

Shared World Anthologies
By
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"The point of a shared world is to build on the works of your collaborators by using their characters and locations in your stories to help build that level of familiarity for the reader."

From: <http://www.stygiandarkness.com/belleslettres/blink.html>

More information: Sharing the World at <http://www.scifi.com/sfw/issue268/cassutt.html>.

Introduction

The phenomenon of the shared world only began being called that in the late 1970s, but there have been things that fit the criteria of a shared world to some degree or other at least since the beginning of the 20th century. We'll take a look at what makes up a shared world as we look at its antecedents, and then we'll examine several of the examples of the genre in more detail.

Roots

One of the defining characteristics of a shared world is the word "shared". This implies, pretty much by definition, more than one author working together on the end product. Leaving aside co-authorship as a separate issue, we can start with fiction put together by multiple authors.

Pulp fiction is where we start. Tom Swift was the hero of a set of dime novels from the turn of the 20th century on. A prototypical "action hero", Tom Swift was the star of all kinds of adventures, much to the chagrin of the parents of the day, and he had a stable of authors to keep his adventures coming. (See www.duntemann.com/tomswift.htm for more information.)

In the 1930s, detectives were all the rage. The Shadow, the Spider, and Doc Savage put paid to the bad guys with the help of multiple authors (thePulp.net/index.html). Science fiction, too, had its pulp heroes in the shape of Tom Corbett, Space Cadet, and Tom Swift, Jr. Moving closer to the middle of the century, you can add in the Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew, the Bobsey Twins and the like. All cranked out by a stable of authors all writing the same characters in the same situations. Or, to put it another way, a very limited shared world.

These things still continue today: people are still writing Conan books, and Lovecraft-type horror. James Bond is still being written about even today, decades after Ian Fleming's death. And someone's still writing as V C Andrews (though that may be beside the point)!

Media Fiction

In 1970, Bantam publishing started something rather monumental. They had been publishing books that contained several episodes of the Star Trek television series each when they also published a novel that had never been televised. The book was written by a well-known science fiction author named James Blish, and it was called Spock Must Die. It was a very science fiction-oriented story (it involved tachyons), and in retrospect the characterization wasn't exactly spot on, but this teenager found it really, really cool.

Bantam published a few more Star Trek novels over the next few years, stretching the life of the franchise. Then the first movie came out and Paramount took over the whole ball of wax. They published a novelization of the movie that was the first in a long series of Star Trek novels, and when the other series came along they published novels in those settings as well, right up to the current series, Star Trek: Enterprise.

It is interesting that the media publishing giant that is the Star Trek franchise has gone beyond its own roots. The early novels had to stay within the frameworks of the television series stars and situations. There were a few experiments that featured protagonists that were not series stars, but these were few and far between, and no novel could develop the characters or setting beyond what the visual media were presenting (i.e. the "reset button" syndrome). But in the past four or five years, the setting has come to life. There are several series of novels, some short, some long, that are centered on characters that are not series' stars: The New Frontier, about the Starship Excalibur; the IKS Gorkon series about Klingons going "where no one has gone before"; and even the books that are continuing the whole DS9/Bajor/Emissary plotline past the finale of the Deep Space 9 series. The Federation has become a character in and of itself,

no longer needing the anchor of people we've seen on TV or in the movies to ground our expectations. Star Trek is a shared world in truth.

Another prolific media-fiction series is based on the BBC science fiction series Doctor Who. Target Books had, like Bantam, been publishing novelizations of the show's stories for years. In the early 1990s, after the show had been cancelled and the end of their novelizations line was in sight, they began to publish new adventures for the current, seventh, doctor. In time, they also began publishing the "missing" adventures of the past six doctors. They were all writing the same characters and "setting" (the TARDIS) – much like the pulp series' of old.

In 1996, the BBC took back their license Virgin Publishing, which had acquired Target, in the wake of the TV movie and began publishing 8th doctor novels as well as missing adventures of the past seven doctors. The "current" doctor series went its own way, much as its Virgin predecessor, expanding the scope of the stories that could be told (in other words, the special effects budget became unlimited!), adding companions and time-zones and aliens and worlds to the Doctor Who Multiverse. Then, perhaps feeling constrained by decades of backstory, perhaps feeling the need to return to the roots of the series in the face of the "fact" that the series was never coming back, the director of the series decreed the jettisoning of the entire foundation of the series by eliminating the Time Lords. The series headed in a new, not necessarily very "Doctor Who" direction for a while, but who knows what the future will bring.

Virgin Publishing continued their own novels using the characters they had created, namely Bernice Summerfield. Doctorless, Bernice continued her adventures in a very similar universe to certain of the Target/Virgin novels, extending the range of this particular shared world. Doctor Who continued into audio adventures, some spin-off videos, web-casts, and now is finally returning to TV in 2005.

Media fiction has exploded in recent years. Go into any (chain) bookstore and you are certain to find a whole section devoted to the genre. TV shows like Buffy and Angel, Alias, X-Files, Babylon 5, Stargate SG1, Farscape, Highlander, Witchblade, Andromeda, Xena, Hercules, Forever Knight, and Star Wars (the first movie-inspired media fiction line), among others. Once again, this is focused on characters first, and settings second, with multiple authors extending the adventures of the series' characters. Believe it or not, there are media fiction lines for things like Looney Tunes and Power Puff Girls! (We'll leave manga to its own devices.)

Gaming Fiction

So far, we have been mostly talking about characters being the subject of these multi-author collaborations. With gaming fiction, in contrast, it is all about the setting. Since there are very few role playing games that are about specific characters, setting is all that there is after all.

Dungeons and Dragons, the progenitor of the entire role playing genre, began the gaming fiction tie-in with the Dragonlance setting. Further settings followed, like Dark Sun and Spelljammer, and, of course, Forgotten Realms, a setting that has almost as many books as the Star Trek franchise.

Other role playing games also generated fiction, like World of Darkness and Shadowrun, which I quite enjoyed. I've never played the game seriously, but their setting is quite well developed, both geographically and environmentally (part cyberpunk, part D&D, all jammed up together).

This sub-genre isn't limited to role playing games, though. There are several Magic: the Gathering novels, which at first just tried to illustrate the system (a failure in my opinion – gaming novels work best when ignoring the mechanics of the game), and then served to tell the stories that their card-sets were based around. One odd type of game that has been novelized is the computer game – Diablo, Halo, Warcraft, etc. I've not read any of these, but I have played these games and I really don't see how their settings can generate enough plot for one novel, much less several.

Fan-fiction

Before we take the next logical step on our journey to shared world settings, let's digress for a moment and take a short look at fan fiction.

I honestly don't know how long fan fiction – stories written by readers of a story intended to extend the adventures of the characters in that story – has been around. Were people making up their own adventures for Homer and Hercules? Were folks thinking up their own Canterbury Tales? Did people jot down their own mysteries for Sherlock Holmes to solve? I have no clue.

We return again to Star Trek to note the "official" beginning of the phenomenon of fan fiction. In the years between the cancellation of the series and the first movie, many people believe that it was fan fiction (not Bantam), circulated by mimeographed fanzines, that kept the franchise alive. The most famous version

of Star Trek fan fiction is known as slash, named for the “slash” in the less generic title Kirk/Spock fiction. Slash extended well beyond Star Trek into any media that had two male stars – Man from U.N.C.L.E., Starsky and Hutch, etc – but we don’t need to go into any more detail than that.

Photocopiers made it easier to circulate these stories, but of course the web has made them virtually ubiquitous. And according to a panel at last December’s Philcon, fan fiction can, very occasionally, get you into writing the real stuff (so said one of the panelists, who was asked to write for the Buffy line based on her fan fiction in that genre).

Opened Worlds

We’ve seen multi-author series concerned with the same set of characters, and with a specialized setting, and it is the latter that more closely resembles what we think of as a shared world setting. But in the two instances we’ve seen of this (Star Trek and Gaming fiction), the authors really had no hand in creating the world they’re writing in.

Another version of this is what I’ll call Opened Worlds; settings created by a single author that other authors have written about. The authors are (or should be) well known: Andre Norton, Marion Zimmer Bradley, Mercedes Lackey, and Isaac Asimov. The settings may well be as well known: Witch World, Darkover, Valdemar, and Robot City (the Robot/Forerunner universe created by Asimov).

In most cases, the genesis of the amateur fiction set in these four worlds was in the category of fan fiction. It began to be more than that when it started using the world but not the characters – in other words, assimilating the setting and fitting new characters into it, rather than just penning new adventures for someone else’s characters. It is to the credit of the authors that they decided to nurture some of that talent by publishing them professionally.

There are more series that fit this category: while researching for this white paper, I found that Dr Pournelle’s CoDominium Universe was opened as well.

Shared Worlds

In 1978, on the Thursday before Boskone (a science fiction convention once held in Boston), three authors were enjoying a little quiet time together before the convention. They were Robert Asprin, Gordon Dickson, and Lynn Abbey. In the course of conversation, Robert voiced a pet-peeve of his: the requirement to reinvent the universe from scratch whenever writing a new heroic fantasy novel. He mentioned that he had this idea to write a collection of fantasy stories with an array of central characters, all peripherally aware of each others’ existence as their paths crossed. Unfortunately, he just didn’t have the time to actually write the stories.

One thing led to another, and the possibility of engaging other authors to write the stories came up. Over the course of the convention, several other established authors joined the project and Ace had proposed publishing it. Robert ended up coordinating the project, managing to round up all of the rest of the authors, coordinate their submissions, put together rough guidelines of the setting, commission maps, and submit a final manuscript a bit more than a year later despite all manner of setbacks, ending up with several surprise submissions and a promise of a second volume even before the first was in print.

That little manuscript was the beginning of something near and dear to all of our hearts, since the book called “Thieves’ World” contained the results of the very first actual collaborative shared world project. The authors communicated via telephone and paper mail, and produced their manuscripts on typewriters, but then again, they had an incentive to suffer these handicaps: they got paid. They continued to get paid through twelve volumes of the original anthology, a surprising number of novels, and a single (so far) volume of a “next generation” anthology. Oh yes, and then there were all off the other projects that their example seeded, including our own, the Dargon Project.

I have read at least one book in six of the following eight shared world project series, buying one especially for this paper. I will compare the ones I’ve read based on objective, as well as subjective. I hope that we can learn something from our professionally published companions and perhaps apply some of that knowledge to make Dargon better.

Thieves’ World

Began: 1979’s Thieves’ World, edited by Robert Asprin.

Setting: Sanctuary, a city on the southern edge of the Rankan Empire.

Kingdom/Continental Map: From book one.

City Map: From book one.

Extent: 12 original anthologies, about 10 novels, 1 next generation anthology

Overview: Sanctuary is a city that is far from the center of the empire and the intrigues of its throne. It is so far from anyone's mind in the empire that it gets invaded and taken over by the not-quite-human Beysib without much of a problem or reaction.

The city seems to collect ne'er-do-wells and other dregs of society, and some refer to it as the arm-pit (or another, less savory portion of the anatomy) of the empire. It has a port, several different races/nations of inhabitants, and manages to support several underworld networks and plenty of gangs, not to mention two or three separate peace-keeping forces, none of which do a very good job.

Magic is a huge force in Sanctuary, from street wizards to rather over-powered necromancers and vampiresses. Gods walk the streets and talk directly to the characters, who usually have no real problem with this interaction. Along the way, a little authorial one-upsmanship took over the plot, but things smoothed out eventually.

Reviewed: TW #9, Blood Ties, published 1986. Authors: Lynn Abbey, Robert Asprin, Diana Paxson, Janet and Chris Morris, Robin Bailey, CJ Cherryh, Diane Duane, Andrew and Jodie Offutt.

A dramatis personae starts things off by delineating all of the characters that have ever been in Sanctuary. Next, an introduction gives a little recap combined with some plot movement in the guise of two characters conversing.

The first story, Lady of Fire, is a self-contained story concerning a god-called plague begun as revenge and ended by more god-called intercession. The out-of-season plague is then utterly ignored in the rest of the stories. The next story, Sanctuary is for Lovers (by the power-player Janet Morris and her husband), tries to set the scrambled situation in Sanctuary back in order by enforcing a temporary truce between all of the factions to forestall empire intervention in the city. Lovers Who Slay Together teaches Chenaya some lessons as she works her own schemes within the truce the previous story began. In the Still of the Night tries to pick up the pieces of the necromancer/vampire conflict, throws another monkey wrench into the truce situation, and dumps Chenaya into the bay for no reason whatsoever.

In No Glad in Gladiator, Chenaya gets told the facts of life and gladiators (she trains them) by a former slave and gladiator. In The Tie That Binds, a god's triune avatars try to get back into the godrealm and are killed before their spell can succeed (a damn pointless story by my way of thinking by an excellent author, Diane Duane). Sanctuary Nocturne has some guardsmen attend a pregnancy with complications and deliver the motherless child to the woman from the first story (whose child had been killed by the riots in the previous book). And finally, Spellmaster brings a new character to Sanctuary – a man who can do only white magic, curing afflictions at a price.

Overall: Thieves' World is the longest-lived and seminal shared world project in existence (it wouldn't be beating us without the "next generation" novel and anthology). It had its problems – not nearly enough inter-author negotiations which resulted in certain authors' plotlines by necessity taking over everyone else's plots, for one – but it did have lasting power. The lack of success of the "next generation" anthology – a second volume was in the works, but its publication has been postponed – may mean that shared world anthologies are no longer commercially viable. Fortunately, the Dargon Project doesn't have to worry about that silly little qualifier, "commercially".

Website: <http://www.geocities.com/jillari1/menu.htm>

Merovingen Nights

Began: 1985's Angel with a Sword, a novel by CJ Cherryh.

Setting: Merovingen, a self-governing city built on islands in a river delta, divided by canals.

Kingdom/Continental Map: Eventually (book 5 has a set of world maps that show all continents as well as ocean currents).

City Map: From book one.

Extent: Eight books – one novel and seven anthologies.

Overview: Merovingen is a city of classes. The lowest class live directly on the canals, running boats and trying to make a living any way they can. The middle class is mostly made up of merchants and those who support them. The upper class runs the city and consists of the rulers themselves, several large families who own entire islands, and the clergy.

The history of the world is interesting – the inhabitants are descendants of spacefaring Terrans who colonized the world but who were then attacked by the alien Sharrh and nearly wiped out. The prevailing wisdom is that it was their technology that drew the Sharrh's attention, and they have subsequently suppressed use of all technology as well as technological research.

There are several religions in Merovingen. The main power in the city is the Revenantist church, who preach a karmic religion that regulates how people relate to each other – favors owed become karmic debt if not paid off, and this debt can be carried from life to life until it is discharged. The Adventist religion preaches a return to technology in careful stages; they are not welcome in Merovingen. The Sword of God is a terroristic branch of the Adventist church; there is a contingent of the Sword in the city trying to gain power. And there is another covert group of agitators in the city, the Janeists, who are trying to bring change to the city in a grass-roots manor, changing things for the better by teaching people better ways to do things and to behave.

Politically, the major families of the city all control various industries. The ruling family, the Kalugins, are all playing the other families against each other as the children try to build factions and gain power to take control when their father finally passes away.

There is no magic in Merovingen (that I've seen yet), and there are the remnants of technologies in the form of firearms and gasoline engines for the canal boats. The general tech level is higher than medieval, but far lower than the gas engines might suggest. The stories are primarily political, with a little action thrown in here and there.

Some of you reading this might remember a review I did of the series quite a few years ago (the messages are probably still in the logs). That review complained of the lack of magic and the lack of action. I suppose that I have matured since, because I find the writing magnificent today, both the structure and the plot. This book proves that you can put together a fine shared world anthology without the standard trappings of the sword and sorcery genre.

Reviewed: MW #5, Divine Right, from 1989. Authors: CJ Cherryh, Leslie Fish, Roberta Rogow, Bradley Sinor, Janet Morris, Lynn Abbey, Mercedes Lackey, Nancy Asire, and Chris Morris.

This book, like several previous volumes, is “braided” – in other words, though each author's story was written as a whole entity, the editor (Cherryh) has broken them up and presented them in roughly chronological order. The whole is very coherent, almost like a novel rather than a collection of short stories, and this is a lesson I would like our project to pay attention to – it is an effective presentation method and storytelling tool.

The overall theme of this volume is two-fold. First, there is an Adventist plot, helped along by the Sword of God in the employ of Carl Fon from neighboring Nev Hettek (a country that Fon took over by revolution, and which is not as technophobic as Merovingen), to gain a huge foothold in the city by forcing a karmic debt on a large segment of the population by providing fast, quiet, cheap-to-run engines for cheap or on credit. One of the reasons that this is a good time for this plan is that a Janist plot to clean up the water in the canals with a plant has caused a bit of a problem – the plant is so hardy that it is growing like a weed and clogging the canals. The weed also fouls propellers (the new engines are jet-pulse), and when it rots it smells really bad. On the up side, it can be fermented to provide essentially free fuel for either type of engine.

So, one set of stories detail the Adventist plot, bringing an agent from Nev Hettek into the city to help deliver the baby of the daughter of a powerful family who has been addicted to deathangel, a narcotic that also enables past-life regression. The agent gives up her baby to retain the hold the Adventists have on the woman in the form of her husband (the woman's child was dead in the womb from the deathangel), but finds her commitment to the cause sorely tested by this deed she is asked to do. The engine shop is set up, but the karmic debt plot is eventually foiled.

The problems with the water-cleaning weed provide the subject for other stories, from the clogging props to the stench of cleared weed, to the properties of the fermented plant and the problems that causes (the family that controls production of gasoline isn't terribly happy about a free replacement for their product). Janeist activists in the city, posing as roving bards, further their sect's plans in other subtle ways, one of which involves getting invited into the highest circles as entertainers to spread their subversive lyrics to the upper class.

Another subplot involves the youngest of the Kalugin children, heretofore ignored and ridiculed as an idiot, finding his place in the plans of one of the less powerful families. Yet another thread involves dealing deathangel and the dangers both the drug and the dealing of it bring.

Overall: My more recent reviews of this series, when I picked up reading it again maybe a year ago, have been much more glowing. I really appreciate the approach to the shared world genre, and to the construction of the stories. They interweave without necessarily all using the same characters (like a certain inter-woven TW volume did), and the story being told has all kinds of different levels, as well as consequences that go beyond the immediate story. I don't know whether CJ has plotted out how everything is supposed to go from beginning to end and is just letting her authors fill things in, or whether everyone is contributing to the direction of the series. I've not yet read the last two anthologies in the series, leaving me

to wonder whether the threads being woven will end up forming their tapestry. I'm looking forward to acquiring those volumes and finding out.

Website: <http://www.nmt.edu/~shipman/reading/merovin.html>

Magic in Ithkar

Began: 1985's Magic in Ithkar, edited by Robert Adams and Andre Norton.

Setting: Ithkar, a city based around a temple to the Three Lordly Ones.

Kingdom/Continental Map: Not in book one.

City Map: From book one, not greatly detailed and showing surrounding area.

Extent: four anthologies.

Overview: The Ithkar stories are set at an annual fair held at the temple on the anniversary of the leaving of the Three Lordly Ones (alien visitors). A prologue gives a history of the temple and the surrounding area, including the growth of the fair from a one-day celebration to a multi-week extravaganza. While the map is more about the surrounding area, there is a well-detailed description of the setup of the fair, with, for example, details of the sections devoted to specific kinds of wares. Essentially, everyone who comes to Ithkar is an outsider, leaving the authors with an amazingly free hand as to their characters.

Ithkar is a port city, but it is a port on a river, not on an ocean. Still, it is not the port that brings the strangers, but the fair itself.

Reviewed: MI #1, Magic in Ithkar, from 1985. Authors: Robert Adams, Lin Carter, CJ Cherryh, Jo Clayton, Morgan Llywellyn, Patricia Mathews, Ardath Mayhar, Andre Norton, Judith Sampson, Roger Schlobin, JW Schutz, Susan Shwartz, Nancy Springer, and Elisabeth Waters.

The stories in this collection have next to nothing in common, only their setting unifying them. They also vary wildly in style, from the unique formality of Andre Norton, to the classical overtones of Lin Carter, from the exuberance of Jo Clayton to the solid storytelling of Elisabeth Waters. The setting itself is not uniformly presented either, with the authors each giving their own twist to the information presented in the prologue. The evil cult that the prologue indicates is growing in the town is by turns just a minor presence and an all-encompassing corrupting influence. The priests of the Three Lordly Ones are sometimes ciphers and sometimes all-powerful overseers who have access to alien technology to help them keep order (and if they were that powerful, how could this evil cult have gained such dominance?). This is more of a first try than any of the other first tries I've read and it shows a lack of something fundamental which I suspect is author interaction.

Overall: At one time, my two favorite shared world projects were Ithkar and Liavek (see below). I was sure that Ithkar was the epitome of the genre! Rereading this has really tarnished the series' reputation, though I'm sure that the other three books would bring it back up in my estimation (I know that at least one book really does make you feel like you're reading stories that all happen at a single faire, with events of one story referred to in another, etc.).

Website: <http://phantasma.onza.net/biblio/review/eng/ithkar.html>

Liavek

Began: 1985's Liavek, edited by Will Shetterly and Emma Bull.

Setting: Liavek, city of luck, a large, self-governed port city south of the Empire of Tichen.

Kingdom/Continental Map: From book one.

City Map: From book one.

Extent: At least five books, through to 1990.

Overview: Liavek is a rich, well-detailed setting with an amazingly unique hook: magic in the setting is a function of one's luck which manifests on one's birthday and never again during the year unless the person spends their birth hours (the time from beginning of labor to birth) trying to invest their luck in an object. If they are successful, they can wield that luck like magic; if they are not, they die. Some women take steps to lengthen their labor to give their children a better chance at harnessing their luck if they so choose.

Liavek is a southern city with something of an air of Cairo, with bazaars and hot summers and the like. It is a port town, so strangers are common. All manner of goods are available there. It is a prosperous city with its share of wealthy residents and its share of the dirt poor. The large size of the city makes for a great deal of diversity among its residents as well.

Reviewed: L #1, Liavek, published in 1985. Authors: Emma Bull, Gene Wolfe, Patricia Wrede, Nancy Kress, Steven Brust, Jane Yolen, Kara Dalkey, Pamela Dean, Megan Lindholm, Will Shetterly, and

Barry Longyear.

The first story, *Badu's Luck*, introduces us to the entire concept of personal luck, giving us the major pertinent details as well as introducing us to a shopkeeper named Snake as well as putting a nobleman named Koseth in her debt. The next story, *the Green Rabbit* from S'Rian, introduces the conquered preceding culture of S'Rian and an artifact of luck that once belonged to them. Then we learn about Granny Carry, a guardian of the S'Rian, and The Magician, a city caretaker, who foil a plot against one of the S'Rian gods. The next story details one woman's rejection of the concept of birth luck, and the limits of what can be a birth luck focus. We meet Count Dashif in *An Act of Contrition* who shoots a camel who spit on him, and then goes on to engineer an assassination with the help of the Magician and Snake, though Snake wasn't in on the plot and gives the count two scars for being so used.

The Inn of the Demon Camel is a fanciful tale told by a storyteller. *The Hands of the Artist* brings justice for someone with talent. *The Green Cat* gives a woman seeking a purpose in life that very purpose in an unexpected way with the help of a suicide cult and The Magician. In *A Coincidence of Birth*, a woman seeks help learning her birth hour from a magician who has lost his focus; Snake finds the focus and sends it, as another repayment, to Count Dashif, and the girl is told to steal it back and as she tries, she learns of her birthtime by accident, the magician's focus is eaten by a chipmunk-avatar of Rikiki, and the Count learns of his daughter. In *Bound Things*, the history of The Magician is explored in full. And in *the Fortune Maker*, a fortune maker is made.

Overall: Liavek is fantastic, exactly how I remembered it. Count Dashif is a major force in the city, mean enough to kill a camel but fair enough to take a whipping he deserves. The count is used in several stories, each building on the last. That camel is mentioned several times just as an aside ("Did you hear that he shot a camel?"). Snake's mirror, mentioned in story one, plays a vital role in the story where the count gets whipped.

The setting is fantastic, with an appendix giving a concise overview of the city, its people, government, and religion. The limits of the luck power are set out in full, with a treatise in the appendixes – we only get to see that there is a downside to the birth-luck phenomenon in the last story. This series not only does it right, but it lived up to my memory of it. I only wish it had lasted longer!

Website:

Borderland

Began: 1986's *Borderland*, edited by Terri Windling and Mark Alan Arnold.

Setting: The *Borderland* series is primarily concerned with Bordertown, a city on the cusp between a returned faerie and some version of the current modern world. Kingdom/Continental Map: No.

City Map: No.

Extent: Three anthologies and three novels through to 1995.

Overview: The *Borderland* series is wholly grounded in the shared world genre, but it also incorporates the popular "present day elves" genre that people like Emma Bull and Charles de Lint write in. In *Bordertown*, the mundane and magical mix: elves and humans mingle more or less freely in the town; magic sometimes works, as does technology, with elements that mix the two being the most reliable. Music plays a large part in *Bordertown*, even when it is only a soundtrack, from electric folk to heavy metal. Rebellion is also a large element of the setting – rebelling teenagers wanting to be free of their parents, rebelling elven lordlings wanting to be free of their obligations, rebelling people wanting something different from what they have, drawn to the supposed freedom of the magical in-between place, *Bordertown*.

Reviewed: B #1, *Borderland*, published in 1986. Authors: Steven Boyett, Bellamy Bach, Charles de Lint, and Ellen Kushner.

The first story in the anthology, *Prodigy*, has next to nothing to do with the rest of the entire series, except that it contains elves and a borderland. It is set only six years after the return of faerie. It reads very much like a post-apocalyptic tale – somehow the return of the elven realm has disrupted everything in the area of the border. Society has broken down and is slowly being rebuilt as people learn to live in an area where magic works. The story is also heavily involved with music, which links it thematically with the rest of the series, but the other stories in this book and the following books are set in a much more stable world. *Prodigy* also takes up nearly half the book, which is very strange in that it has nothing to do with the rest of the series. Not that it isn't a good story ...

The next story, *Gray*, introduces a young woman with an interesting ability, the *Dancing Ferret*, a music club, and shows just how well the humans and elves don't mix. The third tale, *Stick*, introduces *Stick*, a do-gooder and loner, the *Horn Dance*, a biker gang that sings, a young woman looking for a purpose and place who finds both, and some more of the way that elves and humans don't mix in the form of inter-gang

violence. We also find that the Horn Dance is a little more than singing bikers. The last story, Charis, combines several classic folk ballads, a dance contest, and the kinds of tricks elves play on humans – not to mention how humans can hold their own against the elves sometimes.

Overall: Bordertown is really well done. The stories (except for the first) share their setting well and even without a map, you eventually get to know the various districts of Bordertown (Dragon Hill, SoHo, etc) and the establishments and people there. The overall aesthetic – punk-folk with magic and elves thrown in – has a lot of potential, and I can only wish that there were still more books being written about it.

Website: <http://www.endicott-studio.com/brdrInd1.html>

Wild Cards

Began: 1986's Wild Cards, edited by George RR Martin.

Setting: An Earth infected by an alien virus that mutates people, giving them powers, both good and bad.

Kingdom/Continental Map: No.

City Map: No.

Extent: Sixteen books, including a recent reissue campaign.

Overview: Wild Cards extends the shared world paradigm into comic book super-heroes, giving the entire concept a rational reason for happening. Superheroes are obviously popular (look at the recent spate of superhero movies), and so was this series. It just wasn't ever my bag.

Reviewed: The 2003 reprint of the 2001 reissue of Wild Cards, first published in 1986. Authors: Howard Waldrop, Roger Zelazny, Walter Jon Williams, Melinda Snodgrass, George RR Martin, Victor Milan, Lewis Shiner, Leanne Harper, Stephen Leigh, and John Miller.

The prologue tells the story of the alien who brought the virus to earth in the first place, while the first story tells us how it ended up being spread over New York City in 1949. The rest of the stories in the book detail various resultant mutations, some good, some bad, and the things that result from them. At first I didn't think any of the stories would refer to each other, but eventually they began to, with the Sleeper from the second story showing up here and there for example. The alien also figures in several stories.

One thing I didn't like about the book was that only a few stories were "happy ending" type tales. Usually, the super powers ended up being more trouble than they were worth, ruining more lives than they saved. It was nice that eventually the stories began to actually work out, but as a whole, it was pretty much of a downer. The other thing that bothered me was that the super heroes didn't manage to change anything – the McCarthy hearings, for example, changed from communist-chasing to Ace-chasing. I suppose that premise made things easier for bringing the stories into "present" (mid-80s) day, but didn't seem to be all that realistic, frankly.

Overall: I bought and read Wild Cards for this paper – I've not read any of the other books in the series. Frankly, reading book one has not gotten me out hunting down the other volumes.

Website: <http://www.gerogemartin.com/gallery.wc.html>

Heroes in Hell

Began: A 1986 book edited by Janet Morris.

Setting: Hell?

Kingdom/Continental Map: ?

City Map: ?

Extent: Eleven books in 3 years – seemingly more a matter of excess product than success of product.

Overview: ?

Reviewed: None

Overall: Heroes in Hell was a project begun by Janet Morris in 1986 along the lines of Thieves' World (i.e. shared world). I don't ever remember seeing a volume on the shelf, much less being tempted to buy it.

Website: http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/series/heroes_in_hell.htm

The Fleet

Began: In 1986.

Setting: Space?

Kingdom/Continental Map: ?
City Map: ?
Extent: ?
Overview: ?
Reviewed: None
Overall: Never heard of this one before researching this paper. Sorry.
Website:

Conclusion

There is no one way to do a shared world project. Granted, there are similarities between the above examples, but they don't guarantee success, any more than breaking from those similarities guarantee failure. Wild Cards, probably the most successful shared world project (in terms of output) has the entire Earth as a setting, though book one is mostly set in New York City, and it isn't historical fantasy either. The Fleet, from what I've glimpsed, is a space navy series, so it has a universe, or at least some part of a galaxy, as its setting.

Still, one of the major similarities that is obvious from the above is the focus: one port city (with Bordertown being a "port" between faerie and the human world). That limited focus enables a greater crossover of characters and situations – following the threads of characters and actions in Liavek really add to the enjoyment of the book as you can see plotlines develop from story to story. The way that Count Dashif uses Snake, and then takes his punishment for doing so, not only builds that character, but enables the action in A Coincidence of Birth to happen, as Snake takes further revenge on the count. And the way the slain camel is worked casually into subsequent stories is priceless, as well as firmly setting the stories in time. It isn't that you can't do the same thing with a wider setting, but it sure makes things harder.

There is another unifying characteristic of these settings: none of them are ordinary. Sanctuary is the pit to which all the dregs of the Empire drain; Merovingen is a tangled web of politics and religion; Ithkar is a holy fair that fills with strangers for two weeks a year; Liavek is a city filled with luck, the lucky and the unlucky; Bordertown is the mingling point of the mundane and the ethereal; and the NYC of Wild Cards is full of Aces and Jokers, and fundamentally altered by the alien virus. As for the two series I haven't read, well one is set in Hell – how unordinary is that? – and the other is almost certainly set during some kind of conflict (who would write a series about a peace-time space navy?). I know of no shared world anthology set in East Jebip, where everything is safe and normal and people lead ordinary lives. That's not to say that one cannot tell stories about normal people leading ordinary lives in an extraordinary city, of course ... it's just that no one has tried to do professionally what we've tried to do non-professionally. Perhaps there's a reason for that.

All but a few of the projects above have had at least a city map, more or less detailed, from the very beginning. The ones that didn't, like Borderland, still had a very well developed geography. The afterword of Thieves' World indicates that Robert Asprin knew from the moment that the idea started to get legs that they would need maps and for the obvious reason: if people are all writing about the same place, they need to be able to see the space they're writing about.

The Dargon Project began right about when the success of Thieves' World was finally proven in the beginning of so many similar projects. We are fundamentally similar to Thieves' World and its successors, and fundamentally different, chiefly in our publication method and amateur nature. I think we can still learn some valuable lessons from those who have gone before.