

# The Serialised Storytelling in Film: Creating a Completely Furnished World

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## Abstract

This article discusses the inter-relationship and main contradictions between creative development and the commercial use of serialised stories through an analysis of the two series of films, *The Lord of the Rings* and *Pirates of the Caribbean*. The article argues that the existence and development of serialised stories are rooted in people's pursuit of a "completely furnished world". Although there is a basic contradiction between the two at present, the development and commercialisation of serialised stories should not be criticised, but rather require more attempts to ease or resolve this contradiction.

**Keywords:** serialised stories, creative development, commercial exploitation

## 1. Introduction

When Captain America wielded Thor's hammer and fought against Thanos in *Avengers: Endgame*, cheers and applause erupted in cinemas around the world. As the final battle ensued and each superhero made their appearance, the audience's emotions were heightened to the extreme, causing the cinemas to erupt with excitement time and time again. People cheered for the names of those superheroes as if they were also personally involved in this thrilling battle.

This is undoubtedly a phenomenal theatrical response in the history of cinema. However it is not unique, similar phenomenons can be seen in those cinemas which were screening *Star Wars*, *The Matrix*, *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *The Lord of the Rings*. These films not only strongly engaged and fascinated audience in cinemas, but they have been also subliminally integrated into their daily lives. Many discussions around these films can be found on social media and the internet, as well as endless second creations made by their fans. There was even a generation of young boys who grew up wielding plastic lightsabers to play with their friends.

Italian novelist Umberto Eco (1986) once pointed out that to have extensive and profound influence and dissemination among the public, a work should create a "completely furnished world" that is so immersive that its followers can recite lines and scenes from it as if they were a part of a private community. (p. 198) Great works always create a desirable world, and the aforementioned series of stories have all done an outstanding job of this. These films have shaped many completely furnished worlds by creating interesting worldviews and constantly releasing sequels based on them. Then they integrate entertainment and marketing "to create strong emotional attachments and use them to make additional sales." (Jenkins, 2003, p. 104) However, as *Knives Out* director Rian Johnson has said, this approach can also become a poisonous idea because what revolves around these film franchises is often "smart marketing" more than "smart storytelling". (Antonucci, 2003, as cited in Jenkins, 2003, p.104) Audience may lose interest in these series of stories due to the overwhelming marketing activities and uneven production quality of these films. This article will discuss the relationship between creative development and the commercial exploitation of serialised stories, and offer a perspective on the trend of creating intellectual property for commercial profit: despite the many risks involved, the commercial prospects

of serialised storytelling are promising because it aligns with people's pursuit of an interesting and complete world. Therefore, to some extent, the creation and commercialisation of serialised stories should be encouraged to better realise their value.

## 2. *The Lord of the Rings*: How Serialised Stories Can Be Commercially Successful

*The Lord of the Rings* trilogy got a total of \$3 billion at the box office after its release, with each film earning \$898 million (*The Fellowship of the Ring*), \$948 million (*The Two Towers*), and \$1.15 billion (*The Return of the King*) respectively. If just compare the budget and box office revenue, this was already considered a milestone-level success. However, it is also important to consider the associated revenue generated by *The Lord of the Rings* film series. The most frequently discussed one was the tourism revenue brought to its main filming location, New Zealand. In addition, there was also *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring Concert* held in China in 2018. According to a report by Sohu, this concert started crowdfunding on Modian on June 13, 2018 and raised nearly 300,000 yuan within 24 hours. This shows that even 16 years after the release of the films, *The Lord of the Rings* still has considerable commercial value.

Without a doubt, the success of *The Lord of the Rings* owes much to the enchanting Middle-earth world crafted by J.R.R. Tolkien. Although Tolkien only published two long novels, *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) in his lifetime, the Middle-earth world he created was already fully formed. This world has different races who speak their own languages, and have their own habits, just like the world we live in. This has created a huge fan base for the films. Even "a growing number of active or participatory fans are exhibiting a sense of ownership that includes an investment in the creative development of these universes." (Shefrin, 2004, p. 261) So, how is such a highly complete world loved by people? Perhaps the answer to this question can be found in Immanuel Kant's explanation of a basic human aesthetic judgment mechanism, the judgment of the "sublimity".

In Kant's view, sublimity is an existence where "it is an object (of nature) the representation of which determines the mind to think of the unattainability of nature as a presentation of ideas." (Kant, 2000, p. 151) Meanwhile, "sublimity is not contained in anything in nature, but only in our mind." (Kant, 2000, p. 147) It is "a momentary inhibition of vital powers" (Kant, 2000, p. 128) that one experiences when faced with an absolutely large and absolutely powerful object, such as the entire Middle-earth world. This realisation leads to an awareness of the existence of a force within our mind that can resist this natural power, and that can even emerge victorious in this conflict. When people become aware of the existence of this force within their minds, this momentary inhibition is transformed into a pleasurable sense of sublimity. This is a response based on the essential emotional nature of human life power, and almost all successful film franchises have captured this point in the creative development of their worldviews, thereby achieving commercial success. Whether it's the grand worldviews of *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* or just the stories of the same characters in *Knives Out* and *Cold War*, they all directly or indirectly reveal those powerful worlds behind through images or characters, enabling the audience to experience the flow of their vital powers on the screen.

At the same time, establishing such a completely furnished world also means that the film will present various elements. In those worlds revealed by the film, there are layers of clues and various information, waiting for the audience to explore this wonderful world on the screen. And because these elements belong to a completely furnished world, the commercial value they contain can easily be developed. Various characters, music, scenes, and props that were born during the creative development stage will be transformed into various cultural products with the success of the film, discussed and consumed by the audience and fans, and in turn, further expand the influence of the film and its sequels. If executed properly, this process is not like milking intellectual property, as Rian Johnson argues. Instead, it can be seen as a virtuous cycle.

During this process, serialised stories bring a sublime experience to audience through their worldviews and create various cultural products for those audience, thereby gaining a loyal fan base. These fan groups are not only consumers of the films but can also actively participate in the creative development process of the films to some extent. According to Shefrin's (2004) research, Peter Jackson, the director of *the Lord of the Rings* trilogy, connected with 100 million loyal Tolkien fans and avoided alienating as many as possible. (p. 265) Jackson first positioned himself as a Tolkien fan in the development of this story, and then as a film director. He collected fans' opinions through online dialogue with them and answered their questions in interviews, and applied these opinions to film production as much as possible. This approach united the fan base and the film production team into a unified front and maximally respected the opinions of the fans because they were the ones ultimately paying for the films.

However, even though Jackson made these efforts, his films were still criticised by Tolkien's loyal fans for deviating from the novels in various ways after their release. Once a story system is established and its content becomes richer, on the one hand, there are more possible storylines in this world, and on the other hand, there are more fans who love the story and are willing to pay for it. In this sense, it is the worldview of the serialised story

that makes its commercial value. Therefore, how the next story development can convince more fans and let them continue to support the series becomes a crucial question. But unfortunately, it also points to the fundamental contradiction between the creative development and commercial exploitation of series stories.

### **3. *Pirates of the Caribbean*: The Fundamental Contradiction Between Serialised Storytelling and Its Commercial Exploitation**

This fundamental contradiction can be explained in this way: series storytelling aims to build a long-term and stable fan base and a favourable return on investment, but this contradicts the reality of long production periods. This contradiction is mainly reflected in three aspects: firstly, this contradiction is reflected in the audience, especially from the degree to which loyal fans of the narrative universe accept the continuation of the series. Secondly, it is reflected in various unexpected events during the long production period of the film series. And thirdly, the contradiction between the overall story of the series and the individual films. On these issues, *Pirates of the Caribbean* series can also be a good example.

The story of *Pirates of the Caribbean* also featured a completely furnished world in the first trilogy, and each film broke many box office records. However, starting from the fourth film (*On Stranger Tides*), the addition of new characters did not add much brilliance to the sequels. Among the 283 reviews on IMDb that gave *On Stranger Tides* a rating of 7 or above, the vast majority were discussing Jack, Barbossa, and Gibbs. The new characters introduced in this film were almost ignored by the audience. This phenomenon is the result of various factors such as screenwriting focus, the performance of actors, and star power, but the most important factor is that these old characters have gone through the precipitation of the previous trilogy. Their love, hate, and adventure stories have been developed to a considerable extent, which cannot be covered by new characters who have just met the audience. Moreover, Shefrin (2004) pointed out the fact that an active and loyal fan will always be alert for new products. (p. 273) This is expressed in films as fans paying more attention to whether a sequel contradicts the previous work when watching it. Unfortunately, *Dead Men Tell No Tales* still did not overcome this problem, so after losing some fans' support, this film became the second lowest-grossing in the entire series.

Of course, if a series story intends to continue producing sequels, it cannot abandon creating new content. Therefore, we can see the first manifestation of this fundamental contradiction. Once a completely furnished world is created, whether in the novel or film stage, according to Thorburn and Jenkins (2003), fans won't accept the concept of a conclusive and authorised version of a story created by a large media company. Instead, they imagine a world where everyone can contribute to the formation and dissemination of significant cultural narratives. (p. 289) This leads to a divergence in ownership and interpretation of the work. Jackson tried to avoid this during the filming of *The Lord of the Rings*, while George Lucas, the director of *Star Wars*, chose a neutral position and ignored the divergence. However, "Hollywood has sought to shut down fan fiction, later, to assert ownership over it." (Jenkins, 2003, p. 134)

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986) views various art practices such as watching films as "the pursuit of maximum 'cultural profit' for minimum economic cost." Fans' post-viewing comments on films can be seen as the most economical way to get "an appropriate part of its distinctive value." (p. 267) This gradually leads to the divergence mentioned above. However, the purpose of creating a completely furnished world is to trigger extensive discussions among fans. The commercial success and cultural influence of the film series depend on this. Therefore, despite Jackson's attempts to achieve some good results, this divergence cannot be completely bridged at this stage, and it will exist with the production of the series.

In addition, in the aforementioned evaluations of *On Stranger Tides*, some even claim that the film "is all about Captain Jack Sparrow." Indeed, since the first film of this series, Jack or rather Johnny Depp's name has been tied to *Pirates of the Caribbean*. It is undoubtedly a mutually beneficial relationship between Depp and *Pirates of the Caribbean*. However, in 2016, Depp's divorce lawsuit with his wife Amber Heard and a series of lawsuits that followed led to Disney reprising Depp's role as Captain Jack Sparrow in 2018. (Parry, 2018) According to The Mirror, during the filming of *Dead Men Tell No Tales*, Heard had injured Depp's finger, causing the film to be suspended for four weeks. (Bucktin, 2016) Similar unexpected events can also be seen in many films and TV series, such as Higashide Masahiro in *The Confidence Man JP* and Kevin Spacey in *House of Cards*. This article has no intention of analysing the deeper reasons behind these results or the right and wrong involved, but simply reveals a fact through these events: when faced with various unexpected events, the few options that a film franchise can take are just to interrupt filming or replace crew. These measures may be beneficial to the production company's timely damage control, but they undoubtedly harm the serialised stories themselves.

Going back to the films themselves, one of the criticisms of many of the films in *Pirates of the Caribbean* series is that they are too obviously intended to lead up to the sequel at the end. Although these films are subordinate to a complete series of stories, it is the hour or two spent in the cinema watching the film that really defines the audience experience. For this reason, Rian Johnson said in an interview that he insists on making films self-contained and giving them endings. The importance of a complete story has been emphasised since

Aristotle's time. Aristotle believed that the whole of the story "is something that has a beginning, a middle, and an end." And the reason he believes stories need to have an appropriate length is to facilitate memory. (Aristotle, 2013, p. 60) And in serialised storytelling, this issue will be infinitely amplified. If each film is completely produced as a part of the entire series, audiences who are not familiar with the series would find it difficult to form a deep impression of a particular film. For them, it is just an endless cycle of stories, and they will not have the willingness of continuing to watch the sequels.

#### 4. Conclusion

In summary, a completely furnished world is the starting point for the development of serialised stories, and it guarantees the commercial value of these stories. It is precisely because such a world satisfies people's desire for the sublime that the stories set in it can endure and conquer one audience after another. However, there is a contradiction that cannot be avoided in the commercial use of serialised stories at present. That is, the production of serialised stories is to attract a wider audience and turn them into fans of the series, but sequels are always difficult to maintain the reputation of the previous works, which may lead to the risk of losing fans' support. In addition, various unpredictable events caused by the long production cycle contribute to many regrets like the discontinuation of production of *Pirates of the Caribbean XI*.

However, this does not mean that the development and commercialisation of serialised stories should be criticised. After all, there is nothing more desirable than wandering in a wonderful alternate world. It is because of these unavoidable contradictions that serialised stories should be encouraged, leaving it to the wisdom of more filmmakers to find a way to resolve them. If one day, the methods of film production and audience consumption can be changed, perhaps we can continue to follow Jackson's attempt, truly involving audience and fans in the creation of the films, and weaving a world that belongs to every audience and at the same time belongs to each individual.

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