Science fiction as the literature of play

A talk for Playful 2011

Hello, I'm Al Robertson.

This is a convention that's all about play, and I write science fiction, so I'm going to talk about science fiction as the literature of play. And I'm going to be using science fiction to think about play in three different ways; as something that constructs, as something that explores and as something absolutely meaningless.

To start off, let's define science fiction. There's been a huge amount talked about that over the years. I'm going to keep it simple, because otherwise we'll be here all day.

I tend to see fiction as either realist or non-realist. Realist fiction pretends that it's a literal representation of this world, and sticks within its rules. Non-realist fiction doesn't, and goes on to play with the possibilities that that opens up.

Like fantasy, and quite a lot of horror, science fiction is non-realist. It's not about replicating the world as it is, but rather about re-imagining it in new and exciting ways. It does so in a very different way to fantasy and horror.

Fantasy's all about things that never happen. In Fantasy, you don't really need to explain the dragon, you just need to kill it and take its hoard, and then feast.

Horror deals with things you really don't want to happen. In Horror, the dragon comes to your house, and wants to kill you and take your hoard. It probably will. Even if it doesn't, several of your closest friends will die horribly.

Science fiction talks about things that could happen. In science fiction, the dragon is a genetically engineered construct created from re-engineered dinosaur DNA to service a theme park of the future. Whose coffers you are probably trying to rob because of your exotic drug habit. So, the dragon's security protocols activate and it attacks you.

There's a lot of explanation there. That deep need to explain, to root the unreal in the real, is what makes science fiction a fundamentally playful literature. It makes a toy of progress, taking the most up-to-date understanding of the world it can, and then playing with it.

That's something it's been doing for a very long time. There are many different claimants for the first science fiction novel. I'm going to nail our 'it began here' colours to the mast with Mary Shelley's 1818 novel 'Frankenstein – The Modern Prometheus'.

What's so radically SF about it? Well, here's what Brian Aldiss has to say in critical work 'The Detached Retina – Aspects of Science Fiction and Fantasy':

'The seminal point about 'Frankenstein' is that its central character makes a deliberate decision. He succeeds in creating life only when he throws away dusty old authorities and turns to modern experiments in his laboratory… he operates on the world, rather than vice versa: and the reader is taken by plausible steps from the normal world we know to an unfamiliar one where monsters roam and the retributions of hubris are played out on a terrifying scale.'

Frankenstein's central manoeuvre – building a plausible future from an actual present – is something that science fiction does, again and again, in a variety of wildly creative, and occasionally even actually constructive, ways.

That sense of constructive playfulness is thought to be one of the key ambitions of science fiction. Everyone wants to predict something that actually happens. It's the first kind of play I'm going to look at – play as something that takes knowledge, gets creative with it, and uses it to build something real.

So, some examples. First of all, there's the big one – the geo-stationary communications satellite, invented by Arthur C. Clarke in 1945. Another great leap forwards came when US science fiction great Robert Heinlein gave us the waterbed in the late 50s. 1960s waterbed businesses were unable to patent their products, because Heinlein had got there first.

And then there's Star Trek. Some claim that Kirk's communicator invented the mobile phone; I think that that's pushing it a bit far, but there's no doubt that that's where the flip-phone format comes from. And of course the more modern Star Trek communicator design – Captain Piccard's chest-mounted badge radio – has recently been taken up by makers of nursing radios.

That kind of constructive invention's helped shape the digital age, too. Most recently, writers like Charlie Stross, and Cory Doctorow have fed very directly back into the developing digital world. William Gibson famously coined the term 'cyberspace' in 1982, and – with fellow cyberpunks Pat Cadigan, Neal Stephenson and others – shaped our sense of how the online world should work.

They weren't the first to play in those virtual spaces. David Gerrold named the computer virus in a 1972 short story, while John Brunner invented the computer worm in his great 1975 novel 'Shockwave Rider'. And of course, there's the overwhelming, deeply fractured experience of modern digital life itself, arguably anticipated in the 1960s by writers like William Burroughs and his English disciples Michael Moorcock and M. John Harrison.

Today's online world has been a long time coming.

That's some of what science fiction got right; play that turned practical. But they're very much exceptions to the general rule. In fact, it's probably more honest to say that science fiction isn't really there to be constructive; it's there to produce wildly entertaining but utterly misguided misfires. William Gibson should know – and in a recent Paris Review interview he noted that:

'the record of futurism in science fiction is actually quite shabby… used bookstores are full of texts we've never heard of, usually for perfectly good reasons.'

Texts we've never heard of; futures we've never lived. Most of science fiction is wrong - even the classics…

1984 turned up and Winston Smith didn't. The mid '90s were Oasis and Blur, not Dan Dare and the Mekon. The moon's still in orbit around the earth; it should have left us in 1999. 2000AD came along, but Dredd's not Judging; 2001's been and gone, monolith-free. Lycra bodysuits have never yet become high fashion, and I suspect never will. And I'll take anyone's money that – come 2019 – nobody's going to be chasing Replicants around the ziggurats of LA in a flying police car.

Accurate science fiction predictions fall like tears in the rain; heavily outnumbered by all the nonsense. So, time to die? Time to give up on it all? No, absolutely not. Play isn't about achieving specific outcomes – it's about having a lot of fun along the way, and if something good comes up, great, but that's not really the point. The point is the ride:

'I've seen things you people wouldn't believe – attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion….'

But that playfulness is a huge turn off for those who demand reality from their fiction. It contains a risk; a risk that you'll start off reading something that pretends to be real, and then suddenly find yourself lost in (maybe even enthralled by) something that has nothing whatsoever to do with what you understand to be reality. Something that – judged by those standards – is utterly absurd.

That potential for absurdity's damned science fiction in the eyes of many, many people. As far as I'm concerned, that's great. I love working in a genre that's still a bit of distance from being entirely respectable.

First of all, it's just more fun. With respectability comes predictability, and that's always a bit deadening. Secondly, because you're not being taken too seriously, you can get away with an awful lot.

Over the years, science fiction's built up a rich history of some truly mould-breaking content. Because it's seen as not really mattering – 'it's just squid in space, all those silly starships…' – it can take on subjects that actually do matter quite a lot, and it's free to explore them free of the controls that bedevil the less raffishly cosmic parts of the storytelling world.

Take the issue of race, for example. Hugely contentious in 60s America; I'm sure you don't need me to remind you of the details. Two significant points; the US' miscegenation laws were only fully and finally repealed in 1967. Martin Luther King was assassinated early in 1968. The first televised inter-racial kiss followed shortly afterwards – it was between Captain Kirk and Lieutenant Uhura, in the 1968 Star Trek episode 'Plato's Stepchildren'.

When it came to racial equality, Star Trek was in fact something of a trailblazer. Martin Luther King was a huge fan of the show; he talked Nichelle Nichols, the actress who played the Enterprise's Chief Communications Officer Lieutenant Uhura, out of leaving the show after the first season.

In his words, as quoted by Nichols:

'Nichelle, for the first time, not only our little children and people can look and see themselves, but people who don't like us, people who don't look like us, from all over the world, for the first time, the first time on TV, they see us as we should be!'

Of course, Star Trek can also be memorably absurd; but in this context, that absurdity becomes a kind of misdirection, enabling a depth and honesty that might otherwise be too challenging for a 1960s primetime audience.

Battlestar Galactica's its modern equivalent. The show's five year run, from 2004 to 2009, encoded a sustained and sophisticated engagement with the meaning and practice of the war on terror. It dealt with topics including the relationship between civil and military power in a time of war, the problem of torture, the ethics of suicide bombing, the difficulties of engaging with a guerrilla enemy and the final absurdity of aggressive 'them and us' stances in a determined and direct way.

And, of course, at its peak it rocked harder than an out of control battleship, never losing sight of the need to thrill its audience. Play should never be just about dry conceptual exploration; it should be ridiculously enjoyable, too. Science fiction's slightly dubious past helps make sure that the radical exploration is always delivered with a hefty dose of raw pulp thrills.

Samuel R. Delany's one of science fiction's great radicals – his 1984 novel 'Tales of Plagues and Carnivals' was the first from a major publisher to deal directly with AIDS, and his record of racial, sexual and literary exploration is remarkable. His understanding of how SF is particularly well placed to support such activity is very illuminating. In a recent interview, he said:

'Science fiction isn't just thinking about the world out there. It's also thinking about how that world might be – a particularly important exercise for those who are oppressed, because if they're going to change the world we live in, they – and all of us – have to be able to think about a world that works differently.'

That ability to seek out new worlds – to boldly go where no-one has gone before – has been at the heart of science fiction's frequent status as a literature of revolutionary exploration. Those explorations have been far more wide ranging than I can really do justice to here, but I would like to touch on one of them in a bit more detail – the genre's engagement with feminist thinking.

There's a long tradition of major female writers in sf, ranging all the way back to Mary Shelley –daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft, England's first real feminist writer and theorist, and partner in sexual revolution with her husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley.

That tradition bore rich fruit in the early 70s. Generations of female writers – Ursula K. Le Guin, Joanna Russ, James Tiptree Jr, Octavia Butler, and others – came together to use science fiction to reimagine the world. Their dystopias condemned the current order; their utopias (in the words of Joanna Russ) 'suppl[ied] in fiction what their authors believe society… and/or women lack in the here-and-now.'

Deep thought met pulp verve to create books like Le Guin's 'Left Hand of Darkness', an exploration of gender built around an entirely un-gendered alien race, or Joanna Russ' 'The Female Man', a formally thrilling novel that built a kaleidoscopic critique of the problems of feminity on the experiences of one woman as she lived multiple lives in multiple universes.

For me, the most fascinating writer of them all was James Tiptree Jr, who was in fact a woman named Alice Sheldon. She wrote as and was understood to be a man for most of her writing career; she used the world of science fiction to explore gendered identity in a far deeper and more personal way than any of her contemporaries.

Her writing life became a performance that highlighted the ingrained and often deeply limiting attitudes of many of her peers. Her gender play entwined with her fiction to take both to places that were at once radically illuminating and deeply disturbing. Her short stories explore everything from the free-will shredding horrors of biological determinism to the invention of modern celebrity culture, forty years before the fact. Read her – she's astonishing.

So that's play as exploration; the USS Enterprise's mission stretched out to cover a whole genre. So far, I've focussed very much on play as something positive; something to be encouraged, that has or leads to meaning.

But there's a darker side to play, too; play as mayhem, as meaningless chaos, as revel and rout and madness. Science fiction's very aware of that, too, and – over the years – it's dug into it pretty deeply.

To think about that, let's look at two very different, but interestingly related writers – H.P. Lovecraft and J.G. Ballard. If there's time, I might throw a bit of philosophy in too, but we'll see.

Anyway, let's start with Lovecraft. He was around at the start of the last century, hitting his peak in the late 20s and early 30s. He's one of science fiction's great pulp visionaries. The best way of explaining his writing is to let him speak:

'All my tales are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos at large.'

Lovecraft was both a great lover of culture and deeply scientifically literate. For him, the latter destroyed the former. The teeming emptiness of infinite space and deep geological time rendered any sort of human achievement fundamentally meaningless. Here's how his iconic story 'The Call of Cthulhu' begins:

'The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents... The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of disassociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.'

Insanity or willed ignorance; the only two sane responses to the cosmos that early twentieth century science revealed. In fact, there are other options. Lovecraft's characters sometimes just die, and a few even discover that they're not actually human after all.

But embracing your inner alien isn't much help. For HPL, the problem of futility assails everyone and everything; he makes a point of letting us know that almost every non-human race he shows us is doomed to extinction, and his divinities – really just brain-shreddingly huge, turbo-powered aliens – are ruled by the blind idiot god Azathoth, who sits at the centre of the universe, whistling mindlessly.

For Lovecraft, we live in a universe where there can only ever be play; but play as meaningless, rather than meaningful, activity. That's pretty close to how our other science fiction nihilist, J.G. Ballard, felt:

'I think people perceive that life is probably meaningless, that we're an accident of fate biologically, and that societies that we inhabit [are] just a set of opportunistic conventions that we accept in order to facilitate daily life, just as we accept that we drive in this country on the left side of the road; and we all know that that doesn't reflect some deep pre-existing meaning within our lives.'

A profoundly materialist view. But Ballard's response to the perceived meaninglessness of the world was more measured than Lovecraft's, and his solution to it perhaps more positive, if (for the most part) no less orgiastic and perverse.

Ballard saw play as offering a kind of willed salvation. He realised that the process of creating and living your own metaphors could be personally satisfying, fictionalised this process, and thus came to write *'a fiction of psychological fulfilment… describing the merging of the self in the ultimate metaphor, the ultimate image. It seems to me to be the only recipe for happiness we have.'*

However, happiness had a very unique meaning for Ballard. He spent his childhood watching the brutal Japanese occupation of Shanghai, and then trained as a doctor. That left him with a pretty pessimistic view of human nature -

'We are violent and dangerous creatures. We needed to be to survive all those hundreds and thousands of years when we were living in small tribal groups, faced with an incredibly hostile world. And we still carry those genes.'

Or, more succinctly:

'Sex times technology equals the future.'

The personal myths that his characters develop and live out reflect that violent, sexual nature. They range from the deeply strange to the wildly perverse. 'Crash' is perhaps the best example; a novel of social science fiction, it shows us a small group of West Londoners sexually obsessed by car crashes.

It's openly pornographic and stunningly violent. It's also a lethally sharp analysis of the intersection between technology, our media-warped love affair with technology (what is advertising but the pornography of consumption?) and the violently amoral drives that lie deep within us.

And, in Ballardian terms, it ends happily. There's sex, death, Liz Taylor and a car crash; but his characters are living out a carefully nurtured personal myth in ways that they find deeply satisfying. Who are we to judge? We too might need to extract meaning from futility by playing it into existence. Perhaps our shock at his characters is our failure, not theirs.

And I promised a little philosophy, too – so a very quick pause at 90s cyberpunk philosopher Nick Land, and his astonishing Iranian student, Reza Negarestani. Philosophy's a literature of play, too; playing with ideas to see what happens. Quite often people think it's hermetic, self-absorbed nonsense that only ever talks idiolect to itself, so it's a natural fit with SF.

Anyway - Land merged Lovecraftian myth-structures with the language of cyberpunk (along the way comprehensively demonstrating that science fiction is a disease of language) and used them to rewire some of continental philosophy's sharpest thinkers for the late 20th Century.

Negarestani build on that achievement in the authentically sanity-shredding 'Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials'. He re-imagined the components of the military-industrial complex as brooding Lovecraftian entities, digging into the difficulties of terrorism with a depth and acuity that makes even Battlestar Galactica seem clod-hopping. All this cohered as part of a new myth-structure for oil that imagines it as an independently sentient entity actively seeking humanity's downfall – the bastard child of The Terminator's Skynet and The Exorcist's Pazuzu.

Their philosophical play brings narrative, thought, language and event together to create something thrillingly radical; new rules for a new great game, new ways of understanding it and thus playing with it and within it. Lovecraft gave in to the futility; Ballad crashed out of it; Negarestani and Land rewrite it as a cyber-demonology, and then begin the exorcism.

And that's as much playfulness as I have time for just now. I've tried to sketch out some ideas about why play is so important to science fiction, both as something meaningful and something meaningless. I've also tried to highlight some of the genre's more interesting moments.

It's been a very personal whistle-stop tour. What I hope it's done is to stretch your sense both of what science fiction is and can do, and how its used play to either construct or explore more interesting meanings in life, or avoid an ever-present meaninglessness that would otherwise paralyse us completely.

Now it's over to you.

Find your own cars, and learn how to crash them.

Thank you.

Al Robertson / 21st October 2011