A World of Disney:
Building a Transmedia Storyworld for Mickey and his Friends

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Building fictional worlds has been the preoccupation of media creators for a very long time. As Marie Laure-Ryan (2008) points out, "the ability to create a world – or more precisely the ability to inspire the mental representation of a world – is the primary condition for any text to be considered a narrative." Media texts do not merely forge stories or characters; they build worlds in the service of forging characters and stories. But that does not explain how imaginary worlds are actually built, particularly in historical contexts far removed from the technological convergences and innovations of the present media environment. What is it that holds storyworlds together across countless texts and media? And how do we know this?

Arguably the most famous imaginary world of the mid-twentieth century – the fantasy land of Walt Disney's cartoon creations – is not typically discussed as a "world" at all. We readily think of Mickey Mouse and his girlfriend Minnie, of Pluto and of Donald Duck, and indeed of the relationships between them. But what of the fictional world that surrounds these characters? Disney may be synonymous with those characters – colloquially known as the "Mouse House"– but let us not forget that in the 1950s Walt Disney quite literally built an imaginary world that its audience could enter: the magical Disneyland theme park.

This chapter will offer a snapshot of how transmedia storyworlds were built during the early- to mid-twentieth century. Surveying some of the prominent scholarship on consumer culture and media licensing, I will first critically explore some of the key ways in which this period afforded world-building activities as a newly corporatised phenomenon. Specifically, using The Walt Disney Company as a case study, the chapter

will examine popular Disney characters (like Mickey Mouse, Minnie Mouse, Pluto and Donald Duck) as the creation of a transmedia storyworld across comic strips, cartoon shorts, and a theme park. Having outlined some of the key industrial practices as well as some of the broader cultural influences of the period that impacted upon the rise and popularisation of what we now see as transmedia storyworlds, I then turn to a more theoretical consideration of Disney, showing how intertextuality and immersion were key to the way in which its storyworld was constructed. I do this via analysis of texts from the 1920s and 1930s and via reference to the construction of the Disneyland theme park in the 1950s, exploring what the park offered as a site of fictional world-building.

The imaginary worlds of consumer culture

World-building, according to Henry Jenkins, concerns "the process of designing a fictional universe […] that is sufficiently detailed to enable many different stories to emerge but coherent enough so that each story fells like it fits with the others" (2006, 335). For Jenkins, "to fully experience any fictional storyworld, consumers must assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels […] to come away with a richer entertainment experience" (2006, 21). In economic terms, then, world-building operates on the basis that audiences will gain both a richer and fuller understanding of a fictional storyworld by consuming more and more media texts that narrate adventures from that storyworld. Any attempt to historicise world-building must account for consumer culture as a broad contextual backdrop; in any case, the consumerist ideology ingrained into Jenkins' definition of world-building suggests that its industrial history is closely related to the rise of consumer culture.

This rise had meant, as James C. Davis writes, that "the industrial revolution had enabled the manufacturing of more and more goods,' and so 'the stability of the economy required that demand be manufactured as well" (2007, 1). "Mass production has made mass distribution necessary," asserted department store tycoon Edward Filene in 1927 (Filene 1927, 21). Most broadly, consumer culture was about spreading products further, encouraging consumption so as to keep demand at the same high level as supply at a time when the rise of industry brought more choice for consumers. Media creators learned to

conceive of fiction not as single products, but as series of larger narratives that thrived on the building of imaginary worlds.

Perhaps no media form told its stories as threads of a larger storyworld more than the pulp magazines of the 1910s and 1920s, which exploited adjoining narratives so to sustain a high readership. For this reason, many pulp magazines from this period constructed their narratives in ways that saw one character's world joined with that of another, with each of these adjoining characters' stories slowly coming together to form a larger storyworld. The assumption on the part of magazine editors was that readers who responded favourably to one story or character would be more easily persuaded to read a different story featuring a different character – and thus purchase further editions of the same magazine – if both characters were seen to be sharing the same storyworld, linking the exploits of one hero with those of others.

Consider the early work of Tarzan creator Edgar Rice Burroughs. In one of his pulp serials called *At the Earth's Core*, published inside *The All-Story* in 1914, Burroughs created a world called Pellucidar, a land inhabited by a species of pterodactyls called Mahars. Later entries in the series featured visits from Tarzan. The crossover narration was in turn reciprocated when, in a later story titled *Tarzan and the Jewels of Opar*, published in 1916 in *The All-Story*, Tarzan stumbled across the lost civilization discovered in *At the Earth's Core*. Similarly, Burroughs' intention for his first Tarzan sequel, *The Return of Tarzan*, was hence for his hero to "encounter a strange race living in the ruins of a former great city" (Burroughs 1912, 44). Correspondingly, in another of Burroughs' stories called *The Land That Time Forgot* – this time published in *Blue Book Magazine* in 1918 – readers were presented with this former great city, here called Caspak, a place inhabited by dinosaurs. Caspak, as was revealed only at the end of this story, bordered the same jungle as Tarzan's adventures. Burroughs' pulp fictions thus developed themselves into highly intertextual adventures that encouraged repeat consumption.

Intertextual links between media forms also extended across different media. In the late-1930s, *Public Opinion Quarterly* revealed "a complementary relationship between movies and magazines" (Lazarsfeld 1937, 32). The publication concluded that there was "a clear positive relationship between the number of movie houses in a city and

the readers of magazines" (ibid.). By the 1920s, for instance, the film industry had grown adept at marketing films in accordance with the film story's exposure in other media. Consider the marketing campaign that surrounded the release of *In Old Kentucky*, a silent film produced in 1919 based on the play of the same name. The film's marketing campaign included "a jazz band [that] paraded about town giving concerts before each performance and the stage setting of the original play served as the setting for the [film's] prologue" (*The Film Daily* 1920,180). Such innovative marketing created an interactive media experience for *In Old Kentucky* that was highly immersive; the fictional storyworld of the film permeated the space of the cinema and even spread into the streets as audiences were steered from the venue of the story's theatre to the cinema. This constituted a kind of immersive transmedia attraction, as the spectatorial spaces of multiple entertainment forms all operated in concert to expand a fictional storyworld both around and across media.

This kind of immersive attraction emerged from the need to spread the mass-produced products of the industrial age. An influx in brand names around the early twentieth century had given rise to the licensing of those brands – thus spreading them further across other media. Broadly, licensing refers to a practice of spreading a product or service beyond the confines of one manufacturer, who issues "the rights to manufacture products" under management (Jenkins 2006, 107). In many respects, licensing was the logical response to the rise of consumer culture, for as Avi Santo writes, "as a professional practice, licensing is linked with the development of mass culture industries" (2006, 11). Early forms of licensing included comic-strip characters such as The Yellow Kid and Buster Brown, which were licensed as the faces of consumer products and soon became linked with merchandise such as shoes.

The spread of licensed intellectual property across multiple media was followed by a continued broadening of the fictional storyworlds created in those media, with Disney one of the most prominent of the era. Janet Wasko writes that "from its inception, Disney created strong characters that were marketed in various forms (mostly through films and merchandise) throughout the world" (2001, 1). The Walt Disney Company was founded in 1923, formed as a producer of animation before diversifying from film production to merchandising, television and theme parks. Kristin Thompson explains that

"when Mickey Mouse rose to stardom late in the [1920s], Walt Disney licensed numerous items on a large scale. For decades Disney's was the only Hollywood studio that essentially ran on the franchise principle – not only creating tie-ins but also rereleasing his classic animated features regularly … The merchandising around them remained perpetually current and desirable" (2007, 4). But even without licensing, the Disney storyworld was being constructed in the earliest Mickey Mouse cartoons as a strange yet familiar place. It may be populated characters that operated as the most familiar emblems of the Disney brand, but as I will now explore, its fictional storyworld was no less significant to building those characters.

'The plausible impossible'

In 1933 the Walt Disney Company released *Mickey's Gala Premier* into cinemas, already the fifty-eighth cartoon short to feature Disney's iconic Mickey Mouse. In several important ways, this cartoon epitomises precisely how the Disney storyworld operated during this period, and indeed precisely how this storyworld was built. J.B. Kaufman writes of *Mickey's Gala Premier*:

> In this cartoon all Hollywood, in the form of movie-star caricatures, turns out for the opening of Mickey Mouse's latest picture. The film-within-a-film (a western bearing a loose resemblance to the 1930 Mickey short *The Cactus Kid*, but augmented with a host of new gags) rolls 'em into the aisles: stars range from Douglas Fairbanks to Boris Karloff, from Barrymore family to Mae West, are reduced to helpless convulsions of laughter and eagerly cheering Mickey on, are a number of legendary comedians – performers familiar to the audience from decades of vaudeville and two-reel comedies. (Kaufman 2011, 51)

Kaufman also points out that this cartoon ends by revealing that "this show of adulation turns out to be dream" (2011, 51). For Kaufman, *Mickey's Gala Premier* was but one in a string of Disney cartoons during this era that marked "a subtle but distinct shift in the balance between fantasy and reality" (2011, 52). Disney's Mickey Mouse-fronted cartoon shorts were "grounded in … the real, physical world [but] moved unmistakably not toward realism but toward a more convincing form of fantasy" (Kaufman 2011, 52). The

effect, Kaufman continues, "was one that Disney himself later termed 'the plausible impossible'" (2011, 52-53) – a boundless amalgamation of the real and the imaginary into a single fictional storyworld where Disney's characters could roam free. As exemplified by *Mickey's Gala Premier*, the fictional storyworld on display in these cartoons was one where imaginary creations such as a talking mouse could share the company of the great flesh-and-blood comedians and Hollywood legends of the era. This storyworld was therefore one where real films existed in the same milieu as artificially created ones; films-within-films became dreams-within-dreams amidst a narrativised collapsing of all real/imaginary binaries.

Two distinct if equally related concepts are at work in this process of Disney world-building: intertextuality, itself the idea that multiple texts exist and operate in relation to many others, and immersion, a concept that Jenkins defines most simply as "the consumer enter[ing] into the world of the story (e.g. theme parks)" (2009). Let us now examine how these two concepts of intertextuality and immersion informed the creation and expansion of the Disney storyworld across media as a place "grounded in … the real, physical world [but] moved unmistakably not toward realism but toward a more convincing form of fantasy" (Kaufman 2011, 52). I shall begin by discussing the role of intertextuality and Disney characters.

Intertextuality

Fictional characters are one way of understanding how storyworlds are held together. Scolari, Bertetti and Freeman have called for the need to find new analytic categories for deciphering the way in which fictional characters are formed across media, arguing that "it is the case of legendary heroes or of modern serial characters, from Tarzan or Zorro to Harry Potter […] [that character] forms itself among and through texts […] [but] never completely enclosed in a single text" (2014, 45). Similarly, Marrone argues that a "character does not live in a single text or in a generic context with no textual links; it rather lives and feeds itself in the intertextual network in which it is constantly being retranslated" (2003, 28). Put simply, a storyworld is built up of characters that cross back and forth across numerous iterations of a storyworld, signalling to audiences that one story belongs in the same world as another. Today's Marvel

Cinematic Universe, with its superheroes like Iron Man, Captain America, Hulk, and Thor all popping up in each other's movies, is a notable recent example. But if character is one way of holding a storyworld together, then it is intertextuality that serves to underpin this process on a textual level.

Julia Kristeva defines intertextuality by suggesting that multiple texts exist and operate in relation to others. Roland Barthes similarly argues that a media text is "a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings […] blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations" (1977, 48). In other words, in seeing intertextuality as an expansion of story across different texts, as Daniela Caselli (2006, 49) proposes, intertextuality creates a scenario where the meaning of a story may be built in relation not only to the individual story in question but also in relation to other stories that are invoked in the reading process.

The same principle underpins the world-building of early Disney. Martin Rubin has argued that the "tendency toward explicit intertextuality reached its most intense and overt form in the 1930s" (1990). Rubin in fact claims that intertextuality helped to create distinctive cartoon stars precisely via "topical references to popular songs, sayings, movies, plays, radio shows, books, magazines, celebrities, political figures, advertising slogans, etc." (ibid.).

We have already seen how *Mickey's Gala Premier* populated its storyworld with Hollywood stars and comedians, forming intertextual connections with the movie-world of those stars' fictional characters. Martin Kornberger ascribes this intertextuality to the "ubiquitous trend began by the rise of mass media" upon the beginnings of consumer culture "to re-mediate the same content across different media. Such intertextuality creates space and allows for linking things in unanticipated ways" (2010, 108). In 1932's *The Klondike Kid*, for example, Mickey is seen attempting to pick up the coins that have been thrown at him during a variety performance, only to realise that one of those objects is not a coin at all but a gob of spit. Famously, Charlie Chaplin performed the same joke in *The Vagabond* sixteen years earlier.

Moreover, it was intertextual references to figures such as Chaplin that served to construct both the Mickey Mouse character and his storyworld. Films such as *The Klondike Kid* presented Mickey in the same silent-comedian category as the likes of

Chaplin and Buster Keaton. Mickey was branded with the same outsider status that typified those screen comedians – meaning, as Kaufman notes, that the storyworld itself was often populated with the "tramps, outcasts, unfortunates living on the fringes of society" as well as the famed stars of the mass media (2010, 53). There was a working-class directive about the screen comedians of the 1930s, a fact that often saw Mickey taking on such roles as a hot dog vendor in *The Delivery Boy* (1931) or a construction worker in *Building a Building* (1933). Even *Steamboat Willie* from 1928, the first Mickey Mouse cartoon to be released, was meant as a parody of Buster Keaton's *Steamboat Bill Jr.* from the same year. The working everyman quality of this era's screen comedians indeed defined Mickey; as far back as 1928's *The Barn Dance*, his objective was to win a date with Minnie Mouse, battling against far more resourceful characters. Such one-upmanship was the result of a further source of intertextuality. According to Ub Iwerks, animator of Mickey in these early days, "Mickey Mouse was based on the character of Douglas Fairbanks. He was the superhero of his day, always winning, gallant, and swashbuckling" (Iwerks 2001, 54-55). Mickey was effectively a more comedic Zorro or Robin Hood, an exemplar of everyman camaraderie.

But alongside Mickey Mouse were a number of supporting characters from the cartoon films, which would feature prominently in ways that served to connect the storyworld across texts whilst building it in new directions. The Disney storyworld was built up of characters that re-appeared across texts, their role within the narrative re-shuffled. Minnie Mouse has already been mentioned, who shared the screen alongside Mickey since *Steamboat Willie* in 1928. Pluto, originally introduced as Minnie's floppy-eared dog, was first introduced in 1930's *The Picnic*. Pluto was later seen roaming on stage in 1932's *Mickey's Revue*, a cartoon that also introduced the dim-witted Goofy, a further staple of the Disney world, who was seen in the audience of a concert hall ceremony whilst Mickey and Minnie try to perform a duet. In some cases, secondary characters such as Goofy were turned into the heroes of their own stories; Goofy's first solo cartoon *Goofy and Wilbur* was released in 1939. The same intertextual transition was true for Donald Duck. Having stood alongside Mickey in *Orphan's Benefit* (1934), Donald Duck soon appeared without the aid of Mickey in 1934's *The Wise Little Hen* and in 1936's *Donald and Pluto*, before then leading his own *Don Donald* film in 1937.

But this intertextuality extended far beyond the cinema, and the continual re-appearance of characters established the likes of Mickey, Minnie, Pluto and Goofy as character brands in and of themselves that could embrace multiple media – including newspaper comic strips. By the early 1930s, newspaper comic strips had evolved from the purely advertising avatars of the earliest years of the twentieth century to instead become actual products; that is to say that comic strips contributed, as David Welky observes, to the "creation [of] the consumer culture" (2008, 80) – owing in large part to the industrial production of mass culture. The *Mickey Mouse* newspaper comic strip began life when the King Features Syndicate approached Walt Disney with a proposal to licence Mickey for use in a comic, first appearing on January 13, 1930. Jason Scott observes that the aforementioned "stable of Disney characters provided the basis for licensing" (Scott 2009, 42); Mickey, Minnie, Pluto, Goofy, and Donald Duck were all licensed under Disney's partnering and policing of the King Features Syndicate. "Design and artwork was supplied free of charge to licensees to ensure that the images of Mickey Mouse and his friends were consistent with the cartoon film characters who might change, sometimes imperceptibly, from film to film" (Heide and Gilman 1994, 43).

For the comic strip, intertextual references to the real world increasingly gave way to intertextual references to the Disney cartoons themselves; the story events of the *Mickey Mouse* comic strip were typically based on what was going on in the Mickey Mouse cartoons at the time, taking the storyworld in related but expansive directions. For example, the comic began with Goofy as Mickey's sidekick before Goofy was granted his own newspaper strip. From then on, Mickey and Goofy would cross over into each other's comic strips, effectively linking both comics as strands of the same larger storyworld. By adding more existents to this larger storyworld and by turning secondary characters into the heroes of their own stories – a strategy formed on the basis of intertextuality and afforded by licensing – Disney was granted "co-ordinated cross-promotion," leading to a successful and significant development in media world-building (Scott 2009, 42).

Immersion

But as I noted earlier, there were two conceptions at work in Disney's world-building, and the second one was the idea of immersion. Whilst intertextuality is about the "links *between* texts, operating in the perception and experience of audiences" (Esser, Bernal-Merino & Smith 2016, 225), immersion concerns the engagement of audiences *around* texts. Building on his earlier definition, Jenkins argues that transmedia storyworlds are themselves based on a balance between immersion and extractability: "In immersion, the consumer enters into the world of the story (e.g. theme parks), while in extractability, the fan takes aspects of the story away with them as resources they deploy in the spaces of their everyday life (e.g. items from the gift shop)" (2009). To put it another way, world-building envisions a balance between fantasy and reality, the imaginary and the real.

This particular emphasis on the shift in the balance between fantasy and reality, as Kaufman noted of *Mickey's Gala Premier* earlier, is pertinent in Jean Baudrillard's theorisation of the postmodern, which is itself another useful tool for understanding the building of the Disney storyworld at this time (1994). Fittingly, Baudrillard demonstrates his key idea that the postmodern represents a destruction of meaning where binaries such as real/imaginary are abolished via Disneyland, which opened in California in 1955 (1994, 12-14). For Baudrillard, Disneyland encapsulates the collapsing of the real and the unreal, allowing guests to relish in a fully immersive imaginary world (1994, 12-14). Paul Grainge discusses how "Disney pioneered the concept of the theme park in the 1950s … linking film interests to the development of rides and to associated business concerns in real estate" (2008, 122). Grainge then goes on to explain how "the history of modern entertainment branding is inextricably linked with the Disney Company and its transition in the 1950s from a studio specializing in cartoon animation to a company whose activities would take place within, and in many ways herald, the postwar integration of leisure markets, connecting movie production to developments in television, tourism, theme parks and consumer merchandise" (2008, 44).

Disneyland was the symbol of this transition, and by "expanding upon the lucrative character merchandising market that the studio had joined in the early 1930s" (Anderson 1994, 134), Disney created an all-encompassing consumer environment that Walt Disney himself described as "total merchandising" (Anderson 1994, 134). The

crucial term "all-encompassing" refers here to the Disneyland theme park's immersive potential to blur reality into fantasy. Organised around four divisions – Fantasyland, Adventureland, Frontierland and Tomorrowland – Disneyland allowed audiences to not simply enter a magical storyworld, but to bend the rules of plausible reality. Disneyland is a place where Mickey's Toontown, for instance, a cartoony walk-through of Mickey's home, lies in proximity to Adventureland and to other equally "real" attractions of "fantasy." In effect, Disneyland became the living embodiment of the plausible impossible – an immersive blend of the real and the imaginary into a single leisure space where audiences could also take aspects of the storyworld back home with them as items of character-based merchandise that could then be deployed in their everyday lives.

Disneyland's blurring of the real and the imaginary may exemplify Jenkins' principle of immersion vs. extractability, but this theme continued to characterise the textual world of Disney. The earlier outlined *Mickey's Gala Premier* demonstrates this perfectly: the film was a comedic blurring of the real world (where Hollywood stars and comedians exist) and the imaginary world (where they share this world with a talking mouse). Moreover, Kaufman points out that this blurring of real stars with fantasy stars turns out to be a dream at the end of the reel itself adds a further level of blurring – this time between real-life and dream.

But this blurring of real and unreal was not specific to *Mickey's Gala Premier*. In 1929's *Plane Crazy*, Mickey is seen discovering his hero Charles Lindbergh – the real-life aviator and inventor – in a book before attempting to emulate him by building and flying his own airplane. And in *The Barnyard Battle*, from the same year, Mickey joins an army of mice dressed like the forces of the Confederate States of America to battle an army of cats dressed in German World War I helmets. The fusion of imaginary logic with real people created a dream-like storyworld where dream logic provided much of the comedy. In *The Chain Gang* (1930), for example, Mickey is a prisoner embarking on a prison break. In one scene, Mickey leaps over a wall, escaping into a swamp before riding away on a horse. But when the horse throws Mickey off a cliff, he falls not to his death but through the roof of the jail and finds himself back in the same prison cell.

And this illogical development of the storyworld does not stop with the cartoon shorts. In fact, the boundless scope of the imaginary fused with the real world that

epitomised the joy of Disneyland also provided further ways to build the larger Disney storyworld across media. An example of how this worked was *The Grocery Boy* cartoon in 1932, which saw Mickey reaching for the wrong doorknob; upon opening this particular door, rather than it leading logically to the house's exterior it instead results in an ironing board falling from the sky, knocking Mickey into another realm. This realm was the home of Goofy's comic strip adventures, marking one of the many occasions that Mickey Mouse crossed into Goofy's solo comic strips. Conceptually, of course, this example echoes both the intertextuality of Burroughs' earlier pulps and the immersive experience of a theme park attraction. Disney's world-building was thus ultimately driven by the irrational gags emerging from the intersection of the real and the unreal in an immersive, all-encompassing space where Disney's branded characters and our real-life characters could unite.

Conclusion

Given its expanse across so many media and decades, The Walt Disney Company is a useful case study for understanding the industrialised practices of world-building in the twentieth century. According to Scott, "Disney would effectively innovate new forms of repurposing and repackaging" (2009, 43), embodying alternative but complementary approaches to character-centred world-building. With Disney controlling all aspects of their character exploitation, even for licensed products, the world-building on display in such media products provided substantial opportunities for cross-promotion. In effect, world-building came to equal audience-building.

It was, of course, the *world* of Disney that audiences flocked to experience following the opening of Disneyland. The same conceptions of intertextuality and an immersive collapse between the real and the imaginary underpinned the world-design of Disney's iconic theme park just as it did on the screen and in comics. The Disney storyworld expanded into an increasingly pervasive public sphere, which stretched from the celluloid fantasy of the cinema screen to the constructed reality of the Disneyland theme park. Emerging as "a primal scene of brand synergy" (Grainge 2008, 122), Disneyland would define itself as a place that brought dreams to life. While enjoying the rides available, audiences could defy gravity, moving at vast speeds and in ways that

seem to violate what rational logic suggests is possible on Earth. The entire attraction is driven by intertextual representations of space flight, aliens, time travel and lost dream-worlds – it is an immersive postmodern world not limited by time, distance or size. Just as Mickey was able to leave the realm of his home and magically re-materialise in Goofy's realm of adventures, effectively crossing from one medium to another in the process, so too are visitors of Disneyland constantly navigating a storyworld that embraces, absorbs, and combines all media.

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The Chain Gang. Directed by Burt Gillett. 1930. California: Walt Disney Animation Studios. Online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eIv12pLu_zQ

The Delivery Boy. Directed by Burt Gillett. 1931. California: Walt Disney Animation Studios. Online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ynBYb8KJBYc

The Grocery Boy. Directed by Wilfred Jackson. 1932. California: Walt Disney Animation Studios. Online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Dz6poE8WAs

The Klondike Kid. Directed by Wilfred Jackson. 1932. California: Walt Disney Animation Studios. Online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mf2zRm2H2s

The Vagabond. Directed by Charles Chaplin. 1916. California: Mutual Film. Online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9dVjXN1vmn4

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