Understanding *Worm*

“Help, somebody! Dr. Bad is holding beloved newscaster/model Jane Innocent hostage at the top of the Empire State Building! He’s threatening to drop her unless Hero Man turns himself in!”

You already know how this story goes.

For a long time, the superhero genre existed broadly in the public consciousness as a caricature of the classic struggle between good and evil, laden with two-cent one-liners, wacky plotlines, cartoonishly two-dimensional characters, and borderline schizophrenic origin stories[1]. The candy-colored veneer of predictable slapstick and action prevented most from taking the genre seriously. Some, such as the revolutionary Alan Moore, recognized this abhorrent waste of artistic potential for what it was and decided to experiment with something unthought-of: bringing realism to a genre defined by the opposite. Small factions within the genre began portraying superheroes as humans, superpowers as afflictions. Batman experienced crushing defeat for the first time. Spider-Man went noir. Superman fell victim to something far spookier than Lex Luthor: communism.

And then came the films. Sam Raimi’s *Spider-Man* showed producers that superheroes could save not only the day, but their pocketbooks. Immediately, high-budget superhero blockbusters were debuting several times a year to overwhelming audience approval, entering superheros into the pantheon of pandering, forgettable action-adventures that continue to characterize modern mainstream entertainment.

As per Newton’s Third, a young John “Wildbow” McCrae sat before a keyboard. Thus was born *Worm*.

Worm is a web serial set (mostly) on an alternate version of Earth called Earth Bet[2], which, until the year 1982, resembles ours in every way barring the existence of a coastal U.S. city called Brockton Bay. Earth Bet diverges from ours in 1982 when people mysteriously begin manifesting superpowers, the first of which appears to be a golden man found hovering over the Atlantic Ocean. Superpower-enabled individuals (referred to as parahumans) exist at a rate of one per every 8,000 regular humans in urban areas and one per every 26,000 humans elsewhere. Understandably, such a sudden and fundamental shift in the natural order causes a great deal of chaos, exacerbated by a trio of indomitable, indiscriminately murderous entities who begin appearing in vulnerable locations across the world two to three times per year, causing catastrophic damage before retreating beyond the reaches of mankind and waiting in stasis for their next strategic appearance. These creatures are aptly dubbed Endbringers and from the very beginning appear to pose a significant threat to the long-term survival of human civilization.

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[1] A WIZARD appeared and granted me SUPERPOWERS that activate whenever I yell SHAZAM!

[2] In order to distinguish it from Earth Aleph, one of many Earths existing in parallel dimensions, none of which are particularly relevant to my point.

This is the bare minimum amount of exposition required to have a baseline understanding of the *Worm*-verse. The rest of the lore could fill volumes, making a comprehensive analysis next to impossible. Just to offer a glimpse into some of the broad historical implications of parahuman activity, the entirety Japan was devastated irrecoverably and partially flooded in an Endbringer attack in 1999, the September 11 terrorist attacks never occurred, prominent international criminal enterprises arose, and, most importantly of all, Nicolas Cage was cast as John Bender in *The Breakfast Club*. The point is, evidence must be introduced as necessary. If you're looking for a complete understanding of the work, read it[3], because there's no other way to get one.

Otherwise, join me in a simple thought experiment. You've spontaneously gained the ability to teleport anywhere in the world instantaneously. Do you:

A) Begin rescuing kittens from trees and stopping ne'er-do-wells from committing heinous acts
B) Begin committing heinous acts
C) Profit (there has to be some way)

Spoiler: your choice doesn't matter. What does matter is that you have the ability to choose; you're no longer confined to society's behavioral Overton window. Gaining superhuman abilities effectively terminates your social contract, enabling you to express your innermost desires with little consequence (to varying degrees, depending on how you play the hand you're dealt). In the beginning of *Worm*, Brockton Bay alone is home to a sprawling asian ethnic gang, a superpowered Ku Klux Klan equivalent, an underground criminal syndicate, and 6-8 smaller gangs and mercenary groups. While Brockton Bay in particular has a greater concentration of crime and parahuman activity per capita than most other urban centers due to its economic collapse after water-based Endbringer attacks ravaged the shipping industry, its high levels of crime are representative of a greater trend: more people than ever translating their ugliest compulsions into action.

Fortunately for the citizens of Earth Bet, Wildbow's view of the human condition is not completely cynical. Some characters in *Worm* are sincerely guided by a sense of empathy, others by social obligation, others still by a selfish desire to hold the world together so that they aren't crushed by its collapse. In response to the parahuman problem, people did what they've done since the first primitive tool: solve. The Parahuman Response Team (PRT) formed, a non-governmental organization dedicated to the neutralization of parahuman threats. Under its command arose the Protectorate, a government-sponsored organization spanning the U.S. and Canada that takes the 'fight fire with fire' approach, employing parahumans to combat para-criminal activity. Rules were written to protect wanted parahumans from being identified or arrested during Endbringer attacks so as not to discourage assistance. More rules against the

[3] But make sure you set aside a week or ten first. At ~1.68 million words, *Worm* is a light read by no means.

use of lethal force, meant to keep parahuman forces strong in the event of an Endbringer attack, were left unwritten but understood.

But while superpowers widen human potential vastly, the agency gained tends to be comparatively little when put into perspective. It is repeatedly demonstrated within the story that, with respect to the greater forces at work, most individuals are next to powerless. The main character, Taylor, spends almost the entirety of *Worm* trying to find the top of the metaphorical ladder, clawing her way through webs of organized crime, bureaucracy, and conspiracy. Every time it seems like she's come out on top, it's revealed that there are more levels above her. She sets out to stop a local gang, the Undersiders, only to conclude that the real enemy is the system, so she uses the Undersiders to fight the system, only to realize that she is little more than an underling a shadier, crueller system run by a man called Coil, so she attempts to unravel that, finding success only after it is revealed that Coil's organization was little more than a side-project perpetrated by a mysterious global organization known as Cauldron, so she joins the Protectorate to fight Cauldron[4], only to discover that Cauldron founded the Protectorate… you get the picture. The story contains more twists and turns than steel wool.

Taylor's unending struggle reveals an underlying system of logic governing Wildbow's vision of Earth Bet that I'll call soft determinism[5]: the paradoxical idea that free will can only be exercised meaningfully through the sacrifice of free will.

There's a character in *Worm* named Contessa who is able to see the 'path to victory', a step-by-step course of action that yields whatever result she desires with 100% efficacy, barring a few notable exceptions[6]. This superpower gives her the ability to sculpt the future to her liking, but in order to use it, she has to follow the given instructions precisely, essentially forfeiting her ability to act of her own volition. Her future is mutable, but there exists a limited number of sequences of events that can produce any given future, so in order to exercise influence by choosing a desirable future, she must follow one of the paths exactly. Nobody is exempt of this rule, including Taylor. She works tirelessly, day-in and day-out, with the goal of eventually saving the world, becoming a cog in her own deterministic machine in order to exercise choice. She acts as an agent of the common good (or, at least, her conception of it) rather than an agent of her own desires. In the end, she successfully prevents total apocalypse, but only when she hands partial control of her own mind over to the parasite that granted her superpowers, literally sacrificing part of her free will along with her sanity. After it's all over, she's faced with a line of questioning:

> "'Would you do it all over again? Knowing what you know now? Knowing that you end up here, at gunpoint?'

[4] And to prepare for an apocalypse foretold by a superpowered fortune-teller, but that's another story.
[5] This term is sometimes used in philosophy to denote a kind of determinism in which free will is sustained, but bear with me as I proceed to use it incorrectly for the sake of smooth writing.
[6] Those exceptions being anyone/anything else with superpowers under the 'thinker' umbrella.

> ‘I… know I’m supposed to say yes,’ the words made their way past [Taylor’s] lips. ‘But no. Some-somewhere along way, it became no.’” (*Worm*, Speck 30.7)

Despite having accomplished her goal, Taylor never got to live the life that she fought so hard to give others. The practical implication of soft determinism is that one must choose between being able to purposefully alter the future or being able to act according to desire. For every objective sought after, no matter how big or small, there is a proportional sacrifice of autonomy. Taylor just happened to choose an objective that required almost all of hers.

If the rejection of pure free will, existence of Endbringers, or the cruel, uncaring world of *Worm* didn’t clue you in, the story has some pretty nihilistic undertones. Toward the end, it is revealed that the golden man who people originally thought was the first parahuman, Scion, is actually the avatar of an unfathomable extraterrestrial Eldritch abomination that accidentally began feeling the human emotion of sadness after it modeled its physical form after ours.[7] To make a long story short, Scion goes bonkers and decides to evaporate all human life in every conceivable reality, succeeding thoroughly until Taylor manages to bully it into submission with images of its dead partner. Scion is an anti-god. It has all the power of a god, but none of the reassuring qualities provided by most gods like divine purpose or afterlife. It exists as a bleak reminder that we are nothing compared to the forces of nature. Beyond the narrow scope of our insignificant lives there is nothing more than indifferent, inhospitable cosmos, beyond our reckoning or control.

Worm is, at least in part, postmodern storytelling. It opts out of the mainstream perception of its subject matter, going for a grittier, more grounded approach, and rejects the idea of intrinsic meaning. It’s written from a place of existential dread that seems to be growing ever more popular in our own reality. It becomes apparent very early on in the story that humanity’s days are numbered, yet very few people ever seem to do anything about it. Because of this, Taylor feels that it’s her responsibility to solve all of the world’s problems, placing an insurmountable burden on her shoulders. With looming threats hanging over our heads such as climate change, income inequality, environmental destruction, and more, this is a concerningly relatable sentiment. Unfortunately, much like the protagonists of *Worm*, very few of us are gifted with the means to do anything about it.

Worm **in Context**

In February of 2010, roughly 16 months prior to the start of *Worm*, Eleizer Yudkowsky began publishing a serial fiction online called *Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality* (*HPMoR* for short), a peculiar revision of the beloved *Harry Potter* series in which Harry and his friends use the scientific method to exploit magic to their benefit. This work gained a cult following and led to the classification of a new type of fiction: rational fiction. I say “type” because rational fiction

[7] Due to the loss of its alien counterpart, which died upon arrival to Earth.

transcends genre; it is defined by a certain set of characteristics that any work of fiction can possess, no matter the story's subject matter. These are typically broken down as follows:

1. In-world mechanics are consistent and well-defined. Think of these mechanics as extensions of the laws of physics; they are fundamental and unbreakable. If there is magic, this means that the magic operates under a strict set of rules that cannot be contradicted. If there is impossible technology, it must be established precisely what each invention does, how accessible it is, etc. This does not mean, however, that each of these things must be established off the bat; often, discovery of mechanics is an important element in rational fiction, but those mechanics can only come into play after they have been established to the reader.
2. Main characters are intelligent and strategic. An important component of rational fiction is the exploitation of its in-world mechanics. The main characters act as surrogates for the reader's curiosity and imagination; if they do not always take the best available option, the reader will probably notice and be frustrated. Brownie points if the main characters can come up with inventive solutions that the reader can't.
3. All characters are motivated and behave realistically. While this should be a tenet of any good story, we are too often given unsatisfying evil-for-evil's-sake villains, spotless Mary Sues, and other cookie-cutter archetypes.
4. The conflict is always solvable using pre-established information. Conflicts should be set up so that the reader can invest themselves in the outcome by making predictions and formulating solutions.

The primary appeal of rational fiction is the speculative power that it gives the reader. It's storytelling designed like a role-playing game, structured like a puzzle with sympathetic characters that have stake in its resolution. It's an active experience that rewards the reader for connecting obscure dots or coming up with creative solutions on their own. The definite rules and generally fleshed-out worlds allow the reader to step in with characters of their own making and produce their own stories. These qualities are what make *Worm* such an addictive read. Its world-building is on par with the likes of Tolkien and Martin, using interludes to interrupt the plot every so often for the sole purpose of providing insight into secondary characters or adding nuance to the environment. It's written in straightforward prose because its focus is the content of its ideas rather than the poeticism of its words. The website on which it exists could be colorful and eye-catching, and might even draw in more readers that way, but it's instead composed of white text on a plain gray background, the only image on the page being a stock cityscape in the header. It doesn't try to grab your attention because it doesn't want to distract you from what's important: the story.

Rational fiction was born and raised online. Most popular works of rational fiction were published on the internet, and most of the community is hosted on the internet. *Worm* is no exception; in fact, it is the epitome of the rule. Community naturally feeds on imagination fodder.

Worm, like most works of rational fiction, is the type of story that you want to talk about with your friends, speculate on, and create your own headcanon about. Its online serial format capitalizes on community. The comment section allows for immediate discussion with other fans as well as occasional interaction with the author, and its regular schedule[8] sets up intervals of cathartic group discussion upon release followed by anticipatory speculation. It's no wonder that the *Worm* community developed into one of the most lively and dedicated written fiction fanbases on the internet. Even now, over 6 years after its completion, it consistently ranks #5 on topwebfiction.com[9], which doesn't sound impressive until you consider that the majority of its voting fanbase is using their votes to keep *Ward*, the work-in-progress sequel to *Worm*, at the #1 spot.

But that doesn't quite sell just how committed *Worm*'s fanbase is. The r/Parahumans subreddit has 22 thousand members, more than the Rational Fiction subreddit itself, many of whom are active members. It receives posts every few hours and comments on those posts far more often. Its second subreddit, r/WormMemes, gets a similar treatment. There have been hundreds of fanfictions and visual art pieces inspired by *Worm*. There is a fan-made *Worm* Wiki with 1,556 pages. There is a complete fan-made audiobook, along with a commentary podcast called *We've Got Worm*, each of which have over 50,000 listens from YouTube in addition to however many they get from their respective websites. Fans love the story so much that they even pressured Wildbow into editing *Worm* for traditional publication, something he was originally reluctant to do, because they want so badly to spend money on a story that they already have free access to.

I could go on.

The point is, *Worm*'s strength doesn't come from the text alone; it comes from what's inspired by the text. Reading *Worm* without participating in the community is like celebrating Christmas without the presents or Cinco de Mayo without the cultural appropriation; you're missing half the fun.

If nothing else, *Worm*'s popularity signifies the increasing acceptance of alternative media as a valid art form. The internet has given artists an unprecedented opportunity to reach audiences that they would never have been able to otherwise, which allows non-traditional publications like *Worm* to thrive. By garnering such a massive fanbase and by eventually entering the world of physical books, *Worm* could be a flagship for web-based authors.

Worm doesn't simply tell a story, it offers complete immersion and encourages you to continue the fantasy with a couple hundred thousand of your close, personal friends. That's because *Worm* isn't a story—it's a world, both within the pages and without.

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[8] Wildbow was legendarily consistent, releasing two chapters per week almost without fail. That's an average of 11,000 words per day, every day for 2.4 years!

[9] Generally considered an authoritative measure of web fiction popularity.

Resources

Worm, https://parahumans.wordpress.com/

Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* success, https://www.boxofficemojo.com/article/ed1651770372/

Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality, http://www.hpmor.com/

Rational fiction, https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/RationalFic

The rational fiction subreddit, https://www.reddit.com/r/rational/

Web fiction ratings, topwebfiction.com

The *Worm* subreddit, https://www.reddit.com/r/Parahumans/new/

The *Worm* memes subreddit, https://www.reddit.com/r/WormMemes/new/

The *Worm* audiobook, http://audioworm.rein-online.org/

The *We've Got Worm* podcast, https://www.doofmedia.com/weve-got-worm/