Fizek, Ruffino and Schrape 2014, 7). This currently manifests itself in the reliance on game and play techniques in non-ludic domains, allowing people to “collectively use their problem-solving skills not only to solve puzzles within a digital game but also to approach social and political issues in the real world” (idem, 9). Daily activities are analysed as playful behaviour, which

would include media use and therefore universe exploration. Next to this simultaneous rise of attention to play and world building, classical takes on worlds and universes mention play and ludic behaviour as key element of engagement with a universe. Saler, for instance, credited the uptake of imaginary worlds to the shift “from a more restrictive attitude to the imagination to a more relaxed and *playful* one ..., accepting the whimsical free play of a child’s imagination” (2012, 38). Despite their simultaneous rise, universes and play are hardly combined. Maybe it is time to play around with this coincidence. I argue that analysing transmedial universes through play can help sidestep the textual fallacy due to the more flexible and transmedial nature of play. Next to that, play can pierce through the essentialist claims due to its own dynamic character and can overall provide tools to study these complex media entities.

Playing as cultural activity, what does that even mean? I follow the definition of play by Sicart, starting from the conviction that “play is being in the world, through objects, towards others” (2014, 18). To him the most important characteristics of play are its reliance on context and appropriation. When Sicart states that “[c]ontext comprises the environment in which we play, the technologies with which we play, and the potential companions of play” (idem, 7), it should be clear that playful contexts can be heavily structured, like playgrounds, where the context is made specifically for play, but can also be anything but play oriented. This is where appropriation comes in, meaning that play “takes over the context in which it exists and cannot be totally predetermined by the context” (idem, 11). Regardless of how structured for play a context is, playing means taking the circumstances at-hand and using them to create a new context that temporarily dismisses the oppressive forces of the establishment, context or canalised game design (idem, 11). Applicable to many situations, Sicart’s characteristics of play specify the free movement possible within a structure and specify what happens with the structure once played with, two capacities essential in understanding different universe structures and their engagement.

This approach sees the relation between instalments - specific playful contexts - as consumable through an appropriative attitude. The instalment provides the means for appropriation but depending on how explicit the existence of a transmedial universe is made, appropriation will take different shapes. If explicit, the appropriation is more structured than when a universe must be constructed from scratch. I therefore use play as an epistemological lens to show different transmedial universe structures. Based on these structures, I will introduce three heuristic models: the intellectual property, curatorial and concept universe.

Method

Complementing the essentialist take through play analyses will require focus. With the above considerations in mind the following question will be answered: *how can a play-focused analysis and reflection on the evocation of and interaction with the ASSASSIN'S CREED universe provide different heuristic models for understanding transmedial universes in the current popular media culture?* With this focus this thesis will argue for the following three key thoughts:

1. There is not one possible formation of transmedial universes. Formal characteristics function as umbrella terms for multiple variations, showing that the essentialist take actually only deals with part of the phenomenon.
2. Each medium has its particular strengths in creating a world. A strength which can come forward in their interrelations and can be exploited depending on the universe model.
3. The intellectual property, curatorial, and concept universe each privilege different constructive characteristics, which show themselves through different forms of play.

The unit of research required to deal with these arguments is the underlying structure of a transmedial universe as found in multiple texts. A formalised manifestation of such a structure can be found in AC. What counts as knowledge within this preconception is “what different [universes] have in common, finding recurring patterns in their design, topics, aesthetics, and so on” (Fernández-Vara 2015, 11). This means I do not deal with the political economy of transmedial universe or their economic strategies. Nor will I look at functions of universes, such as the use of the transmedial universe of X-Men as advocacy for gay rights (Fawaz 2011), or their use as an analogy to discuss the world by (Saler 2012, 19) for this strays from the textual and transmedial focus. Instead, I follow a structuralist methodology that game scholar Frans Mäyrä describes as “identifying the constituent elements and their underlying structures, as well as describing the rules for their combination within the object of study” (2008, 157). For the task at hand, this means that the underlying structures of universes can be found within a singular instalment but must be understood as functioning in combination with other media. AC has as its central narrative medium – dubbed “macrostory” by semiotician Carlos Scolari – its videogame instalments while other media stand in relation to these (2009, 598). The games form the basis for the universe and thus how they apply their medium specific rules that conjure a fictional world influences the derivative instalments’ contribution. A structuralist methodology then relies on identifying the formations of formal characteristics in the videogames of AC, their invocation of other media, their relation to each other, and the resulting canalising of imagination.

A textual analysis method can foreground how the structuring of formal elements in the AC games positions players in a transmedial universe. This positioning of the player shows what aspects of the universe are designed to be engaged with and how. The position however is a construction of the universe text, therefore ‘the player’ is understood as a textual construct as well. Aarseth describes such a constructed player – an “implied player” – as “a role made for the player by the game, a set of expectations that the player must fulfill for the game to ‘exercise its effect’” (2007, 132). The textual analysis will thus identify players and their capabilities in the effects – the capabilities and limitations – of the game. As such it will not address player demographics, player interviews or other player research. The focus of the textual analysis should be on the formal characteristics of the game and other instalments, according to game scholar Clara Fernández-Vara, and the implied player is a result of these formal elements. This focus can be used to “explore the relationship between the rules and the fictional world of the game” (2015, 120), which is where instalments can structure encounters with universes. Key questions, based on Fernández-Vara’s ideas, are what aspects of the world the player can interact with and what has been left out (idem, 130). The relation between the game rules and the fictional world shows the structure of the world in its affordances, the procedural dynamics, and representation. Because of this, the textual analysis will serve three functions:

1. Provide an exemplary holistic analysis of a transmedial universe.
2. Outline the formative characteristics and structure of the essentialist take on universes.
3. Critique the essentialist take by highlighting the imposed limits.

A methodological reflection is required though. Merely pointing out the formal elements of the transmedial universe in AC actually proves the claims of essentialism. Furthermore, the play model implies that formal characteristics are mere building blocks for the player to use. By ignoring the playfulness of universes, they are once again understood as top-down orchestrated experiences, making this whole thesis rather pointless. Game scholar Sybille Lammes is a vocal propagator of attention to play in game analysis methods and she foregrounds two aspects that must always be part of a methodology when play is embraced: reflexivity and situatedness (2007, 25). The former stands for the acknowledgment of “the position of the researcher as being simultaneously an observer and a participant” (Lammes 2007, 28), while the latter “secures that the local embodiment that is part of every game is put on the agenda” (idem, 29). Although I use these two categories more as further distinction of player actions instead of a critical perspective on the researcher, adding these two aspects to the structural textual analysis of transmedial universes breaks through essentialism with a head-butt of playful dynamism.

A reflexive attitude in the case of transmedial universes means observing the type of playful engagement with universe building blocks. This foregrounds the degrees of freedom afforded and facilitates an exploration of other forms play. Situatedness for Lammes means “the

local environment in which they are played” or the physical context (2007, 29). This exceeds the textual focus of this thesis so the context is interpreted as the particular universe model in which play takes place. While not physical, these models also influence the possibilities of play and suggest alternatives. Literary reviews and empirical examples can contrast the essentialist take and offer alternatives with which to understand universes and new distributions of power.

This approach yields a method classified as a *structuralist textual analysis of the fictional world created in AC subjected to a situated reflection*. Every chapter starts with the textual analysis of instalments in the AC universe to determine the formal characteristics that invoke this manifestation of a transmedial universe. The findings of this textual analysis will be subjected to a situated reflection, scrutinising procedural suggestions and comparing them to alternatives gathered from theoretical and empirical comparisons. Key in this reflection is the consideration of universes as playful constellations thus exploring the appropriative nature of play in response to its canalisation. This way the essentialist notion of transmedial universes can be problematized and the full flexibility of the underlying structure of universes can be illustrated in alternative heuristics.

With this method in tow this thesis ventures into transmedial universes in three chapters. The first chapter details how transmedial universes and play relate to each other. The goal is to outline what characterises transmedial universes. Taking cues from Jenkins’ discussion on world building and contextualising his claims through theoretical reviews of debates on world building, I distil key dimensions of universes, which can have different manifestations depending on their interrelations. I introduce play as epistemological tool to understand these interrelations. How playing can lead to the awareness of a world and how play design can privilege characteristics over others show where to look for salient differences. The domains of evocation and interaction cluster such biases and prove salient domains of inquiry in the pursuit of heuristic models.

In chapter two I look at how transmedial universes are evoked based on the relation between the texts and the capabilities of play. The story world and affordances of the AC games show how the player is presented with incomplete information and encouraged to search on. This means looking at ambiguous elements but also at (medium-specific) forms of explicit guidance. AC is exemplary for what I call the intellectual property universe model, relying on explicit guiding of the player’s search for information, resulting in a top down designed immersive subcreation. Alternative positions can be explored by breaking open the limitations placed on play in this model. In the situated reflection I introduce the curatorial universe as alternative model mainly determined by familiarity as evoker instead of explanation. Thereby this chapter already ticks off two different heuristic models to chart universes by.

In chapter three my trajectory addresses how player actions and additions are incorporated into manifestations of transmedial universes. Invitations to player activity in universe texts as well as hypothetical play appropriations serve as implied player actions here. The player's role in the construction of the universe can be discussed through the concept of agency – assessing what the player has control over. Agency in AC is shown to be representational only, subjecting each medium to a passive mode of reception in order to construct a coherent universe. In the situated reflection I subsequently explore less limited agency forms and contrast AC's representational agency with the curatorial agency in the curatorial universe, which already relies more on medium specificity. By observing agency in a more unlimited form I introduce a final universe model – the concept universe – that exists by virtue of productive agency.

Finally, the thesis concludes with a synthesis of different perspectives on universes, resulting in an overview of three heuristic models and their most salient characteristic to be privileged in analyses. These heuristics serve as an intervention into debates on current storytelling practices. Do not expect these models to fully chart the entire galaxy of current and future universes though. As heuristic models, the universes serve to aid analyses – to plot a course at understanding this imposing phenomenon. Media developments, audience appropriation or corporate takeovers may well complicate these heuristics. Still, this questioning of the essentialist take on transmedial universe will open up lines of inquiry for more flexible visions on universes and weather media studies against an eclipse of critical attention.

Connecting the Dots

The Playful Ontology of Media Constellations

Like the universe itself, the debate around transmedial universes is big; mind-bogglingly so. However, like the current American space program, the understanding of media constellations is limited by earthly monetary concerns. To indulge in the alternative - to take to the rest of the stars instead of merely those universes that are corporately orchestrated - one needs a telescope; a tool to look at universes in order to understand what they can be made of and how they come into being by playing. In the pursuit of heuristic models. This chapter will serve as a theoretical framework, detailing the general characteristics of transmedial universes as handled throughout this thesis.

As shown before, engagement with universes can be understood as playful, relying on player appropriation of provided means.³ In the pursuit of a heuristics for transmedial universes, this chapter will introduce formative characteristics of transmedial universes and argue that play can reveal their dynamic character and interrelations. The essentialist take on universes, for instance, actually describes a more limited approach to engagement, opting for a preferred, canalised pattern of player behaviour. This is achieved by privileging certain characteristics over others, resulting in a 'to enjoy this you must also buy the other' structure. The underlying elements of universes, their interrelations, and their afforded, limited or expanded engagement are formative for different universe models. In this chapter I therefore focus on how the functional characteristics of transmedial universes and play relate to each other.⁴

³ Those engaging with a universe can be grouped under many names for many media are incorporated. Player, viewer, user, participant, consumer, prosumer, viewer; all are applicable but all have different nuances. Consumer for instance sees interaction as primarily of economic nature while participant attests of an active, co-constructive role. Since I do not focus on the economic dimension, scrutinise the role of the audience in the current formation of universes, and argue from a play theoretical viewpoint, the audience in this thesis will be designated as 'the player' regardless of whether a game is discussed.

⁴ The characteristics alluded to here are functional characteristics in that they can be coordinated to suit specific functions. Such functional characteristics of media, especially games, are seen by Aarseth as ontological (2014, 484). I do not claim that the characteristics outlined in this chapter are ontological of a general understanding of transmedial universes for different models exist based on different perspectives. The functional characteristics should thus be seen as purely epistemological means.

The goal of this pursuit of characteristics is not to deliver incontrovertible evidence of play as an ontological unit of universes, nor will I argue from constricting definitions of both concepts. Instead, the functional characteristics serve as models in an epistemological approach: how and in what situations do the functional characteristics of play grant insight into the changing structures of universes. The instrumental use of play must foreground the different intra-universal relations that structure heuristic models. From this analysis come the following three insights in this chapter:

1. Transmedial universes are overarching entities housing fragmented subcreations that function as possible worlds, rely on a forensic audience and thus achieve a multi-author nature in a transmedial shape.
2. Play is contextual, carnivalesque, appropriative and autotelic.
3. Evocation and interaction with the world are domains that foreground different universe manifestations due to their approach to additive comprehension and agency.

Theoretical reviews provide an overview of salient functional characteristics. First, debates on the creation of imaginary universes will be reviewed to identify oft discussed characteristics that contribute to the formation of a universe – their building blocks. The debates mainly arise from Jenkins’ treatise of a world as a means to transmedia storytelling. No comprehensive account of shared characteristics exist however, so based on Jenkins’ preliminary ideas I introduce formal characteristics based on elaborations on Jenkins’ references as well as other theories. These newly introduced formal characteristics are created from isolated references in diverse publications however. What is missing, and what I shall provide through play, is a holistic approach. I shall provide such an approach by first reviewing the debates around Sicart’s definition of play to fully outline the dynamic capabilities of play.⁵ This model of play serves to chart the interrelations between the newly outlined characteristics of universes. This way different structures can be highlighted. A final comparison foregrounds the domains in which play with worlds can consciously be designed for, signalling key markers determining the various forms of transmedial universes. These design domains form the main topics of analyses in the chapters to come.

⁵ Sicart’s approach to play will be discussed in relation to objects of play for transmedial universe instalments can be considered as such. However, Sicart is more interested in play for play’s sake instead of game- or toy play. The “spontaneous manifestations of the play instinct” Sicart refers to, dubbed *paidia* by early game scholar Roger Caillois who also differentiated this sort of play from more tool incited variation, will not be addressed here (2006, 141).

What in the World? – Formative Universe Characteristics

Attested by the downsizing of Pluto, what exactly counts as a world is anything but clear. In order to problematize what I've deemed the essentialist take on worlds, one requires a general understanding of the formal characteristics of what I understand as a world or universe. This paragraph will therefore dive deeper into the term 'world' or 'universe' and scrutinise debates around key characteristics. The debates discussed arise from Jenkins' treatise of world building in *Convergence Culture* (2006, 113-128). He hints at recurrent characteristics that, when combined, characterise transmedial universes – albeit in a limited formation only in the case of Jenkins. As is often the case in such debates, some elements are neglected. Here I identify Jenkins' elements and expand them through literary review while simultaneously highlighting neglected topics in these debates that serve as openings for play as epistemological tool. These neglected topics mostly relate to charting the variations possible in as well as interrelations between characteristics. The characteristics, overarching entity, fragmented subcreation, possible, forensic fans, multi-authored, and transmedial, will be discussed in isolation, to later be interrelated after play is introduced.

Overarching Entity

Worlds differ from stories in that they are containers of the latter. In the few publications that explicitly deal with transmedial universes this characteristic of worlds as an *overarching entity* is shared. Jenkins, for instance, states that “a world can support multiple characters and multiple stories across multiple media” and that “the world is bigger than the film, bigger even than the franchise – since fan speculations and elaborations also expand the world in a variety of directions” (2006, 116). The world is addressed as a system that holds multiple instalments, both official and fan made, which by itself does not have a delimited dimension.

Klastrup and Tosca describe their “transmedial world” as “abstract content systems from which a repertoire of fictional stories and characters can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms” (2004, 409). This echoes Jenkins but they add that “audience and designers share a mental image of the “worldness” (a number of distinguishing features of its universe)” (ibidem). Iconic elements, which Klastrup and Tosca call “abstract properties” serve as signifiers that immediately link a particular instalment to a universe due to their appellation of ‘worldness’ (ibidem). Think of any mention of a jedi, a lightsaber or the Force linking whatever kind of a media product to the Star Wars universe. Both these takes address the absence of boundaries. Jenkins stresses numerous fan contributions as legitimate additions, while Klastrup and Tosca illustrate that there is an inherent coherence that is shared but not clearly defined by the audience, creators, and instalments. Both thereby hint at a constant

negotiation about what counts as belonging to a universe – where its boundaries are. This negotiation can be understood through play, which foregrounds different degrees of what is considered as a boundary.

Fragmented Subcreations

According to Jenkins, world building is an industry tactic currently enjoying an immense rise as corporate baiting of consumers Attention to fictional worlds and how they entice their players became more elaborate at the dawn of the 20th century though. As the imaginary took on a bigger role during the nineteenth century several scholars attempted to limit the endless expression of imagination, ensuring a distinction from reality. In 1817 literary critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge reflected on the transposition of a reader into a world. In his *Biographia Literaria* (1817), Coleridge argues that “to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment” (1817, 95-96), meaning that literary worlds were regarded with an attitude “stated with disbelief, which was then willingly suspended in order to partake of the unreal” (Saler 2012, 30). This way, through perpetual critical scepticism, the reader is never fully stepping into the imaginary world.

English philologist and prolific writer J.R.R. Tolkien took issue with this approach. Instead he introduced the term “subcreation” meaning that imaginary worlds are secondary worlds: “new combinations of existing concepts which ... become the inventions that replace or reset primary world defaults,” with the primary world being the shared physical reality we live in (Wolf 2012, 24). Such a detailed construction did not rely on scepticism but instead “inside it, what he [the reader] relates is ‘true:’ it accords with the laws of that world. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken” (Tolkien 1947, 52). As such, the reader is not outside looking in but actually steps into the world and believes it real through the level of detail. Tolkien’s subcreation and Coleridge’s suspension are different ways of embodying a universe that result in different – if any – economic strategies than those looked at by Jenkins.⁶ Instead of seeing the two as mutually exclusive, their distinction is based on a difference in perspectives. These two positions can be seen as two extremes on a continuum, determining the degree in which a world is designed to accommodate immersion. How can play help position a transmedial universe on this continuum?

Play’s epistemological use becomes clear when looking closer at the construction of worlds. Hassler-Forest argues that “readers must use minute details from a story to create an

⁶ Other scholars such as Saler with his “ironic imagination”, a double consciousness believing in both the secondary and primary reality (2012, 31), place more emphasis in being in both worlds at the same time but ultimately the difference is in whether, or in what degrees, the imaginary world is entered or not.

image of the world” (2013, 119; my translation). Transmedial worlds can therefore be said to be fragmented; to bring a world into being requires the player to organise the abstract fragments into a coherent whole. Only from within the world can fragments be united according to laws of that world (i.e. coherence). Critical scepticism will not let the gaps be experienced as fillable, resulting in a less coherent concept of ‘worldness’ but still a negotiated connection among fragments. Instead, as subcreations relying on audience involvement universes can be seen as what performance scholar Chiel Kattenbelt calls “a performative utterance: an act that constitutes what it presents. It brings into existence what – at least in the first instance – it refers to” (2010, 30), conjuring a world to immerse in. Play can show to what degree such subcreation is catered to, determining how the player is positioned in a world. An instalment relying on suspension of disbelief will incite a different engagement with a universe – if any at all – than an invitation to construct an immersive subcreation.

Granted, subcreation is a more sure-fire way to understand universes’ reliance on players. The level of meticulous detail that is part of a subcreation is ensured by the filling of gaps left between story instalments across media, often consciously left open. Saler describes how Arthur Conan Doyle used ‘the absence effect’ in his Sherlock Holmes writing “alluding to intriguing, unpublished events that gave the world additional depth and mystery” (2012, 32) ensuring that fans could extrapolate the world built in his texts, but keeping areas of extrapolation under his control. Play can help unpack the power struggles occurring in this shared world as well as the different modes of design that determines whether players are consciously submerged in a convincing subcreation or whether disbelief and critical reflection still play a role.

Possible

For Jenkins, the relations between instalments are carefully coordinated to fit an economic strategy. But going from a fragmented whole to a shared concept of worldness is a more complicated dynamic process relating to possible worlds. In her book *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* (1991) narrative scholar Marie-Laure Ryan elaborates on when a world can be accepted as possible. Philippus van der Merwe explains her take on possible “not in the sense that a precise set of fictional circumstances has the potential to ‘(re)occur’ in the actual world, but that a set of potential and actual circumstances in the actual world ... may be *conceivable* in a fictional world” (2011, 21; emphasis added). From what is considered actual, be it the domain of the reader or the domain of the main character in a story, a suggested world needs to have actions that could happen in this actual world. This makes a world possible and makes a reference to it in an instalment a conceivable route to follow. The world sketched in ACII is a possible world judged from the actual world –the physical reality of the player – for its overlap with history makes it conceivable from the player’s point of view. The

overarching transmedial world of a prehistoric advanced civilization exceeds possibility though. However, from the focalisation of the in-game character the playable worlds can be understood as possible because from the “textual actual worlds” the occurrences are conceivable (1991, 25).

Sure this can be highly coordinated as Jenkins says but conceivability can also arise in many different ways. Evoking a universe from instalments requires the relations between fragments of the subcreation to be possible according to the players who construct it. What is deemed possible can be explicitly designed for – declaring a textual actual world for instance – and the normativity of what is possible is determinant in heuristic models. Play will function as marker for the degree of normativity.

What Jenkins ignores is the ambiguity of signs and contexts used to coordinate a universe. This is explained by linguist Kier Elam who elaborated on the dynamic process of conjuring something possible from signs (1980). When researching the semiotics of theatre, Elam posits that a presented world provides the basic but unfinished framework of a world (idem, 62). It is up to the viewer to project a finished conception onto this world, filling in the aforementioned gaps. Possible worlds are “specified from within,” which means that inhabitants of the possible worlds reflect on their own world only, as if it is real, making it conceivable through focalisation (idem, 68). In a singular instalment this would mean that the presented world only refers to the world presented by itself, like Ezio in ACII talking solely about retaking Rome from the villainous Pope. However, some actors or objects may be *ambiguous* enough to allude to a larger possible world; as if the specification relates to a larger ‘within’ than just the game experience. The sudden appearance of Minerva contextualises Ezio’s struggle in Rome into a larger setting, making it possible from the initial frame of reference.

As possible worlds universes exceed mere economic strategies Jenkins professes, resulting in different formations and value variations. Official instalments – the ones Jenkins talks about – are usually carefully coordinated to be possible by ironing out plot holes for example. Fan additions often lack this possibility link resulting in a more difficult acceptance into a larger world. The Pixar theory for instance, an unofficial fan account placing all the Pixar films in one universe relies on humans turning into cars (Lussier 2013). That is quite a mental leap to make and thus will not easily be inferred as part of the universe. Therefore, different degrees of explicitness in what is possible can exist in universes and play can be used to understand how each form results in a different universe construct.

Forensic Audience

Jenkins’ mention of world building arises from his identification of a more active audience and studio practices to capture their attention. One of the earliest mentions of what kind of an audience this is, is Aarseth’s conception of an “ergodic” audience, meaning “nontrivial effort is

required to allow the reader to traverse the text” (1997, 1). This approach however is mostly directed at videogame interaction but the elaborate transmedial universes need a more granulated model to encompass the corporate and medium-skipping nature. Jenkins for instance sees the new audience as “consumers who actively engage with a franchise that flows across different platforms [who] can potentially enjoy ‘new levels of insight and [an] experience [that] refreshes the franchise and sustains consumer loyalty” (Jenkins in Perryman 2008, 26). Like Aarseth, Jenkins banks on active audience participation and adds corporate strategy as structuring audience behaviour but it remains abstract into the motivations and therewith specific actions of audience engagement. Television scholar Jason Mittell (2009b, 132) instead discerns “forensic fans” when looking at audience activity in relation to the television series *LOST* (Lieber, Abrams and Lindelof 2004-2010). Forensic fans have a “hyper-attentive mode of spectatorship” and “embrace a detective mentality, seeking out clues, charting patterns, and assembling evidence into narrative hypotheses and theories” (Mittell 2009b, 132), pursuing a feeling of ownership (idem, 134). This description explains what kind of engagement is expected to construct a universe from fragmented signs, with unclear boundaries and relying on conceivability. Although offering a model more in line with the textual focus, Mittell only provides a moniker. Play will provide procedures that explain the practices of these fans.

Multi-authored

An active, investigative audience makes the authorship of a universe a contested issue. Due to changing positions of power in convergence culture players can create new additions to a universe next to the required linking of fragments. In other words: worlds are *multi-authored*.

In *Third Person*, author Walter John Williams (2009) explains that worlds have a complicated relation to the owners and fans. Since worlds usually are comprised of many products, each new instalment has a past to be reckoned with. Studios often have production Bibles, manuscripts containing stable elements that have to be obeyed. Fans also have critical knowledge of what came before, spotting mistakes or discontinuities like no other. Furthermore, Williams describes that world-contributors compete amongst themselves to maintain originality while still obeying continuity through original additions. These are subsequently subjected to studio and fan acceptance in order to be incorporated (idem, 31). It is clear that in transmedial universes there are several games of stake in place with actors who all have agency, leading Williams to lamentingly reflect that “perhaps, in the end, a single creator is best” (idem, 32).

The power balance has changed in the convergence culture. Fans can keep shows alive in the absence of an authority through world building, as happened with the BBC series of *DOCTOR WHO* (Newman, Webber & Wilson 1963-present) that saw fans writing and curating stories and radio dramas when the BBC outsourced production (see Perryman 2008; Parkin 2009). Usually

though, there is a tension between what fans deem important and how a story normatively unfolds.⁷ Play can show to what degree a universe model banks on player contributions. Some boundaries of universes are negotiated while others provide a pre-furbished experience.

The tension in the multi-author character of worlds stems from a duality of perspectives. Cultural theorist Will Brooker explains that the image created by conglomerations can be understood as “the brand ...: expressions of the contemporary corporate template, rather than a broader, folk identity” (2012, 153). In the case of Batman for instance, the gritty and dark form of Batman, instigated by Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) is the current brand. Non-brand elements are therefore discredited, consolidating control over how the world of Batman unfolds in instalments in conglomerate hands. This brand focus ignores what Brooker calls the level of “myth ... a summation of all existing texts plus all the gaps that those texts have left unspecified” (Reynolds in Brooker 2012, 151). This shows universes can cater to a single brand image alone or accommodate divergent versions, constituting a myth. The model of play introduced later can help identify different degrees of the multi-author nature in the pursuit of a brand or myth.

Transmedial

What sets transmedial universes apart from their preceding subcreations are their transmedial nature. A main characteristic of transmediality only partly touched upon by Jenkins is that he states that “each medium does what it does best” (2006, 98). Klasturp and Tosca echo this when they say that “we do not want to claim that some media forms are better at presenting worlds than other, though we believe that each media form has particular advantages” (2004, 411). Next to that, Klasturp and Tosca however state that “the idea of a specific world’s worldness mostly originates from the first version of the world presented” (idem, 409). This latter comment implies that the medium in which a world is encountered can have consequences on how the audience engages with other instalments. While one encounter will not determine all the other engagements, medium specific strengths play a role in the construction of transmedial universes.

This new attention to the medium relays the focus of an instalment as adaptation. Traditionally in world adaptations, the key issue was each contribution’s fidelity to the world. Klasturp and Tosca state that “fidelity of transformation will always be at play in an actualization

⁷ Indicative of these new power relations are Augmented Reality Games (ARGs), which, according to Jeffrey Kim, Elan Lee, Timothy Thomas and Caroline Dobrowski, are “loosely defined enough to improvise with the players, accepting major changes in content [and] ... the story of the game is undetermined at its outset” (2009). Relying on audience participation makes ARGs unfold largely in response to the players’ actions. These games are more a hybrid between real and textual, relying on world enriching instead of world building through transmedial texts. As such they exceed the scope of this thesis. For a more detailed discussion of world building in ARGs see Christy Dena’s dissertation *Transmedia Practice* (2009).

of a world, because in order to maintain the essential worldness of a transmedial world ... a certain amount of fidelity is always required” (2004, 412). Still, literary scholar Linda Hutcheon in the second edition of her *A Theory of Adaptation* says:

The ‘success’ of an adaptation today, in the age of transmedia, can no longer be determined in relation to its proximity to any single ‘original,’ for none may even exist. Perhaps it is time to look instead to such things as popularity, persistence, or even the diversity and extent of dissemination for criteria of success (2013, XXVI).

Instead, adaptation studies, according to production scholar Simone Murray, shifted to the “scientific concepts of variation and diversification” (Murray 2011, 5). Comparative media scholar Karin Littau, in the same volume, argues for the degree of adaptation in the biological sense – its fit with the medium it is used in – as means to understand the role of an instalment (2011). Each instalment does not only share in abstract properties on a content level but also adopts medium elements on a formal level, resulting in different medial manifestations of a universe. Tracing the use of medium specific afforded play can reveal different approaches to the construction of and engagement with universes, indicating new historical trends.

This first step introduced six formal characteristics of transmedial universes. Gathered from the expanded debates alluded to by Jenkins I will regard the following formal characteristics as influential for the construction of a transmedial universe:

- *Overarching Entity*: Universes are settings for multiple storylines that by themselves do not have a clearly demarcated form but are invoked through a shared ‘worldness.’
- *Fragmented Subcreations*: A universe is constructed by inferring gaps in which its nature as detailed immersive subcreation can become coherent or critically negotiated.
- *Possible*: In order to infer a universe, its elements must be possible from within the domain of engagement.
- *Forensic Audience*: Universes require active participation to be inferred from the minute details that are provided.
- *Multi-authored*: Different actors with varying agency are enveloped in games of stake.
- *Transmedial*: Each medium has specific strengths that structure the universe.

These characteristics are diluted from various debates that deal with transmedia or world building. The problem with creating characteristics from such isolated mentions is that the characteristics occur as static properties, studied in (disciplinary) isolation. They neglect

acknowledging that many of these characteristics can have different forms depending on the top down design or player appropriation. This oversight also impacts on the relations between the elements.⁸ In the next section, play serves as my spaceship with which to incorporate and address this dynamism.

The Ontology of Sicartian Play

Just having the formal universe characteristics lying around will not create a million dollar franchise involving many fans in creative ways. As explained before, many engagements with worlds were described as playful, thus offering a starting point to approach the interrelation of these building blocks. While a complete overview of the many debates regarding play would require a thesis of its own and proposing a definition of play covering all aspects is all but impossible, the values of play must be scrutinised to limit the concept to an epistemological tool.

Sicart argues that “play is being in the world, through objects, towards others ... making sense of it” (2014, 18). As a way of understanding how players engage with worlds next to consumption, Sicart’s model offers characteristics that illuminate how transmedial universes are traversed, engaged with, and proliferate. His model aims to “reclaim play as a way of expression, a way of engaging with the world – not as an activity of consumption but as an activity of production” (idem, 5). It thus exceeds a sole game focus and its scope prevents uncritical subscription to the essentialist take on transmedial universes. This segment will elaborate on Sicart’s four characteristics (contextual, carnivalesque, appropriation, and autotelic) because he sacrificed academic depth for readability.⁹ Each of the characteristics will be placed in its discursive heritage to determine their facets as epistemological tool used to shed light on the dynamism between the characteristics of transmedial universes.

⁸ This thesis explains the interrelations from a play-inspired view transmedial universe view but world-building discourses often take place in the context of discussions on ‘cult’. Umberto Eco for instance states that cult products “must provide a completely furnished world so that its fans can quote characters and episodes” (1984, 462). Key in Eco’s understanding is the ability to “break, dislocate, unhinge it so that one can remember only parts of it” (idem, 463). This way each cult object gets a new interpretation every time it’s engaged with resulting in that “its addressee must suspect it is not true that works are created by their authors” (ibidem). This attests of a similar fragmented, overarching, multi-author characteristic and even media have a different impact on cult according to Eco. On the surface, transmedial universes and cult products seem to relate to the same thing. The difference making transmedial universes a standalone concept is its adversity to the “ramshackle” nature of Cult (ibidem). Transmedial universes have a carefully planned dimension to them. The gaps Eco argues are key for a text to become cult are highly coordinated moves in transmedial universes. True, some fan alterations of franchises are reminiscent of cult activities but the more orchestrated nature makes transmedial universes something different. What’s also important is cult’s association with originally poorly performing box office hits whilst transmedial universes have a high profile corporate release dimension.

⁹ This may sound derogatory but it’s not intended to be. *Play Matters* is a good read with plenty of examples to give the reader a clear understanding of the extent of play Sicart refers to. Furthermore, the many notes ensure that the reader has full access to the debates behind his claims. However, the debates themselves are not scrutinised and will therefore require attention here.

Contextual

In his reluctant attempt to define play Sicart names context as the first major characteristic of play. In his description he exceeds the “colloquial understanding of play ... the formally bound place determined by the rules and the community” (2014, 6). Instead he sees it as “the network of things, people and places needed for play to take place” (idem, 7). Such play space can be designed, like game levels or playgrounds structure playing through rules. Sicart states that rules “determine where we play, when we stop playing, and when we can re-enter the play context” (idem, 8). For Sicart though, “rules are not sacred” but simply “another prop that can be targeted by the transformative capacities of play” (ibidem). This means that in play the player can reinterpret what is provided and contextualise *every* context differently to fit the act of playing.

This more liberal approach to the context of play is at odds with earlier mentions. It clashes with the much discussed concept of the magic circle. This concept is passingly mentioned by the oft referenced Dutch cultural scholar Johan Huizinga when he argues that “play is distinct from ‘ordinary’ life both as to locality and duration” (1971, 9). The magic circle refers to “a playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally” that forms “temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart” (idem, 10). Within this specific context new meanings run amok, turning everything into play tools, for instance pieces of wood becoming meaningful chivalrous chess units. The term has been popularised by game designers Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman as professing the idea that play takes place in specifically marked zones that are more or less consciously stepped into (2003, 95). Seen by Salen and Zimmerman as a closed system, the magic circle is demarcated by rules that when broken dissolve the magic circle (idem, 96).¹⁰ This more normative approach to play is perpendicular to Sicart’s take where entering a specifically demarcated space is not required. Playful contexts to Sicart can arise out of any configuration of playful tools without conscious predetermination. Some spaces can be designed to simulate the experience of a magic circle, but the playful context for Sicart can be found anywhere.

It would be more accurate to say that in Sicart’s functional ontology of play the context is formed *in response to* the provided means. Instead of mutually agreeing to rules with a community *a priori* and stepping into the magic circle, the context of play is constructed and perpetually negotiated by the players. Taking in all the means of play present in the context, as well as expectations and other external factors, the players construct a magic circle that defines and signifies their play sessions *during the act of play*. This constant negotiation already highlights play’s use as a tool to understand the dynamics of changing universe characteristics.

¹⁰ This oversimplified stance is what incited a vehement debate about the permeability of the magic circle. It is not the goal to chart this whole debate here, merely to illustrate Sicart’s flexibility. For an overview of this debate, see Mia Consalvo’s article ‘There is No Magic Circle’ (2009).

The general fluidity of the context of engagement can change, such as in an instalment making way for a universe.

Carnavalesque

The second characteristic of play introduced by Sicart is its carnivalesque nature; the “tension between creation and destruction” (2014, 9). Due to the ephemeral nature of this concept, often vaguely used in game studies, and its current booze-infused iterations, it is useful to cite at length Sicart’s take:

When playing, we struggle to make sense of the world by constructing our actions within a context. That struggle is not only with the obstacles and needs that play imposes on us, but also with the permanent temptations that happen in play: the temptation of breaking the context, breaking the rules, corrupting play, or, on the opposite side, letting go of all the elements of rationality and structure and letting ourselves loose in the intoxicating pleasures of play (Sicart 2014, 9).

Sicart’s labelling of play as carnivalesque refers to Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin’s treatise of the carnival and the related concept of laughter. For Sicart, laughter and the carnival give play the power to work “against seriousness, restoring the ‘ambivalent wholeness’ that is opposite the institutions we live in ... that leads to a festive liberation in search of freedom, expression, and truth” (idem, 11). This is however where Sicart’s readable prose lacks depth. Shouting freedom and truth requires some elaboration for full epistemological use.

Bakhtin discusses folk humour through the writings of François Rabelais. While his linguistic insights in these texts are astounding, key in his work is the folk expression of the carnival, hence Sicart’s ‘carnavalesque,’ which “opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture” (Bakhtin 1984, 4). In the Middle Ages such festivities and spectacle were the antithetical complement of official rituals. The carnival “offered a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world ...; they built a *second world* and second life outside officialdom” (idem, 6; emphasis added). These carnivals became a substitute world for the medieval citizen in which everyone participated resulting in a “temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank” (idem, 10). This particular context fostered what Bakhtin dubbed ‘laughter’ which is what Sicart’s take touches upon.

Bakhtin calls laughter “not an individual reaction to some isolated ‘comic’ event ... [but] universal in scope” and “ambivalent: ... it buries and revives” (1984, 11-12). As a universal act, everyone joins in on it and everything is touched by it. The act of laughing is then about the state of affairs one resides in. Laughter mocks the current states of affairs (destruction) but at the

same time affords a critical or droll sense of self-reflection (construction). Even in the current drunken lark of a carnival people dress up as a female version of Star Wars characters, thus mocking the state of affairs but simultaneously reflecting on the lack of female characters in the franchise. During the carnival everyone joins in this laughter, this mocking of basic structures in search of alternatives.

In Sicartian play, any tool provided by the context of play, be it rules or playgrounds, can be subjected to laughter, reducing it to something risible but simultaneously opening it up for reconstruction in a new image. Brooker explains that in highly designed contexts, such as universes believed to be essentialist, the folk expression is marginalised in an attempt to “narrow and secure ... meanings, reducing [it] to one continuity ... in the same vein as ... the formal structures that incorporated and contained carnival” (2012, 149).¹¹ A carnivalesque approach breaks down this attempt at canalisation, with Brooker paraphrasing Bakhtin in stating that “any position supposes its intrinsic op-position. All stories comprise within themselves the ghosts of the alternative stories they are trying to exclude” (Bakhtin in Brooker 2012, 150). This nature of the carnivalesque is what Sicart banks on: instead of blindly complying with what is provided, play lets the player imagine alternatives through the principle of laughter; the breaking down of the current context and rebuilding it into a new fashion. But how does one rebuild?

Appropriation

Sicart states that “play is appropriative, in that it takes over the context in which it exists and cannot be totally predetermined by such context” (2014, 11). The context provides the means and the carnivalesque nature provides an inherent ambivalence to the space of play but the appropriative nature lets the players adopt any situation and tools to play. “Regardless of all the intention and meanings embedded in the design of play objects, play will always force us to contextualize the meaning of the things involved in playing” argues Sicart and this requirement makes play useful in determining different player positions in an instalment (idem, 14)

The appropriation of a context for play is what determines the meaning according to Sicart. In transmedial universes the plethora of ambiguous signs or fragments can make the meaning-position in the world of a singular instalment confusing. According to Salen and Zimmerman “[m]eaning requires a formal system to generate relationships between signs, as well as a context for interpretation” (2003, 361). The formal system can be understood as the collection of tools, signs and rules, designed or not. The context of interpretation can change when the formal system is appropriated, for instance when the context of play switches from

¹¹ Brooker actually discusses the carnivalesque in relation to the Batman franchise. Game design however features a similar canalization of play.

singular instalments to the overarching universe. Appropriation of signs then requires a context change to become meaningful again for the purpose of play. The varying ways of steering this appropriation are salient determinants that structure a universe.

Autotelic

Labelling play as autotelic – of having no goal other than its own act of being – brings Sicart into familiar territory. Play as “an activity with its goals and purposes, with its own marked duration and spaces and its own condition for ending” (Sicart 2014, 16) has characterised play since Huizinga’s remarks on the non-material gain in play (1971, 9). Most famous is Bernard Suits parable of golf as activity performed as inefficient as possible for the sake of play (2005, 38).¹² Again, Sicart distances his play definition from the classical takes in stating that “play is autotelic in its context, but it is also negotiated” (2014, 16). The constant renegotiation of the goals of play, depending on what elements are encountered, gives play an adaptive nature and makes it *personal* – relying on the player in particular to shape it. This means “the effects of play are individual, attached to our own sentimental, moral and political memories,” which ultimately influences the negotiation of goals (idem, 17).

It is this adaptive personal nature which gives rise to the other two characteristics of play Sicart notes that are instrumental in the construction of a universe by the player. The perpetual negotiation of goals through appropriations can make play *disruptive*. Appropriation can “break the state of affairs” and “in disrupting the normal state of being playful, we can go beyond fun when we appropriate a context with the intention of playing with and within it ... reveal[ing] the inner workings (Sicart 2014, 14-15). This disruption of the status quo through play can be disadvantageous, in the case of gambling for instance, but can also be used to engage more critically with a product. Forensic fans of *LOST* engaged with the series completely differently from usual dramatic investment, opting for a more detective-like engagement of parsing out clues about the larger mythology. Such playful engagement that required active re-watching and observation disrupted the standard method of consuming television series. This forced its showrunners to take this large forensic fan base into account by making important clues available more clearly, effectively redefining the structure of the universe of *LOST* into a large mystery instead of a drama (Hassler-Forest 2013, 95).

A similar result of the negotiation of goals is play’s *creative* character. The autotelic and carnivalesque creativity can grant the player the possibility to produce new instalments. These

¹² Game scholar Bernard Suits provides an anecdote in his book *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* on the lusory attitude of certain activities. “Suppose I make it my purpose to get a small round object into a hole in the ground as efficiently as possible. Placing it in the hole with my hand would be a natural means to adopt. But surely I would not take a stick with a piece of metal on one end of it, walk three or four hundred yards away from the hole and then propel the ball into the hole with the stick” (Suits 2005, 38).

constructs expand or disrupt corporate universes but can also rely on other universal constructions to be accepted. An example is TAMRIEL REBUILT, a fan product that creates modifications for the game THE ELDER SCROLLS: MORROWIND (Bethesda Game Studios 2002) in which the rest of the in-game map is being created, outside of the island in which the game takes place (Tamriel Rebuilt community, 2015). This shows how playing can divulge into goals that cater to the process of world making, foregrounding play's capacity to deal with the co-constructed nature of universes that can either be fostered, as with TAMRIEL, or prohibited.

According to Sicart's characteristics, play can be seen as an appropriative activity that approaches playful contexts in a carnivalesque way and thus creates playful situations that serve a personal goal that is constantly renegotiated through new additions. Within the appropriation of a provided context, instead of mere subjugation, lies play's capability of problematizing the essentialist take on transmedial universes. This capacity is especially relevant in formative domains of design in universes in which the approach to play is foregrounded.

Playing the Universe – Interrelations of Universe Characteristics

Now that play has been introduced as alternative and holistic approach to universes, what remains is understanding how the intersections between the characteristics of play and transmedial universes can be designed for. The essentialist take on transmedial universes for instance, banking on economic merit and customer retention, actually only ensures that the carnivalesque and appropriative power of play are kept at a minimum, forcing the players to thrive in a normative context. This final section will therefore observe what domains of the design of transmedial universes rely most on the capacity to play. Depending on the type of play afforded, these domains foreground interrelations and biases among characteristics, which ultimately determine a universe's structure.

Designing a universe means presenting it to the player during a play session. These begin with a context of play, often in a singular instalment, such as a game or film. Sicartian play however dictates that the player is not isolated and subjected to this a priori context. An ambiguous reference or earlier experiences with other instalments, can redefine the context of play into an overarching entity. Designing for play in forming a transmedial universe then means constantly minding the possibility of an instalment being renegotiated as part of a larger whole. But what tools do both the designer and the player have to (re)negotiate the context?

Additive Comprehension

Key to the renegotiation of the context is the player's ability to appropriate ambiguous abstract properties into a new context. To cater to this appropriation by the player, appropriate abstract properties have to be of a specific quality, catering to what semiotician Umberto Eco calls "ostension" wherein signs express the class they belong to (1978, 225). Eco discerns two functions of ostended elements. Firstly, ostension causes loss of particular characteristics and becoming "more elementary than it already is" (idem, 226). For appropriated elements this means that repeated gaps in a story can result in a general awareness of something not shown. These elements represent a class that requires a different context to be understood and meaningfully played with; functioning effectively as *invitations of playful appropriation*. Secondly, Eco sees ostension functioning as a synecdoche (idem, 226). This means that ambiguous abstract properties are seen as a fragment of the larger narrative world. Repeated ambiguous references give rise to a conception that something bigger is afoot that unfolds the ambiguity.

The scarcity and normative nature of such ostended properties can be designed for. The level of explicit guiding in the interpretation can limit the appropriation. Literary scholar Roland Barthes, describing his concept of mythology, which is similar to Eco's ostension in that a sign is undone of its meaning only to be contextually granted a new one, adds that "the mythical signification ... is never arbitrary; it is always in part motivated, and unavoidably contains some analogy" (1972, 110). A lack of context required for signification will quickly be considered intentional and thus further food for playful appropriation. Game designer Neil Young calls this "additive comprehension," the effect of having a piece of information that allows a reconsideration of the current narrative into a larger context gathered from fragmented references (Young in Jenkins 2006, 127). Instilling additive comprehension is thus an activity that can consciously be afforded, guided or delimited and thereby determines the plurality of meaningful subjective contexts.

Hassler-Forest shows how such additive comprehension can take different forms when instigated by different parties. He explains that Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* success "gave rise to the appearance of Gulliver in a mass of other media, such as punch cartoons, songs, sketches and plays" (2013, 19; my translation). Gulliver's travel narrative suited its transposition into different spin-offs made by different authors, often hardly artistic or possible. This ensured that Gulliver's tale transcended a singular story and instead became contextualised in a transmedial world; an abstract system of travel-places where a shared character could be set in. In this case, motivated by economic gain, the travel narrative of Gulliver structured additive comprehension outside the author's control. In contrast, Swift's rage at this

appropriation was prevented by Arthur Conan Doyle, who used the absence effect to ensure that additive comprehension caused stories outside of his control, but still inceptioned by his own ideas. He guided appropriation by already providing the parameters of a new context of play, keeping the universe within Doyle's subcreation instead of subjecting it to multi-author whims like Swift's work. How a universe is evoked then is one of the main domains in which play design will foreground the construction of the transmedial universe. Determinant is the degree of canalisation or how free the player is in appropriation. Creating a normative universe in which players must follow predetermined lines differs from free appropriations that yield universes in which erotic adventures or crossovers are swiftly incorporated.

Agency

The evocation of a universe is one design domain that foregrounds play, this time through the conjuring of a context. Sicartian play's carnivalesque nature lets players break down this context in order to construct a new one during interaction. This rebuilt context results in a construction of a universe through critical breakdown of the instalment, making disruptive and creative additions that were deemed to characterise the universe better. Players therefore have the *agency* to impact on a world. The extent to which players possess this though is another key design criterion that determines the shape a universe can take, traceable through the approach to the carnivalesque.

Not all transmedial universes are as easily broken down or approached with laughter. Players can re-appropriate the provided means and build the world according to their own critical insights but this does not mean that their carnivalesque reconstruction will become accepted as part of the narrative universe. Many homo-erotic slash-fiction writers incorporated a subtext in their additive comprehension and through writing/appropriation extended the universe. These will not be accepted into the brand of the universe due to their schism with what is generally accepted as possible. However, agency to change the world can still be in the hand of fans as well, as was shown with the DOCTOR WHO example and, as Mittell illustrates (2012, 10), in the PORTAL franchise, where the fan comic *Lab Rat* (Avon, Oeming & Pinkerton, 2011) was referenced in the official instalment of PORTAL 2 (Valve Corporation 2011).

Some universes accommodate different degrees of the carnivalesque, based on what functional characteristics they privilege. Designing a transmedial universe then means considering how much agency the player has in defining the world. One possibility would be to limit reconstruction to construction of predetermined relations, creating an a priori defined world that fits the economic strategies believed to be essential. Differentiating the design of transmedial universe then requires understanding how agency is delimited. Television scholar Derek Johnson for instance illustrates the distribution of agency in the transmedial universe of

LOST (2009). He makes clear that players are encouraged to participate in the mysteries provided by the show. As such, the agency of the players is limited to finding predetermined clues and having hypotheses checked by the series' canonical results. Fully catering to detectives, this universe strives for a particular form of agency: selective problem-solving whose level of detail and investment will curate attention in the continuation of the universe.

Other authors however speak of transmedial universes where the player has more agency, or where more leeway is provided in what counts as the 'truth' (van Steenhuyse 2013; Boni 2013). Determining how the player is skewed to adopt a particular view of a universe or how fan contributions are encouraged foreground design privileges that must be scrutinised if transmedial universes are to be understood in all their dimensions.

Conclusion

The intersection of the characteristics of transmedial universes and Sicartian play has foregrounded two domains in which play highlights possible alternatives – evocation and interaction. Therein the topics of additive comprehension and agency foreground the different configurations of the characteristics of transmedial universes, privileging some in the pursuit of specific universes. The privileges reveal themselves in the approach to play in the universe. Philosopher Nelson Goodman, when discussing the topic of pluralism – the existence of many worlds – argues that it is more relevant to look at “certain relationships among worlds than [at] how or whether particular worlds are made from others” (1978, 7). By observing the privileging of characteristics or the structuring of the universe through play a profile can be made of the rather limited take in the ASSASSIN'S CREED franchise, to be criticised by looking at the full extent of affordable play and alternative privileging. This means looking at how different worlds arise from the same building blocks instead of at whether or not something is a transmedial universe, thus fulfilling Goodman's suggestion of a comparative exploration of what makes a universe. Because why only explore one collection of billion stars if we have the capacity to look at all of them?

2

To Infinity and Beyond

Additive Comprehension in and Beyond ASSASSIN'S CREED

Looking up at the night sky does not grant you a peek at a universe – not clearly anyway. Transmedial universes only consist of six formative characteristics but like their galactic namesake a telescope – play – is needed to see the relations amongst their characteristics. Depending on the form of play, different biases for the formative characteristics can be found in the relations between characteristics. One fruitful domain that displays distinctive approaches to play and thereby universes is that of evocation – the act of inferring a universe from singular instalments.

Universes were shown to be overarching abstract entities that are fragmented but can be recreated through the possible relations between elements. By playing, fragments can be appropriated to form a universe, which functions as a new context in which the fragments are meaningful. Ultimately, the degree of freedom to determine what the signs refers to or how they can become meaningful is something that can be designed for, limiting or relying on the ambiguity of the sign. Additive comprehension is a flight trajectory that brings us closer to the specifics of universe design. It refers to what world builder Neil Young describes as “that one piece of information that makes you look at the [instalment] differently” due to the revelation of its position in a larger system (Young in Jenkins 2006, 127). Understanding how a universe fosters additive comprehension can then reveal the type of universe the players must construct. This provides the basis for different heuristic models. In this chapter I therefore look into how additive comprehension structures a transmedial universe by limiting or broadening the playful engagement.

The evocation of a universe relies on *signs* that are appropriated in a meaningful context, be that another instalment or medium or even a larger abstract overarching entity. This focus on signs gives this chapter a semiotic approach inspired by semiotician Scolari (2009). In his approach to transmedia storytelling Scolari observes how a singular text constructs the reader. Following Eco, texts appeal to different “implicit consumers” by “constructing a sedimentary multilayer text that needs different cognitive skills to be interpreted,” explaining why some texts

appeal to wider audiences than others (idem, 592). Depending on what signs are used, appellations are made to different members of the audience. Something similar can be observed in universes. Instalments are multi-layered in that they suggest different degrees of narrative, from a self-contained possibility to an overarching entity. The signs used can appeal to multiple universe conceptions or can be limited to cater to a normative version. In my model, the freedom to play outlines how the different layers are presented and explored when evoking a universe. This playful semiotic approach will thus foreground the privileged characteristics of universe models, centred on structuring of additive comprehension.

Through this approach I present two heuristic models arising from different approaches to additive comprehension, namely the intellectual property and curatorial universe. These models introduced here will be elaborated in the following chapter but stand out due to their approach to additive comprehension. To this end in this chapter I first outline how additive comprehension differs from traditional comprehension as an explanation for current player actions. This section defines additive comprehension as a proactive form of comprehension, structured by player actions.

The next step is to analyse how additive comprehension is achieved in the limited take of AC. This will be done, after an explication of AC as a franchise, through a textual analysis of the fictional world of AC and how this becomes playable in the games. The goal is to illuminate how universes typically are evoked nowadays and illustrate what elements in AC are used to create a normative version. Procedurality, explanation, and clever positioning of the player contribute to a normative version of a universe.

The second part is the situated reflection on the act of playing AC. I look into how the limited play in AC privileges universe characteristics over others. From those interrelations and manifestations a generalised heuristic model of the intellectual property governed universe arises. Unpacking this model's limitations on play can show alternative modes of additive comprehension that conjure a universe. The curatorial universe will function as alternative model due to different characteristic biases, relying on rigid boundaries but a negotiable possible world expanded with every evocation. These two models foreground the dynamics possible in designing for additive comprehension and thereby show salient characteristics of universe models that inspire different analyses.

Following this method I address the following:

1. Comprehension in transmedial universes should be seen as proactive, relying on the player to pursue information and actively deal with the construction of the space of play.
2. AC belongs to the intellectual property universe model, a normative form constructing a self-referential, symmetrical world, banking on the reconstruction of an embedded mystery identified by limited freedom to play.

3. Additive comprehension can also give rise to the curatorial universe relying on the constant negotiation by the player of how the presented signs fit in the universe of which the boundaries are well known.¹³

Additive comprehension thus is influential in shaping universes. Before its full power can be known it must first be distinguished from general comprehension of media products.

Comprehension Revisited

Understanding universes requires comprehension that is a tad bigger than the one required to understand an isolated stellar instalment. Young, in an interview with Jenkins, describes additive comprehension as a specific design method to shape interpretations. It relates to “that one piece of information that makes you look at the [instalments] differently” (Young in Jenkins 2006, 123). It not only changes the comprehension of the instalment but it “would shift your perception of what has happened in previous [instalments]” (ibidem). Clearly, Young is hinting at a different sort of comprehension – an additive version – than that described by narratologists or film scholars such as David Bordwell (1985) or Edward Branigan (1992). While Young calls additive comprehension one of “the kinds of story comprehension which are unique to transmedia storytelling” (Jenkins 2006, 124), he stays mum on what makes it so different. As a main form of audience engagement in universes and determinant in their structure, a more detailed understanding of this term is required.

As an additive form of comprehension it differs from ‘traditional’ comprehension of narrative. Branigan provides a model centring on the managing of “hierarchies of knowledge,” understood as the distribution and acquisition of information among the audience and characters (1992, 74). No one is ever omniscient but the audience has the capacity to compare disparate versions to gain the most complete image, thus leading to increased comprehension of a story. Branigan states that the information available to the player in relation to the on-screen characters “has the merit of suggesting broadly how the spectator is being asked to respond to a given narrative situation” (1992, 75). He distinguishes between suspense, mystery and surprise as a response to having more, equal or less knowledge than the characters respectively (ibidem).

¹³ A note on playing is required. The previous chapter outlined a model of play as an epistemological tool to understand transmedial universes. However, in this analysis, a preconception is adopted that players are actually interested in constructing and investing in a transmedial universe. Jenkins points out that “each franchise entry needs to be self-contained” (2006, 98) so it is possible to outright reject the appellation to a transmedial universe. In order to ascertain the role of additive comprehension in the construction of universes however such rejection will be ignored.

Comprehension in traditional narratives then counts as balancing of information, which structures the engagement with the tale, and is orchestrated by a top down authority.

Comprehension as top down determined distribution of information takes a specific shape in traditional forms of world building. Comprehension in this case arises from the positions from which the world (i.e. narrative information) is relayed to the audience. Kattenbelt, when discussing the construction of possible worlds in theatre, introduces the heuristic category of “auctorial authority” (1991, 96; my translation).¹⁴ Utilising *auctor* as operative term, this authority is related to its Latin meaning of ‘the one responsible,’ which could take many shapes ranging from creator, builder or witness to relay, human or not (ibidem). Kattenbelt argues that the positioning of the auctor “acts as determinant for the way the spectator is skewed in the observing and experiential creation of the possible world” (idem, 99; my translation) and thus, through information control and channelling, will determine the mode and form of comprehension.

Kattenbelt distinguishes three ideal positions for the auctor to relegate the world from. The dramatic position sees the auctor hidden behind the created world which therefore has to be enjoyed on its own merit. In this case the world is there to be enjoyed by the player on its own, requiring an “action-motivated orientation” (Kattenbelt and Raessens 2003, 422). The epic position sees the auctor as an observer outside or next to the possible world. Through the auctor’s reflection on the created world the audience is led to comprehension. Finally the lyrical position places the auctor within the world as experiential subject, forcing the audience to an “affective perception,” for the world is only comprehended through the experiences of the auctor in traditional comprehension (ibidem). These positions never occur in such pristine isolation but do explain how a top down auctor could affect the distribution of information.

With the advent of convergence culture however the positions of power have changed and top down authorities are not in full control of information anymore. Transmedial universes are symptomatic of this new climate, which rubs off on their forms of comprehension. Not only does comprehension require participation, the hierarchies of knowledge have become asymmetrical. A universe is spread over multiple instalments and not every player will indulge in all of them resulting into different distributions of knowledge. The player is now in control of the depth of knowledge of a narrative but this does not mean information dissemination cannot be structured or skewed. Branigan’s three modes of engagement still hold. An abundance of information may suit highly emergent universes catering to the suspense of discovery, while

¹⁴ The original Dutch dubs this the *auctorale instantie*. The translation of ‘*instantie*’ into authority is not ideal. *Instantie* refers to a more abstract entity that fulfils the role of the auctor, not necessarily human, singular or existing. Authority already has an anthropomorphic quality to it, though not necessarily. Still, this translation is chosen, for Kattenbelt explains that “de auctorale instantie tot op zekere hoogte een *autoriteitsfunctie* vervult” (1991, 96), already hinting at the role of authority present in the term.

canalised and normative universes thrive on the careful orchestration of what knowledge is gathered, such as in a mystery.

Within this new power distribution Kattenbelt's use of the world auctor proved historically fortunate. As 'the one responsible' the auctor now makes up the joint actions of the players as well as the designers, who both function as creators and instigators of actions, especially in games. Comprehension turned proactive in its pursuit of (modes of) knowledge by the players instead of just the dissemination by designers. Whether dramatic, epic or lyrical, the position of the player still impacts on how story information is gathered, even with this newfound power. As acting agents in a self-contained world or as reflecting authorities the positioning influences how players can infer an overarching universe.

Additive comprehension is a direct result of this proactive approach, which changes universe instalments into what philosopher Martin Seel calls presentative situations. Outlined in Seel's *Die Kunst der Entzweiung* (1985) and coherently explained by Kattenbelt (1991), Seel's presentative situation is approached as not simply communication of information but as a promise of experiences. The presentation consists of a body of ostensive signs presenting "not a provision of an everyday situation, but an event which is interpreted as collection of meaningful signs ... relating to either real or possible situations" (Kattenbelt 1991, 61; my translation). An instalment of a universe in a presentative situation is not regarded in isolation but as promising a larger experience than just what is represented. Watching an episode of *LOST* bombards the player with mysterious references that hint at something fishy going on – something beyond what is shown. The instalment thus promises a larger experience the player just has to uncover, in this case in the videogame instalments, books or webisodes. Such a presentative situation sees an increase in reference density, for each sign is ostensive – it refers to much more. The DHARMA sign in *LOST* for instance sends many a player's mind ablaze with its implications next to a simple bit of branding. This makes signs "situation invariant" – not relating to one meaningful context specifically but referring to the promise of many (ibidem). Alerted readers may already sense the connection to playful appropriation.

Kattenbelt paraphrases Seel and states that increased density of contexts in which signs can be meaningful "unleashes unthinkable possibilities within the knowledgeability of shareable experiences through the aesthetic objects" (1991, 62). This stems from the aesthetic disposition involved in engaging with such a density, meaning simultaneously receiving and experimenting with aesthetic signs. The presented context is experimented with to "make experiences" that signify the sudden density of possible references (idem, 57) – they are appropriated and contextualised in the hope of finding a meaningful context.¹⁵ This echoes the carnivalesque

¹⁵ The aesthetic disposition described by Seel shows a striking resemblance to the lusory attitude described by Sicart. Both explain that given a specific situation engaged with, either in the pursuit of

embracing of alternatives, laughing at the existing order in lieu of a new pursued experience. Players can, for instance, infer relations and produce hypotheses in order to signify all the newly interpretable signs. The sheer abundance of fan hypotheses explaining the many LOST mysteries (and the subsequent plot holes at the end of the series) attest of this. This can mean many subjective, autotelic interpretations of the newly presented promise of a universe.

Additive comprehension is then comprehension as proactive pursuit of experiences in an increased density of signs signifying a multitude of possible worlds. In other words, it is the *pursuit* of meaningful info instead of its unfolding, which according to Kattenbelt “provide[s] the possibility to observe and experience oneself in the created world” (1991, 76).

While this sounds completely bottom up, plenty of design possibilities to limit subjective interpretative freedom still remain. Kattenbelt explains that the signs are judged on expression, materiality and structure (1991, 61). Regarding the expression of the sign, or the level of ambiguity, explanation can reduce the reference density by cutting off possibilities of interpretation. The materiality, such as a sign’s relation to the medium, affords certain interpretations while cutting off others as well. Structure is the central determinant though. The increased density can be employed in a directional sense, using the increased reference possibility to allude to a specific version more often. Cross-referencing within the world can then create *internal coherence*, more in line with a subcreation whose details cater to one world. A plethora of fan theories may exist but if multiple instalments keep referring to one sequence of events only then who are we to think differently? Furthermore, what is deemed possible in a universe is defined more strictly through such forms of canalised additive comprehension. This is, however, only one way to design for additive comprehension, with the main question being how the sudden density of experience potential is limited and/or exploited.

While not necessarily new,¹⁶ additive comprehension differs from its traditional counterpart due to its new proactive nature focused on the player, as shown in table 2. The canalisation of information highlights models of different manifestations of transmedial universes – approaches central in forming heuristics. AC as exemplary case offers insights into how universes can indulge in or eschew this new form of comprehension.

experiences or striving for play, the provided context is received and interpreted. In order to create a playful context from the one given or to make experiences to make a situation familiar, both positions suppose an appropriation of means into a new context of signification. The full nuance between the playful appropriation and more performative variant exceed the scope of this thesis but can prove insightful in the furtive balance between the two concepts.

¹⁶ While Young sees additive comprehension as one of the new forms of comprehension belonging to transmedia storytelling, it is not novel in any case. While current media do cater more to aesthetic play or production than simply aesthetic observance, the presentative situation characterising the transmedial universe was already present in large strokes in theatre, as Kattenbelt shows (1991, 96).

Table 2 Traditional vs. Additive Comprehension.

Characteristic	Traditional Comprehension	Additive Comprehension
<i>Narration</i>	Hierarchies of knowledge	Body of ostensive signs
<i>Situation</i>	Communicative	Presentative
<i>Information</i>	Divulged	Pursued
<i>Auctor</i>	Writer/Director/Narrator	(Steerable) Player
<i>Meaningful product</i>	Coherent Story	(Subjective) Internal coherence

“I have so many questions” – Canalised Additive Comprehension

Armed with transcended comprehension, the larger galactic entities should be available. Additive comprehension is a proactive form of comprehension that structures players’ inferring of a larger world from an ostensive collection of signs. How the collection is seen as presentative and how the interpretation is guided are key design criteria underlying different universe models. AC’s universe foregrounds varying takes on additive comprehension throughout its development since 2007. Its development and approach to play show the conjuring of transmedial universes and the privileging of specific characteristic to attain a normative version. But what content actually counts as signs? What is it that AC urges the player to conjure?

The Universe of Assassin’s Creed

The AC universe is characterised by an elaboration of human history, replete with perpetual struggles, conspiracies, and cover-ups. In this universe, the First Civilization – the Precursors – was a technologically advanced civilization responsible for the creation of the human race as slave workforce. Through mind-controlling artefacts called Pieces of Eden, shown in figure 3 and 4,¹⁷ the Precursors ensured the humans’ obedience and made themselves be revered as gods. However, due to interbreeding between humans and Precursors, several human generations became impervious to mind-control. Two humans, Adam and Eve – those of Biblical fame, - stole the Apple of Eden and started a war between the two factions. Distracted by the war the two factions were surprised by a coronal mass ejection causing heavy losses on both sides and driving the Precursors to extinction, but not before they could save their technological knowhow

¹⁷ Depicted here are the Apple and the Staff of Eden. However, multiple famous historical artefacts are actually pieces of Eden, such as the mysterious Crystal Skulls, the Shroud of Christ and several swords and Ankhs throughout history, mostly encountered in the online database game Assassin’s Creed: Initiates.

in three temples. With several humans in control of some Pieces of Eden, the future could be bent to their will, resulting in history as the player is familiar with (figure 5).¹⁸

This new power balance gave rise to a new struggle. Those humans controlling the pieces of Eden, their best known incarnation being the Knights Templars, giving them the name 'Templars', wanted to use the pieces of Eden to provide a 'rightful' path for humankind in their image. They were opposed by the descendants of the first hybrid human/Precursor members, known as the 'Assassins' due to their early role in assassinating their Precursor parents. The Assassins believe in the sanctity of free will and thus try to safeguard the Pieces of Eden from the Templars and leave their powers dormant. This resulted in a perpetual struggle throughout human history with Templars taking up positions of power through the Pieces of Eden or in their quest to acquire them and the Assassins preventing this by being true to their name.



Figure 3 The Apple of Eden.

¹⁸ Pieces of Eden were for instance responsible for many historical tales and miracles, such as the Parting of the Red Sea, the Trojan War, the miracles enacted by Jesus Christ, and the Biblical plagues that ravaged Egypt, achieved through mental projection.



Figure 4 Tsar Nicholas II with the Staff of Eden.



Figure 5 Napoleon holding the Staff of Eden, explaining his rise to power.

In AC instalments the Templars run Abstergo Industries. As Abstergo, they have developed a machine – The Animus, depicted in figure 6 – which can create a vivid simulation of its users genetic memory meaning that lives of ancestors can be explored in a virtual reality simulation. Basically it creates a third person videogame. Abstergo uses this machine to relive the lives of descendants of the Precursors to find out where Pieces of Eden are hidden. Desmond Miles, or subject 17, is Abstergo’s latest victim and the player’s reticule into the world. As the estranged son of the Assassin Mentor, Desmond unwillingly and unknowingly helps the Templars and gets caught between Abstergo’s desire for past truths, his Assassin past and his colleagues’ plot to get him out.

Three distinct layers provide signs required for additive comprehension:

1. Present Day: the unfolding of Desmond’s events or Abstergo’s activities.
2. Past: the Animus simulations in a historical setting.
3. Indirect: What Gerard Genette called the peritext: “the interstices of the text, such as chapter titles and certain notes,” which nonetheless are still found in the same text (1997, 5). E.g. menus, multiplayer modes, the game code.

These three layers are present differently in each instalment. Their interrelations show structural considerations making up the AC universe and how these are made clear is closely tied to play design. Throughout the development of AC an increasingly constrained logic encroaches the universe, seen in the configuration of the universe characteristics.



Figure 6 The Animus Machine.

Dramatic Crusades

The first instalment, *ASSASSIN'S CREED* (Ubisoft Montreal 2007) (ACI), came out in 2007 and only marginally embedded itself in a larger universe due to its unproven success. Still, this game already hinted at the interaction between past and present day elements that would form the basis of AC's limited approach to transmedial universes.

In ACI the memories of Altaïr Ibn-La'Ahad, a member of the Assassin cult in Masyaf during the Crusades are explored. In order to regain his honour he must assassinate Templars who, according to his master Al Mualim, are planning to unleash a new world order through a secret weapon. These quests to assassinate Templars form the main gameplay. Altaïr must travel to cities such as Jerusalem, Acre and Damascus, climb buildings, eavesdrop and uncover mysteries to create the perfect killing context. The Templar victims hint to a bigger scheme going on, which implies that ACI is a presentative situation requiring additive comprehension to parse out more clues of this mystery.

ACI is not necessarily presentative though, as shown by Elam's insights into possible worlds. To go from a fragment of a universe to an overarching entity requires new info to be conceivable within the larger universe. The player at this point is aware that Altaïr's world is being monitored from the present day perspective. Yet the events encountered in the past have no bearing whatsoever on present day events. In Elam's terms, the past and present day are asymmetrical: "one world is accessible to another but not vice versa" (1980, 63) and this hinders universe evocation. For a sign to actually evoke a universe the "dramatic world has to be specified *from within* by means of references made to it by the very individuals who constitute it" (Elam 1980, 68). Both the past and the present do not necessarily specify a 'within' that constitutes as an overarching entity for individuals of both time zones never imply a larger context. The present day segments, although more knowledgeable, position every reference to a larger entity in the maliciousness of Abstergo making the past struggle merely a means to an end. The 'within' of the past only constitutes the current gameplay the player is involved with. The larger plot alluded to by the killed Templars refers to the ultimate betrayal of Al Mualim who wants the secret weapon – the Apple of Eden – for himself to create a new world order. This Apple is merely a McGuffin for the final boss fight and is not reflected upon as being one of pieces Abstergo is looking for during the majority of the game. Other collectibles, usually a prime way to suggest connections to a larger universe, only consists of flags from Crusade factions like Richard of Lionheart's army. Collecting all of them – and there's lots of them – only means better armour. This positions the game setting as the sole meaningful and largely unambiguous context. While an enjoyable experience, ACI does not indulge in universe building per se – remaining communicative instead of presentative. The game therefore plays it safe for the success had not been proven yet.

A possibility for change does arise at the end. After defeating Al Mualim and gaining possession of the Apple, Altaïr, and therewith Desmond and Abstergo, witness the projection of a map indicating further locations of Precursor artefacts. A cutscene shows Desmond suddenly seeing messages scribbled in blood by his predecessor, subject 16, hinting at a larger conspiracies (figure 7).



Figure 7 Subject 16's message to Desmond, forming a presentative situation.

The sudden ambiguous signs turn the ending presentative. The new information redefines all the signs the player has seen thus far in a kind of *gestalt* switch due to the sudden ostensive nature, referring to many possible scenarios. However, despite an increase in density, no new context to interpret these signs in is provided other than that of the game itself. The locations of Pieces of Eden are just other weapons to use in the Crusades and Desmond's visions are similar to Altaïr's Eagle Vision, hinting at Desmond becoming as skilled as Altaïr.¹⁹ Creating the ultimate cliff-hanger, ACI canalises additive comprehension through an internal coherence solely focused on the game itself. The game is the only context in which the increased density of signs holds meaning. This ensures that those players not interested in the larger mystery can still expect an enjoyable experience should a sequel arise.

Turning the player into a playable character in the world only, the early approach to comprehension in AC follows what Kattenbelt dubbed the "dramatic auctor," meaning that "the auctorial authority hides itself from the spectator behind the constructed possible world as if this only presents itself" (1991, 99; my translation). This limits additive comprehension (and the carnivalesque as well) to comprehension of what is provided. The player is placed in a detailed world – a subcreation – they can interact with, but which is not acknowledging the players as

¹⁹ Eagle Vision is a heightened sense of vision and the result of interbreeding between humans and Precursors. Pressing the left control stick turns the game world colourless apart from goal-related entities. Enemies become red and assassination targets become yellow. This heightened perception is essential in setting up assassination contexts and if Desmond achieved this power it is not unreasonable to think that in future instalments he would have to use his new skill in similar situations. (Spoiler: he doesn't).

multi-authors. While not even evoking a transmedial universe, this positioning already forces players to subscribe to the only presented world image there is.

(Re)Naissance of a Universe

ACI's game focus was emulated in its sequels. In Assassin's CREED II (ACII) the memories of Ezio Auditore, Desmond's ancestor from Renaissance Italy are traced, set only in simulations of Florence, Turin and Venice. The gameplay focus is on free-running to explore cities, reaching places one normally cannot reach, like the top of the Santa Maria del Fiore, in order to unearth the many mysteries of these ancient cities. This exploration also rubs off on ACII's missions, which require Ezio to reach a specific place, infiltrate a famous building and ultimately steal or assassinate something, instead of setting up contexts. Exploration in ACII can be seen as the game's core mechanic, meaning "game mechanics (repeatedly) used by agents to achieve a systemically rewarded end-game state" (Sicart 2008). This repeated reliance on exploration is part of the change in strategy towards additive comprehension.

ACII relies on its core mechanic to instil symmetry in the world. Spread throughout the cities, Subject 16 (of bloody scribbles fame) has hidden 'glyphs' throughout the Renaissance world for Desmond to find (figure 8). Moonlighting for hidden files, these glyphs show Pieces of Eden throughout human history and the larger struggle between Assassins and Templars. Finding them as Ezio requires climbing around cities, after which he climbs through a crack in reality into cyberspace, directly engaging with the present day elements. After solving Subject 16's mysteries, Ezio, highly confused, climbs back into his reality but with better understanding of his role as Assassin in a larger history. This opens up the possibility of positioning both the past and present elements into the same universe – the same 'within.' Awareness in both past and present that Assassins, Templars, and Pieces of Eden pervade history makes actions in both time periods conceivable and meaningful in larger context.

To achieve additive comprehension the new reference density – for every sign in past and present is now situation invariant – must be scouted for more signs that can be appropriated and used in the contextualisation of other signs. The expressivity of the sign is however explained, which canalises interpretation. A different context in which the many appropriated signs prove meaningful is provided by the game itself, such as the explanation given by Minerva at the end of ACII. This both forced awareness of a shared world on the players and characters and provided internal coherence for the many ambiguous signs encountered thus far.



Figure 8 Ezio facing the Omega shaped glyph.

ACII and its sequels also rely on the nature of the videogame – the materiality of the sign – to ensure each player contacts the larger universe. While still focusing on the historical simulation, Ezio is encouraged to explore the cities to gain a stronger position as an Assassin. In an early mission the player has to make Ezio climb to the roof of his base of operations and thereby is introduced to the existence of glyphs and how to engage with them during a scripted encounter. By weaving the general gameplay into the activities of additive comprehension AC relies on what game scholar Ian Bogost called procedurality that “refers to a way of creating, explaining, or understanding processes,” which “define the way things work,” often through an entrenched ways of doing things (Bogost 2007, 2-3). In his book *Persuasive Games*, Bogost explains how in videogames designers can determine ‘how a game works’ by structuring the procedures; what can and cannot be done by the player. Bogost goes as far as to claim that through a careful orchestration of procedures a rhetorical expression can be added to games. While not rhetorical in the sense Bogost discusses, which “entails persuasion – to change opinion or action” (idem, 29), ACII relies on the oft invoked procedure of exploration to furnish additive comprehension, ensuring a higher probability of encountering provided information due to this procedure dominating the game. This way each player will ultimately run into multiple glyphs by virtue of the limited procedures, effectively canalising the pursuit of knowledge into designed paths. ACII’s procedurality even accounts for Sicart’s well-known critique that “players don’t need the designer - they need a game, an excuse and a frame for play” (2010). The requirement of exploration to find the glyphs, spread throughout the city, remains largely optional. Instead it expects the players to play, to explore, to use the cities as

playgrounds, incorporating both structured gameplay as well as free play. Through this strategy ACII ensures that additive comprehension is part of the general gameplay and the discovered, ostensive signs are interpreted in predetermined fashion, even when goofing around.

With procedures ensuring contact, embedded narratives ensure a normative interpretation. Defined by Salen and Zimmerman as “pre-generated narrative content that exists prior to a player’s interaction with the game,” they are opposed to emergent narratives that “arise from the set of rules governing interaction with the game system” (2003, 383). In ACII, and its sequels ASSASSIN’S CREED: BROTHERHOOD (Ubisoft Montreal 2010) (ACB), ASSASSIN’S CREED: REVELATIONS (ACR) (Ubisoft Montreal 2011), and ASSASSIN’S CREED III (Ubisoft Montreal 2012) (ACIII), additive comprehension relies on *uncovering embedded information* that is normatively explained and contextualised through in-game comments or databases. The clearest example of this explication is found at the start of ACR where Subject 16 talks to Desmond in the Animus. Partly serving to refresh the player’s memory of the past games, this monologue clearly lays out the universe as it should be understood:

Desmond Miles. Your life has changed so much in so little time. Two months ago you were pouring shots for bankers and celebrities. But now look at you. You’re an Assassin. You’re one of us. One of the good guys, isn’t that nice? Men and women dedicated to protecting human life and liberty. Not like those Templars, cold and calculating autocrats, drunk with power and obsessed with order and all that. We’re doing our best to stop them. ... You remember the animus, the machine we use to unravel genetic memories from the lives of our ancestors. First you were Altaïr, a stoic twelfth century Assassin from the Holy Land. Then you were Ezio Auditore, a wealthy Italian with charisma and a talent for revenge. So, what do you three have in common? That’s right. The Apple of Eden. That strange artefact left behind by ‘those people’. The Ones Who Came Before.

The carnivalesque nature of play is limited to reconstruction by closely guiding appropriation. The monologue at the start of the game provides the parameters in which the newly presented signs have to be appropriated. As such, AC creates an internal coherence amongst ostensive signs.

This internal coherence is embedded in collectibles, for instance, the glyphs or Animus Fragments in later instalments. These are explicitly marked on the in-game map, facilitating their discovery. Functioning as embedded narratives, these collectibles offer coherent explanations of what has been discovered and how it functions in the larger picture. Exemplary in this are the emails between Desmond and his colleagues, which the player must open at

specific moments in the game. In ACIII technician Shaun Hastings mails Desmond about mysterious artefacts handled by the main antagonist Haytham Kenway:

Though I suppose Haytham's amulet is TECHNICALLY a Piece of Eden, it's not particularly exciting. It functions as a key and, well, that's about it. I know, I know... we're all used to these things being incredibly powerful (and thus rather dangerous). But this one is neither (ACIII).

Shaun canalises additive comprehension through these emails. Instead of leaving the artefacts as ambiguous elements open to player hypotheses, tested through transmedial engagement, these emails cut off information gathering in the game by providing an interpretation by an 'expert.' This shows that mystery and collectibles can be used to give the player clear clues on how the universe must be understood. Talk about buzzkill.

Taking this further, in a way *the game itself* turns into an embedded narrative containing salient pieces of narrative information. Indirect signs further enhance this attitude. When playing the multiplayer in ASSASSIN'S CREED IV: BLACK FLAG (Ubisoft Montreal 2013) (ACIV) for instance, the player may notice sudden flickers of images in the screen during the introductory video such as a woman's face (figure 9). While meaningless in multiplayer, these images illustrate that Juno, the Precursor *deus ex machina* of the franchise, has infiltrated the internet. Playing the multiplayer in ACR, ACIII and ACIV successfully will also grant access to Abstergo files, providing a Templar perspective on the world already encountered.²⁰ The player can even become what game scholar Joost Raessens labelled an "outlaw," operating outside of the game code (2014, 106). ACIV affords this restructuring attitude by hiding some narrative information in the sound files, where the player can find a message from a key character in the game who mocks players for their perseverance.

While still playing as dramatic auctor through a character in the world, hints of what Kattenbelt calls the epic auctor intrude in this second phase. As an observing subject *outside* the possible world who both constructs this world and reflects on it (Kattenbelt 1991, 99-100), this epic author cannot act within its own world but has unlimited access. The game thrives on a dramatic engagement with a subcreation, which an epic auctor must construct from discovered elements. Critical reflection on alternatives is limited by a mystery invoked through the many ostensive signs such as glyphs. This lets the appropriation of signs be controlled through the orchestrated disclosure of information, which includes what counts as 'the truth' within the

²⁰ By putting this perspective in the multiplayer it mostly caters to the forensic fans who want to construct the world. It does not present new information on the universe as a whole, just another perspective, ensuring that every player still has the same access to the universe.

mystery. Additive comprehension in this phase thus is canalised through the controlled release of information, aligning the pursuit of information with the core, designable, gameplay.



Figure 9 Juno's face glitching the screen during the multiplayer introduction video.

The Rise of the Essentialist Take

The end of ACIII saw another changing point, also within the franchise, that furthered the additive comprehension canalisation started in ACII. Creative designer Alex Hutchinson, argued that AC's universe "has certain immutable laws and there's a base kind of tone to it, but within that you can do whatever you want" (Sipple 2013). Desmond's present day elements were an obstacle; a human can only have so many ancestors around the world. Furthermore, Desmond's sections received much negative criticism for they basically undercut gameplay to tell a normative interpretation of the universe. At the end of ACIII, Desmond was killed off, with the developers telling that "we don't want to definitively end the universe, but we can have storylines that have endings" (Serrano 2014). With Desmond gone however, the present day reflection on the universe was gone. How can additive comprehension be structured and controlled in absence of a top down interpreting agency; especially now that the universe became an explicit goal for the developers?

With the entirety of human history now open for inclusion in the universe, ACIV and ASSASSIN'S CREED: ROGUE reverted to a strategy not seen since ACI: relying on an asymmetrical world. Taking feedback from ACIII, which was criticised for how "the missions' unnecessary prescriptiveness sometimes undermines the sense of freedom that the rest of the game works so hard to create" (MacDonald 2013), ACIV and ROGUE turned the past setting into a self-contained but engaging world. Both take place in the pirate infested waters of America of the 18th century, with the former in the Caribbean and the latter in Nova Scotia. Although the majority of gameplay still centres on exploring – the sea this time – exploration lost its forensic character.

Players are free to play pirate instead of Assassin for hardly any hints to the larger universe are present in the historical simulation. Instead, both games let their protagonists seek McGuffin's that have no function in the present day segments and thereby, like ACI, are not a presentative situation that requires additive comprehension to become meaningful, instead offering a fully furnished subcreation.²¹

Instead, world building happens in the present day segments. With Desmond dead, a new player substitute had to be chosen. Instead of having a character to identify with, seen through a third person perspective, the player now is a silent employee of Abstergo entertainment, seen through a first person perspective. Abstergo has refashioned itself into a producer of entertainment experiences. Employees explore the memories of promising subjects to see what works as a good entertainment experience. In ACIV the player employee is actually working on making a little game called ASSASSIN'S CREED IV. However, this front is actually a cover by the Templars to have multiple people scouring memories to find the Pieces of Eden. This revelation becomes clear in a strategy familiar to the franchise: exploration. Helped by Assassins from previous instalments, the employee is led through the office and ordered to hack computers. This is where pieces of information are acquired that contextualise not only the player's current activities, but also past adventures. Again, the game banks on an explicit appellation of the exploration mechanic to find all the collectibles. The collectibles subsequently explain and position gaps in the events from past games and the wider universe, resulting in a normative but immersive subcreation.

The player in the present day segments is now positioned *within* the universe itself through the first person perspective and the abundant references to the player's reality. The play setting for instance introduces familiar marketing material, an office in Montréal, Canada and even other games such as FARCRY 3 (Ubisoft Montreal 2012). ASSASSIN'S CREED: UNITY (Ubisoft Montreal 2014) even turns the player into a gamer playing a game that is monitored by Abstergo. This gives the player an experiential account of what it is like to live in the AC world with the referential density now incorporating daily activities as well.

Faced with so many new possibilities, additive comprehension is structured differently to aid the player's interpretation. Being embedded in Abstergo, many of the collectibles provide Abstergo's take on the events of the universe. This Abstergo point of view explores the sudden rise of Abstergo as entertainment company and the position of the Assassins after Desmond's death, effectively filling up the holes between instalments. This is done by explicitly referring to

²¹ Both do deal with endgames related to the First Civilization. ACIV ends at 'The Observatory', a tool to see through someone else's eyes and ROGUE centres around First Civilization structures that hold the Earth together. However, in the present day segments, these elements do not seem very important, either because they are not referenced anymore, or because the past simulations shows the object is obliterated, as is the case in ASSASSIN'S CREED: UNITY (Ubisoft Montreal 2014).

events occurring in other instalments, such as reports on viable characters for products, like Ezio, Altaïr and ACIII's Connor with explicit reference to ACI, ACII and ACIII. Even Assassins Nikolai Ourolov from the comics *Assassin's Creed: The Fall* (Stewart and Kerschl 2011) and *Assassin's Creed: The Chain* (Stewart and Kerschl 2012) or Avéline de Grandpré, the heroine from the PSP game *ASSASSIN'S CREED III: LIBERATION* (Ubisoft Montreal 2012) are mentioned here. This explicit cross-referencing has two effects. On the one hand it allows explicit marketing of transmedial products to aid additive comprehension, further canalising the interpretation into official channels and creating some clarity in the sudden abundance of signs. On the other hand, media products are now included in the possibility of the universe. This forces the players *as consumer* to reflect on their role in the universe, with consumer being the most fruitful position for achieving additive comprehension.

Within this new positioning and depth of information, the absence effect structures the expressivity of the signs in order to guide the player from product to product. ACIV, for instance, introduces Reginald Birch briefly, but with enough clarity to denote this character's importance. In the novel *Assassin's Creed: Forsaken* (Bowden, 2012) Birch is revealed to murder Edward Kenway after a long friendship. Characters like Birch draw attention to themselves due to their lacking information. Their nature as a synecdoche – representing signs whose explication must be sought elsewhere – makes these signs particularly useful in a franchise consisting of a network of products. Additive comprehension in this final phase is then aligned with a marketing ploy raising awareness of where players can find new information, thus more or less turning into a multimedia exploration of an existing network.

As dramatic auctor, the player is suddenly in a larger, but also more familiar, universe due to this blend with reality. The recurrent appellation of the player's real life world tampers the epic, detective position with aspects of what Kattenbelt calls the "lyrical auctor ... a reflexive posture towards one's own subjectivity and an expressive one towards the outside world" (1991, 100; my translation). Suddenly thrust into the action, players must consider their consumption practices as meaningful in the AC universe. Through cross-referencing of own products and leaving purposeful gaps with explicit hints on how to explore these, the designers contain the universe in an experiential but subcreated bubble. Additive comprehension in AC then ultimately creates a universe in which the player is encouraged to consider further consumption of the products as part of the universe.

AC in AC

Throughout the development of AC, additive comprehension has become more and more canalised, resulting in a closer internal coherence that guides the ever growing reference density into a normative subcreation. As charted in table 3, additive comprehension in AC shows a

gradual perfection of control and increase in scope, catering to different designed forms of play in each phase. Still, the franchise always thrives on a subcreation in which possibility is largely determined by the existence of cross references. This holistic analysis has shown how a universe's scope can be related to player positioning. Central then are the analysis insights into how additive comprehension can be canalised but still cater to different forms of engagement. This approach must now be generalised into a heuristic model and problematized with an alternative.

Table 3 Construction of the AC universe through additive comprehension.

Characteristic	Phase one (ACI)	Phase two (ACII, ACB, ACR, ACIII)	Phase three (ACIV, ROGUE, ACU)
<i>Symmetry</i>	Asymmetrical	Symmetrical	Asymmetrical in game Symmetrical with reality
<i>Auctor</i>	Dramatic	Dramatic Epic outlaw	Dramatic Epic outlaw Lyrical embedding
<i>Possibility</i>	World determined	Procedurally determined Explained	Procedurally determined Explained Cross-referencing
<i>Narrative</i>	Game world play	Embedded	Embedded Playing as part of narrative
<i>Scope</i>	Game world	Games and peritexts	Games and reality

Parallel Worlds - Problematizing Additive Comprehension

As if the stars of the essentialist take are the prettiest in the sky, AC approaches the evocation of a universe by gradually introducing the players to a highly orchestrated and explicated presented possible world. Instead of relying on player appropriations, the signs are signified and explained in-universe through cross-references and real world parallels. Additive comprehension is guided to achieve a provided subcreation, cutting off alternative experiences made possible by the carnivalesque. This paragraph will set out on a situated reflection in order to characterise AC's approach as a heuristic model, the intellectual property universe; a reflection whose principles will iterate in the following chapter. Exploring an unlimited form of

play, this section will also provide an alternative model, the curatorial universe, which will start an overview of contending constructions of universe characteristics.

The Intellectual Property Universe

A situated reflection on the discovered treatise of AC can abstract its general features as well as limitations imposed on possibilities. Lammes explains that a situated reflection partly functions “as a means to show the position of the researcher as being simultaneously an observer and a participant” (2007, 28). Adapting this category to the player instead of the researcher, the position of the player in the universe relies heavily on an “implied player” (Aarseth 2007, 132). Adapting Wolfgang Iser’s implied reader, Aarseth defines the implied player as a “role made for the player by the game, a set of expectations that the player must fulfil for the game to ‘exercise its effect’” (ibidem). The player functions as a construct of the text. Relying on the procedurality of videogames as well as the dramatic positioning, the implied player in AC can be seen as a player who follows the rules. Autotelic and carnivalesque play are therefore disrupted. This player model is extremely limited and an exploration of alternatives is insightful in the pursuit of heuristic models that account for multiple audience practices.

The implied player thus follows orders in AC. The situatedness characterises what orders the player is expected to follow and the structure of these orders. Adapting Lammes’ play context to the textual system of play, the situatedness highlights the underlying invitations and expectations governing play. The downloadable content (DLC) packs are indicative of AC as commanding officer. This DLC provides a new storyline with the same mechanics as the game it could be downloaded in. In other words: it is a concentrated repetition of the model present in all the game instalments. ASSASSIN’S CREED IV: FREEDOM CRY (Ubisoft Montreal 2013), for instance, saw an elaboration of the character Adéwalé, the first mate of ACIV protagonist Edward Kenway. The DLC delves into Adéwalé’s personal values and convictions, generally related to liberating slaves in Haiti, focussing on dramatic investment with the subcreation. The DLC subscribes more to videogame’s capability to “let the user of the world *become* and act as a character *in* the world, not just experiencing the world from the outside, but actually being transported inside it” as Klastrup and Tosca describe it (2004, 413). This structuring of additive comprehension serves to *deepen* the knowledge of the subcreation by providing more details.

This situating of the implied player as someone who immerses into a subcreation relies on mystery and embedded information. Branigan sees mystery as the player constantly having the same amount of knowledge as the characters since they both uncover new information simultaneously (1992, 75). This allows the designers to carefully structure how the universe will be encountered. Hierarchies of knowledge are then still relevant as well as power distributions heralding back to traditional forms of comprehension now simply spread out over more

instalments. All evocation in the AC universe serves to position the player in a subcreation that can be explored but not expanded. Players cannot partake in any of the universe building or make headway with additive comprehension without subscribing to the possible world presented – similar to the characters in the hierarchies of knowledge.

The situatedness described above outlines the key principles and vocabulary that form AC's universe model, as well as an indication on how to analyse them. Generalised and abstracted, these characteristics can be turned into a model, seen in table 4. The categories of this model are determined by conspicuous design traits that privilege universe characteristics, found behind the play restrictions. Universes exhibiting traits present in table 4 can be judged on how they fit the other categories. Universes that do not exhibit such traits should then be judged on different categories. With the high degree of control and focus on a detailed and immersive subcreation as privileged characteristic, this universe shall be dubbed the *intellectual property universe (IP universe)*. Banking on more traditional techniques of world building and comprehension, such universes require different analytical approaches. The guiding of the player through a transmedial mystery or how traditional comprehension models explain what involves the audience in such a fragmented product are but a few stellar possibilities fitting this universe.

Table 4 The Intellectual Property universe as understood through additive comprehension.

Universe Characteristic	Intellectual Property Universe
<i>Overarching Entity</i>	Normative embedded Narrative
<i>Fragmented Subcreation</i>	Dramatic auctor in detailed macrostory
<i>Possibility</i>	Top down explicated
<i>Multi-Author</i>	Canalised through procedurality
<i>Forensic Fans</i>	Guided by Mystery
<i>Transmediality</i>	In service of traditional narration
<i>Comprehension</i>	Traditional Internal Coherence provided

The Curatorial Universe

Looking at one universe can get boring pretty quick, even with proper telescopes. Having characterised the heuristics underlying the essentialist take (which therefore is not as essentialist as it may seem), problematizing the implied player can yield different models. Looking at an implied player that can utilise all play facets identified by Sicart introduces the *curatorial universe*. With alternative play possibilities, additive comprehension can result in different universe conceptions, exemplified by the Batman franchise.

Media scholars Roberta Pearson and William Uricchio have discussed the structure of the Batman universe. They stress that Batman “has no ur-text set in a specific period, but has rather existed in a plethora of equally valid texts constantly appearing” (1991, 185). Brooker even states that “Batman is inherently multiple and ... the character is an amalgam of all his different forms” (2012, 151). This means that contrary to AC Batman does not have a singular macrostory. Additive comprehension then is about finding one meaningful context in a presentative situation. Instead, *each* instalment *presents* a possible world of Batman; a possible furnishing of the universe, thus adding to the reference density instead of providing contexts. Still, appropriation is not entirely free. The context in which all signs are meaningful is largely fixed, consisting of stable character traits, canonical events, recurrent characters, a stable setting and consistent iconography, according to Pearson and Uricchio (1991, 186-187). Internal coherence in the universe is a skeleton, a set of parameters, which is familiar to the player. Players therefore always know more about the universe than the characters in the instalment; suspense arises from how an instalment makes Batman deal with a situation. How and with what events these parameters are filled then creates the universe for the player – it defines what instalments are quintessentially Batman. Playing with Batman is thus mostly an autotelic engagement, judging how each instalment fits with what counts as Batman, effectively forming a subjective internal coherence. This invariably means the carnivalesque destruction of some takes on the character but also the reconstruction of instalments in the wake of appropriated ones. The curatorial universe thus arises due to players *curating* ostensive instalments into a subjective formation of the universe. It is up to the player to lay out the expectations of suspense – what has happened before and what characterises Batman. This means that within the iconic characteristics, all versions are as valid.

An example of this autotelic play in the curatorial universe can be seen *Batman: Year Three* (Wolfman 1989b) and *A Lonely Place of Dying* (Wolfman 1989a). These showcase Batman’s bizarre behaviour after the death of Jason Todd, the second Robin. These presentations of a possible world can contextualise what Batman is in a new way, forever casting a shadow on the sanity of the Caped Crusader as being ‘one bad day away’ from becoming a psychopath. The universe then is defined based on a personal perspective on Batman, which influences what counts as relevant. ‘My’ Batman might be Adam-West as camp Batman, while someone else might swear by the growling Christian Bale from the Christopher Nolan films – all versions are a valid form of Batman (figure 10). Instead of privileging the subcreated world, the curatorial universe relies on its multi-author nature to house a multiverse of possible subjective iterations of a world. While evocation also relies on different viewer practices, it is in the interaction discussed next chapter, that the unique elements of this universe are operationalised.

Relying on creating internal coherence among instalments, the curatorial universe as a model can be characterised as in table 5. The elements set out there differ from the IP universe and thus illustrate the necessity of different approaches to universes displaying these characteristics. Spawning from autotelic and carnivalesque play, this model allows players to fit divergent instalments in the universe as equal constructors. Curating, as appropriation of instalments into a rigid but negotiable context, conjures this universe. Additive comprehension treats each instalment as a possible source of meaning awaiting curation into many alternative versions. The lack of macrostory makes all subjective versions contained in the signs equally valid. The distribution of knowledge in which the player is constantly more knowledgeable lets the evocation be a matter of negotiation instead of explication, affording a suspenseful engagement with instalments – how will Batman get out of *this* pickle? Therefore, it privileges the multi-author nature over a subcreation, while still functioning within clearly demarcated levels of possibility.



Figure 10 The many equally valid forms of Batman.

Table 5 The curatorial universe as understood through additive comprehension.

Universe Characteristic	Curatorial Universe
<i>Overarching Entity</i>	Familiar Parameters
<i>Fragmented Subcreation</i>	Epic auctor without a macrostory
<i>Possibility</i>	Subjective negotiations
<i>Multi-Author</i>	Multiple valid versions
<i>Forensic Fans</i>	Curating to cater to subjective suspense
<i>Transmediality</i>	Medium irrelevant in evoking a universe
<i>Additive Comprehension</i>	Experimenting filling of the universe. Internal coherence made with provided means

Conclusion

This chapter presented two models to help in universe analyses. AC provided insights into how additive comprehension could be structured into a normative version of a universe, forming the IP universe. Problematizing AC's design and implied player yielded the curatorial universe. In this model, a shared universe concept is evoked due to familiar elements in every instalment but, as multi-author format, the player can determine the construction.

However, the varying sorts of universes arising from the described additive comprehension do not only belong to cases outlined here. The dimensions of subcreation and multi-author are different perspectives along a continuum of universe building. Both characteristics seem to be formative for transmedial universes. While not mutually exclusive, the two are antithetical and analyses should pay attention to what universe model is dealt with to focus attention on the most influential characteristics, as outlined in figure 11. The continuum is closely related to the power of the player to make personalised versions of a universe or having a completely furnished universe provided. In other words, they rely on *agency* which must be understood better in order to properly outline universe models and their approaches.

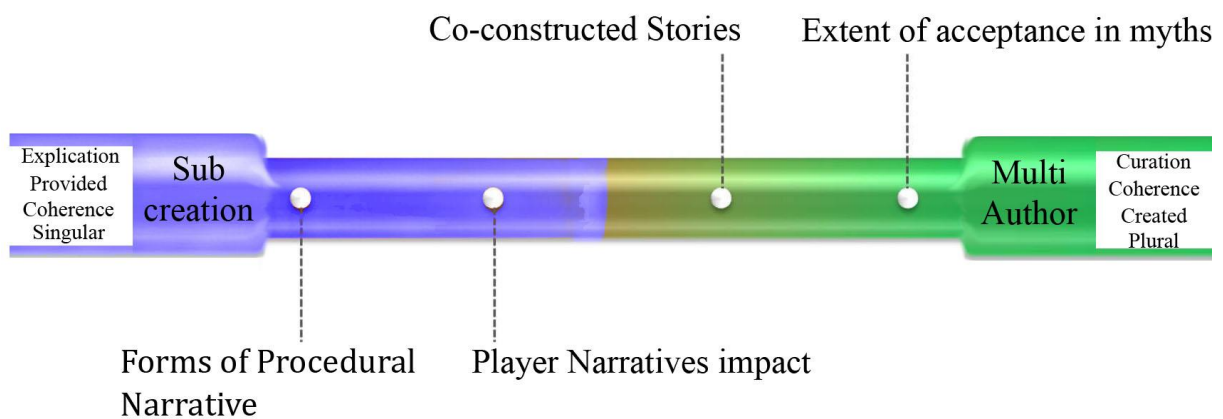


Figure 11 Continuum of the subcreation and multi-author perspective, and corresponding analysis topics.

Colossal Cosmic Powers

Agency in Transmedial Universes

The closest universe to Earth, the Andromeda Galaxy, is 25000 light years away (2.37×10^{17} km). No way we will be interacting with that anytime soon. Transmedial universes however rely to a large degree on our capacity to interact with them. Last chapter I dealt with one section of the engagement with transmedial universes: their evocation. The IP and curatorial universe characterise different configurations of transmedial universe characteristics on a continuum of normativity. In this chapter I look at the interaction with the universe by guiding the epistemology of play through the principle of agency. Can the player construct new additions or add to a universe? Or is the player doomed to merely link or select instalments? These different roles of player can be designed for and thereby are the foundation of heuristic models. Depending on the types of play afforded within (and with) the boundaries of the universe, I introduce the concept universe, next to the IP and curatorial universe, as third heuristic model and argue the following:

- Agency in universes can be reactive, selective or productive.
- Agency determines the structures of transmedial universes, through its influence on the games of stake regarding what is deemed possible.
- The concept universe is the universe relying on productive agency while the IP-governed universe is its extreme opposite structured around the reactive kind.

Agency is defined by narrative scholar Janet Murray as “the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices” (1997, 126). The degree in which the player can perform meaningful actions with lasting effects will obviously impact heavily on the form of a universe. The STAR WARS franchise for instance allowed its audience a degree of agency. While obeying to a strict series bible with lot of pre-plotting (Williams 2009, 29), writers could add to the universe and fans scoured the many instalments to create a

continuous chronology and chart the universe.²² Player agency was encouraged to instil engagement and show gaps in the universe that could be filled through officially licensed products.²³ After the corporate takeover of the franchise by the Disney Corporation in 2012 the agency changed: “Under Lucasfilm President Kathleen Kennedy’s direction, the company for the first time ever has formed a story group to oversee and coordinate all Star Wars creative development” (Starwars.com 2014). Player agency to add and even infer a universe was cut off “[i]n order to give maximum creative freedom to the filmmakers and also preserve an element of surprise and discovery for the audience” (idem). With agency to create now squarely in the hands of the designers, players are positioned as passive consumers of a pre-furbished product. The agency in the interaction with a universe then foregrounds formal design decisions that characterise a universe model. These decisions can be found on a textual level in afforded actions, suggested gameplay, and requirements of abstract properties. These textual dimensions foreground where the boundaries of the universe are placed, determining what is possible.²⁴

The problem with agency as a concept to probe universes is that its domains of functioning are unclear. Next to Murray, comparative media scholar Elizabeth Evans gives a general definition in stating that agency means that “user’s input affects what happens onscreen [...] but also that the player perceives themselves as having control over what they are seeing” (2008, 206), thereby equating agency to control. Later on she argues that agency takes on a different shape depending on what medium is encountered, with television agency differing from videogame agency. If agency is indeed medium specific as Evans suggest, then agency in transmedial universes occurs in multiple variations. These, after all, exist by virtue of different media. Instead of a general definition, a more granulated approach to agency can cater to different player positions in various media. This means looking closely at the relation between media in transmedial universes and especially the role of medium-specific elements or modes of reception. Last chapter for instance showed procedurality as implemented in the evocation of additive comprehension, but in structuring interaction different medium qualities can be called upon.

²² All these findings have been agglomerated on the wiki site Wookieepedia, named after one of the species in the STAR WARS Universe. A fan product in its entirety, this site was accepted and incorporated by official STAR WARS channels, appearing as credible source on the official website. This changed after the Disney corporate takeover.

²³ To be fair, this was possible because the instalments other than the official films and television series – the Expanded Universe – were not considered officially canon. This meant that any canon products did not have to take the events occurring in the expanded universe into account and could override them. However, this also meant a limited degree of creative control over new instalments, besides the series bible containing general parameters (Williams 2009, 29).

²⁴ An important caveat must be provided though. The agency to add instalments to a universe is usually a legal matter but, as explained in the introduction, this thesis focuses on textual poetics instead of the political economies of universes. The specific rules and regulations set out by the corporate designers, found in license agreements and copyright laws, are not discussed here.

This chapter targets how player actions are incorporated into manifestations of transmedial universes. In line with the implied player of my method, player actions are understood as responses to invitations of action in the games. More playful actions are inferred from the characteristics of play, resulting in a textual playful construct of possible player actions. First, I compare different takes on active audience engagement to introduce the levels at which agency can occur in a universe. I create the categories of agency in, agency to link, and agency to add instalments. Subsequently, a textual analysis of the AC universe will provide a holistic account of agency in the IP universe and the way it can be put to use to create a normative subcreation. Finally the limitations imposed on the carnivalesque nature of play are broken down to explore how other universes are formed or can be formed if play is less limited. This last section will touch on the different forms of interaction in the curatorial universe, ultimately landing on a new model – the concept universe.

The Mantles of Worldly Agency

Just like our own world consists of several mantles – terrestrial moving layers that influence pretty much everything– a transmedial world also has different levels at which agency can occur. Agency as a concept already has many applications in various disciplines. Understanding the domains and formations of agency in universes requires identifying the levels at which agency comes to the fore. Mostly discussed in media studies around *interactive* media, agency can be discussed in discourses around interactivity and medium specificity.

Interactivity

In the early 1990s interactivity became a buzzword that was applied profusely to digital media. Media scholars Aphra Kerr, Julian Kücklich and Pat Brereton argue that, as a result interactivity “must be regarded as a political, rather than a descriptive, term, as it is used by many new media advocates to emphasise the user’s control over the medium, while de-emphasizing the medium’s control over the user” (2006, 72).

The ideological charge is problematic when dealing with transmedial universes due to its simplistic notion of change from traditional media, essentially disregarding forms of agency. The idea of a ‘passive spectator’ of ‘non-interactive’ film and television had already been exchanged for an active consideration through interpretation and meaning-making of content – a kind of cognitive interactivity (Hall 1980; Darley 2000). Granted, this form of interactivity does not give viewers agency over the content, like in computerised media. To accommodate both types, instead of a singular definition of interactivity, user freedom and intentional actions could better

be understood as a spectrum as suggested by literary scholar Marie Laure Ryan, when explaining hypertexts (2001). This way cognitive agency can also be included.

Ryan, following art historian Söke Dinkla, distinguishes three types of interaction: reactive, selective and productive (idem, 2005). Reactive interactivity “does not involve any kind of deliberate action on the part of the appreciator” (ibidem). While Ryan sees this kind of interaction as machines reacting to the environment, the aforementioned cognitive interaction with traditional media can be argued to belong to this category as well. The user is free to interpret as a reaction but does not have any intentional agency to act on it. Selective interactivity relates to the selection among selectable alternatives, like the forking path of a hypertext or the ultimately linear structure of a videogame. Finally, productive interactivity lets users leave a “durable mark on the textual world, either by adding objects to its landscape or by writing its history” (ibidem). These three modes of interaction indicate domains in which the player can gain agency. What shape this agency derives from the universe’s construction, thus looking at agency manifestations will foreground different models.

Medium Specificity

The relation between agency, interaction and the transmedial universe is also found in the use of media. Evans argues that depending on the medium engaged with, different forms of agency are afforded while others are limited. Given a transmedial game addition to a television series, she argues that “‘passive’ spectator positions, which are in fact positions of cerebral rather than physical interactivity, are desired by participants” and that “control over fictional characters is welcomed, but only so long as those fictional characters remain to serve as figures for the viewer to manipulate” (Evans 2008,223). Taking this argument further, the player’s agency is tied to focal points of the main medium in the universe.

Medium specificity as determining factor is a contested line of argument in media studies though, with many discarding clear distinctions. Media boundaries are said to be vanishing due to remediation – the incorporation of media within each other (Bolter and Grusin 2000) – and more scholars act on the acknowledgment of media boundaries as discursive conventions (Rajewsky 2010). It is not my goal to contribute to the understanding of this debate. Instead, I take a pragmatic position in order to sidestep the ontological discussion. In transmedial configurations each medium makes a contribution other than an adaptation of the same content. Jenkins offers as examples that “a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction” (idem, 96). Evans’ earlier quoted remarks illustrate that the relations between specific media can influence the design of the universe (what function does each medium serve?) but also the experience of the player (what is expected after first contact?).

Each medium then has a strength that will influence the structure of the universe if utilised. Several scholars have identified such strengths. Games, for instance, are credited for their possibility of making the player present in the game world (Klastrup and Tosca 2004; Dubbelman 2013) or its control over and signification of space (Jenkins 2003; Wenz 2010). Film is lauded for its power to create a fictional world that is convincing but clearly different from the context in which it is viewed – a diegesis (Verstraten 1989; Kessler 2007), and television has its strength in character development (Evans 2008) but also in introducing viewers to procedures of an institution (Mittell 2009a).²⁵ The incorporation of the strengths can both determine forms of agency and highlight the biases present in universe constructions, elucidating different models.

Universe Agency Levels

Agency then is determined by the interaction capabilities – reactive, selective or productive – and the medium use in the content of the universe; a distinction echoed by Ryan (2001, 205). These domains, however, are anything but clear cut, for the content of the universe spans multiple media. To address agency in *the universe* then requires analysing it in three domains that together encompass the entire work as well as the specific media used, outlined in figure 12. The three mantles of the transmedial world are:

1. Freedom to act in instalments
2. Freedom to link instalment
3. Freedom to add to the universe



Figure 12 Different sorts of agency within (1) and between (2) instalments, and to add creations to the world (3).

Looking at the agency in these three domains in AC will foreground how agency can be used to emphasise the nature of universes as subcreations, control what is deemed possible and limit its

²⁵ These strengths of television are based on a more traditional view of the medium. Many scholars have argued that television is changing and has been in transition since at least 1986 (Spigel 2005, 86). A formative trend redefining strengths of television is what media scholar Esther van Ede calls “binge-publishing” in *Gaps and Recaps: Exploring the Binge-Published Television Serial* (2015). Making an entire season available from the get go not only changes publication practices, it also influences textual focal points in television series, for instance taking a different approach to recapping which may well affect how a universe can be interacted with. For a more detailed take on this rising trend, see (van Ede 2015).

multi-author nature. Just presenting a pleasurable experience is not enough anymore; interaction must be upgraded.

Killing by the Book – Agency in the IP Universe

Assassinating historical figures, climbing famous buildings; sounds like there is plenty of agency in AC. The universe complicates this however. In the three domains agency can occur, the form of interactivity and the role of the media must be determined to specify what sort of agency is afforded and how the characteristics of transmedial universes are influenced by these design choices. Again, the allowed forms of play determine what universe construction comes to the fore. As shown last chapter, AC embeds the player in a universe that can be uncovered, placing the role of constructing the universe in the hands of the designers while the player can only reconstruct. This does not mean the player is merely following orders. To discuss this, I scrutinise the forms of agency afforded in AC's normative take on a transmedial universe. This foregrounds how the universe characteristics can be orchestrated into models that strive for different forms of engagement.

Agency in an Instalment

A universe is encountered through its instalments. Then *what* is the player is granted control over in those outings? The approach to play can show the forms of agency arising from the construction of universe. In AC the player controls a Precursor descendant, whose movement and actions such as running, fighting, hiding or climbing, are subject to the player input. These measures of control allow the player to play around with this character. Exploration of the cities featured in the game, going on a killing spree, or even pretending to be an ordinary citizen are all actions afforded to the player that do not necessarily progress the game. Through its playful character, the context of the game is under the control of the player to the extent that it can be appropriated for specific autotelic goals. While this is a form of agency that can provide a pleasurable experience in itself, it is constituted by the interactive capabilities of the medium as Ryan outlines (1991, 205). The ability of videogames to give the player the possibility to play – to impact on what happens on the screen – is seen by many as their defining characteristic (Aarseth 2003; Lammes 2007). This mode of agency is expected when dealing with the macrostory of AC as individual instalments, but does not necessarily impact on the world. In fact, indulging too much in this freedom, like randomly killing civilians, will result in present day characters chastising the player for not behaving like their ancestor would and subsequent desynchronisation – an alternative to Game Over, since the player actually plays a subject in the

Animus machine.²⁶ The interaction forms specific to the medium are non-progressive and canalised even, although they do ensure additive comprehension through procedurality as shown last chapter.²⁷

Instead, AC games interact with the universe by revealing meaningful narrative additions through cutscenes that spur the story forward or give context to the required mission. These often have through a more cinematic mode of representation with varying camera angles. A cutscene in ACB, for instance, shows antagonist Cesare Borgia killing both his sister and the antagonist from ACII, Rodrigo Borgia. Protagonist Ezio (and the player) have been hunting these characters for two full games now, only to have the chance to deal with them taken away. AC robs the player of what Evans has called “a potential way for audiences to gain more control over the text as an omniscient observer-manipulator” (2008, 221). Even when the player is given control over the avatar during story exposition, the freedom is limited. At the start of missions the player often has to travel, accompanied by an ally who narrates current affairs. The player could choose to ignore this and run off, embracing the carnivalesque desire to destroy. This however results in desynchronisation, limiting the medium-specific agency to a canalised version of information gathering. Unsurprisingly, game scholar Paul Cheng characterises such gameplay moments as “cosmetic expansions of the standard cut-scene” (2007, 21).

This more reactive interaction, reminiscent of film, provides an exhilarating form of engagement with the universe of AC, despite the eschewing of games’ selective interactivity. As interactive movies, the instalments grant the player “representational agency,” defined by Cheng as “the feeling of being the star in an action movie” (2007, 17). AC’s reliance on cinematic camera angles does afford a deeper investment into the subcreated world, action genre or not. ACI even had the possibility to change the camera angle during cutscenes to fully cater to this cinematic transposition (figure 13 and 14). Next to that, each game lets players climb high buildings to ‘synchronise’ the environment, i.e. taking in the sites in order to add them to the mini-map. After this synching, the player can perform an eagle dive from great heights into the soft and safe (!)

²⁶ This even went as far as ACU removing the possibility to kill civilians completely. Through limits and procedures, the game thus ensures an optimal form of play that fits the narrative and serves only “semiotic resonance and semantic depth” (Darley 2000, 164). The only narrative agency the player really has in an instalment is to fail or succeed, for even the strategies deployed in fulfilling a mission are usually ignored or reduced to a preferred form of stealthy assassinations, ensured through optional mission elements, in the subsequent cutscenes.

²⁷ To be fair the balance between narrative and the formal capabilities of gameplay has been a contested topic since the beginning of game studies. Multiple approaches address games’ capacity to tell stories or construct specific narratives through space (Jenkins 2003; Wenz 2010). Jenkins for instance argues that games can have “embedded storytelling” in which discovered items or objects sought out by the player can, through a degree of interpretation, be turned into a continuous story (2003, 126). AC does not rely on such game specific storytelling for it is not up to the player to construct the story from resources. Instead, this is done through cutscenes over which the players have no agency whatsoever.

landing spot of a haystack. This dive is accompanied by a vertigo-zoom tracking shot of the player falling down, adding to the cinematic investment in the world (figure 15).



Figure 13 Cutscene glitch functions as button prompt.



Figure 14 Pressing a button changes the camera angle.



Figure 15 A highly cinematic dive from the Notre Dame.

With representational agency, the player is cut off from the productive interactivity Sicart imagines with the carnivalesque nature of play. However, as with additive comprehension, this representational agency allows the player to be positioned as a dramatic author within the world. The cinematic engagement creates a predefined universe out of the player's control which is coherent and detailed. Clouds with silver linings and all that.

This representational agency governs other instalments in the AC universe as well, for instance in *ASSASSIN'S CREED: LINEAGE* (Simoneau 2009), depicting the career of Ezio's father as Assassin. This short film functions as a cinematic game instead of making a game feel like a film.

Featuring many of the actions required in the game like climbing, jumping over rooftops, stalking, and killing, filmed from similar angles as in the game cut-scenes, LINEAGE lets players imagine what they look like during a play session. Helped along by the minimal showing of the main character's face during his actions, safe from his characteristic cowl, this instalment most literally supplies the feeling of being the star in an action movie. These forms of agency allow the player to be invested more deeply into the world of AC through the provision of more detailed perspectives.

Immersive as it may be, it however does not give them any power over how this world unfolds. The carnivalesque is severely limited, which Brooker linked to the institutional attempt "to fit the diversity of many voices into a reductive interpretative system" (2012, 149). The player is subjected to a passive form of narration more reminiscent of film and the strengths of media are thereby not incorporated meaningfully. While some strengths are still indulged in, for the player can still play around, the universe is meaningfully interacted with through cutscenes or clips only. This limiting of agency on this lower level has impact on the other domains in which agency occurs, the next one of which is the agency to link instalments.

Agency between Instalments

The universe is made up of different media products that must be linked as an overarching entity to provide a meaningful context of play. So how does agency manifest such linking, especially if agency is only representational? The agency to create links or merely follow them indicates how universes are structured and interacted with. Linking agency comes in two forms: gap-filling and medium reception.

Gap-Filling

Several theoretical approaches already exist on gap-filling in texts and worlds, but not necessarily in transmedial universes. When looking at the relation between the presentation of a fictional world and their mental representations – the links formed by the players – media scholar Jan-Noël Thon explains that "all presentations of fictional worlds are necessarily incomplete and players ... use their world knowledge to 'fill in the blanks'" (2009, 2). This filling in has been discussed by various authors who argue that gaps are filled by appealing to their knowledge of reality in Ryan's "principle of minimal departure" (1991, 51) or to contextual conventions in philosopher Kendall Walton's "mutual belief principle" (1990, 150). Such rational appeals do not comply with what Mittell identified as forensic fans' affective engagement with a universe (2009b, 134).

Forensic fans' playful engagement requires a different theoretical approach. Filling gaps ultimately touches on the carnivalesque. How much of the existing order must be destroyed and

the freedom of reconstruction can differ. If the play session already links instalments together through explanation, little destruction and reconstruction are required, thereby limiting agency. Conversely, large gaps appeal more to the carnivalesque in that the player must deconstruct the information provided and make individual contributions in order for it to function as a meaningful context. This carnivalesque approach to gap-filling and the design considerations to limit it can outline the agency afforded in AC.

The carnivalesque in AC is restricted, decaying even. While not always explicitly mentioned by name, allusions to other instalments are made as explicit as possible. In ROGUE's Abstergo databases the player can discover allusions to an Assassin operation occurring in Paris, and the destruction of the Phoenix Project. The explicit references to Assassin activities in Paris directly allude to ACU set in Paris wherein you indeed obliterate the Phoenix Project. This is but one of many of the explicit references that link instalments together, alluding vaguely but clear enough to an overarching entity that holds the instalments together, but thereby severely limits the carnivalesque alternatives. Again, agency is mostly reactive – the player can only react to a fully detailed world.

What such examples from AC mean for the heuristic model of the IP universe is that the reality of the game world and its universe is made conceivable by working it out in a high degree of detail, leaving few and small gaps for the player to fill in. The overlap with reality already provides a normative understanding of possibility and introduces media products as valuable sources of information. A carnivalesque deconstruction that appropriates the signs from the instalments will result in a construction not wholly dissimilar from the world already presented for that is the form that proves to be most meaningful.²⁸ Following a selective form of interactivity, it is up to the player to discover predefined references, but agency is reduced to following predetermined paths in exchange for a coherent but normative subcreation. Designers can limit interactivity through cross-referencing, thereby presenting canonical entries and limiting player agency to following these references to immerse in a self-contained world, instead of the creation of links themselves. The AC universe is presented as an *object* to be uncovered instead of a process to be performed, thereby limiting the productive interactivity of the player.

Although the player can choose what instalment to expand the universe with (like in a curatorial universe), the largely top down control forces selection into the macro-microstory structure of the universe. The macrostory tells the main story of the universe, offers most information, and is wholly placed in videogames. Microstories in turn detail this macrostory with new information. ASSASSIN'S CREED: ASCENDANCE (Bernier and Ouellet 2010), a short film

²⁸ Of course it is possible for the player to completely link the instalments differently. This would however result in a structure of the universe that is constantly proven to be faulty or is never verified.

depicting the rise to power by Cesare Borgia, for instance, does not narrate any new information that could not be gathered in ACB. What it does provide however is a more detailed take on the political and historical situation at the time, through the visually enticing mode of moving paintings. The same goes for *ASSASSIN'S CREED: EMBERS* (Plourde & Baudet 2011) that narrates the end of Ezio's life; an aspect also explained in *REVELATIONS* and in later Abstergo files but not relevant for the larger story. While it is up to the player to determine how to elaborate on the universe, all additions are rather redundant and the focus is clearly on the canonical macrostory.²⁹ Again, representational agency underlies the selective interaction in order to enhance the immersion, now elaborated with minimal choices on how to elaborate the macrostory.

Medium Reception

Next to gap-filling, Cheng argues that current transmedial games, on a theoretical level, contain "modes of 'agency' ... directed towards gaining symbolic control over modes of reception of mass media that have been traditionally bound by constructions of genre, narrative form and reception contexts" (2007, 22). AC as a universe spreads over multiple products. Granting players agency over their mode of reception, the varying instalments can be consumed for medium-specific reasons if this agency is taken at heart. Two different ways of engaging with the transmediality of the universe exist in AC, depending on the appropriation of the medium reception.

Firstly, the universe can be consumed *regardless* of the media used to construct it. As such, the transmedial nature is disregarded in favour of the subcreation simply spread out over multiple instalments. This position is afforded by AC in that it maintains a unified form of reception when gathering information about the universe. Despite the games' possibility to play, the universe is constructed through filmic cutscenes. Additionally, the comics and even the hypertext database relate the universe in more traditional textual form in which their nature as comics or web-based platform are not utilised. Following Scott McCloud (1993, 96), *The Fall*, for instance, has each picture contained in a single panel in the main story (figure 16), instead of making use of the possibility to conflate panels or indicate temporal duration through an absence of borders (something that is done in the appendix of *The Fall*, as shown in figure 17). With the medium out of the experience, the focus is on the content, which the player traces throughout multiple instalments in order to construct a coherent universe. *The Fall* and *The Chain* revolve around the Staff of Eden and its destruction. This staff was an important item in ACII wherein it ultimately vanished in the ground. Content is accessed here to complete the

²⁹ Which by a freak case of circumstance are also the most expensive consumable products.

holes left in instalments, resulting in a chain engagement with instalments for all have ambiguous signs that require further exploration, but do hardly require medium-specific skills.



Figure 16 The sequential, text-filled, panels of *The Fall* adding information to the subcreation.



Figure 17 Unused panel in the appendix of *The Fall* using comics thematically.

An alternative way AC affords such symbolic agency is through a new approach to adaptation. On a theoretical level Hutcheon, in her preface to the 2013 edition of *A Theory of Adaptation*, discerns a change in adaptation research and engagement. Instead of looking at the success of an adaptation, Hutcheon suggests looking at “popularity, persistence, or even the

diversity and extent of dissemination” (idem, XXVII). Littau elaborates on this new approach by observing that in adaptations “a given story, character, or motif must be fitted into a new environment in a meaningful way” (2011, 32). She labels this form of media relations crossmediality (from the biological ‘crossbreeding’) and states that “its [the franchise] realization in each case has been media-specific, *per se* the [franchise] is not bound to a specific medium” (2011, 28). Crossmediality sees the transmedial universe as an autonomous entity to which every medium can make a valid contribution because of its medium-specific adaptation of recurrent content.

Applying these theoretical considerations to AC questions what instalments are chosen to expand the macrostory and furbish the universe. This can be determined by what modes of reception are preferred or sought out for particular purposes. Playing ACIII will, for instance, introduce the player to Haytham Kenway, the father of protagonist Connor Kenway and main antagonist of the game. The book *Assassin’s Creed: Forsaken* (Bowden 2012), however, illustrates through a series of diary entries by Haytham that throughout ACIII Haytham has been silently helping Connor and protected him on many occasions. Relying on the adaptation of the ACIII story into a novel, affording more mental elaboration to outline the inter-character relations, the player has the agency to select what medium contributions expand the universe. This symbolic agency then caters to autotelic appropriations for it does not necessarily expand the universe but does influence player engagement. However, as seen in the discussion of agency within an instalment, AC does not necessarily make use of medium-specific capabilities, instead forcing a singular mode of reception onto the player that caters to representational agency. Still, as transmedial universe AC has the potential for this agency and it should therefore be included in the IP universe capabilities.

Both the gap-filling and media reception rely on selective interaction and thereby remain focussed on constructing a detailed subcreation for the player to immerse in. Agency is thus directed as *sophisticating* the master narrative instead of constructing it.

Agency in the World

Whereas the agency between instalments made the player deal with filling in the boundaries, the agency in the world is occupied with defining the boundaries themselves. Key considerations are whether and how new additions to the universe are incorporated and how free the player is in constructing a new instalment – as determined in the textual construction of the player through affordances. The agency in the world is mostly determined by political economic measures, replete with legal procedures. The example of Blizzard Entertainment’s stance on the expansion of the WARCRAFT (Blizzard Entertainment 1994-present) universe is typical:

Blizzard Entertainment® reserves the right to extend and expand our properties to other media. We want to provide a consistent story and universe for our customers, and want to ensure that only the highest quality, officially licensed and approved material is created based on our characters and other creative properties. (Blizzard FAQ, 2015).

These legal procedures decide, first of all, whether the player is allowed to even come up with alternatives, and second, if allowed, whether the additions are licensed and thereby integrated into the original canon.

Business and economics scholar Peter Zackariasson shows that the world builders determine what the content of a universe should be, often following their “view of a good society” (2007, 6). While this could be understood as proof that legal matters rule all, it also shows universes are the product of discursive practices – a pursuit of negotiated values. Player agency and collaboration can be part of such values and therefore explicit invitations can be present in the universe for the players to add new elements. Such invitations can suggest varying forms of interactivity, depending on the design. Central in this is how productive the player is allowed to be. This section will discuss how such a discursive contract is struck in the AC universe focussing on player freedom and designer constrictions.

The nature of the AC universe as a mystery determines productive player agency. The explanations of discovered answers within this mystery keeps the knowledge balance steady, allowing the creators to stay in control of what information is disclosed. Through a discursive cat and mouse game players chase the boundaries of the universe, constituted by new information. This construction is exemplified in the online environment of Assassin’s Creed: Initiates that provides a false sense of agency. Here the player is addressed as an Initiate, part of the hacker network Erudito, a third party in the battle between Templars and Assassins. By completing simple ‘hacks’ (read: puzzles) that often require collaborative efforts, the player-hackers uncover the manipulations in human history performed by both Assassins and Templars. In doing so, the players seem to redistribute the boundaries of the universe, incorporating more and more of human history into the conspiracy. Juicy revelations are that the Bush administration was a Templar puppet and the hidden corporate meanings of Abstergo’s commercial ads. Such hacker activity seems to attest of a highly productive form of interactivity, shifting the hierarchy of knowledge in favour of the players who now possess more information about the mystery.

Guess again. This apparent mode of carnivalesque play is another example of AC’s canalised, top-down gameplay. Erudito is a player position designed by the game developers and later this grassroots initiative becomes an ally of the Assassins, making them part of the mystery

instead. As such, the players only uncover the redefined boundaries the designers created through selective interactivity instead of productive. The agency of the player is therefore again limited to representational agency; it allows them to take part in the universe by linking instalments together and create a more detailed world. If the players could actually produce and theorise original links themselves, the resolution of the mystery would be derailed, resulting in conflicts in the story or controversial elements that would obliterate the complex network of references that is AC.

The mystery limits the IP universe model to canonical instalments. Player productions, regardless of their detail or correspondence to the intended course of the mystery, will not be referred to in official instalments. Player productions are then removed from the canon – “the strict sense of what counts and what happened” (Brooker 2012, 154). Only the canon is clearly presented in the many macrostory instalments, such as the Abstergo files on hackable computers, which effectively function as gatekeepers of the universe. As far as discursive construction goes player contributions are not valued in AC for keeping the possibility under strict control is central in the IP universe.³⁰

Productive interaction can take place though. Licenced authors or designers can create commissioned products. But even here, in line with the rigid discursive construction, the creators are limited, formally this time. Even if an author’s addition to the universe and its mystery is approved by the world designers the authors have to deal with their addition being an extension of a *possible world*. As such, they are not completely free in crafting their instalments for the additions must ‘fit’ with the rest of the universe. Klasturp and Tosca (2004) describe how this fit is determined at three different levels: mythos, topos and ethos. Mythos relates to “the central knowledge one needs to have in order to interact with or interpret events in the world successfully,” such as the backstories of characters, the world, and its history (ibid, 412). In AC this generally refers to the macrostory of Assassins vs. Templars and the pursuit of Pieces of Eden throughout human history. Topos is “what is to be expected from the physics of and navigation in the world,” like the topography of the world and its basic functioning (ibid.). In AC this category is most fluid due to the time shifting, but historical cities with lots of climbable surfaces are the norm. Ethos corresponds to “how to behave in the world,” which relates to the general code of conduct but also the ethics and morality of a world (ibid.). For AC this means that most instalments deal with a game of shadows and assassinations in a historical setting as

³⁰ While it is the nature of Sicartian play to appropriate the canon and create new versions for autotelic purposes, this is of less relevance when understanding the creation of a universe, for new additions will not impact the universe or be accredited to the player, limiting and even stealing agency. This is explained in Ubisoft Terms of Service agreement, which states that “[b]y posting any Original UGC at the Services, you hereby grant UBISOFT a royalty-free, fully paid up, perpetual, irrevocable, non-exclusive and fully sublicensable right and license to use, reproduce, modify, adapt, publish, translate, combine with other works, create derivative works.” (Ubisoft 2015).

central action. Based on this description, ethos could be argued to also relate to the core mechanics of exploration and assassination – the behaviour in every instalment.

In order to make an addition to this universe then requires functioning within these pre-set categories. However, all instalments in the AC universe thrive on the same ethos: stalking and assassinating targets in a historical setting. The topos and mythos differ but this central action is omnipresent. Evans shows how the central medium of a universe can influence the engagement with other media. She describes this in the specific case for the *SPOOKS* television series (Wolstencraft 2002-2011), centring on characters in all instalments, but a more general claim can be made about the influence of the medium of the macrostory. In AC this entails videogames, which thrive on mechanics. Game designer Soren Johnson would go as far to claim that “meaning emerges from a game’s mechanics – the set of decisions and consequences unique to each one” (2010), implying that AC’s exploration and assassinations capture the entire experience. While too normative a claim due to the reliance on a context for the mechanics in AC, Johnson is right in claiming that more engaging experiences arise from a resonance between the story and the mechanics, an aspect apparently often forgotten (2010).

For AC, these theoretical considerations mean that its stable gameplay of exploration and assassination lays a foundation for a meaningful experience in other media. The macrostory limits alterations in the ethos but it is up to the designers to create a setting and story that incorporates these familiar and expected actions. Appropriation and contextualisation are thus once again canalised, illustrating another limitation of play in service of specific universe characteristics. This also explains the limitations of crossmedial practices in the IP universe. Medium-specific modes of engagement are subjected to a similar ethos in most instalments, forcing the instalments to adapt in a way possibly not fully exploiting their abilities. Productive agency is thus always a two-step with the world’s possible nature – largely determined by the universe dimension privileged by the macrostory medium.

The IP Universe Agency

In AC representational agency allows the players to have control over how they position themselves inside the world, depending on what expanding media are grasped next to the macrostory. What counts as a meaningful context is thereby gridlocked for designers through formal restrictions and players possess only representational agency. This more immersive representative agency privileges the subcreation by limiting play immensely, while also pervading the universe with a consistent experience. Table 6 outlines the IP model by showing the factors determining agency on each level. Next to that, it charts the coherence between these approaches to agency, ultimately constructing a larger universe from agency contained in the singular instalments. It outlines the interrelations between agency levels, shows their

constriction and thereby privileges certain analyses approaches, such as a more traditional textual analysis detailing how a universe is interpreted.

Still, the top down control ensures a professional mystery with (relatively) satisfactory resolutions. This is familiar to the more ‘passive’ detective stories wherein everyone witnesses the same detailed events. Furthermore, this lack of bottom up intervention to the story appeals players to take part *in* the world through transmedial characters or situations, compared to being part *of* the world as a creator. This, however, does not unleash the full capacity of play. Wouldn’t it be nice to just play among the mediated stars unrestricted?

Table 6 Central design and analyses criteria for agency in the IP universe.

	Agency in an instalment	Agency between instalments	Agency in the world
<i>Textual characteristic</i>	Procedural play guided	Exploration of product network	Mystery determined
<i>Interacting possibilities</i>	‘Cinematic’ narrative interpretation	Explicated gaps to explore	Discovering of boundaries
<i>Interacting nature</i>	Interaction as means to narration	Selection delegated to macrostory	Subcreation immersion False sense of agency
<i>Afforded interaction</i>	Reactive	Selective	Selective Productive limited by macrostory
<i>Agency Form</i>	Representational	Representational	Representational

Collective Creation: Curated and Negotiated Universes

Sometimes feeling as if you’re in an action movie just isn’t enough. While providing a phenomenological engaging experience, AC’s universe touches on only a fraction of Sicartian play and thereby undercuts the complex engagement possible in universes. This section will therefore present a situated reflection on the discursive construction of agency in a universe by exploring the possibilities of play outside the limits imposed by AC in alternative empirical examples. This means taking the implied player model of the IP universe – an obedient player – and experimenting with more extreme levels of play. For agency, the central characteristic to indulge in is the carnivalesque. Sicart states that the carnivalesque aspect “takes control of the world and gives it to the players for them to explore, challenge, or subvert” (2014, 4). The IP

universe's implied players have only made use the first of these three possibilities and a situated reflection should investigate the entire scope.

To reiterate, the IP universe, is what Marsha Kinder in *Playing with Power* has called an "entertainment supersystem," meaning "a system of transmedial intertextuality across different narrative media ... constructing consumerist subjects who can more readily assimilate and accommodate whatever objects they encounter" (1991, 122). The limited selective agency in AC mostly ensures that players will consume more Ubisoft products in order to expand the experience of the universe, helped along through the explicit referencing. Such an implied consumerist player is but one possible form. Other motivations may be more self-indulgent or community related. Alternative models I shall provide can provide different agency to the player, other than consuming (although profit is still a dominant motivation).

The Curatorial Universe

Last chapter introduced the curatorial universe as an alternative model. This was described as an overarching understanding of a character or theme without a normative macrostory but with stable characteristics providing canonical boundaries within which various subjective practices or conceptions can exist. This already attests of a different approach to the boundaries of a universe. According to literary scholar Veerle van Steenhuyse such plural appreciation of a character, and its universe in extension, is possible because the canonical elements of the universe are "filled out with different, 'default' sets of information, and actualised in an infinite number of ways," arguing that players "switch 'glasses' whenever a fic [fanfiction or instalment] cues one rather than the other (2012, 120-121). Instalments that overlap or contradict then acknowledge "that history doesn't have one voice, but rather, through discrepancy, redundancy, adaptations, it constitutes of a *polyphony*," according to media scholar Marta Boni (2013, 122; emphasis added). This less constricted validity already opens up more freedom to play.

The concept of the transmedial character foregrounds the agency in a curatorial instalment deriving from such freedom to play. Film scholar Paolo Bertetti defines such a character as a "fictional hero whose adventures are told across different media platforms, each one giving more details on the life of that character" (2014, 2345). Agency *in* an instalment then arises from the player's capacity to expand life of the character. Bertetti links character and universe by seeing the latter as a "shared acted world" which "is not only a common background, a shared universe of things and of places, but it also consists of the totality of actions and events that happen inside it" (idem, 2347). The actions performed by a character often differ per instalment and interaction means changing the boundaries of the universe because new actions are added to the whole.

Agency in a singular instalment then means exploring the universe through engaging with new actions. This agency can be dubbed *curatorial agency* for, in keeping with selective interactivity, it is up to the player to determine what discovered actions belong to the universe and which should be disregarded. As such, this agency embraces the exploration, challenge, and subversion of the carnivalesque Sicart envisioned (2014, 4), for singular instalments let players explore possible alternative contents, challenge existing conceptions of the universe, and, by their appropriation, subvert them as well.

Due to this selective engagement with the curatorial universe, the medium consumed can heavily impact on the interaction due to different functionalities deemed valuable. The unique contribution of videogames is exemplary for this medium impact in the curatorial universe. Aarseth identifies two layers as ontological for videogames: the expressive, or *semiotic*, layer, which “informs the player about the game world and the game state, through visual, auditory, textual, and sometimes haptic feedback” (Aarseth 2014, 488) and the *mechanical* layer, or “the engine that drives the game action, allows the players to make their moves, and changes the game state” (ibidem), i.e. the affordances as coded in the game programming that act as limit on visual and interactive possibilities, but also the afforded actions the players can take. In Batman, the semiotic layer is persistent throughout multiple instalments, for we all know who the Caped Crusader is, but the mechanical layer is a unique addition to games – we don’t know what he can do.

An example in practice is the BATMAN: ARKHAM (Rocksteady Studios 2009-2015) videogame series. Here the player plays the Batman, whose semiotics fit in the brand image of the current take on Batman: a dark and brooding orphan billionaire-turned-vigilante who, through the practice of fear tactics, fights crime in Gotham City with a variety of gadgets. The games also introduce new mechanical elements that expand Batman. Examples are the electric charge launcher as a new gadget and a free flow combat system, which shows that Batman is a veritable black shadow, chaining punches and kicks in a fluent series of movements from enemy to enemy. Playing the games gives the player the possibility to explore the established image of Batman by experimenting with mechanical additions. In AC an individual instalment allowed the player engagement with the world but the story remained out of their control. In the case of Batman the exploration of the identities of Batman and his universe gives players the agency to redefine their understanding of Batman, possibly deviating from the brand image. This shows that agency in the curatorial universe relies on player decisions to structure the universe – sole selective decisions though.

The ARKHAM Series is but one example illustrating the reliance of the curatorial universe on Littau’s crossmediality in interaction. The search for medium-specific expansions of the character expands the agency usually attributed to engagement with worlds, for the player

cannot only explore the contours of Batman or the universe but can even determine how this is experienced. The lack of a macrostory ensures that the instalments are not subjected to a similar mode of reception like in AC but instead provide a unique experience. Players can for instance choose to “become and act as a character in the world, not just experiencing the world from the outside, but actually being transported inside it” when playing game versions of Batman (Klastrup & Tosca 2004, 414). Otherwise, they can choose to shape Batman in a more realistic setting by indulging in the films by Christopher Nolan, banking on film’s (photo)realist promise. It is even possible to incorporate free form play within the universe of Batman with the many LEGO Batman sets. Library scholar Neal Baker argues that “the sets deliver authorized, licensed recreations ... as well as a license for recreational possibility that goes far beyond the packaged content and instructions” (2014, 52). This opens up the universe of Batman to the constructive freedom both suggested and appropriated in LEGO. Crossmediality can thus result in different engagements with curatorial universe, providing a fruitful analysis category.

Summarising then, in lacking a macrostory to immerse in, the curatorial universe interaction is characterised by carnivalesque and autotelic curation. This means filling a universe as the player sees fit, granting the agency to explore experimental engagements. The players can appropriate the means provided by top down agents and, contrary to AC, can decide themselves what aspect is part of the universe – the acted shared world of Batman. While possessing more agency than the players of AC, players of the Batman universe are equally impotent in productive interaction though. Some fan creations become highly successful, such as Sandy Collora’s fan film *Batman: Dead End* (2003) but this is the exception rather than the norm (Brooker 2012, 152). Batman’s mythical nature thus allows for multiple sanctioned variations. Contrariwise, the normative rewriting of human history in AC places many restrictions on any alterations and thereby player agency.³¹

Some curatorial universes can thrive when embracing co-construction of a universe though. In the transmedial universe of the cartoon-like first person shooter game *TEAM FORTRESS 2* (Valve Corporation 2007), the game itself does not contain a narrative but short video clips introducing the characters and a comic series position the constant battle between a red and blue team of mercenaries within a larger universe. Player agency comes in through the addition of the Steam Workshop, an environment in which users can upload 3D modelled and designed weapons or items to be subjected to a community vote. Highest scoring additions are considered by the game developers and possibly added to the game through a story-ridden update. The End

³¹ AC’s human history as basis for the world and Batman’s completely fictional Gotham City and DC Universe have a different relation to reality which may explain the lack of agency in the former due to less space for alternatives. However, according to Nelson Goodman “certain relationships among worlds” (1978, 7) are what set them apart, instead of what world derives from which. Still, the relation to reality and agency in transmedial universe is a fruitful field deserving more attention than this thesis can grant.

of the Line update, for instance, not only introduced a cascade of community produced items, they were given narrative significance by Valve officially hosting and licensing a fan made video of the same name (McVinnie 2014). This update attests that players can possess productive agency in the universe, relying more on the multi-author nature of universes. What is considered possible is also left up to player imaginations. However, this agency is anything but stable for the developers still act as gatekeepers, determining who can actually contribute.

Although such productive interactions exists and despite its higher freedom than the canalised take of AC, agency in the curatorial universe, again, mostly functions within and between instalments. Complete productive agency privileges the multi-author nature of universes as well as democratises the dimensions of what is deemed possible. This relinquishes control and coherence, potentially harming the brand image should every addition be considered canon. Still, agency in the curatorial universe has foregrounded a series of characteristics that provide salient topics for analyses, outlined in table 7. This model shows on what level curatorial universes should be analysed in order to address medium use for instance. More coherence in analyses is also achieved by the clear constrictions observed in the productive agency and the corresponding agency. This ensures that universes are studied within their capabilities, instead of dragging in preconceptions that have no place in a current form, such as productive agency in a curatorial or IP universe. Productive interactivity is not wholly impossible though.

Table 7 Central design and analyses criteria for agency in the curatorial universe.

	Agency in an instalment	Agency between instalments	Agency in the world
<i>Textual characteristic</i>	Functional identity addition	Curating additions	Canonical constrictions
<i>Interacting possibilities</i>	Different default	Medium-specific expansions	Filling of boundaries
<i>Interacting nature</i>	Interaction as probing new additions	Interaction as personal activity	Interaction as community addition
<i>Afforded interaction</i>	Reactive	Selective	Selective Serendipitous productive
<i>Agency Form</i>	Curatorial	Curatorial Medium reception	Curatorial Serendipitous production

The Concept Universe

The curatorial universe allows for a different, more potent, kind of agency than the implied player of the IP universe possesses. Still, as shown with the serendipitous productive agency, these two models do not account for the full freedom of Sicartian play. Hypothetically embracing the full scale of play as searchlight let me understand the practices ruling alternative theoretical and practical examples. These alternative practices seem to allude to a different kind of universe. With the convergence culture granting audiences access to productive tools, these practices can be understood through the heuristic model of the *concept universe*, centring on productive agency. Here I outline the characteristics of this model and its reliance on interactivity.

The concept universe embraces the carnivalesque because the possibility of the universe depends on a communal discussion and negotiation. This is possible due to the “temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival” (Bakhtin 1984, 10). This means that the boundaries of the universe are constructed instead of procedurally discovered or filled up as in the other models, since the carnivalesque nature lets players construct an alternative or original from appropriated means.³²

From Pearson’s “Bachies, Bardies, Trekkies and Sherlockians” (2007) the concept universe’s main elements and appeal can be distilled, as well as their reliance on play. In her article, Pearson makes a case for renewed attention to cultural practices relating to those products previously considered ‘highbrow.’ Cultural studies have treated “high culture figures only as a repressive other against which to celebrate the virtues of the popular” (Pearson 2007, 99), with fan activities being the prized horse.

Pearson’s appeal is valid. Her treatise of the music of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Johan Sebastian Bach, and the works of William Shakespeare shows that they rely on other audience engagement than incorporation into self-identity or collection in order to create a “narrative virtual world,” which are often seen as fan engagements (Pearson 2007, 105). These different audience practices Pearson describes exemplify the concept universe (ibidem). Summarising these practices is the piecing together of an overarching universe by inferring or appropriating clues in any original text. While this sounds similar to the other two universe types, the concept universe is actually *constructed* through this process. Pearson, for instance, talks of the “‘Mozart on the romantic Danube’ cruise, visiting many of the places that played a prominent role in his all too short life” and “Bardies [Shakespeare ‘fans’] have been flocking to Stratford since the eighteenth century” (idem, 104). Appropriating several elements from these authors’ lives, story inspirations, and other thematic links, the players contextualise these authors differently.

³² This universe model is only introduced now for its additive comprehension stems from the interaction capabilities. Productive agency is what brings these universes into being, with later additions being contributions to the production instead of arising in a pursuit of knowledge. A presentative situation of a plethora of signs is created instead of encountered or explored.

Players create a new overarching entity that draws from these texts, in this case in the shape of a physical space or experience, effectively expanding the act of playing with their texts into reality. In true carnivalesque fashion, the existing order of textual enjoyment (be that music or theatre) and specific spaces to enjoy these is broken down and supplanted with a new coherence.³³ While such constructs are often enjoyed for autotelic purposes – to partake in the experience of the object of appreciation, which in highbrow products is not contained in the original works³⁴ – such constructs can achieve lasting popularity as universes due to the communal acceptance and indulgence of the newly made context of play and experience – it fits the possibility deemed inherent in the original works

This passage from isolated but iconic elements to an overarching entity can be understood with reference to the auteur theory. Pearson's reliance on highbrow culture, often singular composers or authors, and a focus on distinction, attests of the concept universe's overlap with the heuristic category of the institution of an auteur. Often attributed to critic and director Francois Truffaut, the auteur theory argues that certain directors leave a personal mark on a film. Truffaut however offered the auteur merely as an alternative to the *metteur en scene* who just slavishly followed the scenarist in the French post-war cinema of the fifties (1954). The treatise of the auteur by Edward Buscombe is more insightful in relation to the concept universe (1973). As critique against the romanticising of the auteur as a category of quality, Buscombe sees films as "a network of different statements ... elaborated into a final 'coherent' version" and the auteur, as institution instead of person, stands for "a structure which underlies the film and shapes it" (Buscombe 1973, 82). A similar structure can be said to exist in music or literary texts. The concept universe functions as a similar structure which is made by players by appropriating different statements, either thought up themselves or found in existing texts. This creates an 'institution' like the auteur film but now takes the shape of a world.

Buscombe stresses that this structure or institution is separate from the auteur him/herself and more "an unconscious, unintended meaning ... usually to the surprise of the

³³ The link with reality is no coincidence according to Pearson. She argues that these highbrow appreciators want to distinguish themselves from fans, who are often accused of losing sight of reality (2007, 107). This is however a polemical position for, as Saler has shown, inhabitants of virtual worlds adopt an "ironic imagination," described as "a form of double consciousness ... which enabled individuals to embrace alternative worlds and to experience alternative truths" (2012, 14). People immersed in virtual worlds were, according to Saler, therefore perfectly capable of discerning reality from fiction, something echoed by philosopher Peter Otto (2009) and Pearson (2007).

³⁴ Adding a spatial dimension to the narrative virtual world is something originated in highbrow audiences, according to Pearson (2007, 104). She does agree that such activities could also count as "fan pilgrimage" and one could argue current theme parks, such as the Wizarding World of Harry Potter in Universal Studios in Orlando, Florida, have in turn appropriated a more top down creation of an experiential physical world. Like the concept universe these theme parks can be seen as an institutionally designed version of what geographer Anton Clavé called a "symbolic microcosm with a distinctive identity that proposes a complete emotional experience, a place of entertainment which has been provided with its own homogeneous semiotics" (2007, 21).

individual concerned" (ibidem), often created by fans and/or critics. This liberates the player from a top down authority that determines what is possible, putting them on equal footing in the carnivalesque construction. This also means that the boundaries and possibility of the world remain discursive. This means they are subject to negotiations that discuss different interpretations of a concept or author, adding a communal nature to the universe. The shared social support makes the concept universe into a multi-author construction in which the possibility of additions is negotiated among producers. This is what distinguishes the concept universe from the other two models. They usually arise on the internet exactly because of this social character. As the evolution of fanzines in Saler's "public spheres of imagination," the internet's networked nature facilitates concept universe in its socially defined network, contrary to 'just another default' to be curated (2012, 17).³⁵

The interaction stemming from this social reliance is foregrounded in the Slenderman myth. Described as "open source horror" by media scholar Shira Chess (2012, 376), Slenderman emerged on image forum community Something Awful in a thread devoted to the creation of paranormal images. On the 10th of June 2009, user 'Victor Surge' uploaded two pictures of playing children with a tall, suited, faceless figure standing ominously in the background, accompanied by a horror story of child abductions. Other users took a liking to this 'slender man' and started uploading more photographic encounters and stories relating to the entity. Users began to take this shared concept of Slenderman and turn it into a transmedial myth spanning the entirety of human history. Folklorist Peter Burger found out that wood carvings by Hans Freckenberg dating back to 1543 (figures 18 and 19) were even incorporated in this construction of the universe to give it historical credibility, illustrating the appropriative nature of this process (2013). Ultimately, the phenomenon gained widespread fame through a series of webisodes called MARBLE HORNETS (Wagner and DeLage 2009-2014), which featured Slenderman, and later a free to play game SLENDERMAN: THE EIGHT PAGES (Parsec Productions 2012).

The Slenderman phenomenon, like the Shakespeare tourist trips, is a construction of boundaries around a network of intertextual references, effectively creating a transmedial

³⁵ An extreme example is the "Disneyverse theory", developed by Tumblrite kristoffbjorgman, who used the agency to create a world that links the Disney films of BIG HERO 6 (Hall & Williams 2014), FROZEN (Buck & Lee 2013), TANGLED (Greno & Howard 2010), THE LITTLE MERMAID (Clements & Musker 1989) and BOLT (Howard & Williams 2009). The theory is based on the premise that "It is a WELL DOCUMENTED [sic throughout] fact that all DISNEY PRINCESSES reproduce ASEXUALLY via MITOSIS" (kristoffbjorgman 2014). Based on the visual similarity of several female characters, some Easter Eggs, and cameos, productive interactivity was embraced to redefine the boundaries of the universe in much the same way Pearson describes the appropriation of elements from Mozart's life and work. However, this discursive construction was rejected based on the fact that it was not possible. Many other players rejected this theory for it is not realistically possible for humans to asexually reproduce. Instead of forming a new concept universe, this theory lacked the social support to contextualise the films anew as source of new experiences.

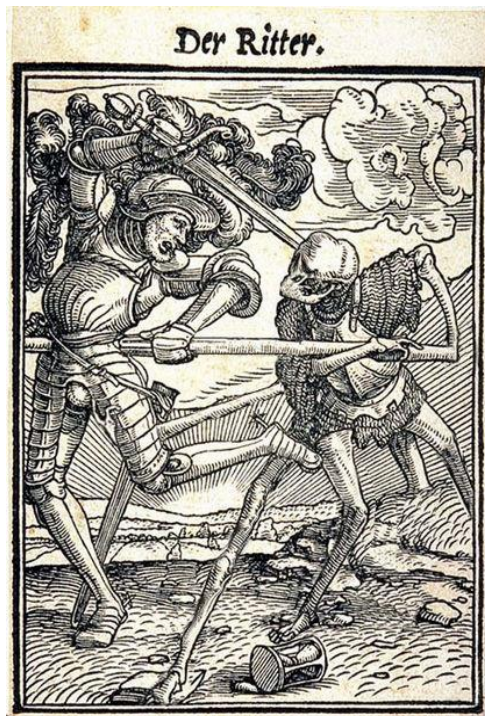


Figure 18 Wood carving depicting a historical precedent of Slenderman, characterised by the many arms

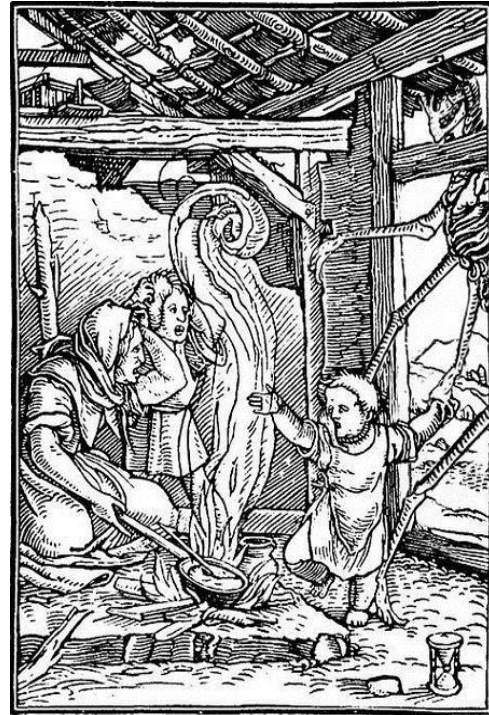


Figure 19 Originally depicting Death, another wood carving served as origin for the child kidnapping characteristic.

universe for players to explore. Relying on the internet's sharing capabilities, the power of Photoshop, and the appropriation of many open access artworks allowed everyone to chip in, exploiting its multi-author nature to the fullest. The accessibility makes this an open source universe, but, as Chess argues, open source is always subject to modification (2012, 386). The universe could be constructed using newly created instalments, but the horror genre conventions had to be obeyed. Chess describes negotiations taking place amongst contributors that fall back on horror conventions to determine what is possible within the world (ibidem). These top down rules are less constricting than the explicated possibility of the IP universe but still indicate the reliance on a required reference frame to anchor possibility. Differences between forms of universes can therefore largely be explained by the freedom granted to the player to construct the context of possibility. In the case of Slenderman, there is no top down authority to determine how the universe should be constructed. Instead, the productive agency of many users results in a negotiation based on Walton's mutual reality effect – how can a universe be formed based on what is (conventionally) considered real in this context (1990). Ultimately, the players rely on their considerable agency as collective to make their shared experience tangible. In doing so, they spawn multiple instalments that, after carefully negotiating what is possible, form a fragmented subcreation less normative or constrained than the other heuristic models have.

With both the construction of the boundaries and the forming of instalments at their behest, the players are also confronted with what media to use. Players can now rely on each medium's specific contribution to expand the constructed universe in specific ways. The use of wood carvings as narrative conveyer grants the universe a more historical engagement for instance. The tourist trips, alternatively, rely specifically on a physical experience of a textual or historical work. Pearson states that "high-culture fandoms must be sated primarily through consumption of the works (going to the theatre, cinema and concerts)" (2007, 104), so expanding the extent of the universe through different medial experiences can contextualise the auteur institution in a new experiential way.³⁶ Finally, Chess argues that the rise of Slenderman was not just a foray into world building by a set of players but was mostly a form of community building to which the hypermedial character of the internet, next to a place of easy production and sharing, allowed everyone to be "included in the larger development scheme, even without the proper skill set" (2012, 386). The strength or cultural standing of a medium chosen to expand the universe is operationalised in the concept universe. Where in the IP universe it was subjected to subcreated immersion and in the curatorial universe used as elaboration, crossmediality is formative for the concept universe.³⁷

The concept universe exists because of multiple authors indulging in carnivalesque practices. By creation a growing network of intertextual references new boundaries around instalments are created that as a result form a universe. Its reliance on interaction to even exist results in different manifestations of key characteristics, outlined in table 8. Relying on ongoing negotiations to determine what is possible and what new experiences to add, the concept universe is a far cry from the top down, highly coordinated subcreation of AC. Table 9 provides an overview of agency in the concept universe– its most formative characteristic. Contrary to the other models, however, this model is best understood in reverse – from world to instalment – for it is the created world that furnishes agency through instalments. This table then illustrates how instalments arise from the concept universe, their relation to the whole, and where meaningful considerations take place. Productive agency, while never fully bottom up, results in the construction of a unique universe model that would be ignored if treating the IP universe as essentialist.

³⁶ Granted, despite possible skill barriers, not all media are as suited for the concept universe. While spatial explorations proliferate, an expedition of Shakespeare into videogame territory has yet to prove successful. Some media can then be seen as too constrictive in how they adapt the shared appreciation of the universe.

³⁷ The productions of the concept universe are encroached by corporate parties, effectively trying to appropriate them into a curatorial or even IP universe. Several tourist trips have been officially licensed by national tourist agencies, which places limits on who can add new locations as well as on the possibility of the universe in that the tourist agency has the final say instead of negotiating players. Furthermore, Slenderman has received official merchandise, such as a jumpsuit for Halloween, indicative of a corporate encroachment over the open source character.

Table 8 The concept universe.

Universe Characteristic	Concept Universe
<i>Overarching Entity</i>	Concept and conventions shared in products
<i>Fragmented Subcreation</i>	Fragmented references encompassing history
<i>Possibility</i>	Negotiated conventions
<i>Multi-Author</i>	Each player can make contributions
<i>Forensic Fans</i>	Construct additions and appropriate media
<i>Transmediality</i>	Media can add specific meaning
<i>Additive Comprehension</i>	Players create a presentative situation Players construct internal coherence

Table 9 Central design and analyses criteria for agency in the concept universe.

	Agency in an instalment	Agency between instalments	Agency in the world
<i>Textual characteristic</i>	Building block	Displaying conventions	Less internal coherence
<i>Interacting possibilities</i>	Personal contribution to the universe	Medium-specific expansions	Creating boundaries
<i>Interacting nature</i>	Interaction as community building	Interaction as creating meaning	Interaction as creation
<i>Afforded interaction</i>	Productive	Negotiated productive	Negotiated productive
<i>Agency Form</i>	Production Medium reception	Production Medium Reception	Production Community building

Conclusion

Interaction with the universe occurs at different levels. Often resulting in a dominant form of agency that governs all levels, the construction of a universe can be assessed based on the interaction. Within the three heuristic models, play has illustrated that the multi-author nature is at odds with the subcreated character of universes, resulting in a continuum determining what sort of universe is constructed, often based on different perceptions of what Zackariasson's

gatekeepers deem “a good society” (2007, 6). Concept universes rely on multi-author construction but therefore have less coherence in the universe, often remaining not more than a network of passing mentions or references. The IP universe, contrariwise, is based on a coherent interaction with an immersive world. Underlying these different perspectives is a different approach to possibility. Depending on the agency afforded the three universe models define possibility differently. More productive corresponds to a higher indulgence in crossmedial agency due to a more lenient approach to possibility, which sole reactive agency must obey to limited freedom in defining what is possible. Possibility in a universe, just like the relation between subcreation and multi-author as characteristic, is therefore determinant for analyses tracks, as outlined in figure 20. With these heuristic models of universes and general findings, the colossal cosmic responsibility of studying universes can be directed properly, to prevent academic (or galactic, if you want to be dramatic) destruction.

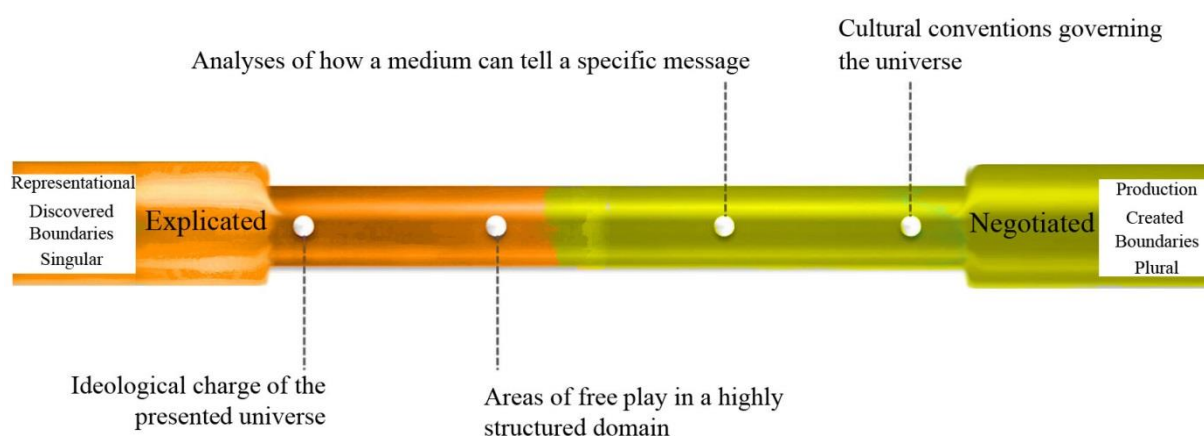


Figure 20 Continuum of possibility versions with analysis suggestions.

Conclusion - The Edge of the Universe

Finding that Proper Restaurant

At the launch of this voyage to different transmedial universes the current academic telescope was focused solely at those universes spearheaded by corporate concerns. This telescopic tunnel vision – falsely dubbed essentialist – left other universes not fitting this highly orchestrated structure sadly unobserved. Next to a lack of monetary incentive, there seemed to be no models that understood the connections between the separate stellar instalments of other universe structures. Plenty of knowledge existed on the singular instalments but their coherence remained unaddressed.

With a flight plan pursuing the question of how a play-focused analysis and reflection on the evocation of and interaction with the ASSASSIN'S CREED universe could provide different heuristic models for understanding transmedial universes, this thesis set out to provide for this absence of holistic models. What remains is to consolidate the findings. The IP, curatorial and concept universe are three different models that address the full complexity of this media phenomenon. Each has their own formation of characteristics and their approach to play shows the privileging of these characteristics. The different models ultimately express the requirement for different analytical approaches.

These new suggestions for analyses have to complement the essentialist take. This solely profit focused and top down approach is presented as ontologically essentialist while in truth it is actually a form of the IP universe. The textual analyses of AC served as illustration of holistic approaches to universes, a critique on the short-sightedness of the essentialist take, and an in-depth analysis of the determinant characteristics of the IP universe. In this model, additive comprehension is tampered to goad the player into conjuring a normative universe. Sole attention to the IP universe then would mean a focus on a more traditional and constricting form of comprehension, not in step with current emerging practices. Next to the evocation limitation, the textual analysis of interaction showed that, surprisingly, for the universe model that receives most attention the interaction of the IP universe is most reminiscent of traditional narrative media, forcing the player to subscribe to a top down provided narrative, regardless of the medium. Therefore, to ensure the explicitly delimited areas of the IP universe are addressed as well, alternative models were made.

The three universe models rely on different interrelations between their formative characteristics. The analysis of the freedom to play has illustrated that IP universes privilege subcreation as an immersive world for the player to experience. Contrariwise, the curatorial and concept universe rely more on the multi-author dimension of universes in order to accommodate a multitude of different furnishings or a collaborative negotiation of the boundaries respectively. Linked to that is the IP universe's reliance on the a singular understanding of how a universe can be possible, thereby limiting room for play, cutting off alternative versions or defaults, and canalising possibilities for crossmedial interactions, effectively undercutting the transmedial nature. The curatorial universe does allow for a multitude of possible worlds within its overarching entity, but ultimately contains possibility within acknowledged and familiar boundaries wherein media can offer elaborations on familiars. The concept universe is least constrained in possibility, relying on the negotiation of what counts as conceivable, which operationalises media strengths in the process. These three characteristics of universes are then determinant in the structure a universe has. The other characteristics can influence the shape as well but do not structure the evocation or the interaction. Analysing transmedial universes requires the chosen universe to be positioned on a continuum ranging between subcreation and multi-author, and canalised or negotiable possibility, illustrated in figure 22.³⁸ Depending on the position on the continuum different modes of research will be more fruitful. Studying an IP universe from a participatory culture perspective will ultimately provide less content-related results than a narratology perspective due to the different strengths of the universe. To further improve the study of these complex and proliferating media entities, these models help in determining the desired approach.

Due to this positioning, the three universes have different approaches to each characteristic, consolidated in table 9. Knowing what universe model you are dealing with will streamline the analysis of transmedial universes as well as provide footing for comparative analyses on a worldly scale. These models are based on different perspectives on what makes a universe though. As such, they are ideal categories that will usually overlap. The models could greatly benefit from close analyses of specific cases. Specific approaches to a universe can foreground granulated examples of the general theories sketched here, for instance the use of "repeated memes" as a form of additive comprehension in the more or less curatorial universe of DOCTOR WHO as discussed by Perryman (2008, 26). These sophistications can refine the models to make them more effective.

³⁸ A negotiated subcreation universe is not discussed in this thesis but Augmented Reality Games (ARGs) can be said to fit this category. Exceeding the textual focus of this thesis, ARGs are "loosely defined enough to improvise with the players, accepting major changes in content. In a very real sense, the story of the game is undetermined at its outset," according to Kim et al. (2009). Due to the blend with reality, augmented with a story, ARGs clearly strive for a subcreation, but what is possible depends on how much the players can achieve.

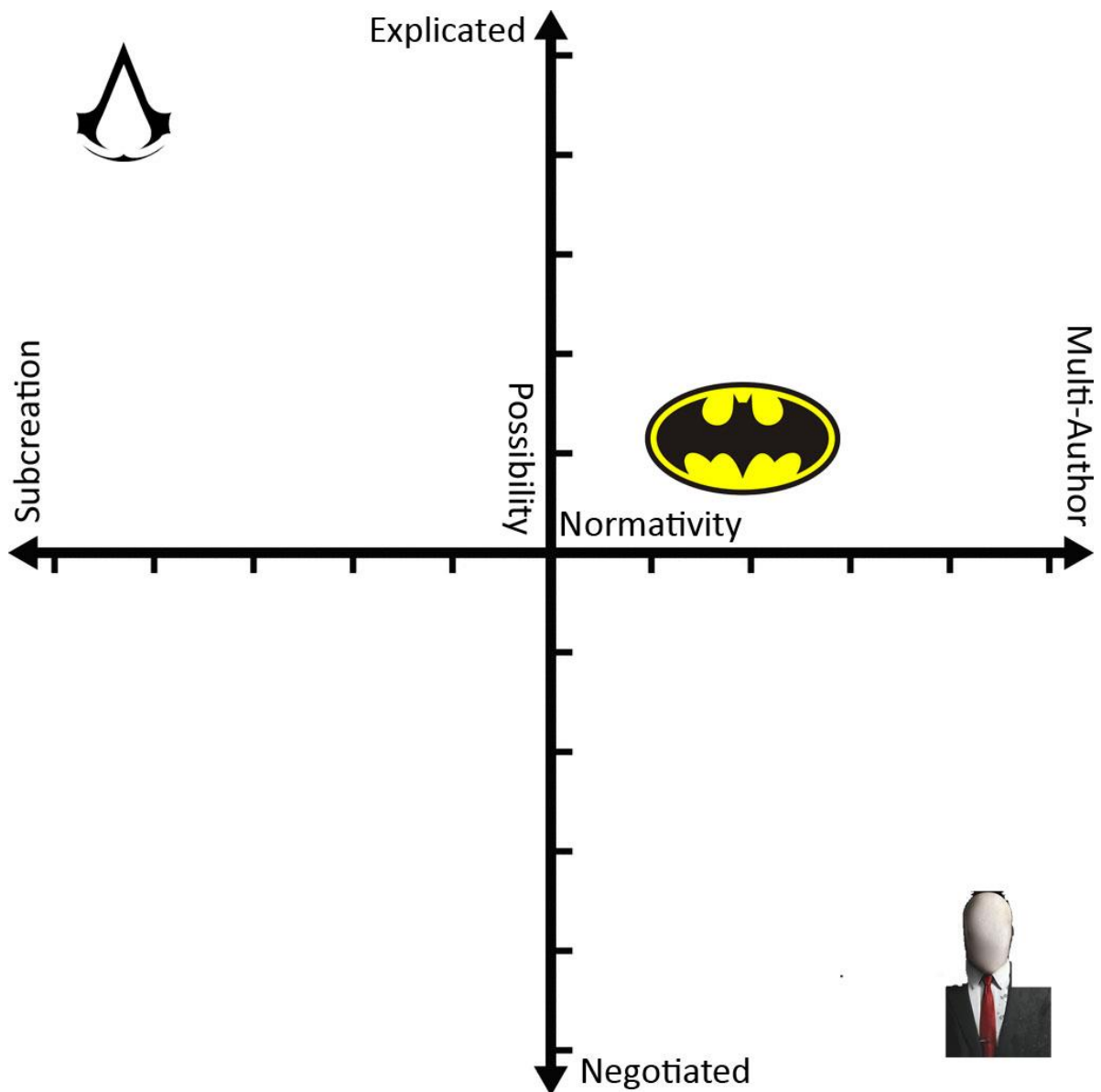


Figure 21 Depending on the privileged characteristics, universes can be positioned differently, illustrating the need for different analytical approaches.

Table 10 The specifics of each characteristics of the heuristic models.

Characteristic	IP Universe	Curatorial Universe	Concept Universe
<i>Overarching entity</i>	Normative Boundaries	Familiar but rigid boundaries	Negotiated boundaries
<i>Fragmented subcreation</i>	Normative experience	Container of multiple worlds	Network of intertextual products
<i>Possible World</i>	Explicated	Multiple but canalised	Negotiable
<i>Multi-Author</i>	Limited involvement	Subjective defaults of the universe	Co-constructed and negotiated entity
<i>Forensic Fans</i>	Detective mentality	Curating players	Producing instalments
<i>Transmedial</i>	In service of narration	Medium specificity as source of salient additions	Operationalised to redefine boundaries

Granted this further sophistication, in a way this thesis has unleashed carnivalesque play on the discourse around transmedial universes, breaking down the existing context in order to construct alternative models. Despite the curatorial and concept universes' greater freedom of play, IP universes should *not* be antagonised. While their claims of essentialism are faulty, creating a subcreation can yield a highly immersive and successful experience and should therefore not be disregarded based on its commercial background alone. Ultimately, the three models are different configurations of formative characteristics but not exclusively distinctive. The IP universe's functioning does reminisce of traditional models of narration and therefore to solely focus on this model would occlude any insight into current emergent practices.

Although alternative foci are possible now, a methodological constriction must be addressed. In this thesis, I used play as epistemological tool to gain insight into universes. While already relying on a wider and inclusive definition, play might still be too skewed to a universe relying on videogames. As Evans' treatise of *SPOOKS* illustrated, the engagement present in the macrostory can influence the interaction with other instalments (2008). Alternative epistemological tools, such as the filmic concept of diegesis, defined by Paul Verstraten as "everything that belongs to the narrated history, and the fiction of the presented world on film" (1989, 61), might provide a less medium-specific approach to heuristic models. Such alternative models can be cross-referenced with the models achieved through play, through which the heuristic tools can be refined and made more inclusive. Still, the choice of play in this thesis is

justified due to the central textual analysis of AC; a series consisting mainly of videogames, thus benefiting from the play focus.

The method used in this thesis thus privileges videogames to an extent. With good reason, but this still limits the scope and will require further research starting from different media. Even within this game focus, a caveat must be confessed. I relied on an implied player in these analyses – a textual construct. This fit the textual focus of this thesis but will require actual player research to be validated. In order to accurately ascertain the (possibly new) player practices depending on the type of universe, qualitative research into the player must be performed. Interviews and participant observation can show the actual practices afforded by the universes but also those practices that wrestle control over universe constructions. This way an IP universe might suddenly turn into a curatorial one, further granulating understanding of universes and undercutting that pesky essentialism falsely attributed to the IP universe.

Alternatively, one may even argue that the methodology remained too inclusive. The media practices that in this thesis have been labelled as transmedial universes might go by different monikers in other publications. Transmedial universes as described here share some characteristics with cult products as explained by Eco (1984), and what is labelled as the concept universe is described as “open source” by Chess (2012, 376). To fully trace the nuances between what counts as a universe or an alternative term requires a metaphorical discussion on the concept. Not only can such a discussion refine the heuristics due to heightened clarity in the categories, more attention to the metaphors used can help prevent a similar polyphony currently complicating the discourses around transmedia. This term is not to be confused with crossmedia (Giovagnoli 2011) or interfictionality (Ryan 2013), which are differentiated ever so slightly by their instigators, and many others, all possessing slight but less discussed nuances.

Despite these methodological reflections, the models provided in this thesis open up new trajectories to other universes in future endeavours. In this thesis I have mostly focused on AC and other third person adventure games as the basis of transmedial universes. In doing so I have ignored many other game genres that are perfectly capable of forming transmedial universes, albeit through different practices. Especially massive multiplayer online role playing games such as WORLD OF WARCRAFT (Blizzard Entertainment 2004-present), THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE (ZeniMax Online Studios 2014-present) and DC UNIVERSE ONLINE (Daybreak Game Company 2011-present) often are extensions of an already existing universe. These games can be insightful in that they rely more on individual player practices than on an overarching story, as described by Thon (2009), but still elaborate on a universe. As such, the heuristics I provided can be used to gain a new understanding of these games but these games can equally well provide new insights into the role of the player in the construction of a universe.

On a more general level this thesis has offered an expansion in the discourse on storytelling spread out over an (abstract) space. Taking this further, the insights gathered here can be applied to different spatial contexts in future research. A similar kind of overarching entity for instance can be identified in city building, for the city has an identity that is created through many aspects – instalments. Adding stories to a city, or analysing it from a universe perspective can highlight more playful elements in a city– a current trend in urban planning (see de Lange & de Waal 2013). Depending on how the city is approached can help suggest different practices to engage citizens. A city following the characteristics of the IP universe is highly top down structured with citizens solely accepting what is provided. Conversely, a concept city would be completely grassroots but with little top down coordination. A curatorial universe still starts from an agreed upon conception of a city but relies on citizens to actually make it work. All three formations are possible to some degree and the heuristics supplied here may offer new systematic ways of approaching such situations in which an overarching concept is created through many instalments with varying degrees of control.

Regardless of these required sophistications and elaborations, this thesis has shown that universes are not solely top down created corporate strategies, exploiting new ways to bind audiences to a franchise. The provision of alternatives has opened up world building debates to new approaches to transmedia and has incorporated multiple disciplinary models under one header. Within the changing media climate these new elaborate products, which will only proliferate further, have now been launched in a variety of discourses. As a result there is a whole sky full of universes with different structures and strengths, all we have to do is direct our academic nose up and gaze at the mediated stars.

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In the current convergence culture successful media products never exist in isolation. Marvel and DC Comics for instance are both heavily banking on the construction of a cinematic *universe* while many videogame instalments bank on a *transmedial* extension of their product with complementary comics in the game box for instance. Transmedial universes can be said to be a formative strategy for the current popular media culture, both in complexity and profitability. Attention to these entities is often derogatory due to the commercial nature or limited to singular instalments. In doing so, the formal characteristics of these entities are disregarded or rejected, while proper attention to these universes can show new audience practices in the current culture and manners in which media relate to each other.

This thesis will take you on a journey to discover these media constellations. Armed with a flight-plan etched on play, the configurations of the formal characteristics of transmedial universes will be assessed in all their diversity. Depending on the freedom of play afforded, different biases in universe constructions can be shown that suggest different analytical approaches. The creation of three heuristic models – the intellectual property, curatorial and concept universes – must put academic attention to these entities back on course. Armed with these models, transmedial universes will no longer be the final frontier.

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