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Factors of Authenticity in Digital Artworks: An Exploration of the Proportion of Real-World Social Rules in Fictional World-Building

Zhihan Guo
School of Architecture and Design, Beijing Jiaotong University, Beijing 100044, China

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the design of fictional world-building in digital artworks and examines the role of real-world social rules within them, as well as their relationship with fictional rules. It analyzes the specific role of social rules from four aspects: character design, narrative, social relationships, and the creative process, with comparisons drawn from examples across different media. The study finds that social rules can connect various design elements and and contribute to a coherent world logic; there is not a fixed correct proportion between real-world rules and fictional rules, instead, the key lies in how they are organized in relation to each other.

Keywords

Digital Art; Fictional World; Social Rules; World-Building Design

Introduction

With the development of media technology, digital design works such as movies, animations, games, and interactive art have created a large number of fictional worlds that are different from the real world. These digital works build distinctive fictional settings through visual forms and narrative content, allowing audiences to enter imaginative worlds created by artists and designers. The audience often goes through a process from unfamiliarity to understanding when they encounter a digital artwork set in a fictional world. This is because they initially encountered a world that does not exist in reality. However, as the story unfolds, the audience gradually accept the its social structures, character relationships and ways of behaving, and start to consider these settings as reasonable. This kind of experience, which allows the audience to gradually accept and understand a fictional world, can be seen as a manifestation of the authenticity of the fictional world.

1. Real-World Rules in Fictional World-Building in Digital Artworks

1.1. The Manifestation of Authenticity in Fictional World-Building.

Authenticity in a fictional world does not mean that the work needs to completely replicate real society, but rather refers to the work having a relatively independent and internally consistent "world logic"[1], that allows audiences to understand how different systems operate and how they are connected to one another. Although a fictional world may alter certain rules of reality, the logic of character behavior and the development of events must still need to conform to the setting of the society in which they exist. A fictional society with a well-defined and consistent logic, even if the work has a highly distinctive visual style or a highly imaginative world, audiences can still perceive it as believable. Therefore, the authenticity of a fictional world-building is primarily reflected in the rationality of its internal logic: how characters are influenced by rules, how their actions drive events, and why there can be connections between different events.

In order to pursue authenticity, creators usually look for references from real society when designing fictional worlds. For example, a fictional city still needs to consider how goods are traded, how society is maintained and operated, and what common behavioral norms its characters follow. These come from the creator's experiences of reality, allowing the audience to use their existing knowledge to understand the fictional world in the work. However, works with different fictional settings still need to establish distinctive systems of rules according to their respective themes. Completely replicating the way reality operates would limit the creativity and imagination of the work. Creators can retain some rules that are familiar to audiences, modify them according to the needs of the work, and introduce new fictional rules.

1.2. Classification of Rules in the Real World and Their Application in Fictional World-Building.

From the perspective of the function of rules, this paper divides rules in the real world into three main categories: natural laws, ethical norms, and social rules. This classification is intended to facilitate the analysis of fictional world-building and does not imply that rules in real society can be divided into only these three types. Different types of rules play different roles in fictional worlds, and the extent to which creators modify them also varies.

Natural laws form the foundation of how the world operates, determining the basic rules of the environment and the ways life exists. In fictional world-building design, creators can create environments that differ from reality by changing natural conditions or redefining physical laws. For example, magical systems in fantasy works often alter the way energy is transferred and matter changes in the real world, allowing supernatural phenomena to operate according to stable rules. However, no matter how the nature laws are adjusted, creators still need to establish a corresponding logic for them. Ethical norms mainly influence how

characters judge the value of their actions. In fictional world-building, most works do not significantly alter the basic ethical understandings of real society. For instance, the standards used to distinguish good from evil in a work are usually still based on social experiences that humans have developed over a long period of time. Although different fictional world works may explore different values through their particular settings, ethical norms generally serve to connect the fictional world with audiences' understanding of reality.

In contrast, social rules are the most adjustable part of a fictional world and an important area for creators to express the creativity of their world-building. Social rules directly determine how an entire society is organized and maintained. In the process of world-building, creators can reconstruct social structures according to the background of the work, thereby altering the relationships between social individuals and establishing lifestyles that distinct from reality. Different types of rules serve different functions in world-building design. When designing a fictional world, creators need to select and adjust different rules based on the theme and expressive needs of the work, allowing the fictional world to maintain uniqueness while providing a reasonable basis for its operation. Among these, social rules generally offer greater design space and are better able to reflect the creator's conception of the fictional world.

1.3. The Relationship Between Real-World Rules and Fictional Rules.

In the process of fictional world-building, creators usually select and adjust rules from the real world according to the genre, theme, and expressive needs of the work. Some rules need to be retained to maintain audiences' understanding of the basic ways in which the world operates, while others can be modified to give the fictional world characteristics that distinguish it from reality. When a work does not explicitly explain certain aspects of its world, audiences often assume existing knowledge and rules from the real world[1]. Therefore, a fictional world does not need to reinterpret all social relationships and ways of operation. Essentially, world-building is also a process where creators select, adjust, and reorganize real-world experiences.

The "proportion" discussed in this paper refers to the relationship between real-world rules and fictional rules. including which real-world rules should be retained, which rules can be modified, and to what extent they can be modified. Different works may rely on real-world rules to different degrees when building their worlds, or may establish a more independent operating system by introducing additional fictional rules. Even when real-world rules are modified, creators can still use the social experiences familiar to the public as a foundation to recombine the rules and form new relationships within the fictional world. Discussing the proportion of real-world rules is, in fact, a discussion of how creators handle the relationship between real-world experience and fictional settings, which also

provides a foundation for further analyzing the role of social rules in fictional worlds.

2. The Functions and Effects of Social Rule Design in Fictional Worlds

After observing the ways different types of digital artworks construct their fictional worlds, I briefly summarize the main ways in which social rules affect fictional world-building as follows:

2.1. Identity Positioning and Behavioral Logic in Character Design.

Characters are the most direct medium through which audiences understand a fictional world. When audiences encounter an unfamiliar world, they often first learn about its ways of life, social relationships, and operating rules through its characters. What a character can or cannot do, whom they establish connections with, and what causes them to come into conflict can all reflect the basic rules of the society. In the real world, individuals take on different responsibilities and develop different behaviors according to their identity, occupation, and social relationships. The same applies to characters in fictional worlds. When designing a character, creators need to determine the social environment in which the character exists and then assign the character an appropriate identity according to the rules of the world. For example, a merchant in a free-trade society may be identified as a market operator; whereas in a society where resources are strictly controlled, the merchant's activities might be restricted by institutional regulations and resource distribution methods. Social rules primarily affect a character's position within the world, determining what social activities characters can participate in and what kinds of social relationships they can form with other characters.

Social rules influence how characters behave in specific situations. Characters do not exist as independent individuals within a fictional world; their behavior needs to remain consistent with the basic structures of that world, such as its social structure and cultural norms. The same behavior may have different meanings in different social environments and identities, and characters' responses to others and to their surroundings may also change accordingly. Creators can use these differences in behavior to reflect social status of character, establish a connection between character's behavior and identity. When audiences can put themselves in the character's position and understand their behavior from the perspective of their identity, the character becomes more fully developed and can naturally fit into the broader social environment, making the character more believable to audiences.

2.2. Causal Relationships and Conflict Formation in Narrative Development.

For digital art works set in fictional worlds, events in the story cannot exist entirely

independently of the world itself. The reasons why characters make certain choices and why events occur at particular times both need to be grounded in the existing world setting. Social rules can therefore serve as an important link between characters and events, connecting the story to the fictional world itself. As the story develops, when an event occurs, characters respond to it according to the existing social rules, and these responses may in turn become the cause of subsequent events. For example, when a character is unable to obtain the resources they need because of certain rules, they must seek alternative solutions, and this behavior may trigger new events. In this way, the plot can gradually emerge from the social environment in which the characters exist, and rules also become a method for the creator to organize the causal relationships within the story.

The constraints formed by rules can also become a source of conflict in the story. When a character's personal goals conflict with the rules of the world, the character must make a choice between their own needs and the existing rules. In addition, social rules can impose limitations on a character's choices, causing conflicts between their goals and further creating story conflicts.

Social rules can place characters' behavior, the development of events, and conflicts within a shared world context. As a result, events in the story can find their basis in characters' choices and the social environment, allowing the narrative to remain consistent with the fictional world and form a relatively stable causal logic.

2.3. Order Formation and Value Expression in Social Relationships.

When characters remain in a shared social environment over time, they tend to develop certain behavioral habits and patterns of relationships based on existing rules. Rules influence characters' habits and standards of judgment in this process. Once a certain behavior is generally accepted by society, it may gradually become a common practice; when certain behaviors that are rejected or restricted, people may also develop corresponding understandings of them. These commonly followed rules form the basis for social interactions between characters.

The formation of social order can further reflect the values recognized by a fictional society. How a society views certain behaviors often reveals what this world places greater importance on and which notions are acknowledged. Creators can integrate these value judgments into the world through relationships between characters, society's attitudes toward certain behaviors, and the ways different groups interact with each other. When audiences encounter these contents, they do not need direct textual explanations to gradually perceive the values of the world through the lives of the characters and social environment. Therefore, social rules not only maintain the basic order of a fictional society but also express the work's perspective on social relationships and values.

2.4. Process Planning and Creative Efficiency in World-Building.

From the perspective of the creative process, rules themselves can also serve as a basis for world-building. A complete fictional world usually includes multiple elements, such as characters, settings, stories, and social relationships, which continually intersect during the design process. Planning social rules in the early stages of worldbuilding design can help creators determine the fundamental direction of the entire world. Once the rules are established, the subsequent design of characters, settings, and stories can gradually develop based on them. Starting from the established rules, creators can use the established rules to evaluate new design elements and supplement them with corresponding settings according to the way the world operates. When rules serve as a clear basis for design, creators can make decisions more quickly when developing new settings. If a new setting conflicts with existing rules, it can be adjusted at an earlier stage, preventing the accumulation of problems that would require modifications later in the process. This reduces repetitive work and rework during the creative process, making the entire creation process more efficient and manageable.

Thus, social rules not only influence the characters, stories, and social relationships ultimately presented in a fictional world, but can also become part of the specific process of worldbuilding design. By planning rules at an early stage, creators can establish a consistent foundation for subsequent character, setting, and narrative design, while continuously evaluating and adjusting new content throughout the creative process. Social rules can thus develop from being part of the world setting itself into a design tool for organizing the fictional world.

3. Case Analysis and Creative Implications of Social Rule Design

3.1. Case Analysis of Social Rule Design in Works Across Different Media

Example 1. In the animated film Zootopia(Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2016), most of the social rules can find corresponding relationships in real-world society. Zootopia presents a modern city where different animal species live together, but its urban management and the relationships between social groups are relatively similar to those in real life. Differences in race, social groups, and identity in reality are transformed into species differences among different animals. The identity of being a rabbit affects how the protagonist Judy is perceived in society, as well as the circumstances she faces after joining the police force. At the same time, the relationships between different animal groups also constitute an important source of conflict in the story. Therefore, the characters' social identities and behavioral choices can be understood through real-world social experiences. The fictional setting changes the way these rules are represented, without completely alter audience's basic understanding of how society operates, allowing them to accept this world relatively quickly.

Example 2. Cyberpunk 2077(2020), developed by the Polish game company CD

PROJEKT RED, incorporates more fictional rules while retaining the basis of character identity. Cybernetic enhancement technology, megacorporations, gang organizations, and highly commercialized futuristic cities together constitute the social environment of Night City. These settings are clearly different from real society, but social relationships such as corporate competition, the gap between the rich and the poor, and class divisions can still be understood through real-world experience. While players need to become familiar with new technologies and social organizations, they do not need to relearn fundamental relationships such as how power operates or how resources are distributed. The fictional rules change the environment and social circumstances in which the characters exist and provide new conditions for story conflicts, while existing social relationships in reality continue to help players understand the relationships and interests between characters. In terms of character, narrative, and social relationships, real-world rules and fictional rules jointly shape how the world operates.

Example 3. The Star Wars series(first released by Lucasfilm in the United States in 1977) presents the reconstruction of social rules more thorough. The series establishes different organizations, such as the Galactic Republic, the Empire, and the Jedi Order, as well as concepts such as the Force, alien species, and various planets. Many of these elements have no direct counterpart in real world. These numerous fictional rules create a highly independent world system and distinctive world-building characteristics for Star Wars, At the same time, however, the increase in the number of rules also raises the cost for audiences to understanding the world. The conflicts in the story are often based on the relationships between different organizations, and characters' motivations need to be understood based on these new social structures. However, the fictional rule framework in its world-building requires a certain amount accumulation of information to gradually be established. For audiences unfamiliar with Star Wars, it can be difficult to understand the characters' situations and the reasons behind the development of events when the connections between these rules have not yet been established.

The three works discussed above all establish fictional societies that differ from reality, but there are obvious differences in the sources and number of rules. By comparing these works, it can be seen that fictional rules can increase the uniqueness of the world, but they may also raise the threshold for the audience to understand it. As new fictional societal rules are continuously added, the richness of the world and the difficulty of understanding it increase at the same time. Creators need to make different choices between real-world rules and fictional rules based on the theme, world setting, and audience's cost of comprehension.

3.2. Balance Between Rule Complexity and Audience Acceptance.

Audiences do not passively accept all the information about the world provided by a work. Instead, they actively fill in gaps based on existing information and develop an

overall understanding of the world through “extrapolation.”[1] Once a fictional world has established a stable internal logic, audiences can infer some content that is not explicitly explained based on their real-world experience or the fictional rules that have already been established. Therefore, the design of world rules does not need to explain every detail. Excessive rules by the creator may instead increase the audience's burden of understanding and memory. On the other hand, too few rules may leave the world without a clear basis for how it operates, making it difficult for character actions and plot developments to form a stable logic. Creators needs to find an appropriate balance between these two directions, allowing the world to maintain a certain degree of richness without creating difficulties for audiences in understanding it.

When determining this degree, the number of rules is not the only criterion. More importantly, it is the concentration extent of unfamiliar rules within the entire world that matters. The comparison of the cases discussed above shows that even when a work contains a large number of fictional rules, audiences can still use their real-world experience to understand new settings as long as some of these rules remain consistent with experiences that are familiar to the general public. In contrast, when a large number of unfamiliar rules are concentrated in the same world, the audience needs to establish multiple new systems of understanding at the same time, which increases the difficulty of comprehension.

The "proportion" between real-world rules and fictional rules is not a fixed ratio but is closer to a matter of degree in design. A work may retain many real-world rules or make substantial adjustments to them. The key is whether these changes can be connected through the existing logic of the world. For creators, an important consideration in world-building is how to use audiences’ existing real-world experience to establish connections with unfamiliar settings, and to what extent new rules are introduced into the world, in order to reduce the cognitive pressure caused by the concentration of unfamiliar information.

3.3. Practical Insights of Social Rules in Fictional World Design.

For digital art creation, rule design means that world-building should not focus only on visual forms and story content, but also on the social logic that supports the operation of these elements. Only when different design elements such as rules, characters, narrative, and visuals are interconnected can a fictional world develop from a collection of settings into a coherent whole with a complete internal logic. Social rules are therefore become a method for creators to organize and connect different aspects of the design.

Social rules provide creators with a method to handle real-life experiences and imaginative spaces. Creators do not have to create a completely unfamiliar world from scratch. Instead, they can extract existing rules and relationships from real society and then modify, reorganize, or even reverse them according to the theme of

the work. From this perspective, the design of rules in a fictional world can be understood as a reorganization of real-world social experiences. Visuals, characters, and narratives are concrete expressions of the world, while social rules determine the ways how these elements can exist. For digital art creators, actively considering "what can be retained from reality, what can be changed, and what kinds of social relationships these changes may create" may be more effective in creating a distinctive fictional world than simply adding more world-building settings.

In summary, the authenticity of a fictional world depends on whether the work can establish a stable and understandable operational logic. When character identities, narrative development, and social relationships are all built upon mutually corresponding rules, these otherwise independent design elements can form a unified world logic.This logic comes both from real-world experience and from the creator's reorganization of real-world rules.At the same time, there is no fixed proportion between real-world rules and fictional rules. At the same time, there is no fixed proportion between real-world rules and fictional rules. Creators need to determine which rules are worth changing and to what extent they should be changed. By establishing connections between real-world experience and fictional settings, rules can both support the operation of the world and serve the thematic expression of the work.

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