The Bending of Blending: World-building in Avatar: The Last Airbender and Legend of Korra

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Introduction

Ever since their first release in 2005, Nickelodeon's two animated television series Avatar: The Last Airbender (ATLA) and Avatar: Legend of Korra (LOK) have made a considerable impact on their target audience and attained cult status with the fans. One of the most fascinating elements of this popular series is the world in which the stories are set. This paper delves deeper into the world-building of the 'Avatarverse' and finds three elaborate blends (Fauconnier 1994; Fauconnier & Turner 2003) that greatly influence the fictional setting:

1. A blend between Eastern and Western elements that manifests itself in a big correlative network.
2. A continued blend between the first series Avatar: The Last Airbender and its sequel Legend of Korra, set some 70 years later, where modern elements are blended into the world as it was created before.
3. The hybrid animals or hybrid creatures that live in the Avatarverse.

This paper is a qualitative study of the anime series and further shows that many cultural artifacts are built up through conceptual blending and later can blend themselves back into popular culture.

Animal blending

The fauna that inhabits the Avatarverse is also of a special nature: most animals are literally blends of two (or more) animals from our world. The blend is realized in two ways:

- In various adventures, the heroes have to face off against these hybrid creatures, who sometimes side with allies, but more often with antagonists.

- In clever language jokes, ordinary English idioms are adapted to fit the world of Avatar.

Discussion, conclusion

A big part of why the Avatarverse appeals to its target audience (boys 6-11 yo) and attained cult status is due to the blends shown in this paper. That the show has left its mark can be seen in:

- A live-action adaptation (dir. M. Night Shyamalan) which greatly disappointed fans and has become the butt of many jokes online.
- Other media: comics, games
- Intertextual references to the series in other media, e.g. The Simpsons (population among cosplayers; Brandner 2010), Memes (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017)  Avatar.wikia.com (~ 12,000 pages), vibrant community

So in this way it is possible to conclude that Avatar and Korra were built up out of blends, and form a seemless blend with current pop culture.

Key references


Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Chuanung Li for her advice and support during the class Linguistics in Comics and Animation at NTU (2016). Funding: AMR/17/725/122-093-201. Role: Associate Professor (Mt. Wutai 2018)