SHRINKING AN EXPANDED UNIVERSE

by Chris Compendio

I once wrote a series of linked short stories, all centered around the goings-on in a high school. While I attempted to be cautious and precise in crafting the prose, much of my labor and effort was directed towards the details that were not on the page. In my head, this school was its own sort of universe, with characters that inhabited their own smaller spaces within this larger world. They stood alone, their individual stories playing out, with maybe a few brushes with other characters through cameo, and the occasional full-on crossover.

When applied to popular media, the concept of the shared, expanded universe is exemplified by the likes of Middle-earth, Westeros, the Star Wars galaxy, the Marvel Cinematic Universe and so on. There are moving parts so large in scale, yet they may never affect each other simply due to the vastness of the world. The creators of each world would explain its elaborate histories, cultures and languages as if they were real. And the field is open enough that other creators can freely craft their own narratives and spaces within a larger world, even if just in their own imagination.

A common fallacy comes from a creator attempting to widen their universe, yet narrowing the scope through their protagonist. The joy of a large, fluid universe is that anyone can be a protagonist – yet many modern writers choose to drag down their protagonists by tying them to the pre-established, rather than letting them breathe in their own space. It's the difference between Star Wars having Rey Nobody versus Rey Skywalker.

2020 was rife with mainstream television shows that fell victim to this. HBO's *Watchmen* was in the same universe as the graphic novel but occupied a different space through Tulsa while observing the ripple effects from the original story.

What started as a new frontier in an existing world became slavish to the source material, with the fresh protagonist Sister Night having forced connections to not one, but two legacy characters. The trope of a "special" protagonist or a "chosen one" still lives in today's media. Season three of *Westworld* went beyond the theme parks and into the real world through an everyman named Caleb with no stake in the game – until his backstory tied into the established character of Dolores. And then there is the eleventh series of Doctor Who, a show defined by an infinitely expanding universe with a renegade and rebellious Time Lord, one out of countless, who built their own legend. But that allure was taken away, as the Doctor was not only special as a child, but the progenitor of the entire Time Lord race.

There are still efforts from films like *The Last Jedi* and *Blade Runner 2049* in demonstrating that an ordinary person, free from lineage and legacy, can make a difference. A person so small in a massive universe can make their own story, build their own space in the world – but some creators still push back and revert back to tropes. For these shows aiming to build something new in an old universe, these sci-fi and fantasy universes became too focused on the past, undercutting and devaluing all of the new, fascinating additions to their respective lore.

There is certainly still a balance to be had when creating something new in a pre-established world. Using references and tie-ins can be advantageous, and the theme of legacy is a fun element to tinker with. There is still something precious about a shared universe – but in the end, oftentimes it is more valuable to let its inhabitants carve out their own spaces and let them live on their own. 🦅