Is the Multiverse Where Originality Goes to Die?

The concept helps entertainment companies like Marvel Studios recycle old characters—but it can also unlock new kinds of storytelling.

By Stephanie Burt October 31, 2022

Film studios plan to spend billions of dollars on more multiverse entertainment.Illustration by Philip Lindeman

In 1941, Jorge Luis Borges published "The Garden of Forking Paths," a short story in which a spy travels to the home of an English scholar. There they discuss an odd book by the spy's great-grandfather, Ts'ui Pên. Rather than follow a single plot, the book aims to explore countless story lines. "In all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives he chooses one and eliminates the others," the scholar says. "In the fiction of the almost inextricable Ts'ui Pên he chooses—simultaneously—all of them. *He creates*, in this way, diverse futures, diverse times which themselves also proliferate and fork."

Borges devoted most of his story to explaining the complicated idea that many different realities can coexist in a mazelike web of time lines. "This network of times which approached one another, forked, broke off, or were unaware of one another for centuries, embraces *all* possibilities of time," the scholar goes on. "We do not exist in the majority of these times; in some you exist, and not I; in others I, and not you; in others, both of us." The story invites the reader to imagine what else, other than the world we know, might be possible. But the spy ultimately wonders whether, if everything that can

happen does happen, any choice is really worth making.

If Borges were alive today, he could call his garden a multiverse and be done with it. An idea that seemed fantastical in the forties—that our universe is one of many, and that these parallel worlds might share the same past or the same characters—now seems to be everywhere. The multiverse has spawned countless comics, empowered science-fiction writers like Charles Stross and N. K. Jemisin, and inspired television shows as divergent as "Adventure Time," "Rick and Morty," and "Star Trek: Discovery." It has started to shape our language: instead of saying that the rise of the multiverse was never inevitable, I can tell you that there's a world in which it never became popular. In our world, it's very popular: the concept has given rise to billion-dollar movies associated with Marvel Studios, from "Avengers: Endgame" (2019) to "Spider-Man: No Way Home" (2021).

All these multiverses might add up to nothing good. If all potential endings come to pass, what are the consequences of anything? What matters? Joe Russo, the co-director of "Endgame," has warned that multiverse movies amount to "a money printer" that studios will never turn off; the latest one from Marvel, "Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness," a sloppily plotted heap of special effects notable for its horror tropes, cameos, and self-aware dialogue, has earned nearly a billion dollars at the box office. This year, Marvel Studios announced the launch of "The Multiverse Saga," a tranche of movies and TV shows that features sequels and trequels, along with the fifth and sixth installments of the "Avengers" series. ("Endgame," it turns out, was not the end of the game.) Warner Bros. has released MultiVersus, a video game in which Batman can fight Bugs Bunny, and Velma, from "Scooby-Doo," can fight Arya Stark, from "Game of Thrones." Even A24, a critically admired independent film studio, now counts a multiverse movie, "Everything Everywhere All at Once" (2022), as its most profitable film.

There's a reason that studios plan to spend billions of dollars—more than the economic output of some countries—to mass-produce more of the multiverse: tens of millions of people will spend time and money consuming it. Is the rise of the multiverse the death of originality? Did our culture take the wrong forking path? Or has the multiverse unlocked a kind of storytelling—familiar but flexible, entrancing but evolving—that we genuinely need?

The first time that the multiverse had a moment, Franklin D. Roosevelt was President and Marvel Comics did not yet exist. Science-fiction writers of the nineteen-thirties didn't have a unifying name for the many worlds they were exploring, but the concept helped them to think about why we tell stories and what we can learn from imagined worlds. In Murray Leinster's short story "Sidewise in Time" (1934), chronological anomalies transport dinosaurs, Russian colonists, and Confederate soldiers from alternate time lines into the present day. A math instructor hopes that his modern knowledge will make him all-powerful, but his students refuse to follow him, as their experience with Roman legions has put them off dictatorships. The British writer Olaf Stapledon, whom Borges admired, wrote in his novel "Star Maker" (1937) about a cosmos—one of many—with "strange forms of time": "Whenever a creature was faced with several possible courses of action, it took them all, thereby creating many distinct temporal dimensions and distinct histories." The multiverse, for Stapledon, was a mind-expanding place of grandeur and complexity.

Such storytellers could draw on the work of scholars and scientists. In the sixteenth century, the Florentine thinker Giordano Bruno posited an infinite universe populated with many worlds; he was later burned at the stake. Four hundred years on, Erwin Schrödinger (of the cat in a box which is both dead and alive) and Werner Heisenberg (of the uncertainty principle), among others, tried to explain their findings about quantum physics. Atoms and elementary particles, Heisenberg wrote, "form a world of potentialities or

possibilities rather than of things or facts." And according to what is known as the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics, proposed by Hugh Everett III in 1957, to observe the universe is to create multiple copies of it. In other words, everything that can happen does happen—in some reality. You may have ordered the chicken, but somewhere you ordered tofu, or grilled stegosaurus; a world exists in which Hillary, and the Mets, and your kid's softball team won.

Some writers used the multiverse to explore alternate histories in which humanity took a wrong turn. Philip K. Dick's novel "The Man in the High Castle" (1962)—celebrated by sci-fi fans at the time, and more recently a TV series from Amazon Prime—begins with a time line on which the Axis has defeated the Allies. One of Dick's point-of-view characters, Juliana, travels to Wyoming to visit the reclusive author of "The Grasshopper Lies Heavy," a banned and scandalous novel in which the Allies won the war. The book, Juliana tells its author, "showed that there's a way out"—another world, and therefore "nothing to want or hate or avoid" in this one. But the author did not write the novel alone; he relied on communications received via the I Ching. Confronted with the question of who won the Second World War, he answers sadly, "I'm not sure of anything."

The term "multiverse" seems to have assumed its modern meaning in the sixties. (William James used it much earlier, but in a different way.) The hero of "The Sundered Worlds," by the British fantasy novelist and editor Michael Moorcock, describes "the theory of the 'multi-verse,' the multi-dimensional universe containing dozens of different universes." He hopes to move between them with something called the Shifter. This multiverse serves to expand the scope and the stakes of a space opera; Moorcock later used the concept as a metaphysical device and a way to unify his novels. Many of his books feature some version of an "Eternal Champion" who is doomed to take

on world-saving quests. On occasion, these Champions cross universe boundaries, hang out together, and work toward a common goal.

Moorcock's multiverse of Eternal Champions echoes Joseph Campbell's "hero with a thousand faces"—a culture-bearer, like Aeneas or Luke Skywalker, whose journey reshapes his society. But Moorcock's most famous Champion, Elric of Melniboné, created in 1961, feels like a sendup of Campbell's macho archetype. Elric, a pale, last-of-his-line aristocrat whose true love is his cousin, is weakened and hollowed out by his epochal role; he chooses heroism only reluctantly, and instead allows his murderous sword to guide him. Nor does he take the multiverse very seriously. "Certain ancient sorcerers of Melniboné proposed that an infinite number of worlds coexist with our own," he muses. "Indeed, my dreams, of late, have hinted as much! . . . But I cannot afford to believe such things." As in "The Garden of Forking Paths," multiversal thinking can result in jadedness or even cynicism. The more you see what all heroic journeys share, the less you care about each one.

Other novelists treated alternate Earths and time lines as social and political experiments. Joanna Russ's 1975 novel, "The Female Man," now a cornerstone of feminist science fiction, follows four versions of the same person: present-day Joanna; Jeannine, in a stifling, decades-long Great Depression; confident Janet, from the all-women planet Whileaway; and dangerous Jael, from a militarized Earth split into Manlanders and Womanlanders. Will Joanna adopt Jael's brand of violence in order to build the future that Janet enjoys? The book uses the multiverse to frame the dilemma. "Every choice begets at least two worlds of possibility," it explains, "or very likely many more."

Comic-book writers invoked the multiverse and its branching time streams for more practical reasons. They needed to renew old characters, and to

reconcile conflicting, previously published adventures. In the forties, DC Comics portrayed the Flash (Jay Garrick, chemistry student) in a wide, shallow hat with tiny wings. But the Flash of the fifties (Barry Allen, forensic scientist) wore a red mask. "Flash of Two Worlds!" (1961), written by Gardner Fox, with art by Carmine Infantino and Joe Giella, asks, "How many Flashes are there? . . . Is Barry Allen the real Flash? Or is Jay Garrick?" Barry's superfast vibrations transport him to another Earth, where he recognizes Jay—not as a real superhero but as "a fictional character appearing in a magazine called Flash Comics!" Earth-One and Earth-Two "vibrate differently—which keeps them apart," but super-vibrators like the Flash can link them. (Delightfully, DC Comics' vibration-based multiverse prefigures physicists' superstring theory, which proposes that the universe really does comprise vibrating strings.)

Multiversal superhero comics launched new kinds of plots: heroes could now team up across worlds, like rock-and-roll supergroups, and so could bad guys. But a multiverse can get so crowded with alternate realities that each one starts to lose its significance. A 1964 Justice League comic introduced Earth-3, "where every super-being is a criminal," and DC Comics eventually manufactured dozens of alternate Earths. Then, in 1985, editors at DC decided to simplify. "Crisis on Infinite Earths," written and drawn by the industry-leading team of Marv Wolfman and George Pérez, visited oblivion on Earth after Earth until just one, with one Superman, remained. Overlong, with ultra-high stakes on every page, "Crisis on Infinite Earths" makes tough reading today, though the line art by Pérez (who died in 2022) holds up beautifully. In one array of parallel panels, heroes watch entire worlds fade into the emptiness of the white page. The single remaining Earth, for a while, evokes Leinster's "Sidewise in Time": the Empire State Building shares a city with dinosaurs, biplanes, and "Jetsons"-style futurism, and we witness "the past and future merging with the present, creating impossible anomalies."

Later in the story, heroes try to traverse the multiverse by running on the Flash's "cosmic treadmill."

Marvel Comics began to assemble its own alternate Earths in the seventies, and they have piled up over the years: Earth-616, Earth-811, Earth-1191. DC, for its part, orchestrated "Crisis" after "Crisis"—"Zero Hour: Crisis in Time!," "Infinite Crisis," "Final Crisis," and so on—merging, destroying, and remaking its multiverses again and again to accommodate new slates of characters, some of them acquired from other publishers. Black Adam, an ancient Egyptian with magical powers and the antihero in the 2022 story line, "Dark Crisis on Infinite Earths," entered DC Comics as a resident of Earth-S, along with Billy Batson, a.k.a. Captain Marvel or Shazam, who originally appeared in Fawcett comics. Shazam got his own big-budget film in 2019. In October, Black Adam got one, too, starring Dwayne (the Rock) Johnson.

The multiverse first appeared in fiction as a plot device or a philosophical notion that could power interesting stories. But in the second half of the twentieth century multiplexes multiplied, superhero films found commercial success, and franchises that returned to popular heroes, such as James Bond or Luke Skywalker, dominated the box office. Against this backdrop, the multiverse evolved from a storytelling tool to a business tactic, one of several that enable vast entertainment companies to recycle beloved characters. The multiverse may be one of the reasons that the critic and writer Elizabeth Sandifer decries "the Marvelization of all things." Francis Ford Coppola has made a similar complaint: "A Marvel picture is one prototype movie that is made over and over and over and over and over again to look different." According to Martin Scorsese, these big-budget movies displace real works of art: "In many places around this country and around the world, franchise films are now your primary choice if you want to see something on the big screen."

It's true that the age of corporate intellectual property has swallowed Hollywood. Just a handful of companies—Disney (which owns Marvel Entertainment and Lucasfilm), Warner Bros. Discovery (which owns DC Films), Sony Pictures, Paramount Global—now hold the rights to the fictional people who stride across our screens. Watching their pulse-pounding prequels and sequels can itself feel like running on a cosmic treadmill: because corporate owners tend to resist change, heroes often end up right where they started (and we get a "new" Spider-Man movie every few years). Multiverses seem to make it easier for big companies to create new-yet-old heroes. No wonder cinephiles have had enough.

And yet this explanation for multiverse mania—that it's a cynical ploy to squeeze money out of moviegoers—does not fit all the facts. Marvel hits such as "Iron Man" were blockbusters well before the studio embraced the alternate time lines and multiple universes found in the comics. And superhero fans, especially diehards who have explored multiverses for decades, love to see creators riff and reimagine. Marvel Comics readers are proud, not annoyed, that "every little story is part of the big one," as Douglas Wolk writes in "All of the Marvels," his book-length history of the comics and their heroes. In those tales, alternate Earths and time lines often allow familiar characters to step off the metaphorical treadmill, to do big things that they could not otherwise do. Prestigious and straight-arrow heroes die, or turn evil, or come out as gay; in a 1994 issue of Marvel's "What If?," Jean Grey, from the X-Men, burns our solar system to ash. In one 2003 issue of the universe-hopping series "Exiles," Tony Stark becomes a totalitarian technocrat until the Fantastic Four's Sue Storm takes him down; in another, Spider-Man's girlfriend Mary Jane dates the woman of her dreams. These characters aren't the "real" Jean Grey or Tony Stark or Mary Jane, so audiences and advertisers need not worry that their favorite characters will never be the same.

Some comics even seem self-aware about their own status as intellectual property. In "Secret Wars," the ambitious 2015-16 series from Marvel Comics, by Jonathan Hickman and Esad Ribić, a mysterious catastrophe obliterates the cosmos. The forward-thinking Doctor Strange and the masked tyrant Doctor Doom create, "from the shattered remnants of broken Earths," a planet to hold the surviving Marvel heroes. They then carve up the planet into genres, much as a corporate manager would carve up an entertainment company: mythic warriors inhabit Doomgard, while Howard the Duck lives in New Quack City. Doom thinks the planet belongs to him, but we know that he in turn belongs to God Disney.

To Coppola and Scorsese, multiversal blockbusters may represent the dark time line of popular culture. But, at their best, these works can still amaze and inspire. When "Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse" came out, in 2018, many film critics judged it a cinematic achievement and the best superhero movie to date. It owed its success not to any brand-new character but to how the movie helped us to see new sides of a familiar one. The film illustrated, especially for young people, that there are multiple ways to see yourself in a hero, even if you don't look much like the white male Peter Parker with whom Spidey began. "Today, there is a Spider-Man for every kid," the comics critic Zachary Jenkins wrote. "It's not just about representation," he went on, but "about giving kids options to express themselves." When so much of our culture is sequels and prequels and reboots, we might need multiverses all the more, so that we can imagine what else is possible.

"Maybe try turning the mug around so its inspirational message faces you?"

Cartoon by Sophie Lucido Johnson and Sammi Skolmoski

Why do we live in a multiversal moment? One theory holds that the ascent of the multiverse matches our need to keep up many identities. We may feel like different people as we slide from Instagram to Slack to the family group chat; we code-switch as we

move between work and home and parent-teacher conferences. Victorians might have been wowed by the two-faced Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, this theory goes, but nowadays we require something stronger—hence a TV show like "Loki," whose titular antihero has numerous manifestations, including a man, a woman, a child, an alligator, and a President. Every time I try to answer questions from both my kids at the same time, without burning their cinnamon toast or showing up late to a Zoom call with my students, I think there must be something to this hypothesis.

But it still doesn't explain why the English singer-songwriter Grace Petrie would invoke the multiverse in her heart-crushing song "Done Deal," about an affair: "I know that out there somewhere in a fairer universe, we were a done deal, darling, and you met me first." Nor does it explain why political commentators, during the Trump Presidency, tweeted longingly about Earth 2, where Hillary Clinton became President. When the poet Stella Wong writes, in her thoughtful collection "Spooks" (2022), that she was "taken as an only child / with multiverses. There's nothing // worse than the sense of being alone," she does not seem to be writing about the fragmentation of our postmodern identities. Neither does the hip-hop duo Atmosphere in their new single "Sculpting with Fire," with its melancholy refrain, "So many other realities exist simultaneously." These everyday multiverses contemplate comforting but fragile alternatives to our one and only Earth.

Multiversal stories, told well, can reveal not only what might have been but what could still be. In "Everything Everywhere All at Once," an exhausted Chinese laundromat owner named Evelyn, played with verve by Michelle Yeoh, discovers very suddenly that her reality is one of many. Her husband, Waymond, tells her to walk into a supply closet, then claps a Bluetooth headset onto her; he has come, we learn, from another time line. The headset lets Evelyn tap into the talents of her alternate selves—a spy, a martial artist, a chef. "Every tiny decision creates another branching

universe," Waymond-from-another-time-line later tells her.

On Evelyn's too-real time line, her daughter, Joy, is rebellious, sullen, and—to the dismay of Evelyn's father—gay. But somewhere else in the multiverse her daughter has become a villain determined to scramble all reality. "Nothing matters," Joy's alter ego says, echoing the Borgesian spy for whom choices lose their meaning. "Everything we do gets washed away in a sea of every other possibility." The symbol of Joy's nihilism is an everything bagel, shaped like a zero, or like the iris of an eye. Evelyn starts out quietly despising—or, at best, reluctantly resigning herself to—the laundromat, the family, and the world she knows. But in order to save the multiverse she has to accept herself and her kid.

In a different world, "Everything Everywhere," with its many moments of absurdist comedy, might feel like a parody of Marvel movies. Yet critics praised it, rightly, for originality. The director-writers Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert fuse the psychology of multiversal fiction—its potential for despair over endless, meaningless choice, for example—with the open-ended, high-stakes storytelling of superhero tales. Marvel may own the idea of Tony Stark, or at least the right to make money from him, but the notion of the multiverse belongs to anyone who can use it to tell a good story.

Our fears about the future, and our hopes for the children who will inhabit it, may be a final reason that twenty-first-century audiences welcome tale after tale of multiple Earths, and why alternate time lines are flourishing in our time. In so many multiversal stories, from "Sidewise in Time" to "Everything Everywhere" and "Spider-Verse," members of the rising generation take long and skeptical looks at their elders. They may wonder whether they will become their parents, or whether they can choose something else altogether: whether history must repeat, or whether it can be rewritten. We parents, meanwhile, learn from our children what is possible and what could

have been. Children are bringers of change and agents of chaos; they can seem to come from another dimension. But their very presence can balance out our multiversal ennui. Shouldn't we at least try to give them a better world than this one?

A generation ago, before the Marvel Cinematic Universe existed, Philip Pullman created a multiverse in "His Dark Materials" (1995-2000), a trilogy of novels that became a film, a play, and an HBO TV series. Though a repressive religious institution forbids research into other worlds, two children named Lyra and Will find a special knife that can cut doorways between them. But the doors create ghostly spectres that feed on human souls, and they are also open to adults, who wreak havoc all over. Lyra and Will themselves come from different worlds, and (spoiler alert) they fall in love while they try to save everything and everyone. Yet at the end of the trilogy they have little choice but to seal the doorways and give up their use of the knife. Some readers consider Pullman's ending needlessly harsh, but, like the creators of "Everything Everywhere," he seems to have a message for the next generation. Your imagination can introduce you to astonishing people and take you to incredible places, Pullman suggests, but you can't just stay there. Your reality needs you.

The garden of forking paths cannot continue to fork forever, if we are to find meaning there. Multiverses speak to the part of us that wants every option to be open, that wants the journey to go on and on. Of course, no journey really does—and at the end of many multiversal stories the tangle of time lines resolves into one, or a traveller finally arrives at the right version of history and decides to stay. Such endings seem to invite us to return to our one life, on our one planet, with some added spark of hope or curiosity or resolve. They speak to the part of us that wants, like Evelyn and Lyra and so many versions of Spider-Man, to go home. ♦