10. The Creative Use of Retconning

Often, when new viewers watch *Adventure Time* for the first time, they are shocked when a joke, minor character, or obscure detail from one of the earliest episodes is brought up in a later season, revealing itself to be part of a major plot point. *Adventure Time* is a sprawling epic comprising almost 300 episodes; how exactly did the show's writers create such an intricate web of continuity? The answer? An attention to detail, coupled with the creative use of retcons.

What Is a Retcon?

According to the cultural theorist Andrew J. Friedenthal, "retconning"—a contraction of "retroactive continuity"—is a narrative device that "involves the revisiting of past stories, told in previous installments of a long-form narrative, and adding a new piece of information to that older story, literally rewriting the past."[1] Arguably, in the popular consciousness the technique is probably most associated with comic books (given the medium's penchant for constantly supplanting or reinterpreting information established in past issues),[2] but the method has been used in everything from classic works of literature[3] to movie franchises.[4]

Friedenthal argues that retcons can be one of three types: "revisions," "reinterpretations," and "reinscriptions."[5] In the first category are those

retcons that supplant previously established information by presenting and then privileging some new canonical development. Sometimes these revisions are acknowledged within the text[6] itself, but often, these drastic changes go uncommented upon. An excellent example of this sort of retcon in *Adventure Time* is the case of the giant gumball machines who guard the Candy Kingdom. In the first-season episode "Slumber Party Panic," these beings are quite powerful—possessing the ability to stop time itself—and are referred to by Princess Bubblegum as the "Keepers of the Royal Promise." However, in later episodes, the beings are suddenly renamed the "Gumball Guardians" and are substantially less powerful, functioning more or less as giant alarm systems. Despite this drastic shift as to their purpose, the change is never commented upon in the series itself, and some flashback episodes—which canonically occur before "Slumber Party Panic" (e.g., "The Vault")—extend this retcon into the past.

The second category comprises "reinterpretations," which are those retcons that "less-than-definitive[ly] ... change how an earlier work is seen and interpreted ... allowing for some choice on the part of audience members to determine which history is still considered canonical to the narrative."[7] These types of retcons tend to be of relatively minor consequence all things considered, and are usually invoked by fans or creators to cover over small inconsistencies or errors. For instance, when a fan asked Pendleton Ward on his Formspring account as to why Finn and Jake were unable to perform magic after the events of the first-season episode "Wizard," he argued that it was because the two no longer wore magical wizard cloaks, which had provided them with the abilities in the first place.[8] This answer is never explicitly confirmed in any episode, meaning that while Ward's answer patches a plot hole, viewers are still free to ignore it and substitute in their own solution.

The final category comprises "reinscriptions," which are "solidified change[s] to how an earlier work is viewed, concretely and canonically changing the [original] work's meaning going forward."[9] In other words, reinscriptions revisit and expand upon some past event, providing that event with a new meaning that it was not originally intended to have. It is this final type of retcon that the writers of *Adventure Time* commonly made use of, and thus it is this final category that I will explore in greater detail by discussing two major examples.

Example 1: Gunter the ~~Penguin~~ Primordial Space Demon

Perhaps the premiere example of a reinscription in *Adventure Time* occurred near the end of the show's sixth season. In the episode "Orgalorg," the

audience learns that the cuddly but mischievous penguin commonly referred to as Gunter is not a penguin at all, but rather a huge, fiendish space-demon named Orgalorg. Desirous of the power contained within the catalyst comets, Orgalorg had long ago attempted to capture one but was struck down by the power of Grob Gob Glob Grod. The demon then crashed on earth, and the gravity of the planet crushed her into the shape of a penguin. After wandering the earth for millennia, Orgalorg was eventually adopted by the crazed Ice King, who mistook her for a bona fide bird.

But how exactly is all of this a retcon as opposed to normal plot development? To understand this, we need to revisit the second-season premiere, "It Came from the Nightosphere." In this episode, the Lord of Evil himself, Hunson Abadeer, refers to Gunter as the "Dark One" and "the most evil thing [he has] encountered."[10] Written by storyboard artist Adam Muto, this line was meant as nothing more than a joke, as the blocking of the scene clearly attests: as Abadeer speaks the aforementioned line, the character is off-screen and the camera is focused on the snowy peaks of the Ice Kingdom. This leads the audience to intuitively think Abadeer is speaking to the Ice King—the only real "villain" in the show at that point, as well as the only major character who lives in the landscape depicted. The subsequent reveal that Abadeer is *actually* talking to a penguin is thus quite hilarious.[11]

During the production of the fifth-season movie, when the writers were first dreaming up the idea that Gunter was some sort of primordial being of great evil, they remembered Muto's joke from "It Came from the Nightosphere" and realized that they could reinscribe the line with newfound meaning. While the television movie was scrapped, the idea that Gunter was more than she seems was bounced around between the writers, and by the time the show's writers were working on the last episodes of season six, Gunter had evolved into an evil space demon. This is a textbook example of what TV Tropes, calls a "Cerebus retcon," in which something that was initially meant to be funny is retroactively given new meaning as the original piece of media grows darker.[12] In other words, the writers took what was initially a silly gag and retconned it so that it actually had deep significance to the mythology of the series itself.

Example 2: A Farmworld Flub

Another example of reinscription was implemented to fix what originally amounted to a simple animation error. In the middle of the two-part fifth-season premiere "Finn the Human"/"Jake the Dog," Finn is transported to an alternate dimension bereft of magic known as "Farmworld." Here he stumbles across an aged and non-vampiric Marceline (voiced delightfully

by Cloris Leachman), who is guarding a frozen Mushroom Bomb, under which the skeletal corpse of Simon Petrikov—complete with ice crown—rests. Farmworld Marceline explains to Finn that one thousand years in the past, Simon used his ice powers to freeze the aforementioned bomb, thus preventing the extinction of humanity at the loss of his life. Finn, however, is not that interested in Farmworld Marceline's tale, and he grabs the crown and darts off, hoping to sell it and pay off his family's debt. After getting into an altercation with a local gang of rabble-rousers, Finn puts the crown on his head to protect himself, which fills him with ice magic but drains his sanity in the process. As Finn begins shooting bolts of ice that shake the earth, Farmworld Marceline runs in horror down to the frozen Mushroom Bomb, aghast as these tremors cause the mutagenic weapon to detonate over Simon's bones.

What is the problem with all this? In the final scene with Marceline, as the bomb detonates, Simon's corpse is shown clearly wearing the ice crown, even though Farmworld Finn had snatched it away in an earlier scene; in other words, there is no logical way it could have found its way back onto the top of Simon's skull. For many of the fans watching the episode, this was a major goof—a designer had obviously dropped the ball by not editing the crown out of the background piece. I distinctly remember watching the episode for the first time with my roommates in university and having one of them point out the blunder. At the time, it irked me; of course *Adventure Time* is a cartoon, but it was still a distracting mistake for those of us paying close attention to the details.

Fast forward to the seventh-season episode "Crossover." In this episode, Finn and Jake learn that the Farmworld dimension is somehow still in existence, and that the Farmworld version of the Lich is threatening to destroy the Multiverse. Our heroic duo travels to this parallel dimension and, after much effort, subdues Farmworld Lich, thereby saving the day. To prevent the Farmworld Crown from causing any more damage, the omnipotent wish-master Prismo opens what can only be described as a cosmic version of Adobe Premiere and literally queues up footage from the episode "Finn the Human." Prismo then edits the crown into the previously-discussed scene, placing the artifact back on Simon's corpse so that it is destroyed when the Mushroom Bomb detonates. This is a classic example of what TV Tropes calls a "cosmic retcon," as it is the result of "forces within the story itself ... altering history."[13] The beauty of this storytelling decision is that it provided the show with a chance to explain away an outright error without having to either go back and "fix" the original animation or ignore that the error ever happened.

The Usefulness of Reinscription

While the intentions behind a reinscription may vary within the industry, the *Adventure Time* writers seemed to have mainly used them in two ways: to create a tighter sense of continuity post facto, and/or to make Ooo feel more "lived in."

The first approach is most clearly on display in this chapter's examples: In each instance, the show's writers went back to a previous episodes, found some throw-away detail (e.g., a joke, an outright error), and then used that detail as the basis for future plot development. Perhaps the writers were most upfront about this method in the commentary track for "It Came from the Nightosphere," wherein Jesse Moynihan mused, "I think [reinscription is] a good process ... throwing stuff out there and then using it later as if you had planned it the whole time ... [It's like] leaving bread trails for yourself in the future."[14] In the same commentary track, series showrunner Adam Muto similarly noted: "Sometimes [a reinscription-style retcon] comes organically out of a joke but later it seems like we were planning it all along."[15] As Muto alludes to, the major strength of this strategy is that it better connects episodes to one another after the fact, thereby creating a sense of continuity that appears to have been laboriously blocked out from the get-go when it was really generated ad hoc. (And, for the record, it seems that this approach was a success, judging from the dozens of online posts in which fans express amazement that the writers were able to plan such key plot developments "seasons in advance").[16]

Other times, a reinscription was used simply to connect episodes or characters to one another in a way that made the world of the show feel "real." This approach was openly discussed by Tom Herpich when the two of us corresponded via email:

> I don't think [reinscription is] something we [i.e., the writers and storyboard artists] ever talked about—I think it was probably an intuitive leaning that a lot of us shared. We all wanted the stories and characters to feel like they had real histories and real emotions. It might've been an outgrowth of that drive towards some kind of naturalism. The examples that pop to my mind are my having the Huge King [from season six's "Walnuts & Rain"] be related to Prince Huge [from season four's "The Hard Easy"], and having the Hall of Egress be the intended destination from "Dungeon Train." I still like both of those [post facto reinscriptions]; they make the world feel a little smaller and realer, and aren't too much in your face.[17]

This sort of retcon helps to create the illusion that Ooo is a consistent world that *exists* even when it is off-screen, and that the characters in that world continue to live their lives and interact with one another in the inaccessible spaces between episodes.

All things considered, reinscription was a clever method of retconning that allowed the writers of *Adventure Time* to create a complex, knotty, and highly consistent world without having to painstakingly plan out storylines seasons in advance.

Endnotes

1. Andrew J. Friedenthal, *Retcon Game*, 6.
2. Friedenthal, 33-106; William Proctor, "Reboots and Retroactive Continuity," 231.
3. E.g. Friedenthal, 25-32; Proctor.
4. E.g. Friedenthal, 107–26; Proctor, 232.
5. Friedenthal, 7.
6. This term being used broadly to denote any media object that can be analyzed by fans, be it a novel or a television episode.
7. Friedenthal, *Retcon Game*, 7.
8. Pendleton Ward, "All of the magic Finn gained in that episode was contained in the robes they got, which was later destroyed," Formspring, 2010, http://www.formspring.me/buenothebear/q/867844670 (site discontinued).
9. Friedenthal, *Retcon Game*, 7.
10. "It Came from the Nightosphere" (Season 2, Episode 1).
11. "It Came from the Nightosphere," commentary by Adam Muto.
12. See: https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/CerebusRetcon.
13. See: https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/CosmicRetcon.
14. "It Came from the Nightosphere," commentary by Jesse Moynihan.
15. "It Came from the Nightosphere," commentary by Adam Muto.
16. E.g., https://www.reddit.com/r/adventuretime/search/?q=planned&restrict_sr=1.
17. Herpich, interview with author, January 23, 2019.