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MA by Research and Creative Work

From Words to Worlds

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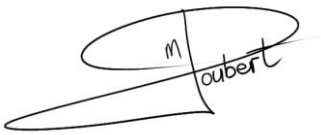
Supervisor: Dr Kenneth Kaplan

Declaration

I, Megan Joubert, student number: 2352872, hereby declare that this thesis titled *From Words to Worlds* and the work presented within it are my own.

I confirm that:

1. This thesis has been composed solely by me and has not been submitted, in whole or in part, to any other university or institution for any degree or qualification.
2. The research and writing are my own, except where explicitly stated otherwise, through proper citation and acknowledgment of sources.
3. All references and acknowledgments have been made where required, in accordance with academic integrity and ethical standards.

Signed:  Date: 30/03/2025

Contents

Declaration 2

Chapter One: Introduction: 5

Aim 5

Background 6

The Research Problem 7

The Limitations of the Study 8

The Structure 9

Chapter Two: Foundations of Speculative Worldbuilding – Literature and Theoretical Insights: 12

Worldbuilding in the Entertainment Industry 12

Approaches to Worldbuilding: Hard vs. Soft: 14

Primary and Secondary World Concepts in Character Development 17

Transmedia Storytelling and Worldbuilding 20

Conclusion 23

Chapter Three: Comparative Methodology and Case Study Analysis: 25

Hard Worldbuilding: 26

Soft Worldbuilding: 26

Mixed Worldbuilding: 27

Analytical Framework 27

1. Narrative Coherence 27

3. Audience Engagement 28

Comparative Methodology 29

Comparative Case Study Approach 31

Comparative Analysis of Hard Worldbuilding: 32

Comparative Analysis of Soft Worldbuilding: 38

Comparative Analysis of Mixed Worldbuilding: 42

Comparative Analysis of transmedia Worldbuilding: 47

Conclusion 48

Chapter Four: Creative Practice and reflexivity Aspect: 50

Introduction to the Creative Work 50

Research-Driven Methodological Approach 51

Tolkien's Secondary Belief 51

Hard and Soft Worldbuilding Integration 52

Hemingway's Iceberg Theory 53

Potential for Transmedia Storytelling 53

Narrative Structure and Character Development 53

Methodology of the Creative Process 54

Reflexivity and Self-Analysis 55

Conclusion 57

Chapter Five: Conclusion: 59

Bibliography 63

Filmography 64

Chapter One: Introduction:

Aim

Scholars and audiences alike have been captivated by the worldbuilding and narrative landscapes of speculative fiction, particularly in fantasy and science fiction genres. Worldbuilding refers to the process of constructing an imagined world, complete with its own geography, history, cultures, and often unique rules, that serves as the setting for a narrative (Wolf 2014:16-64). Meanwhile, narrative landscapes can be understood as the interconnected web of story elements, such as plotlines, character arcs, and thematic underpinnings that are shaped by and respond to the constructed world (Jenkins, 2006:95-120). Speculative fiction encompasses genres that imagine worlds significantly different from our own, often by exploring futuristic, fantastical, or alternative realities (Mendlesohn, 2008:59-94)

Recently, there has been a growing focus on understanding the role of worldbuilding in shaping not only narratives but also character development, emphasizing how increasing complexity of fictional worlds in screen-based entertainment actively inform character motivations and arc formations (Martin & Sneegas, 2020, pp. 15–16). This study examines the nuanced relationship between various worldbuilding techniques and their impact on the construction of speculative worlds, analysing how these methods serve as frameworks for storytelling and character arcs. A primary goal of this research is to investigate the balance screenwriters must achieve between detailed worldbuilding and narrative coherence, a pressing concern for creators aiming to maintain audience immersion. Through a comparative analysis of notable film franchises, this study will explore how different worldbuilding methods influence narrative structure, plot coherence, and character evolution.

Guided by several objectives, this research first analyses the characteristics of hard, soft, and mixed worldbuilding in selected case studies, evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of each approach. It further assesses how these methods impact plot structure, pacing, and clarity, ultimately examining the role of worldbuilding in supporting or shaping character growth and motivations. Additionally, the research identifies best practices for balancing worldbuilding with narrative clarity, contributing to the broader academic discourse on worldbuilding in speculative fiction. By proposing a framework for understanding the interplay between world creation and narrative structure, this study serve as a valuable resource for both scholars and practitioners in the field.

This chapter offers background and context, followed by an exploration of the research problem, the research aims, objectives, and questions. It discusses the significance of the study and, finally, outline its limitations.

Background

In speculative fiction, worldbuilding serves not only as the foundation of narrative structure and character development but also as a means of anchoring storytelling across different platforms. This perspective aligns with Jenkins' (2007) concept of transmedia storytelling, which emphasizes how worldbuilding unfolds across multiple platforms, such as films, games, and fan fiction, to construct a larger story universe that extends beyond the primary narrative. In fantasy and science fiction films, carefully crafted settings, societies, and cultural elements do more than establish context; they actively drive plot progression and shape character motivations, creating dynamic story ecosystems. This idea is supported by Mendlesohn (2008), whose work emphasizes how the structures of fantasy worlds inherently influence narrative flow and character arcs. This study specifically explores how these worldbuilding techniques impact screen-based storytelling, with the need for expansive, multifaceted worlds.

Transmedia storytelling, extensively analysed by scholars like Henry Jenkins (2007), unfolds a single narrative across various media platforms, each contributing uniquely to the story's richness and depth. This concept emphasizes the strategic use of multiple media forms, such as books, films, and video games to deepen audience engagement and understanding of a narrative world. In the context of this research, transmedia storytelling is vital for examining how worldbuilding can create immersive and consistent secondary worlds, significantly enhancing character development and thematic exploration.

In recent years, worldbuilding has gained increased academic attention, with scholars such as Wolf in *Building Imaginary Worlds* (2014:16-64) and Hickson's work in his books *On Writing and Worldbuilding* (2019-2023), exploring the role in shaping narratives and character engagement in the speculative fictional world. Wolf's comprehensive analysis of imaginary worlds, along with Hickson's insights on the mechanics of worldbuilding, have highlighted the narrative potential of detailed setting creation.

While the concept of worldbuilding is not new, the approaches vary significantly between films. Some filmmakers opt for 'hard' worldbuilding, where the rules and logic of the fictional universe are meticulously defined, a method discussed by Sanderson, (2010:1-10) while others employ 'soft' worldbuilding, where ambiguity and flexibility invite more interpretation as

Hickson (2021:150) highlights in his exploration of creative openness. Understanding these approaches is essential for analysing how speculative fiction operates, especially as the genre continues to evolve.

In the context of screen-based speculative fiction, this research explores different worldbuilding methods, specifically hard and soft worldbuilding, and examine their broader implications on narrative structure and character arcs. The analysis will focus on case studies of fantasy and science fiction films, examining their approaches to worldbuilding and narrative construction. This study will compare the worldbuilding techniques in *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2014) and *Game of Thrones (2011-2024)* (hard worldbuilding), *Spirited Away* (2001) and *Howl's Moving Castle (2004)* (soft worldbuilding), and *Avatar* (2009, 2022) and *Harry Potter* (2001-2011) (mixed worldbuilding). Through these examples, the research will critically analyse how different worldbuilding methods impact storytelling effectiveness, character development, and audience engagement in speculative fiction.

While worldbuilding in literature and games has been studied, this research aims to fill a critical gap in the literature offering a more nuanced understanding of how Worldbuilding is applied to screenwriting using the above examples.

The Research Problem

In the realm of speculative fiction, worldbuilding is a key narrative device that significantly influences both story structure and character development. However, as the scope and complexity of these fictional universes increase, so do the challenges face by screenwriters. One of the primary difficulties lies in balancing the creation of an immersive, expansive world with the need for a cohesive and engaging narrative. While worldbuilding can enrich a story, it also risks overshadowing the plot and characters if not carefully integrated.

A critical problem that has emerged in contemporary screen-based speculative fiction is the tendency for elaborate worldbuilding to detract from narrative clarity. For instance, films that employ hard worldbuilding where every detail of the world is tightly structured, run the risk of focusing heavily on the rules, geography, or lore of the universe that the narrative becomes secondary (Wolf, 2014:16-64). Audiences may find themselves overwhelmed by details that serve more as exposition, rather than storytelling, weakening the emotional resonance and narrative drive.

Conversely, films that utilize soft worldbuilding, where the rules of the universe are more flexible and ambiguous, face the opposite challenge: if the world is too loosely defined, the narrative can lack depth, leading to a sense of disconnection from the story as seen in *The Maze Runner* series, (2014-2018) where the mystery of the maze initially engages viewers, but the gradual expansion of the world, particularly the unclear motives of the WCKD organization and the vague rules surrounding the virus, leads to narrative confusion and diminished emotional investment. The flexible and ambiguous nature of soft worldbuilding presents a challenge for academic analysis, as its open-ended approach often resists strict categorization. This gap in research leaves crucial questions unanswered, particularly regarding how ambiguity influences audience immersion and narrative coherence in speculative fiction (Hickson, 2021:150). Striking the right balance between world depth and narrative clarity is particularly crucial in speculative fiction, where the universe itself often functions as a character within the story, this ensures that the fictional universe enhances rather than detracts from the story's emotional and thematic impact.

In summary, this research addresses a key gap in academic literature by examining the intersection of worldbuilding theories and screenwriting practice, particularly in relation to the underexplored nuances of soft and mixed worldbuilding. While much scholarly work has focused on structured, rule-based worldbuilding, such as Wolf's (2012) typology of narrative worlds and Jenkins' (2007) discussion of coherence across transmedia systems. There is a lack of analysis on how more fluid and ambiguous worldbuilding techniques impact character development, audience immersion, and transmedia storytelling. By integrating theoretical perspectives from Tolkien, Jenkins, and Hickson with practical case studies, this study provides insights into how worldbuilding functions as a dynamic narrative tool rather than merely a background element. These findings contribute to the broader discourse on storytelling in speculative fiction and offer a framework for screenwriters navigating the evolving dynamics of narrative in the digital age.

The Limitations of the Study

While this research aims to provide insights into the relationship between worldbuilding techniques and narrative coherency, several limitations must be acknowledged.

The case studies focus on a selective group of films that fall into the categories of; hard, soft, and mixed worldbuilding This selection enables a comparative analysis using specific

measures, such as narrative coherence, character development, and adherence to internal rules, to evaluate the strengths and limitations of each worldbuilding approach. The study does not intend analysis of the entirety of speculative fiction cinema. Instead, it defines speculative fiction as encompassing science fiction and fantasy film, and uses selected case studies from these categories to enable a more focused exploration of worldbuilding and narrative structure. These include worldbuilding methods and the influence they have on narrative structure, plot coherence, and character evolution.

The evaluation of worldbuilding techniques and their impact on narrative and character development inherently involves a degree of subjectivity. Interpretations of how worldbuilding influences storytelling may vary among viewers and scholars, likewise conclusions drawn from the case studies are my own. Additionally, my perspective as a white South African woman raised within Afrikaans culture may shape my analysis. My cultural upbringing influences how I interpret the representation of culture and gender in the worldbuilding of speculative fiction. For example, my background might lead me to examine the portrayal of women or cultural norms in these films from a perspective that differs from other cultural or gendered experiences. Acknowledging this positionality allows me to be more conscious of the biases I may bring into the research and how these perspectives shape my critical discourse.

The Structure

This dissertation is structured around the exploration of the relationship between worldbuilding techniques and their impact on narrative coherence and character development in screen-based speculative fiction. This is explored in the following chapters as follows:

Chapter One: Introduction

In this chapter, the context of the study is introduced, outlining the significance of worldbuilding in speculative fiction. The research objectives and questions are clearly identified, along with a discussion of the value of such research. Additionally, the limitations of the study are addressed, framing the scope and focus of the research.

Chapter Two: Foundations of Speculative Worldbuilding – Literature and Theoretical Insights

This section explores the major theories and conceptual frameworks used in understanding worldbuilding in speculative fiction. By reviewing key scholarly works, it aims to place the research within the wider academic conversation and pinpoint areas where current discussions

fall short, particularly when it comes to understanding the connection between worldbuilding techniques, narrative coherence, and character development. The chapter argues that while many theories focus on different elements of worldbuilding, a gap exists in explaining how worldbuilding shapes both story plot and its characters, especially in screen-based speculative fiction.

Chapter Three: Comparative Methodology and Case Study Analysis

Relevant theory is discussed for analysis of the selected case studies to explore how different worldbuilding techniques like hard, soft, and mixed are used in speculative fiction. By examining narrative structure and character development, the chapter uncovers how worldbuilding impacts the overall storytelling experience, answering key research questions.

Alongside this analysis, the study examines different techniques affecting the clarity, cohesion, and depth of the stories in question. The methodology of this study is grounded in a comparative analysis of selected case studies, examining different approaches to worldbuilding in speculative fiction. By systematically analysing elements such as culture, geography, and narrative mechanics within these fictional universes, the research aims to uncover patterns and techniques that influence storytelling and character development. This methodological framework ensures a structured approach to data collection a clear lens for analysis.

These insights, in turn, inform the practical aspect of the research. Drawing from the findings of the case studies, the creative process of screenwriting becomes an avenue for applying and testing theoretical concepts. This integration of theory and practice allows for a reflexive exploration of how worldbuilding strategies can shape the narrative and character arcs in speculative fiction.

Chapter Four: Creative Practice and reflexivity Aspect

Focuses on the artistic research component, reflecting on the practical application of the insights gained throughout the study. Utilizing the findings from the previous chapter, I integrate these insights into my creative practical work, a screenplay for a pilot episode of an original TV series titled *City of Thieves*. This reflexivity focuses on how the different worldbuilding techniques identified through case study analysis inform my screenwriting process. This practical application opens a deeper understanding of the interplay between theory and creative practice.

This section explores how the principles of worldbuilding and narrative coherence can be integrated into creative practice, culminating in a reflexive analysis of the author's own screenwriting process and outcomes.

Chapter Five presents the conclusion of this study, where the central arguments and insights from the analysis are brought together. This chapter summarizes the findings, reflects on their implications, and explores potential directions for future research within the field.

Chapter Two: Foundations of Speculative Worldbuilding – Literature and Theoretical Insights:

This literature review critically examines existing research on transmedia storytelling and worldbuilding, establishing a foundational understanding of how these concepts intersect to enhance narrative construction. Key theories, include Henry Jenkins (2007) writing about transmedia storytelling frameworks and Nelson Goodman (1978) on worldbuilding perspectives which intersect with insights from McKee (1998) and Rabiger (2014) regarding narrative ambiguity and character development. The scope of this review encompasses an analysis of various media forms, such as film, literature, and video games.

Scholarship on digital media and transmedia storytelling highlights how video games and other digital platforms expand the fictional universes established in films. These extensions demonstrate the potential for transmedia storytelling to deepen audience engagement and broaden the narrative scope of speculative worlds. Such examples reinforce how worldbuilding functions not only within a single medium but across platforms, shaping the way audiences experience and interpret speculative fiction.

Worldbuilding in the Entertainment Industry

Worldbuilding has taken on increased prominence within the entertainment industry, with franchises shifting from character-centred stories to expansive, world-centred narratives (Bostan, Tinli, and Çatak, 2020). This trend reflects the industry's focus on creating immersive environments that anchor narratives across various media. Such approaches not only enrich the storytelling experience but also create opportunities for transmedia expansions. For instance, by constructing intricate histories and multidimensional characters, franchises like *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) and *Harry Potter* (1997-2007) have paved the way for spin-offs, prequels, and interactive experiences. These expansions, such as *House of the Dragon* (2022-present) exploring *Game of Thrones'* past or the *Hogwarts Legacy* (2023) game building on the *Harry Potter* universe, demonstrate the value of crafting worlds with layers that can be revisited and expanded over time. Scholars argue that effective worldbuilding fosters audience engagement and creates pathways for future storytelling across platforms (Bostan, Tinli, & Çatak, 2020).

Worldbuilding is a central concept in creative writing as explained by Hickson (2019) where the methods of hard and soft worldbuilding contribute to both structural consistency and thematic richness, shaping audience engagement and character development.

As a fundamental aspect of narrative structure, this research examines how fictional worlds can shape stories and influence the way audiences connect with characters. By exploring approaches like hard worldbuilding (detailed and systematic) and soft worldbuilding (flexible and open-ended), his study investigates how they enable audiences to emotionally and cognitively engage with the story, offering either clarity through detailed world mechanics or intrigue through open-ended elements. These dynamics are critical to understanding how crafted worlds drive the story forward while shaping character arcs in ways that resonate with audiences, ultimately revealing the balance between structure and mystery in fostering narrative immersion.

The academic exploration of worldbuilding techniques highlights their respective strengths and limitations, shaping audience engagement in different ways. Soft worldbuilding, as noted by Hickson (2019), emphasizes accessibility and adaptability, allowing audiences to immerse themselves in the story while filling in gaps with their imagination. This open-ended approach can foster engagement by inviting curiosity and personal interpretation, but it risks leaving certain aspects of the world underdeveloped, potentially resulting in a lack of cohesion or clarity for some viewers.

Conversely, hard worldbuilding, as described by Mendlesohn (2008), takes a meticulous and detail-oriented approach, creating richly defined worlds with a strong sense of realism and internal logic. This depth can appeal to dedicated fans who enjoy exploring the intricacies of a story's environment. However, as discussed in Chapter Three, this level of detail may also pose challenges for accessibility and narrative flexibility, particularly for audiences less inclined toward such immersive engagement. This study explores how these approaches influence storytelling dynamics, examining their contributions to narrative coherence and audience reception through theoretical analysis and case studies

Although extensive research exists on worldbuilding in the context of narrative enhancement, relatively few studies focus on the world as an independent narrative element, a perspective explored in greater depth in this research. Narrative enhancement refers to the ways in which worldbuilding supports traditional storytelling components, such as character development or plot coherence. For instance, Jenkins (2006) emphasizes how detailed worldbuilding strengthens transmedia storytelling by anchoring characters and narratives within cohesive settings, while Wolf (2014) discusses how richly imagined worlds enhance narrative immersion and continuity across different media. Contrastingly, independent narrative elements describe

cases where the world itself functions as a self-contained storytelling framework, inviting audience engagement without relying on linear plots or character-driven arcs. (Bould et al., 2009) By examining both approaches in speculative fiction, this study argues that understanding worlds as independent narrative elements offers a novel way to analyse how audiences engage with speculative settings, thus advancing the discourse on worldbuilding's role in storytelling.

Approaches to Worldbuilding: Hard vs. Soft:

The practice of worldbuilding has expanded beyond simple backdrop creation to become a key component in storytelling, with scholars like Adelaide and Attfield (2021) emphasizing its role in constructing immersive, cohesive narratives. Their work places worldbuilding as central in narrative craft, identifying hard and soft worldbuilding as foundational approaches. Hard worldbuilding, rich in documentation and historical depth, provides a structured and engaging context that directly influences character arcs and plot developments (Hickson, 2019). This approach is exemplified in the film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003), where a meticulously crafted historical backdrop, from ancient battles to political shifts within Middle-earth, provides a foundation that connects characters to a larger mythos, enhancing viewer immersion.

In contrast, soft worldbuilding allows for a flexible, minimalist approach, focusing less on intricate detail and more on thematic resonance (Hickson, 2019). This approach is evident in works like *Spirited Away* (2001), where sparse details and open-ended possibilities support a more fluid storytelling style an effect reinforced by Miyazaki's animation approach, which emphasizes atmosphere, emotion, and intuitive logic over strict exposition. Adelaide and Attfield (2021) underscore that the choice between hard and soft worldbuilding depends on the project's narrative goals and genre, advocating a balance based on creative objectives, genre, and the intended audience. Scholars examine worldbuilding as a storytelling tool, focusing on how different techniques contribute to the development of character and plot dynamics. *Convergence Culture* by Jenkins (2006:95-120) highlights how expansive worldbuilding supports complex narratives that sustain engagement across multiple media, thus contributing significantly to world-based franchises.

Research shows how varying approaches to worldbuilding, particularly hard and soft worldbuilding impact plot coherence and shape audience engagement with characters within expansive fictional worlds. Through the analysis of how these worldbuilding techniques

influence narrative structure, this research will demonstrate how carefully constructed worlds can enhance or hinder the clarity of plot progression and character development. This analysis is explored in greater depth in Chapter Three. The contrast between hard and soft worldbuilding approaches is critical in shaping not only the storytelling experience but also how audiences emotionally invest in and relate to characters within these worlds. This approach is informed by the work of Jenkins (2006), Mendlesohn (2008), and Hickson (2019), who discuss how narrative complexity and audience immersion are influenced by worldbuilding choices.

The influence of fictional historical events and rich lore on cohesive worldbuilding is further explored by Adelaide and Attfield (2021), who argue that meticulously documented worlds like Tolkien's Middle-earth create immersive experiences through structured, interconnected narrative details (Tolkien, 1954). This technique aligns with Kenneth Atchity's assertion that in screenwriting, "Everything has to be connected to everything else" (Film Courage, 2019). This highlights a distinction between screenwriting and novel writing in how worldbuilding operates. While novels certainly involve worldbuilding, the nature of screenplays demands a more immediate, visually integrated form of worldbuilding to maintain narrative continuity. Screenplays are often constrained by time and space, requiring each element, whether setting, character, or plot detail to be meticulously interwoven to maintain pacing and viewer engagement. This distinction between the constraints of screenplay structure and other forms of storytelling will be explored in more detail. In contrast, novels have more flexibility in exploring worlds in depth, as authors can afford more room for exposition and internal monologue to develop their worlds. This interconnectedness is showcased in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004), where initially minor details, like the Marauder's Map, a magical artifact that reveals hidden locations and people, evolve into crucial plot elements, underscoring how cohesive worldbuilding contributes to layered, engaging storytelling.

While detailed worldbuilding supports narrative cohesion, soft worldbuilding allows for thematic and emotional resonance, often aligning with genres that prioritize symbolic exploration over rigid structure. Claire Corbett's insights in *Everything You Can Imagine Is Real* (2021) underscore this dynamic, presenting worldbuilding as a balance between researched detail and imaginative depth. Corbett introduces the concept of *donnée*, a French term referring to foundational premises or established truths within a fictional world, which ensures internal consistency and narrative logic. This concept is particularly important in films like *Spirited Away* (2001) and *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004) where unlike in more rigidly

structured fantasy such as Tolkien's, the *donnée* is not a static set of rules but a flexible framework that allows characters to evolve in response to their environments.

In *Spirited Away*, the *donnée* is reflected in the spirit world's unique rules, such as the necessity of Chihiro's transformation to navigate and survive within the bathhouse. Her emotional growth is tightly linked to the world she inhabits, her relationship with the world (and characters like Haku) directly shapes her arc. The emotional resonance in this world arises from the symbolic structures of transformation and renewal that resonate deeply with themes of identity and self-discovery. This resonates with Corbett's argument that worldbuilding should not only serve narrative logic but should emerge from the characters' journeys and inner transformations, with the world acting as both a catalyst and reflection of their emotional evolution.

Similarly, *Howl's Moving Castle* presents a world governed by the *donnée* of magic and transformation. Howl's own physical and emotional transformation, as seen in his shifting between human and bird-like forms, illustrates how soft worldbuilding allows for symbolic depth. The castle itself, a living, moving entity, serves as a manifestation of Howl's inner turmoil and growth. The world's fluidity supports the film's exploration of themes such as love, responsibility, and sacrifice, demonstrating how animation allows for emotionally resonant storytelling even within worlds that are intentionally fragmentary, surreal, or illogical, qualities that distinguish this medium from more rigid live-action worldbuilding.

Corbett's view that "worldbuilding should be a function of character" (2021:70) is evident in these films, where the fictional worlds are not merely settings but active participants in the characters' emotional journeys. The organic relationship between characters and their environments is crucial for creating worlds that resonate on both a thematic and emotional level, inviting audiences to engage not only with the plot but also with the deeper, symbolic meanings embedded in the world itself.

Adelaide and Attfield (2021) emphasize that a rigid structure might constrain adaptation, making it challenging to introduce new elements without risking narrative inconsistencies. While hard worldbuilding fosters immersive experiences, this approach can at times hinder creative flexibility, limiting the spontaneity that can enrich character-driven narratives. Conversely, soft worldbuilding's flexibility may result in less defined universes, which some

critics argue can reduce believability and emotional depth, or make the film's world harder to comprehend, as in the case of *Princess Mononoke* (1997), where the layering of spiritual and environmental themes can be difficult to fully interpret. Adelaide and Attfield (2021) explore this limitation in their discussion of worldbuilding strategies, suggesting that while open-ended worlds invite greater audience imagination, they risk leaving gaps that undermine coherence and immersion, particularly in genres that rely on tightly interconnected narratives. Drawing on their insights, this study highlights the importance of balancing flexibility with sufficient structural detail to maintain thematic integrity and audience engagement. Further analysis outside the scope of this study is required to evaluate how different genres, such as fantasy and science fiction, can optimize either hard or soft worldbuilding to serve narrative goals.

Scholars provide a nuanced analysis of the interplay between hard and soft worldbuilding to demonstrate their influence on narrative coherence and adaptability. Through a detailed examination of structure and thematic explorations, the research investigates how character development and plot progression are shaped by these techniques. For instance, in *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003), hard worldbuilding establishes a meticulously crafted universe with languages, maps, and histories that underpin the narrative's internal logic, directly influencing character motivations and the unfolding of the central quest. By contrast, *Spirited Away* (2001) employs soft worldbuilding to create an evocative, symbolic landscape, where the emotional journey of Chihiro is shaped by the fluid, dream-like qualities of the world. These examples illustrate worldbuilding's versatility across different genres and its capacity to align with narrative demands.

Drawing on established theories from Adelaide and Attfield (2021) and Corbett (2021), this study demonstrates that worldbuilding not only enhances storytelling but also serves as a framework tailored to genre-specific conventions and audience expectations. The following section further explores how these worldbuilding techniques influence audience engagement and the suspension of disbelief, shaping the storytelling experience in speculative fiction.

Primary and Secondary World Concepts in Character Development

This section explores the concept of secondary belief as articulated by J.R.R. Tolkien in his essay *On Fairy Stories* (2008), positioning it as a central framework for analysing how worldbuilding fosters audience immersion and narrative coherence. Secondary belief arises

when an audience fully accepts the constructed reality of a Secondary World, experiencing it as internally consistent and emotionally authentic. (Tolkien, 2008:36-60) This idea provides a lens to examine the effectiveness of hard and soft worldbuilding approaches in speculative fiction.

Tolkien's distinction between the Primary World; our real-world environment governed by natural laws and the Secondary World; an imagined realm with its own rules, history, and logic, offers a foundational perspective. Hard worldbuilding, characterized by meticulously detailed systems, supports the credibility of Secondary Worlds by establishing clear, logical frameworks that mirror the consistency of the Primary World. For example, in the screen version of *The Hobbit* (2012-2014), Tolkien's richly developed dwarven history, complete with ancestral conflicts, songs, and the significance of the Arkenstone, enhances secondary belief. These detailed cultural and historical elements anchor the narrative and make the world of Middle-earth feel tangible. Conversely, soft worldbuilding, which embraces ambiguity and flexibility, aligns with the symbolic and emotional aspects of storytelling. *Spirited Away* (2001), for instance, uses fluid, dream-like environments to engage audiences on an intuitive level, crafting a Secondary World that relies on emotional resonance rather than strict logic.

By linking these worldbuilding approaches to Tolkien's framework, this analysis argues that both hard and soft techniques contribute to secondary belief, albeit through different means. Hard worldbuilding anchors narratives in detail and structure, while soft worldbuilding allows for thematic and emotional depth, each playing a unique role in how audiences engage with speculative fiction.

Tolkien's (2008) concept of secondary belief emphasizes the audience's immersion in a fictional world that feels internally consistent and emotionally compelling. This process involves more than suspending disbelief; it requires that the world's internal logic resonates with the audience as authentic. In this way, secondary belief serves as a bridge between hard and soft worldbuilding, suggesting a continuum where emotionally resonant, fluid elements of soft worldbuilding complement the structured, rule-based aspects of hard worldbuilding to collectively achieve immersive storytelling. Hard worldbuilding reinforces secondary belief through meticulously constructed systems, ensuring that the rules of the Secondary World are as coherent as those of the Primary World. By contrast, soft worldbuilding invites engagement through suggestion and symbolic resonance, appealing to the audience's emotional and

intuitive connection to the story. Together, these methods demonstrate that worldbuilding is not only a backdrop but an active narrative force, shaping the audience's understanding of the story's themes and characters while maintaining internal coherence within the Secondary World.

Understanding the concepts of primary and secondary worlds is crucial for analysing character development in speculative fiction because the tension between hard and soft worldbuilding approaches informs how characters are crafted within these worlds. Scholars have examined how worldbuilding techniques, like hard and soft approaches, translate Tolkien's theories into contemporary screenwriting. It analyses the role of distinct narrative environments in shaping character arcs and audience engagement through case studies such as *The Hobbit* (2012-2014) and *Avatar* (2009). In *The Hobbit*, the *donnée* lies in the richly detailed geography and cultures of Middle-earth, such as the Dwarves' quest to reclaim Erebor, which establishes clear stakes and historical depth while driving the narrative. Conversely, *Avatar* employs a soft worldbuilding approach where the *donnée* is rooted in Pandora's interconnected ecosystem, including the Na'vi's spiritual bond with their environment, which symbolizes harmony and conflict central to the plot. By bridging Tolkien's concept with cinematic storytelling, analyses of works such as *The Hobbit* and *Avatar* demonstrate how crafted worlds enhance both narrative coherence and audience immersion across genres and media.

The interplay between worldbuilding and character development underscores the relationship between a character's background, culture, and environment in the secondary world. For example, a character raised in a harsh environment may develop a survivalist mentality, contrasting with a character nurtured in privilege. This notion aligns with Tolkien's secondary belief, wherein the credibility of a fictional world significantly influences audience acceptance of characters. (Tolkien, 2008:36–60).

The relationship between a character and their environment raises the pivotal question: Does the world create the character, or does the character create the world? John Yorke, in *Into the Woods: A Five-Act Journey into Story* (2013:132-153), argues that a character's environment and the conflicts they encounter are crucial for establishing depth and authenticity, suggesting that a protagonist's journey is significantly shaped by the socio-cultural context and the obstacles they face. This concept is vividly illustrated in *The Hobbit* (2012-2014), where Bilbo Baggins is deeply influenced by the Shire's peaceful, insular culture, which defines his

reluctance to embark on an adventure. However, as he journeys through Middle-earth, the dangers and moral dilemmas he encounters in locations like Mirkwood and the Lonely Mountain challenge and reshape his character, ultimately transforming him into a courageous and resourceful hero.

Similarly, Robert McKee (1998:100–120) emphasizes that the setting of a story is not merely a backdrop but an active participant in the narrative, as characters are tested by their circumstances. This is evident in *Avatar* (2009), where Jake Sully's transformation is intrinsically tied to Pandora's richly interconnected ecosystem. The spiritual connection to Eywa and his immersion in the Na'vi culture not only influence his decisions but redefine his identity and values. Linda Seger (1990:45-68) further elaborates that a character's background and environment inform their actions and moral dilemmas, a concept highlighted in how Pandora's environmental destruction forces Jake to confront his loyalty to humanity versus his newfound role as Toruk Makto.

Together, these perspectives underscore the symbiotic relationship between character and world; as environments shape characters' motivations and decisions, characters also navigate and redefine their worlds, creating a dynamic interplay that enhances the richness of storytelling. These examples will be further explored in subsequent chapters, where the case studies delve into the relationship between narrative environments, character development, and audience engagement.

Transmedia Storytelling and Worldbuilding

Transmedia storytelling, analysed by scholars like Henry Jenkins (2007), unfolds a single narrative across various media platforms, each contributing uniquely to the richness of the story. In the context of screenwriting, transmedia offers a model for expanding narrative worlds beyond the screen, where each media form (books, films, games, etc.) can serve as a platform for deeper worldbuilding. The narrative world that begins in the screenplay can evolve across different media, allowing character arcs and thematic exploration to be developed more fully. For example, in transmedia storytelling, elements of a character's backstory or unexplored motives can be revealed in companion novels or interactive experiences, which inform the screenwriting process by providing deeper context and additional layers of character complexity.

Concepts of worldbuilding further elucidate how gaps and ambiguities in storytelling foster audience participation and co-creation (Goodman, 1978:7-16). Goodman's concept of co-creation encourages writers to create multi-faceted worlds that invite active audience engagement. As screenwriters craft scripts, they may intentionally leave space for future cross-platform expansion (such as games or novels), creating narrative gaps that invite audience interpretation and engagement. However, these gaps can also emerge organically, becoming meaningful only after the fact through transmedia storytelling and audience interaction. By considering how the world extends across media, screenwriters can design characters and plotlines that are enriched by transmedia, offering a more holistic storytelling approach that engages the viewer beyond the traditional screen experience.

Jenkins identifies two crucial techniques within transmedia storytelling: "spreadability", which allows content to be easily shared and discussed across media platforms, and "drillability", which encourages deeper exploration of supplementary materials (Jenkins, 2006:95-120). For instance, in the *Harry Potter* universe, the *Pottermore website* (now known as *Wizarding World*) provides fans expanded content that deepens engagement with the story. However, such transmedia elements are often developed after the original text, influenced by the film adaptations and audience demand, rather than being directly authored by the original writer (Wizarding World, 2019). This interplay between media forms demonstrates how effective worldbuilding can cultivate a richer audience experience, as seen in the development of *Hogwarts Legacy* (2023) and the series *Fantastic Beasts* (2016-2022).

Furthermore, Rabiger (2014) highlights the necessity of ambiguity in character development and storytelling, asserting that it enhances audience interpretation. Ambiguity in storytelling involves leaving certain aspects of characters, plot, or worldbuilding deliberately vague, creating space for the audience to actively engage with the narrative and form their own interpretations. This approach encourages viewers to fill in the gaps based on their personal experiences, expectations, and knowledge, making them participants in the narrative construction. In the context of worldbuilding, ambiguity is particularly effective as it invites audiences to explore the layers of a fictional world without being fully informed, fostering a sense of discovery and involvement in the unfolding story. As Goodman (1978:102) notes, the use of gaps in narrative design prompts co-creation, where the audience contributes to the meaning-making process, much like how abstract art invites varied interpretation allowing for

a richer and more immersive engagement with the world and its characters. While McKee (1998:100-120) emphasizes that effective storytelling relies on maintaining narrative coherence, this coherence does not require everything to be spelled out. Instead, it ensures that the ambiguity is framed in a way that still respects the story's internal logic, allowing for active audience participation without undermining the overall sense of consistency and narrative flow.

A good example of how ambiguity and coherence work together can be found in *The Lord of the Rings* originally established in Tolkien's novels (1954–1955) and later adapted into film by Peter Jackson (2001-2003) in the cinematic portrayal of Gollum, viewers encounter a character is defined by a deep internal conflict that is only gradually revealed, creating ambiguity about his motivations and allegiance. While readers of the novels may bring prior knowledge of his backstory, film audiences are invited to piece together his past, including how he came to possess the Ring and how it transformed him through subtle narrative clues, body language, and voice performance. This intentional vagueness contributes to the emotional and psychological depth of the character, illustrating how ambiguity can enrich engagement even within a largely coherent world.

This ambiguity allows the audience to interpret Gollum's actions and motivations in different ways. Is he a tragic victim of the Ring's power, or is he an irredeemable villain? The film doesn't provide a clear-cut answer, which fosters active engagement from the viewer. They are encouraged to fill in these gaps based on their understanding of addiction, obsession, and guilt, while maintaining the narrative's internal consistency. This ambiguity does not disrupt the coherence of the story but rather enriches the audience's experience by allowing them to explore the layers of Gollum's complex character. Additionally, Gollum's role in the narrative fits into the overall worldbuilding. His moral ambiguity and shifting loyalties align with the themes of power, temptation, and corruption that are central to the *Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003*)* story. The audience can piece together his motivations over time, as Gollum's actions are always driven by the established rules of Middle-earth and the corrupting influence of the Ring and its controlling power. Showcasing how ambiguity can coexist with narrative coherence, allowing for both active audience participation and a consistent, immersive experience in the worldbuilding.

In conclusion, transmedia storytelling presents screenwriters with a unique opportunity to expand their narrative worlds by extending the creative process across multiple media

platforms. This approach not only enhances character development and worldbuilding but also enriches the storytelling experience. By integrating gaps and ambiguity, as outlined by Goodman (1978), transmedia encourages active audience participation and co-creation. A prime example of this is *The Lord of the Rings*, where Gollum's ambiguous character invites varied interpretations while preserving narrative coherence. The literature demonstrates that the strategic use of ambiguity and transmedia enhances audience engagement, fostering a more immersive narrative experience. These ideas underscore how ambiguity and transmedia storytelling enhance audience engagement and create immersive narrative experiences.

Conclusion

In summary, the exploration of worldbuilding within transmedia storytelling presents numerous valuable opportunities for further research and scholarly insight. Key findings across the literature suggest that fictional worlds, when understood as independent entities, play a foundational role not only in supporting character arcs and narrative structures but also as vibrant, autonomous spaces that enhance audience immersion and sustain narrative coherence. This shift in perspective emphasizes the potential of worldbuilding as a narrative foundation, warranting closer examination of how these worlds operate beyond merely supporting individual plotlines. Additionally, the nuanced interplay between hard and soft worldbuilding techniques invites a deeper inquiry into how specific levels of detail and thematic flexibility contribute to storytelling's versatility. This versatility is especially relevant in the context of adapting stories across genres and media, where the balance of structure and ambiguity shapes audience engagement and sustains genre-specific demands, as demonstrated by theories from Adelaide and Attfield (2021), Corbett (2021), and Atchity (2019).

The literature highlights a key opportunity to explore how worldbuilding influences character development, particularly in the context of adaptations from literary works to film and television. The literature highlights that worldbuilding influences character development, particularly in adaptations from literature to film and television. Exploring the impact of worldbuilding choices on character arcs illuminates how different approaches to constructing secondary worlds can either enhance or limit the creation of compelling, immersive narratives that resonate with contemporary audiences. Specifically, the concept of secondary belief, as explored through different worldbuilding methods, offers a promising area for advancing

knowledge on how cohesive fictional worlds can engage audiences on a psychological and emotional level.

The literature reveals an ongoing need to connect perspectives on transmedia storytelling with an exploration of worldbuilding's role in narrative construction and audience engagement. The next chapter analyses key case studies through the lens of scholars like Jenkins (2007), Goodman (1978), Rabiger (2014), and McKee (1998) to better understand how complex worldbuilding enhances character development and thematic richness across various media. By synthesizing these theoretical insights, the next chapter contributes a deeper understanding of the interactive and participatory nature of worldbuilding, offering a structured framework for future studies. This investigation will build on the broader academic conversation and advance our understanding of how fictional worlds shape narratives and audience experiences, with the aim of contributing to the fields of entertainment studies, narrative theory, and media adaptation

Chapter Three: Comparative Methodology and Case Study Analysis:

This chapter investigates how different worldbuilding techniques, categorized as hard, soft, and mixed impact narrative coherence and character development in screen-based speculative fiction. This analysis explores the interplay between worldbuilding strategies and storytelling practices in screenwriting. To this end, the case studies represent each category of worldbuilding, offering a framework for examining their effects on narrative and character development.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the distinction between hard and soft worldbuilding, with hard worldbuilding being applied to narratives underpinned by meticulously defined rules, detailed lore, and logical consistency, creating a rigid structure that guides both the story and its characters. In contrast, soft worldbuilding evoke atmosphere, mood, and thematic resonance, often leaving details ambiguous or open to interpretation. Mixed worldbuilding, as noted earlier, integrates elements of both approaches, seeking a balance between explicit detail and interpretive flexibility. While these points were explored in Chapter Two, I revisit them in the context of analysing different storytelling dynamics, particularly in respect of their effect on audience engagement. These categories serve as a framework for evaluating how various worldbuilding strategies contribute to the storytelling experience (Hickson, 2019).

The films and television series case studies are prime examples of these approaches and were chosen because they highlight the complex interconnections between character arcs, narrative structure, and world building. The study aims to identify patterns, strengths, and limitations in the application of these techniques by analysing films TV shows that exemplify their use. This approach also sheds light on how filmmakers navigate the challenges of maintaining narrative clarity and audience engagement within complex speculative worlds.

Building on the findings from the literature review, this chapter directly addresses specific gaps in theory and practice in the field. While existing scholarship, such as Wolf's (2014:16-64) exploration of worldbuilding mechanics and Hickson's (2019) insights on starting points for fictional worlds, offers foundational perspectives, this chapter focuses on the direct impact of worldbuilding techniques on how stories hold together and how characters grow.

Looking at the case studies alongside existing scholarship highlights where our understanding is still limited in storytelling coherence and character development. Theoretical frameworks

and analytical methods identified in the literature review guide the examination of each case study, providing a structured way to examine how the stories and characters play out. The chapter deepens understanding of how worldbuilding strategies shape not only the fictional worlds themselves but also the characters and stories that inhabit them.

By contextualizing the case studies within the identified areas not fully explored yet, this analysis test ideas about the link between worldbuilding techniques and storytelling practices. This helps think about how writers can balance immersive worlds with clear, structured stories in screen-based speculative fiction. The selected case studies represent distinct approaches to worldbuilding, hard, soft, and mixed, and collectively provide a solid base for exploring the research questions around narrative coherence and character development.

Fantasy and science fiction genres are selected for their dependence on worldbuilding to create convincing imaginary worlds. These genres often use invented settings, characters, and plots that go beyond ordinary reality, making them particularly suited for analysing how worldbuilding choices affect the story. The chosen films show different ways of doing this, from detailed, rule-bound worlds to more dreamlike, emotionally-driven settings.

To explore the worldbuilding, the selected case studies are categorized based on their alignment with hard, soft, or mixed worldbuilding styles:

Hard Worldbuilding:

The Lord of the Rings (2001-2003) and *The Hobbit* (2012-2014), both directed by Peter Jackson, and *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), created by David Benioff and D.B. Weiss, serve as main examples. These works feature meticulously crafted worlds with well-defined rules, histories, languages, and geographies. While these foundational elements are largely derived from the original novels by Tolkien and Martin, the film and television adaptations adapt them for film and TV, sometimes cutting back or expanding details to fit the medium and keep audiences engaged. *The Lord of the Rings* offers a classic high-fantasy setting with clear good-versus-evil themes and a linear narrative, while *Game of Thrones* incorporates political complexity, moral ambiguity, and intertwining storylines. *House of the Dragon* (2022-present) further extends this rich world, adding depth to its intricate lore.

Soft Worldbuilding:

Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* (2001) and *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004) represent soft worldbuilding, focusing more on mood and themes than on strict rules. These films create whimsical, less rigid worlds where magical elements exist without explicit rules, emphasizing character-driven storytelling and emotional connections.

Mixed Worldbuilding:

James Cameron's *Avatar (*2009) and *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022), along with J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (2001-2011), blend elements of hard and soft worldbuilding. *Avatar* combines an alien ecosystem with detailed cultural and ecological systems, while *Harry Potter* creates a magical universe with established rules but also leans on emotional themes and character dynamics. Both franchises extend their worlds into transmedia formats, including the video games *Hogwarts Legacy* (2023) and *Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora* (2023), giving more chances to examine narrative expansion and character development.

Each case study was selected to address the central research questions, focusing on how different worldbuilding styles affect narrative coherence and character development. The combination of hard, soft, and mixed examples provides a way to compare how worldbuilding shapes storytelling across speculative fiction. These films also touch on wider themes like culture, morality, and identity, linking their narrative strategies to audience engagement and immersion.

Looking at these films together, shows the different ways worldbuilding shapes speculative worlds and their stories, highlighting both strengths and limits of each style.

Analytical Framework

To analyse the selected case studies, this chapter employs criteria based on the theories and concepts from Chapter Two. These criteria focus on important aspects of worldbuilding especially how it fits into the story structures, shapes the character, and connects with the audience. By applying these clear criteria to guide the analysis of how worldbuilding shapes storytelling across the selected works.

1. Narrative Coherence

One of the central elements of this analysis is evaluating how worldbuilding supports or detracts from the overall cohesiveness of the narrative. Scholars such as Jenkins (2006) and Tolkien (2008) emphasize that effective worldbuilding should fit smoothly into the plot, providing a solid foundation for the story without overshadowing it. When done well, worldbuilding enhances the narrative by adding settings, rules, and systems that shape the characters' motivations and decisions. However, if overly intricate or insufficiently developed, worldbuilding can become a distraction, making it harder for the audience to follow or stay interested.

For instance, the rules and elements of the world, such as culture, geography, and magic must directly contribute to story-flow and resolution, ensuring they complement rather than complicate the narrative. An imbalance in the presentation of worldbuilding, whether too subtle or overly heavy-handed can obscure the plot and hinder the audience's ability to follow the storyline (McKee, 1997). This analysis will assess whether the worldbuilding in each case study enhances or detracts from the narrative by evaluating if it helps or harms the story, depending on the clarity, accessibility, and its impact on the audience's understanding and emotions. Furthermore, it will identify instances where inconsistencies in worldbuilding may create confusion, with support from Jenkins (2006) and Tolkien (2008:36-60).

2.Character Development

Worldbuilding's impact on character development is a critical lens for evaluating the case studies. Beyond shaping the physical environment in which characters exist, worldbuilding influences the social, moral, and cultural systems that govern their behaviour. As McKee (1998:100-120) and Rabiger (2014:273-283) emphasize, strong character arcs are often intricately connected to their surroundings. A well-constructed fictional world can shape or test a characters' goals, motivations, and relationships, becoming an actively affecting how they grow.

For example, in *Avatar* (2009), the world of Pandora plays a pivotal role in Jake Sully's transformation, pushing him into choices that test his values. Similarly, in *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004), the whimsical world not only shapes Sophie's emotional and psychological growth but also mirrors her internal struggles with self-worth and identity.

This analysis identifies how elements of worldbuilding create challenges, opportunities, or influence characters decisions and overall growth. Particular attention is given to the relationship between characters and their environment, focusing on how interactions with the world alter their development. Key aspects of this evaluation include how cultural norms, magical systems, or environmental factors shape pivotal character decisions. Furthermore, the alignment between character motivation and the world they inhabit is considered, especially in cases where the fictional world itself acts as a catalyst for growth. Hickson (2019) emphasizes that the rules of a fictional world can significantly shape a character's development, as they create obstacles or opportunities that influence their ability to achieve their goals. These dynamic highlights the crucial role worldbuilding plays in driving or hindering character progression.

3. Audience Engagement

Audience engagement is pivotal in seeing the effectiveness of worldbuilding within speculative fiction. Successful worldbuilding pulls viewers into the fictional universe, creating an emotional connection with both characters and their story's. As Jenkins (2006) notes, immersive worldbuilding allows viewers to become deeply invested in the story by seamlessly weaving in details that resonate on both an emotional and imaginative level. Conversely, overly complex or vague worldbuilding can break immersion, diminishing the audience's ability to connect with the narrative.

The clarity and coherence of worldbuilding contributes to audience immersion. For instance, the richly detailed and visually compelling world of Pandora in *Avatar* (2009) invites audiences to explore its vibrant ecosystem, culture, and characters through its meticulous visual design., Alternatively, the surreal and dreamlike quality of the world in *Spirited Away* (2001) captivates viewers by sparking imagination and emotional curiosity, demonstrating a softer, interpretive approach to immersion.

The research evaluates the interplay between visual design, cultural depth, and character-driven storytelling in enhancing audience engagement. Building on previous insights into narrative structure and Secondary World design, this study highlights how effective speculative worlds balance intricate detail with accessibility. The goal is to ensure audiences remain intrigued by the complexity of the world while feeling emotionally tethered to the story. Worldbuilding choices either deepen narrative connection or risk overwhelming the viewer, depending on how

clearly and purposefully the world is constructed. By exploring these dynamics, this research argues that speculative worlds foster meaningful engagement and enrich the storytelling experience

By applying these criteria to narrative coherence, character development, and audience engagement, a deeper understanding is provided of how worldbuilding techniques shape speculative fiction. The case studies reveal the effectiveness of worldbuilding in supporting narrative structure, enriching character arcs, and helps audiences stay immersed. Additionally, these insights also broaden our understanding of worldbuilding's critical role in driving plot progression and character development within the genre. This framework serves as the foundation for evaluating each selected film, enabling a nuanced assessment of how worldbuilding influences storytelling across hard, soft, and mixed approaches.

Comparative Methodology

To investigate the intricate relationship between narrative coherence, character development, and audience engagement across hard, soft, mixed, and transmedia worldbuilding, this study employs a comparative methodology. This approach facilitates the identification of shared traits and distinct features within and across the selected case studies, enabling a nuanced understanding of how different worldbuilding strategies influence speculative fiction.

Building on John Creswell's (2009:173-202) emphasis on comparative analysis, this methodology looks for similarities and differences across cases to provide broader view of worldbuilding. Creswell's principles guide the examination of how worldbuilding techniques enhance storytelling dynamics, shaping the broader implications of narrative construction.
Michael Rabiger's (2014) framework complements this by stressing the need to break down narrative structures and see how they connect with audience expectations. His insights are particularly relevant for assessing how worldbuilding supports or challenges the coherence of the narrative and its resonance with the audience.

Linda Hutcheon's (2012:2-62) exploration of adaptation and intertextuality further informs this methodology. Her work highlights how narratives evolve across media, particularly from traditional formats like film to interactive platforms like video games. This perspective is central to analysing transmedia worldbuilding, which relies on expanding fictional worlds across multiple media to engage audiences in participatory and immersive experiences.

Henry Jenkins' (2006) concept of transmedia storytelling provides the foundation for evaluating audience engagement in speculative fiction. His focus on audience agency and participatory culture aligns understanding how worldbuilding fosters immersion and emotional connections.

Using this comparative approach, the study systematically evaluates how hard, soft, mixed, and transmedia worldbuilding techniques help build worlds that feel immersive, believable, and coherent. Each case study is urged using the same criteria; narrative coherence, character development, and audience engagement ensuring a balanced and comprehensive analysis. By exploring similarities, differences, and trends across cases, this approach helps build a clearer picture of how worldbuilding shapes speculative fiction.

Comparative Case Study Approach

The comparative framework, approach allows for a detailed exploration of how worldbuilding strategies impact narrative coherence, character development, and audience engagement.

Following Robert K. Yin's (2017:3-66) principles, this methodology emphasizes the value of examining complex phenomena within real-world contexts. By comparing multiple case studies, this approach identifies recurring themes, strategies, and divergences that define worldbuilding types. Yin's stresses the need to clearly define units of analysis and criteria for comparison which helps keep the evaluation organised and consistent. The selected films and games serve as the units of analysis, established through the pre-defined criteria set out in the framework.

This comparative analysis offers contextual depth, exploring how worldbuilding is shaped by and contributes to the cultural, aesthetic, and narrative elements of each case. It also supports pattern recognition, identifying recurring strategies and divergences across worldbuilding types. Lastly, it helps in theory development by synthesizing insights from multiple cases to shape a broader understanding of worldbuilding in speculative fiction.
A qualitative focus underpins this methodology, aligning with Yin's (2017) suggestion to study complex, context-specific issues. This approach allows for a nuanced analysis of worldbuilding, examining not only visible narrative elements but also implicit factors like tone, atmosphere, and cultural context. Drawing from multiple data sources, including film analysis,

visual storytelling, and critical commentary this study supports a well-rounded analysis of each case.

By combining these approaches, the research provides both detailed assessments of individual worldbuilding strategies and overarching insights into their role in speculative storytelling. This framework supports a balanced analysis of the ways worldbuilding contributes to narrative coherence, character development, and audience engagement across speculative fiction.

Comparative Analysis of Hard Worldbuilding:

The Hobbit (2012-2014), *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003), *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), and *House of the Dragon* (2022-present), all represent hard worldbuilding, showcasing its detailed histories, rules, and lore that ground their narratives a sense of realism. In *The Hobbit*, Tolkien's Middle-earth as realized through Bilbo Baggins' journey, emphasizing structured geography, from the Shire to the Lonely Mountain, and well-defined cultures like the dwarves and elves. While *The Lord of the Rings* presents a quest-driven narrative set in Middle-earth featuring its own languages, mythologies, and political tensions such as the divide between Gondor and Mordor, *Game of Thrones* takes place in the entirely separate world of Westeros. It focuses on political intrigue, moral ambiguity, a rigid feudal system, detailed family lineages, and a gradually unfolding magic system. Lastly, *House of the Dragon*, a prequel to *Game of Thrones*, delves into the Targaryen dynasty, centring on themes of succession and power, with its attention to focus on lineage, alliances, and the mythos surrounding dragons exemplifies its hard worldbuilding. All these works rely on established systems, histories, and rules, making their worlds internally consistent and deeply immersive for audiences.

Both *The Hobbit* (2012–2014) film trilogy and the *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019) television series exemplify hard worldbuilding, yet each take different approaches to narrative organization and secondary belief. Tolkien's richly imagined worldbuilding first takes shape in *The Hobbit*, a narrative that introduces readers to Middle-earth on a more intimate and whimsical scale. Bilbo Baggins reluctant to join Thorin Oakenshield and his company of dwarves to reclaim their home from the dragon Smaug. The bestiaries such as trolls, dragons' elvish courts do provide taxonomical depth. However, the relationship between creature design and cultural function isn't always clear. Bilbo's character arc from burglar-in-training to unexpected hero feels almost too neat, though this reflects the source material's fairy-tale

origins rather than the failing in adaptation. The Gollum sequence stands out precisely because it disrupts this otherwise smooth progression.

Building on the foundation laid in *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings* widens Middle-earth's, scale with a quest-driven narrative that goes into deeper moral and thematic layers. The trilogy includes invented languages like Sindarin and Quenya, elaborate maps, and a detailed historical backdrop that foster secondary belief and immerse the audience in Tolkien's world. Frodo's journey to destroy the One Ring serves as the narrative's central thread, with the Ring's whose corrupting influence shapes events like Boromir's betrayal and Frodo's inner conflict. Unlike *The Hobbit* narrative, *The Lord of the Rings* offers a broader explorational view of Middle-earth, blending the characters personal struggles with a larger, moral conflict. Together, these works showcase Tolkien's ability to create evolving fictional universe, where the foundational worldbuilding of *The Hobbit* laying the groundwork for the larger story in *The Lord of the Rings*.

One shortcoming in Tolkien's worldbuilding is the lack of attention placed into the creation of the cultures and societies of Middle-earth's races, despite the detailed geography and history. For instance, the Dwarves are primarily characterized through their association with the Lonely Mountain and their craftsmanship, but little insight is given into their societal values, politics, or internal conflicts. Similarly, while the Elves are portrayed as noble and wise, but their governing systems or day-to-day culture feels underdeveloped. For example, in *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* (2012), the Elves of Rivendell offer guidance and hospitality, but we see little of how their community functions beyond Elrond's leadership. *The Hobbit* offers glimpses of Dwarven and Elven cultures, such as Thorin's lineage and the Elves' interactions with Bilbo, but these depictions remain surface-level and do not fully address the broader societal dynamics. This gap sometimes limits the richness of Middle-earth, especially compared to the landscapes and political conflicts of human realms like Gondor and Rohan.

Secondary belief, as discussed in Chapter Two, refers to the audience's immersion in a fictional world that feels internally consistent and plausible, distinct from primary belief, which is rooted in the real world. In *Game of Thrones*, the secondary belief is achieved through a more complicated and morally problematic world. The show's complicated narrative structure weaving together multiple storylines across the Seven Kingdoms, can challenges narrative clarity but also enriches the depth of the world. The political intrigue, shifting alliances, and brutal realities of Westeros, such as the feudal systems, the consequences of breaking oaths

(like those of the Night's Watch), and the historical rivalries between noble houses, create a complicated yet believable framework. Events like the Red Wedding, while shocking, feel entirely possible within the brutal logic of the world Westeros. Though the fragmented structure occasionally obscures coherence, the show's realism and its commitment to its established rules help maintain secondary belief.

While *Game of Thrones* is often praised for its commitment to realism and its detailed worldbuilding, the use of magic represents a notable inconsistency. In the earlier seasons, magic is rare and mysterious, with events like Daenerys's dragons being portrayed as remarkable and life-changing. However, as the series progresses, magic becomes more frequent in the narrative, it risks feeling less grounded or consistent with the established realism of the storyworld. This is likely caused by the need for dramatic tension, which undermines the earlier approach to magical realism and disrupts the consistency of the world's internal rules.

House of the Dragon, a prequel set 172 year earlier, builds on the world of *Game of Thrones*, but with a narrower focus on the Targaryen dynasty. It goes into the political struggles, family conflicts and power dynamics with in house Targaryen. The internal logic of the world remains consistent, especially through the Targaryens' connection to dragons and the historical events that shape the realm. Like *Game of Thrones*, the story structure adds realism but introduces challenges to the narrative. Even so, the feudal hierarchies, the emphasis on bloodlines, and the violent Targaryens history provide a coherent framework that supports the characters' actions and the narrative progression.

All four studies maintain secondary belief by following the internal rules of their worlds, though each do so with varying degrees of complexity. *The Hobbit* establishes this consistency with a lighter, more whimsical tone, introducing the audiences to the foundations of Middle-earth in a way that feels accessible and grounded. *The Lord of the Rings* builds on this foundation with a more unified and morally clear story, drawing audiences with a bigger scope and deeper thematic explorations. By comparison, *Game of Thrones* and *House of the Dragon* focus on worlds that are complex and morally ambiguous. While their fragmented structures make it difficult to understand at times, their close attention to power struggles, cultural norms, and historical lore keeps them believable and consistent. Ultimately, all four works successfully create immersive worlds that maintain secondary belief through their detailed worldbuilding and steady internal logic.

The character arc of Bilbo Baggins' in *The Hobbit*, centres on his development as a person, which is shaped by the intricate worldbuilding of Middle-earth. As stated earlier, Bilbo starting as an unassuming and reluctant participant in Thorin's quest, he gradually discovers courage and resourcefulness, becoming a hero. The world Bilbo inhabits played a significant role in how his character developed. His encounter with trolls, Gollum, and Smaug are not only plot points in the story but also ties into themes of greed, power, and resilience. Smaug's treasure-hoarding, for example, symbolizes the corruptive effects of wealth and contrasts with Bilbo's growing sense of selflessness.

The contrast between the stories initial light-hearted tone and the darker trails Bilbo faces mirrors his internal changes, and the interaction between his own development and the obstacles the outside world presents. This consistency in tone and theme allows the audience to relate to Bilbo's journey, of how ordinary individuals can confront extraordinary circumstances. The interactive nature of Middle-earths geography and well-defined cultures that Bilbo encounters, enhances his development. Characters that rooted in the world's lore like Gandalf and Thorin, challenge and guide Bilbo, ensuring that his progression from a passive observer changes to an active participant, is tied to the world's thematic underpinnings.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, character development is the heart of the story. Frodo's journey starts out as a naive hobbit and slowly becomes a reluctant hero, carrying a burden that nearly destroys him. His story is a clear example of the archetypal hero's journey, by Joseph Campbell (2008:22-37) in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, where the hero learns about sacrifice, friendship, and resilience. There are strong moral distinctions in Middle-earth, as an example the contrast between characters like Gandalf and Aragorn offer guidance, while Sauron, establish the stakes and represents what happens if that temptation wins. The progression of their arcs encourages the audience to reflect on their own personal struggles with themes like good versus evil, loyalty, and the burden of responsibility. The audience's participation in this story comes through emotional attachment to the characters' development, as the world shapes and tests them, making their journeys feel connected to the narrative's thematic core.

In *Game of Thrones*, character arcs grow directly out of the messy politics of Westeros. The show's multiple storylines across the Seven Kingdoms, mirrors the series' central themes of political complexity. Characters like Jon Snow, Daenerys Targaryen, and Tyrion Lannister evolve through their engagement with the world's intricate power dynamics and societal structures.

Jon Snow, or otherwise known as Aegon Targaryen, rises from an outcast son of Winterfell to the Wall as Lord Commander to a reluctant leader reflects the theme of duty versus personal desire. His development is shaped by the harsh realities of the Night's Watch. Every step of his journey at the Wall forces him to choose between what he wants and what others expect of him. Similarly, Daenerys' rise from a powerless exiled princess becomes, with the birth of her dragons, the mother of Dragons and a force of liberation. Yet as her power grows, the same world that once oppressed her also brings out her darker side, turning her from saviour to conqueror. Her arc explores the corruptive allure of power and the fine line between liberation and domination. Her connection to the world's mythical elements, such as the dragons and Valyrian heritage, positions her as both a symbol of hope but also figure of unchecked ambition.

Tyrion Lannister's journey is shaped by his constant struggle against the way others see him. As a dwarf in one of Westeros's most powerful families, often dismissed because of his stature, he survives by outthinking those who underestimate him, turning using their prejudice as a weapon of strategy. His time as Hand of the King demonstrates how intelligence can hold real power, even in a hostile environment. His outburst at his trial in Season 4 reveals the toll of years of betrayal, making him a player in the game of thrones. His role as both a participant and a critic of the world's structures offers the audience an opportunity to analyse the consequences of power. The title *Game of Thrones* reinforces the theme of power's fragility and the sacrifices demanded to wield it.

House of the Dragon, though more narrowly focused on the Targaryen family, carries forward many of the themes of character development seen in *Game of Thrones*. The show looks into the Targaryen dynasties and its internal conflicts, between characters like Rhaenyra Targaryen, Daemon Targaryen, and Alicent Hightower. Rhaenyra's arc is especially compelling: she begins as a determined young princess but must harden into a more calculating figure as she fights against the limits of a patriarchal society and the brutal politics of succession. Like *Game of Thrones*, *House of the Dragon* invites interactivity and audience participation through its morally complex characters. Viewers sympathize with Rhaenyra's determination while grappling with her decisions as she becomes increasingly ruthless in her pursuit of the throne. Daemon Targaryen, by contrast, brings volatility and unpredictability to the story. His charm and brutality make him magnetic but unsettling. Alicent Hightower's arc adds another layer moral complexity to the series. She is introduced as Rhaenyra's close friend, but later becomes queen through her marriage to King Viserys, Rhaenyra's father. This role is focused into her by her father. Torn between loyalty to her family and the demands of her role as queen, Alicent

gradually grows into a political rival to Rhaenyra. Her devotion to her children drives many of her choices, but that same devotion also blinds her to the consequences of fuelling a divide within the realm. Audiences can empathize with her desire to protect her family, yet her actions clashing with Rhaenyra and pushing Aegon's claim to the throne, raise questions about whether her motivations are rooted in genuine duty or in ambition or resentment towards Rhaenyra. The shifting allegiances and family dynamics also allow the audience to engage actively, contemplating which characters are "right" or "wrong" in a world that is altimetry grey. Viewers do not simply root for heroes or villains; instead, they are drawn into the moral dilemmas and complex choices that the characters' face.

The relationship between character development across all four case studies reveals how speculative worldbuilding, create distinct motivations and conflicts rooted in each fictional universe. Bilbo Baggins' in *The Hobbit* is a direct reaction to the fantastical world around him and goes beyond the typical hero's journey His interaction with trolls, Gollum, and Smaug challenge his naive worldview, forcing him to adapt and grow. The world's planned contrasts between the comfort of the Shire and the perilous unknown, shows Bilbo's transformation and encourage the audience to reflect on themes of courage and self-discovery in unfamiliar contexts.

In *the Lord of the Rings*, worldbuilding incorporates Middle-earth's existential and moral concerns, which have direct influence on Frodo's character arc. One of the world's most important artefacts is the Ring itself, serving as both a narrative and symbolic force that tests Frodo's resolve and exposes the corruptive nature of power. The interactions between Frodo's personal struggles and the fate of Middle-earth creates this relationship between character and world, compelling the audience through the high stakes of the journey. The righteousness of Middle-earth, juxtaposed against Frodo's personal conflict shows the themes of resilience, sacrifice, and hope in the face of darkness, raising emotional engagement.

Character motivation in *Game of Thrones* and *House of the Dragon*, are influenced by the morally complex world of Westeros, in ways that set them apart from conventional story structures. The worlds interrelate political systems, cultural hierarchies, and historical legacies force people to make divisions that frequently blur the line between good and evil. Characters like Jon Snow, Daenerys Targaryen, and Rhaenyra Targaryen navigate the demands of power and ambition, each character showing us a different perspective in trying to achieve their goal while reflecting the fragile and shifting dynamics of Westeros' societal structures. Through

ongoing re-evaluation of their motivations and actions they often have to make morally grey decisions in the unpredictable and often brutal nature of their world.

In these case studies speculative worldbuilding actively impact its characters' arcs, motivations, and even conflicts. In conclusion, the worldbuilding in *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Game of Thrones*, and *House of the Dragon* each uniquely enhances the narratives by merging character development within their fantastical worlds. These work, in contrast to traditional storytelling, actively develops character motivations and conflicts. Through the use of detailed landscapes, histories, cultures and political systems, etc. In both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, the main quests are reinforced by the finely constructed world of Middle-earth.

Westeros complex political systems and moral ambiguity compel characters in *Game of Thrones* and *House of the Dragon*, to make decisions, reflecting the pressures of their environment. This makes audiences empathise with the characters and engage critically with choices shaped by the world's dynamics.

These illustrations show how speculative worldbuilding actively shapes characters, themes, and conflicts too provide deeper and more engaging storytelling, going beyond simple settings. Rather than distracting, details in the worldbuilding enriches the narrative by giving the characters' actions that are believable and cohesive within their universe. Similarly to *Game of Thrones*, *House of the Dragon* with its complicated socio-political groups, historical rivalries, and cultural norms of Westeros drive complex actions for each of the characters, ensuring that the multi-threaded plots remain believable in the world.

These case studies in hard worldbuilding provides a clear set of rules and internal logic that governs the narrative which is something not found in soft worldbuilding. The hard worldbuilding in these stories offers a strong buildable framework while soft worldbuilding relies on ambiguity and atmosphere to create a sense of wonder by offering rich detailed systems. These worlds invite the audience to engage with the history and overall world of the story, inspiring them to learn more about the world's workings. Hard worldbuilding does not detract from the narratives but rather elevates it, something achievable through the use of a softer approach. Hard worldbuilding underscores the transformative power of speculative fiction, demonstrating how a carefully created world can become as compelling and memorable as the characters and stories it contains.

Comparative Analysis of Soft Worldbuilding:

Soft worldbuilding emphasises atmosphere, emotion, thematic resonance and hematic connection over strictly defined systems or rules, is best demonstrated by *Hayao* Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* and *Howl's Moving Castle*. Both films successfully sustain a strong sense of secondary belief, capturing viewers in imaginative environment that are emotionally and thematically connected. Their ability to find this balance shows how character experience and emotional depth can be emphasized in soft worldbuilding to maintain believability.

The plot of Spirited *Away*, centres Chihiro, a young girl who, while relocating to a new town wander into a magical spirit realm with her parents. Once there, her parents indulge in the enchanted food and are transformed into pigs after eating. Chihiro now has to navigate this surreal world to save them and return home. One of the challenges faced is when Chihiro first crosses the shallow river leading to the bathhouse, the framing places her as a very small, hesitant figure against the towering, lantern-lit gates. The low camera angle and warm–cold colour contrast between her world and the spirit world heightens the viewers sense of disorientation, visually signalling her entry into a space governed by unfamiliar logic. The mysterious witch Yubaba is in charge of the spirit bathhouse which is shown vividly but purposefully left open-ended. Characters like the Noh-Face spirit and the soot sprites have little explanation, and play out naturally through Chihiro's interactions. For example, No-Face develops into a powerful symbol of greed, this symbolism becomes tangible in the banquet scene, where the exaggerated sound of slurping and the overwhelming piles of food create a grotesque excess. As No-Face grows physically larger and more monstrous, the visual distortion reinforces his thematic connection to unchecked desire, stenting the abstract idea of greed in a memorable, visceral image. This atmosphere fosters a dreamlike quality, allowing the audience to interact with the world through Chihiro's perspective, discovering its logic or lack thereof alongside her. The story is anchored by Chihiro's realistically grounded feelings, which make sure that the fantastical elements serve to compliment her journey rather than distract from it. An example of this is when she feeds Haku the herbal cake she received from the River Spirit. The intimacy of the moment, framed in a close-up that captures her trembling hands, transforms an otherwise simple act into a pivotal gesture of trust and connection.

While *Spirited Away's* dreamlike ambiguity adds to its immersive quality, it also draws attention to some of the worldbuilding weaknesses, particularly in the backstory and logic of the spirits' realm. The spiritual characters and their motivations are still mostly unexplained. For instance, although the world is populated by spirits of varying significance such as No-

Face, the justification behind Yubaba's authority is never fully explored. Depending on the viewer's choice for narrative clarity this deliberate lack of internal consistency serves as both a strength and a weakness because it leaves some aspects of the world open to interpretation

Similarly, *Howl's Moving Castle* centres on Sophie, a young woman who gets cursed by the Witch of the Waste to become an old woman. Seeking refuge, Sophie enters the famous moving castle, a magical, living building that serves as the home of the wizard Howl. The castle itself operates magical portals that open to entirely different locations. The castle's design mirrors Howl's inner chaos, its features mismatched decorations, clanking gears, and shifting architecture, visually reflect his fragmented identity. When Sophie first steps inside the castle, the crowded, uneven interior spaces convey both a sense of wonder and a subtle instability that foreshadows the emotional turbulence to both characters will come to experience. In the battle scene, the animation purposefully emphasizes vulnerability and strain through Howl's mid-air transition, which is characterized by jagged feathers and heavy wingbeats. By linking his supernatural abilities to his inner struggles over violence and self-preservation this source of sacrifice grounds the magical display in emotional stakes. These imaginative elements support the film's soft worldbuilding, which prioritize whimsy and wonder over rational coherence. The castle, as a shifting magical thing, defies logic yet it holds narrative significance as a reflection of Howl's inner turmoil. Sophie's emotional journey and her growing bond with Howl become the story's focal points, ensuring secondary belief is achieved despite the world's inherent vagueness. Sophie briefly reverts to her younger self while speaking kindly to Howl, the soft lighting and close framing underscoring the emotional breakthrough. This visual shift makes the magic feel inseparable from her self-perception and emotional state, blurring the line between enchantment and character growth.

However, there are certain issues with *Howl's Moving Castle* and its soft worldbuilding approach, especially within the depiction of magic and its rules. While the connection between magic and emotional states enriches the film's themes, the lack of clear explanations about Howl's transformation powers or the magical system and usage of magic may create a sense of unforcedness for the viewers who might prefer a more structured system. Although this uncertainty is in line with Miyazaki's focus on emotional resonance over logical explanations, it may hinder immersion for some audiences. But for those appreciating the rich whimsical storytelling, it is an enchanting experience.

Both of Miyazaki's films exemplify how soft worldbuilding can also enhance a narrative prioritizing character growth and the stories' themes over rigid rules and long explanations. By vividly portraying their fantasy worlds and grounding it in relatable human struggles and emotional arcs, Miyazaki creates these deeply and immersive stories. The magical elements in both *Spirited Away* and *Howl's Moving Castle* invites audiences to experience these worlds with a sense of wonder, developing the secondary belief in the viewers through the unique blend of whimsicality and profound emotion.

Character growth In *Spirited Away* and *Howl's Moving Castle* is linked to the audience's emotional involvement and sense of interactivity. Studio Ghibli productions provide incredibly engaging experiences by skilfully allowing their viewers to actively interpret motivations, growth, and relationships the characters. By focusing on the protagonists' internal growth and relationships with other characters in the story, it fosters participation in the storytelling process, inviting a personal connection with the main character.

As is the case with all narrative fiction with dynamic character development, *Spirited Away*, captivates audiences by allowing them to witness Chihiro's transformation from a shy, reluctant child to a courageous, self-reliant young woman trough small and realistic moments. Her interactions with the spirit realm, like conquering her fear and learning how to overcome obstacles, allows viewers to empathize with her struggles and celebrate her triumphs with her. Character development in relation to the moral or message of the story seems to be important to the worldbuilding of the spiritual realm. An example, is her role in assisting Haku in remembering his true identity. This moment not only strengthens the bond between the two characters but also explores themes of self-discovery and reciprocity. The film's ambiguity enhances this kind of sense of interactivity, it then in turn leaves characters like No-Face open to interpretation.

Similar to this, Sophie's character arc in *Howl's Moving Castle*, the richly imagined world directly impacted by the richly conceived richly conceived environment, which combines the setting's magical elements with human development. The film's unique approach to worldbuilding is exemplified by the curse that transforms Sophie into an elderly woman, which is never fully explained. indicating the story's preference dramatic ambiguity over strict logic. This open-endedness of the story aligns with Jenkins' (2006) concept of co-creation, inviting the audience to actively engage in meaning-making. The curse is connected to Sophie's self-perception, and her acceptance of her own appearance, and her growing confidence is created

by the fantasy world she now finds herself in, a world where castles walk, fire demons speak, and magic is woven into everyday life. Sophie's slow transformation mirrored by her navigation in this unpredictable setting shows the broader themes of change and self-discovery by purposefully omitting explanations about fantastical elements in the story, like Howl's transformations or the rules of Sophie's curse, shifts the focus onto emotional appeal rather than strict logic

The open-ended nature of the worldbuilding in both films accomplishes two goals, it fosters the development of the protagonists while secondly encouraging the audience to engage with the narrative. By omitting certain details like Sophie's curse in *Howl's Moving Castle* or No-Face's nature in *Spirited Away*, the films allow viewers to participate in the narrative and understand the emotional and thematic subtext of the stories according to their perspectives. This deliberate ambiguity supports a bigger goal of encouraging self-reflection and emotional resonance. This collaborative relationship between story and audience creates a lasting impact, allowing the characters' journeys to transcend the screen and resonate on personal, meaningful levels.

Instead of being a sign of 'lazy writing,' *Spirited Away* and *Howl's Moving Castle*, deliberate worldbuilding and narrative gaps increase audience engagement and the thematic depth. While the curse seems to weaken as Sophie gains confidence, *Howl's Moving Castle* avoids explicit explanations of why or how it dissipates. This lack of clarity might feel like a narrative shortcut and unsatisfying for some viewers might even see it as underdeveloped,

Ultimately, the worldbuilding in both films enriches the stories by focusing on the emotional connection between the audience and characters on screen. Although some aspects of soft worldbuilding are left open to interpretation, this serves to strengthen rather than to distance the story. By inviting the audience to co-create meaning, the stories in *Spirited Away* and *Howl's Moving Castle* become more personal and reflective inviting the viewer to interpret the film through their own emotional experiences.

Comparative Analysis of Mixed Worldbuilding:

Examples of hybrid worldbuilding include the case studies of *Avatar* (2009) and its sequel *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022), along with the *Harry Potter* films (2001-2011), where elements of both hard and soft worldbuilding are combined into the stories. The world of Pandora in *Avatar* is very detailed with scientific systems, such as the bioluminescent plants

and animals living alongside the Na'vi people's bond to Eywa. These systems mix elements of hard worldbuilding with the spiritual and mystical connections that relate to the story's themes of environmentalism and interconnectedness. In addition to being aesthetically pleasing, these worldbuilding choices also shape the film's pacing, structure, and character choice, supporting the narrative's environmental themes while reinforcing the plausibility of Pandora as a lived-in world. This is further developed in *Avatar: The Way of Water* which explores the aquatic ecosystems of Pandora, each with its own set of rules and biology, while preserving a sense of wonder and emotional resonance through interactions between the characters and the natural world by grounding new environments in consistent internal logic, the film expands the world without undermining narrative coherence a key principle in maintaining secondary belief across sequels.

In a similar approach, the *Harry Potter* films also mix hard worldbuilding elements with soft worldbuilding elements. The magical world is created with complex systems, such as spells, magical creatures, and potions grounded by detailed rules by which the magic must adhere to and this concept establishes the worlds internal logic. Character-driven themes of friendship, love, and the struggle between good and evil are also explores in this story. Beyond this, the films use the fantasy setting to reflect and critique societal structures associated with the English class system. With the wizarding world acting as a microcosm of these conflicts. The separation between pure-bloods, half-bloods, and Muggle-born mirrors real-world discussions about privilege, prejudice, and systemic inequality. The films are able to tackle general social issues while maintaining emotional depth and interpretive space because to this multi-layered approach, especially when it comes to the complexity of characters like Snape and Dumbledore. The films showcase how hybrid worldbuilding can produce immersive worlds that can balance established systems with emotional and thematic resonance, by fusing these elements, enhancing the plot and the viewing experience.

Nevertheless, despite their popularity, both *Avatar* and the *Harry Potter* films are criticized for some aspects of their worldbuilding that still remain underdeveloped. In *Avatar*, while the world of Pandora is lush and detailed, the portrayal of the Na'vi people's culture is criticized for its oversimplification and dependence on idealized stereotypes of real-world cultures. The deep connection the Na'vi have with nature is a recurring theme in the films, yet their social structures, politics, and history are not explored with the same level of detail as the world of Pandora's environment. The Na'vi may come across as a narrative device to emphasize the

film's environmental message rather than as a fully realized civilization as a result of this imbalance.

Similarly, the intricately constructed magical world in the *Harry Potter* films, occasionally glosses over the societal implications of its separation from the non-magical world or otherwise known as the Muggle world. The Wizarding World is presented as an isolated and self-contained society, but the larger implications of this segregation particularly with regards to how it effects class relations and societal inequality are not fully addressed. Although topic like blood purity and systemic discrimination are touched upon, the stories frequently prioritize the plot progression over deeper exploration of these issues. Some aspects of the worldbuilding feel unfinished as a result of this lack of attention especially the societal structures that support the magical world.

Both *Avatar* (2009) and its sequel *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022), along with the *Harry Potter* films, achieved a strong sense of secondary belief throughout their stories, despite the previously mentioned gaps, which effectively balance hard and soft worldbuilding elements to create a seamless and immersive experience. In *Avatar,* although the plant live in the world of Pandora is based on a combination of scientific and mystical systems, the audience is able to fully embrace the universe because of the narrative's continuity. A solid basis is established by the detailed ecology of Pandora, which includes the bioluminescent plants, the connectivity of the ecosystem through Eywa. The Na'vi regard Eywa as their goddess and the living link that binds all life on Pandora, the plants, animals, and humans through a biological network. She is the governing spiritual power of Pandora. It maintains equilibrium in Pandora's environment by symbolizing both nature and spirituality. Yet, the world also incorporates soft worldbuilding components, like the spiritual connection between characters like Jake Sully and Neytiri, while Pandora's mystical qualities remain ambiguous. For instance, Jake's connection with Eywa during the final battle of the first film is not explained, but secondary belief is maintained because of the narrative consistency resulting from his emotional journey and strengthening kinship with the Na'vi people.

This harmony between hard and soft worldbuilding continues in *Avatar: The Way of Water*. The underwater ecosystems, their unique biological functions and the new introduction to the Metkayina clan, are described with scientific detail, but the narrative remains rooted due to the personal and emotional struggles of the characters experience. Jake's complex relationship with his family and his internal conflict about protecting them, giving his story an emotional weight

that makes his transformation feel inevitable. Once more the mystical aspect of Eywa's influence, which play a crucial role in the final battle of the film, are again a little unclear, but the emotional stakes of the characters are experiences in that moment allow for the audience to accept these circumstances without feeling disconnected from the story.

The hard worldbuilding elements of the *Harry Potter* films, is made up of the intricate magical systems, including the spells, potions, and the rules governing the magical world. The magic is well-structured, and there are clear rules, such as the temporary identity-shifting limitations of the Polyjuice Potion or the binding nature of the Unbreakable Vow, a magical oath that results in death if broken. But the use of magic in the films can also feel inconsistent like the use of the Time-Turner in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004). While it allows Hermione and Harry to alter past events, the device is never meaningfully used again later, even in situations where it could have prevented major tragedies, creating a sense of narrative inconsistency. Soft worldbuilding elements, such as the different magical creatures (e.g., Hippogriffs or House Elves) or the characters interactions are more flexible and less strictly defined. For instance, despite explaining the connection between Harry and Voldemort, through the Horcrux concept, it still remains a mystery. Harry's internal struggle, his connection to his friends, and the exploration of parental love and sacrifice are elements of soft worldbuilding that deepen the emotional stakes of the story, allowing the audience to feel the magical world in ways that connect to their own personal experiences.

Ultimately, by carefully balancing hard and soft worldbuilding both *Avatar* and *Harry Potter* are able to successfully maintain secondary belief. The consistent internal logic of each world, paired with emotionally resonant character arcs and themes, create a world where the fantastical and magical feels believable. The audience is encouraged to participate through the combination of ambiguity and narrative consistency which enable them to identify with the characters and their experiences, while still remaining immersed in the worlds' unique systems and rules. These films balance character growth with opportunities for the audience to interpret and connect with these characters and their journeys, and to participate in the storytelling process.

In *Avatar,* Neytiri's role as a guide to Jack and the audience leaves room for viewers to question her motivations and empathize with her struggle to trust an outsider while trying protect her people from those same outsiders. These dynamics make the characters' on-screen development emotionally engaging. Jake's early discomfort in his artificial Na'vi body and his gradual

embrace of their culture resonate with themes of belonging and finding one's identity. Jake's transformation is a narrative tool that parallels the viewer's introduction to the new world of Pandora. The film uses his journey to progressively introduce the worldbuilding details to the audience, allowing immersion to develop organically without relying on explanation-heavy dialogue. In terms of screenplay, worldbuilding is more than just scenery; it affects character decisions, heightens the tension, and supports thematic subtext. An example of this is the neural connection between the Na'vi and animals on the planet is not just added detail; it influences action, dramatic beats, tension, and emotional turning points throughout the story.

Building on these themes, *Avatar: The Way of Water* emphasizes Jake's family growth and tension between tradition and transformation across generations. For example, Lo'ak's builds a relationship with Payakan an outcast Tulkun, an intelligent, whale-like creatures of Pandora's oceans. Lo'ak and Payakan recognize themselves in each other, both misunderstood, both carrying guilt, both longing for connection. Because Payakan is considered an outcast Tulkun bonding with him defies the Metkayina's sacred traditions and is forbidden alienating Lo'ak within their culture. This relationship allows the audience to interpret his rejection of their cultural norms as either recklessness or courage. This narrative invites viewers to explore their own perspectives on family, sacrifice, and loyalty.

In the *Harry Potter* films, multi-character arcs build audience expectation of how these characters might change and their final outcome. For example, Severus Snape's starts off looking like a cruel, possibly villainous teacher and for long-time viewers are unsure of his alliance and true intensions, but over the series we slowly see that his harshness hides a soft heart, and in the end, we realize he is a tragic, flawed hero whose courage and sacrifices change how we see him in the end. Beyond his personal arc, Snape's story is tied to the wizarding world's class system, discussed earlier. As a half-blood wizard entering a society dominated by pure-blood ideals, Snape's motivations and insecurities come from a desire for acceptance and power within a hierarchical structure. The audience participates by piecing together his motivations through subtle clues, such as his love for Lily Potter and his commitment to protecting Harry.

Harry's own development, from a lonely boy to a determined and selfless leader, sparks audience connection with his growth over time. Harry's choices, like his willingness to sacrifice himself in film *The Deathly Hallows, Part Two* (2011) promotes themes of courage, loyalty, and the power of love. Additionally, the audience interprets the relationships between

characters, like Harry, Ron, and Hermione, on different levels providing different themes. Harry embodies courage and self-sacrifice, Ron represents loyalty and the strength of friendship, and Hermione symbolizes knowledge, justice, and perseverance.

Character development serves as a platform for audience participation and interpretation in both franchises. By creating character arcs that blend internal conflict with external conflicts, the narratives explore themes within the context of a richly developed secondary worlds. This strategy increases audience's commitment to the narrative while ensuring that the characters' journeys remain interesting and sympathetic.

The worldbuilding in both the *Avatar* and the *Harry Potter* significantly enhances their own narratives by creating immersive and unique environments that has emotional engagement anchored in each character's development. In both case studies, the balance between hard and soft worldbuilding contributes to the success of its storytelling. The hard worldbuilding elements, such as Pandora's ecosystem in *Avatar* (2009) or the detailed magical rules in the *Harry Potter* film series provide structure reinforcing believability in the narrative, enabling audiences to enjoy themselves fully in the fictional universes.

Nonetheless, the experience elevated by the incorporation of soft worldbuilding, ambiguous moments and interpretative gaps allow for individual interaction and creativity. For example, the spiritual connection to Eywa in *Avatar* is left open to interpretation or the origins of certain magical events in *Harry Potter*, inviting the audience to reflect on the interconnectedness of the story. This hybrid balance prevents these worldbuilding processes from becoming overly rigid or distracting, instead complementing the characters' journeys and the themes.

In conclusion, the narrative remains both approachable and intricately layered by the combination of hard and soft worldbuilding. Instead of detracting from the story, the carefully crafted worlds of Pandora in *Avatar* and the Wizarding World in *Harry Potter* enhances the emotional resonance, leaving audiences with a sense of wonder while allowing them to engage with the characters and plot. This showcases worldbuilding as an essential storytelling tool, not merely a background setting, but as a force that shapes and enriches the narrative.

Comparative Analysis of transmedia Worldbuilding:

Hogwarts Legacy (2023) and *Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora* (2023) both showcase the transformative power of transmedia storytelling by incorporating both movie worlds into

interactive gaming experiences. These games derive richly constructed fictional settings from their respective films, *Hogwarts Legacy* springs from the *Harry Potter* series and *Frontiers of Pandora* from the *Avatar* films, offering players an opportunity to explore and engage with these universes in new personalized ways. They demonstrate how interactive media can potentially strengthen a viewer's bond and increase narrative possibilities while consistency is maintained with the worldbuilding.

The story of *Hogwarts Legacy* immerses players in the Wizarding World, set in the 1800s, an unexplored period in the franchise. By recreating iconic locations such as the Great Hall, Forbidden Forest, and Hogsmeade with great attention to detail, the game evokes a familiar feeling while presenting new opportunities for discovery. As a player you can craft your own stories as a customizable fifth year students at Hogwarts, you can make decisions that shape your characters personal narrative. By including magical systems like spellcasting, potion-making, and interaction with ancient magic in the game, it guarantees a sense authenticity while giving the fantasy world new depth. Fans can participate with the Wizarding World in ways that suit with their own viewpoint which also strengthens their connection with the film narratives.

Similarly, *Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora* invites players to step into the bioluminescent world of Pandora, offering a standalone storyline where they assume the role of a Na'vi. In the role of a Na'vi following their escape after being abducted and trained by the RDA (Resources Development Administration), you learn the ways of the Na'vi, unite the clans, and protect Pandora from the RDA. The game's open-world design encourages exploration of Pandora's ecosystems with its lush plant and animal life. Players interactivity with the Na'vi way of life and its ecological balance and cultural traditions central in the films allow new conflicts with the RDA, expanding the film themes of colonialism and resistance while connecting the films' core messages through player participation in their own unique storylines.

Both games excel in 'secondary belief' by retaining the same level of detail, aesthetic and familiarity of the films. In *Hogwarts Legacy*, uncovering hidden passages in Hogwarts or attending magical classes feels like an authentic personal experience because of its seamless integration with the Wizarding World's established lore. Similarly, flying over stunning scenery in *Frontiers of Pandora*, amplifies the sense of wonder first experienced in the films *Avatar*. By balancing familiarity with innovation, and honouring its source material the games also

introduce original characters, stories, and gameplay mechanics that builds the original universes without detracting from their integrity.

Hogwarts Legacy and *Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora* exceed the power of transmedia storytelling, by extending the audience interaction with engaging materials within these fictional worlds. Jenkins (2006), supports this by emphasizing how audiences explore and interact with elaborately built universes across multiple platforms. By offering players the ability to experience the lore, the characters, and environments of these worlds, these games illustrate the potential of transmedia formats in reinforcing the audience connection to the overarching narratives. By transforming these cinematic settings into dynamic, explorable spaces, players are empowered to co-create their own narratives, reinforcing the immersive potential of transmedia in contemporary storytelling.

Conclusion

The results of this examination shows that worldbuilding is not about background settings and locations but an active force shaping characters and enhancing narrative. Hard worldbuilding, like in *The Hobbit* universe and the *Game of Thrones* universe, provides a strict framework that anchors all worldly divisions within unbreakable rules, while soft worldbuilding, like that found in *Spirited Away* and *Howl's Moving Castle*, promotes the importance of emotional impact through a flexible storytelling method. The two Mixed worldbuilding examples, *Avatar* and *Harry Potter*, balance these approaches, allowing for both an emotionally immersive and adaptable storytelling. There is no right or wrong choice when it comes to worldbuilding methods in a story but the spectrum of worldbuilding techniques all contribute to the overall consistency and engagement of speculative fiction, it reinforces the importance of intentionality in the construction of the fictional worlds.

Chapter Four: Creative Practice and reflexivity Aspect:

One of the main focuses of this research has been the connection between theory and practice in creative writing, particularly in screenwriting. This chapter examines how the concepts of hard and soft worldbuilding, as well as Tolkien's (2008) secondary belief have influenced and informed and creation of my original screenplay, a pilot episode for a speculative fiction series titled *City of Thieves*. By applying these theories to my creative work, this chapter demonstrates how I used worldbuilding techniques as a tool for immersion and as a driving force behind my narrative structure and character development.

The screenplay serves as a site of investigation and a hands-on example for these worldbuilding concepts. I have created a setting that is both expansive and organic by balanced hard and soft worldbuilding techniques in the construction of a detailed, immersive world. Furthermore, I have applied Tolkien's (2008) concept of secondary belief, ensuring that the story maintains internal consistency. In this way, my practical work acts as a bridge between my academic research and artistic expression, incorporating theoretical concepts into the creative execution.

Reflection has been an essential part of this process because it has enabled me to evaluate how theory is applied in practice by critically analysing my own creative choices. This chapter explores the challenges and discoveries that came to light when I was writing my script. These include consistency in the fictional world and how this research influenced my creative choices. The following sections will explain this process, from the construction of my fictional world and its rules, to the design of my characters and the narrative structure, illustrating the interplay between worldbuilding theories and my storytelling.

Introduction to the Creative Work

The creative component of this dissertation centres on the development of a narrative world situated within an early 20th-century imaginary society. The creative practice involved constructing a detailed historical backdrop, complex social structures, and an intricate magical system that functions as both the source of conflict and potential liberation for the characters. The decision to set *City of Thieves* in London, 1921, stems from both creative and thematic motivation. I was drawn to the atmosphere of post-war London, a city marked by recovery, unrest, and lingering shadows from the First World War. This moment in history offers a textured world where societal tension, economic disparity, and urban mystery converge,

making it an ideal backdrop for the series' tone. The muted visuals of gas-lit streets and dense architecture evoke a sense of unease that complements the *noir* influences within the story. While the series engages with speculative elements, rooting it in a recognizable historical period helps maintain what Tolkien (2008:36–60) calls "secondary belief" creating a world that feels internally consistent and emotionally credible. In that sense, the setting is not only about aesthetic preference; it forms a crucial part of the worldbuilding, informing the narrative tone, character dynamics, and broader thematic concerns of the script. The narrative follows two protagonists:

Elias Rosendale, a member of the elite Raven Syndicate specializing in magical contraband and artifacts, navigates the criminal underworld with the expertise of one born into an Awakened bloodline. His family history, once noble before being stripped of status during the War of Purity, informs his deep-seated distrust of authority and his complex relationship with his own magical abilities.

Isabella Skyler, represents another facet of this society's treatment of the Awakened. She was once a city enforcer before the manifestation of her magical abilities turned her into a fugitive, hiding from the law, a situation that forced her to seek protection within the criminal organization under the crime lord Jack. Her motivation to secure a better future for her sickly half-sister, shows how marginalized individuals must often compromise their values for survival in an oppressed system.

The story takes place within an urban landscape divided between the elites, who publicly condemn magic while secretly employing it to maintain their dominance, and the Awakened, who have largely been forced into hiding and criminality. Important locations in the story are the Blackwood Tavern, Jack's Gambling Den, and Rosendale's Mansion and, in future episodes, Damian Duvall's Mansion. These all function as physical manifestations of the social stratification of society, with each space reflecting different factions that shape this complex world.

Research-Driven Methodological Approach

The project's creative decisions are bases on a number of theoretical frameworks that have influenced the creation of my story and the worldbuilding process. By using these frameworks,

I have attempted to write a narrative world resonant with themes of power, identity, and resistance while being consistent and believable in the secondary world's rules.

Tolkien's Secondary Belief

Tolkien's concept of secondary belief (2008) is the foundation on which my worldbuilding methodology is built. Secondary belief as defined in his essay *On Fairy-Stories* as the audience's willingness to suspend disbelief in order to fully immerse themselves in a fictional world and accept it is real within its own context. This principle has inspired me to see how I can further my approach to refine the magical system, historical timeline, and societal structures within my creative work.

I have established a system that functions based on observable patterns rather than random events by instituting uniform rules that governs the manifestation and consequences of magic, where abilities are natural but have high physical costs. The historical chronology in my narrative beginning with the birth of the Awakened in the early 1800s and leading to the War of Purity offers a logical foundation for the current social tensions explored in the pilot episode script. This attention to internal consistency enables the readers to immerse themselves in the world without questioning the plausibility the narrative.

Hard and Soft Worldbuilding Integration

According to Hickson (2019), story deliberately combining both hard and soft worldbuilding techniques creates a multidimensional world that engages readers on an intellectual and emotional level.

The taxonomic categorization of magical artifacts into Suppressors (which nullify magical abilities) and Enhancers (which amplify powers) are examples of hard worldbuilding components. The structured organization of underground guilds, each with distinct methodologies and objectives. The political systems that have emerged in response to the advent of magic, including methods of regulation and control. These components define the rules of the world in which the narrative is set, defining precise guidelines that control how characters can interact with their environment.

The emotional and psychological aspect of character within this world are examples of soft worldbuilding. For example, the persecution of Elias's family and the weight of his magical

heritage have a significant impact on his personal journey, resulting in internal conflicts intended to resonate with audiences. The narrative explores how living as an Awakened in this hostile society affects one's identity and moral decision-making, and its impact on interpersonal relationships. This method turns the world into a dynamic one that influences character development rather than serving only as their surroundings. In addition to character-driven ambiguity, soft worldbuilding is often conveyed through mise-en-scène such as shadowy interiors, faded family portraits, and the contrast between magical and natural lighting. These are some of the elements that visually represent Elias's inner turmoil and the fractured nature of his reality. These visual cues support the narrative's emotional depth while leaving much of the world's history and logic implied rather than explained.

Hemingway's Iceberg Theory

Hemingway's Iceberg Theory (1952:145-160) argues that narrative power frequently resides in what is left unsaid or suggested. This inspired my storytelling methodology which I employed in the creative work. Following this idea, layers of meaning progressively surface through subtext rather than explicit exposition leaving large portions of worldbuilding and character motivation unspoken. This approach aligns with Linda Seger's (1990, pp.45–68) insights on subtext in screenwriting, where underlying emotions, themes, or world details are conveyed indirectly, through dialogue, setting, or action rather than being overtly stated.

Using this approach, it allows me to demonstrate Elias's family generational trauma and the nuanced character interactions as opposed to straightforward justification. Similarly, the power dynamics between the underground guilds (The Raven Syndicate, The Specters, and The Iron Fangs) develop naturally throughout the narrative events as opposed to explanation. The story makes reading more dynamic and interesting while honouring audience intelligence by letting readers figure out these details by inference.

Potential for Transmedia Storytelling

Jenkins' (2006) transmedia storytelling principles involving an emphasis on producing content that can expand across multiple media platforms while maintaining narrative cohesion when constructing this narrative world. The complexity of my world with its various factions, historical events, and magical systems, detailed guild structures, magical artifacts, and urban geography provides a foundation that could support expansion into different media formats

such as games, graphic novels, or digital content. Unlike many earlier works such as *The Lord of the Rings* or *Harry Potter* which were not originally developed with transmedia flexibility in mind but later expanded, my creative work deliberately incorporates transmedia potential from the start. This allows for worldbuilding decisions such as modular story arcs, rich lore, and cross-platform-compatible mechanics to be integrated into the creative process from the beginning. This approach to worldbuilding recognizes contemporary modes of audience engagement that often transcend single-medium consumption.

Narrative Structure and Character Development

McKee's (1998:100-120) design guidelines, which stress the integration of character development and world-building aspects, are adhered to in the narrative's structural approach. The elaborate worldbuilding was carefully considered throughout the creative process to support character growth rather than overshadow it.

This is especially clear in the way that the Awakened and the elite power clashes reflect the personal struggles of characters fighting for agency and identity. The external conflicts of the narrative world become expressions of internal character conflicts, creating resonance between plot and character development that enriches both dimensions.

These organizations are shown with subtlety, recognizing both their potentially exploitative activities and their protective roles within minority communities, particularly the Raven Syndicate with its focus on high-stakes heists of magical artifacts. This approach acknowledges that resistance to oppressive systems can take on ethically complex forms that reject straightforward moral classifications in favour of how power operates across different levels of society.

Methodology of the Creative Process

Once the setting of the world was firmly established, I turned my attention to the creation of the plot, character arcs and thematic depth. Important theories of storytelling influenced both the structural decisions and the motivations of the character in my work. *The Anatomy of Story* by John Truby (2007:31-46) provided crucial information about character identity, especially in relation to his discussion of the "Missing Piece." Truby elaborates on the concept of the "ghost," which is a past trauma that shapes a character's erroneous self-perception and causes a conflict between identity and essence. The 'identity' represents a mask the character shows

the world, while the ‘essence’ is their true self, which they must discover by finding the ‘missing piece.’ This framework was particularly relevant to Elias, whose stolen history leaves him broken. His arc is centred on reconciling his false identity with his true essence.

Notably, Robert McKee’s exploration of how a character’s greatest fear drives their decisions in his work *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (1997:135-180) had an impact on my methodology. McKee explores the relationship between conscious and unconscious desires, emphasizing how psychological scars, such as fear of failure, rejection, or loss, subconsciously dictate a character’s choices. These principal influences Isabella’s development, since she makes almost all of her decisions out of fear of becoming like her mother. Her internal struggle is not just a personal battle but a driving factor for her story.

K.M. Weiland’s work *Creating Character Arcs* (2016:41-58) further refined the relationship between the internal transformation and external conflict. She introduces the idea of “The Lie Your Character Believes,” a fundamental misconception that shapes the protagonist’s worldview. This lie should be directly contradicted by the external struggle which will either drive the character growth or fail. This is further developed by differentiating between a character’s Want (external goal) and Need (internal transformation). Often, a character pursues their external goal (want) throughout the story to try and avoid confronting their internal wounds, but the plot gradually forces them to face the truth. This framework was crucial in organizing Isabella’s character arc, her external fight against the Enforcers and the oppressed system mirrors her internal struggle with guilt and self-acceptance.

Throughout the drafting process, trying to balance worldbuilding with narrative fluidity proved to be more difficult than I initially expected. At first, I found myself overdeveloping the world, leading to excessive exposition that risked overwhelming my story. I had to improved my strategy to combat this by organically incorporating the world into character interactions and conflicts. As a result, the story's emotional core remains the primary focus and worldbuilding complemented the narrative rather than overshadowing it.

A major component of my methodology incorporated both hard and soft worldbuilding techniques. Elements like resource distribution, societal hierarchies, and magic limitations were subjected to hard worldbuilding, which entails precisely specified rules and structures in contrast to soft worldbuilding which intentionally leaves space for uncertainty, particularly

with regard to the true scope of magical powers and the origins of suppression devices. This approach supports the claim made by Hickson's (2019) that worldbuilding should preserve internal logic while maintaining the feeling of mystery.

Additionally, my creative work was influenced by historical and cultural sources found in London during the 1920's. Earlier real-world persecutions like the European witch trials and more current authoritarian state surveillance serve as inspiration for my story's treatment of magic users. The coded language used in underground rebellion against the system is reminiscent of past secret societies and underprivileged groups that depended on clandestine communication to survive. By embedding these elements into my screenplay, I made sure the setting remained imaginative while resonating with real-world themes.

Reflexivity and Self-Analysis

Critically analysing my creative decisions throughout the development of the screenplay has provided invaluable insights into both my artistic process and the integration of theoretical research. The process of worldbuilding, character development, and narrative structuring allowed me to apply and evaluate the frameworks of Tolkien (2008), Jenkins (2006), and Hickson (2019), among others, in practice. These interactions between theory and practice have enriched my understanding of how worldbuilding drives both story and character arcs.

One of the most rewarding aspects of the creative process was how organically worldbuilding shaped both my narrative and almost all of my characters. Once I established a clear, consistent world, I noticed how it affected character behaviour, action and relationships with other characters. For example, the different parts of the world Elias and Isabella live in, influenced their relationships with one another during the heist. In a city where the Awakened are hunted and exploited by the elite, every move they take is motivated by their survival and secrecy. Elias's pragmatic mindset and his reliance on skills and knowledge of the hidden power structures is influenced by his environment. Conversely, Isabella's more idealistic and reckless approach reflects her instinctive distrust of figures with high positions, like Rosendale, illustrating Tolkien's (2008) concept of secondary belief, where the created world is so compelling that it elevates the character's motivations, actions, and the narrative into a believable reality demonstrated by the balance between the environment and character development.

Using Jenkins' (2006) transmedia storytelling ideal brought a clearer understanding of how worldbuilding might be used in media other than film and the screenplays on which they are based. In order to ensure that the world's interwoven elements, such as lore, people, and settings could expand into games, books, or other media types, I purposefully created it with transmedia flexibility in mind. This intentional design adhered to Jenkins' ideas and improved the story beyond the primary text. This shifted my creative mindset, encouraging me to consider multi-platform possibilities in future projects. Thus, theory directly informed the world I created and showed me how it could surpass the boundaries of a single medium, circling back to Jenkins' concept that the complexity of fictional worlds can amplify the storytelling experience.

One of the challenges I encountered in the writing process, was getting the right balance between hard and soft worldbuilding. The need for internal consistency often pushed me toward a more rigid, hard worldbuilding approach, where every detail needed to be explicitly defined. But I quickly realized that in order for the universe to feel alive and have room to breathe, some degree of ambiguity was essential. The tension between hard worldbuilding and soft worldbuilding was a theme I encountered in Hickson (2019), who advocates for a balance between a structured world and a flexible narrative. For instance, in one scene, the true motivations of Rosendale and the reach of the Raven Syndicate are left somewhat open-ended. In addition to minimizing unnecessary explanation, this suggested a more basic and systemic conflict inside the story. The decision to leave some details unspoken and rather implied allows the audience to fill in the gaps, thus enhancing engagement and mirroring Hickson's (2019) notion that worldbuilding should support, not overshadow the story.

Another challenge was the temptation to over extend my worldbuilding at the cost of narrative conciseness. I found myself delving too deeply into the historical and sociopolitical layers of my world, which risked distraction from the central plot. To address this, I had to returned to my core thematic elements and look at what motivates my character. I then eliminated unnecessary backstory, such as the history of suppression devices, and opted to keep their origins ambiguous, focusing instead on their immediate impact on characters in the story I was writing. This constant refining process was inspired by Hickson's (2019) emphasis on efficient worldbuilding, and how it ensures that the screenplay remained engaging while still being rich in detail.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the creative process and theoretical research, I realise how the two have informed and enriched one another. The theoretical frameworks I studied, particularly those of Tolkien (2008), Jenkins (2006), Hickson (2019), and even Hemingway (1952) were not just academic concepts but tools that guided my practical work. I discovered that when done thoroughly worldbuilding is a strong factor in both character development and narrative structure. The process reinforced my belief in the importance of having your world adhere to secondary belief, where the world becomes so real to the audience that it deepens their emotional attachment the story. Moreover, the challenge in balancing hard and soft worldbuilding, as well as the need for narrative conciseness, helped me refine my writing skills making me more perceptive to how theory guides the writing process. By critically engaging with both the creative process and the theoretical research, I was able to develop a screenplay that is rich in worldbuilding but also structurally sound and engaging.

Chapter Five: Conclusion:

This research explores the intricacies of worldbuilding within speculative fiction, with a particular focus on the intersection of theoretical frameworks and creative practice. The primary objective was to understand how worldbuilding contributes to the development of narrative, character, and thematic elements in screenwriting. The key questions I sought to answer included: How do worldbuilding theories, such as hard, soft, and mixed worldbuilding, as well as Tolkien's concept of secondary belief, inform the process of constructing fictional worlds? How can these theories be applied to enhance the depth and authenticity of characters and plotlines within a screenplay?

Throughout the thesis, I examined key theoretical perspectives from scholars like Tolkien (2006), Jenkins (2007), and Hickson (2019-2023), integrating them with case studies of successful transmedia narratives and worldbuilding techniques in film and literature. Trough an engagement with these theories, Various methods of worldbuilding are explored as both a structural foundation for storytelling and as a vehicle for character development.

The primary contributions of this work are twofold: first, a deeper understanding of how worldbuilding theories can be applied in practice to create immersive, coherent fictional worlds in screenwriting, and second, an exploration of the dynamic relationship between theory and practice, which provides a roadmap for future screenwriters and storytellers looking to integrate theoretical concepts into their creative processes.

An outcome of this research is finding that worldbuilding in speculative fiction is not a static or one-dimensional process but a dynamic, multifaceted approach that combines theoretical insight with creative practice. By integrating hard and soft worldbuilding techniques alongside Tolkien's concept of secondary belief, a deeper understanding is gained of how worldbuilding shapes not only the environment of a fictional world but also of the emotional and psychological landscapes of the characters within it.

An important finding is that worldbuilding, while essential for creating immersive and believable narratives, cannot exist in isolation from the characters and plot. Instead, it must be seen as a foundational tool that supports and enhances the character arcs, narrative structure, and thematic depth of a story. The research demonstrated that successful worldbuilding is a blend of structure and mystery: a carefully crafted world with defined rules provides the

stability needed for a compelling narrative, while leaving certain aspects unexplored allows for engagement and wonder, drawing the audience deeper into the fictional universe.

Through the artistic research component of this work the emphasis on synergy between theory and practice is explored. It underscores the importance of worldbuilding as both an intellectual exercise and a creative endeavour. The application of theoretical perspectives, such as those from Tolkien, Jenkins, and Hickson, proved useful as a guide for screenwriting in my own creative processes, offering a set of tools to create not only believable worlds but also compelling, emotionally resonant narratives.

The implications of this research extend both practically and theoretically, offering valuable insights to those in screenwriting, narrative design, and worldbuilding. By highlighting the interplay between worldbuilding techniques and narrative cohesion, this study not only contributes to existing scholarship but also provides a framework for future explorations of how speculative worlds shape storytelling conventions and audience engagement.

On a practical level, this study offers a framework for screenwriters and creators in speculative fiction to approach worldbuilding as an integrated part of their storytelling process. By emphasizing the combination of hard and soft worldbuilding elements, this research finds that creators should not solely focus on rigidly defining every aspect of their fictional universe but rather leave room for narrative discovery and character-driven exploration. This approach allows for richer, more dynamic stories where the world evolves alongside the characters and their journeys. Additionally, the incorporation of Tolkien's concept of secondary belief highlights the importance of crafting a world that feels believable and emotionally engaging to audiences, not just logically consistent. This theoretical framework is recommended as a guide for writers and creators seeking to create immersive, resonant worlds that connect with audiences on a deeper, emotional level.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the ongoing conversation around worldbuilding in speculative fiction by building on the work of scholars like Tolkien, Jenkins, and Hickson. It reinforces the idea that worldbuilding is a crucial narrative device that shapes not only the story's setting but also the characters' motivations and the overall thematic direction. By integrating these theories into practical application, this study underscores how the structure and depth of a fictional world can significantly influence both the plot and character arcs. It also expands upon the concepts of hard and soft worldbuilding by suggesting a more subtle,

hybrid approach that can accommodate both structured rules and narrative fluidity, offering new perspectives for future studies on the interaction between worldbuilding and narrative theory.

Beyond the immediate scope of this thesis, the findings have broader applications in various forms of storytelling, including literature, television, and interactive media like video games. As demonstrated in transmedia storytelling, worldbuilding extends beyond a single medium, allowing narratives to evolve across different platforms while maintaining coherence and audience engagement. This interplay between hard and soft worldbuilding techniques is particularly evident in transmedia expansions, where the structured consistency of hard worldbuilding provides a foundation for adaptation, while the flexibility of soft worldbuilding allows for reinterpretation and audience co-creation, enriching the overarching narrative ecosystem. The hybrid model of worldbuilding developed in this research is found suitable for various genres and formats, offering a more adaptable approach to creating fictional worlds. Moreover, the integration of secondary belief and the balance between structure and mystery can be applied to other storytelling fields to enhance the authenticity and depth of fictional universes. As speculative fiction continues to expand in both academic and creative spaces, this research provides a foundation for future explorations into the dynamic interplay between theory and practice in worldbuilding.

The process of conducting this research has been both a creative and academic journey, deeply influencing my expanded understanding of worldbuilding and its role in narrative construction. From exploring the theories of Tolkien, Jenkins, and Hickson, to applying them practically in the development of my screenplay, I have gained a richer appreciation for the intricate relationship between theory and practice.

Through this work, I have come to understand that worldbuilding is not a one-size-fits-all endeavour. It requires careful balance between hard and soft elements, between structure and ambiguity, and between the expansive possibilities of creation and the grounded needs of the narrative. What has resonated most deeply is the importance of secondary belief, as established by Tolkien, and how it serves as a bridge between the fictional world and the audience's emotional engagement. This research has allowed me to explore how a well-crafted world can serve not just as a backdrop, but as an integral part of the storytelling process that enriches the experience for both the creator and the audience.

Finally, this thesis has reinforced the idea that worldbuilding is far more than just a tool for creating fictional spaces, it is an essential part of the storytelling process itself, one that allows for depth, complexity, and immersion. As speculative fiction continues to evolve across various media, the findings of this research offer both a theoretical framework and a practical approach to worldbuilding that can influence not only future projects but also contribute to the ongoing conversation about the role of worldbuilding in narrative art.

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