The Problem With Multiple Viewpoints

August 30th, 2013 by [Chris Winkle](#)

Many storytellers enjoy looking through the lens of more than one character. In speculative fiction, multiple viewpoint characters are often used to show different places in the world, or illustrate a conflict that is epic in scale. Unless the story involves a device that is both a [time-turner](#) and a teleporter, a single main character can't fight in a battle on every continent at once.

This technique is not limited to writers. GMs occasionally create the same effect by splitting the party for an extended period, so they can tackle different aspects of a problem. Players alternate between taking action with their character and observing what's happening elsewhere. Eventually the GM, or the writer, brings all the characters together for an epic climax.

It's wonderful to watch all the pieces of a story click together, but is it worth having separate viewpoints in the first place?

Multiple Viewpoints Interrupt Story Flow

I finally got around to reading [Ender's Game](#) a few months ago. Right when I got to the point where he encounters his first bully, I remembered I hadn't read Harry Potter either. So I put Ender's Game down and read the first chapter of [Sorcerer's Stone](#). Then I stopped and read more of Ender's Game, and then more of Sorcerer's Stone, and so on.

Just kidding, I didn't do that. Why would anyone tear themselves away from Ender before seeing him overcome the bully? Or take a break from Harry when he is about to discover his heritage?

But if you write a book that has multiple viewpoint characters living on different continents, you are forcing your readers into doing just that. They have to pause a story they were enjoying to start a new story with a different protagonist. Similarly, if you're a GM and you split your roleplaying party into two groups that go off on their own, your players must now spend half their time waiting for the story to come back to their character.

It's impossible to make all characters and plotlines equally attractive to your audience; each person will have preferences you can't anticipate. Readers satisfy their tastes by picking out the right story. Roleplayers do it by influencing the direction the story will take. If you force them to read or listen to a different story in order to get back to the part they chose, you are removing the control they need to have a good experience.

How Multiple Viewpoints Can Work

Many stories use multiple viewpoints without any of these problems. TV shows frequently switch out different characters in their scenes, and no one insists it should be otherwise. What's the difference?

Keeping each viewpoint short helps, but the most important factor is how closely related the viewpoints are. The decisions that one viewpoint character makes should impact the other viewpoint characters soon after. When this happens, the viewpoints are simply different vehicles for the same story. When it doesn't, they are different stories.

Let's look at the roleplaying example in [Mike's post on Metagaming](#). Nimble the rogue is supposed to be disarming a dungeon full of traps for Stoic the paladin. While Stoic is away, Nimble is kidnapped by angry villagers. Stoic's player will be watching what happens to Nimble with bated breath, because Nimble's disappearance means she'll be walking into a corridor full of armed traps. While Stoic faces those traps, Nimble's player will be riveted, because if she fails to get past them, she won't be able to save him from the villagers.

It's not enough for your characters to hear news of events happening elsewhere. To be the same story, the outcome of conflicts in one viewpoint must also change the other viewpoint, or change the audience's experience of the other viewpoint. Like I mentioned in [my post about](#)

[cutting scenes](#), a good plot is like a boulder rolling down a hill, building momentum as it goes. Every scene should build on the one before it and throw the story into the one after, even if those scenes are starring different characters.

What to Do With Unrelated Viewpoints

This simplest solution is to split them up. Split your two roleplaying parties into two different sessions until they rejoin. Anyone who wants to know what the other party is doing can come watch. Split your epic novel into separate books. Readers can then read all the books to get all sides of the conflict, or they can just read about their favorite character. Control is back in their hands.
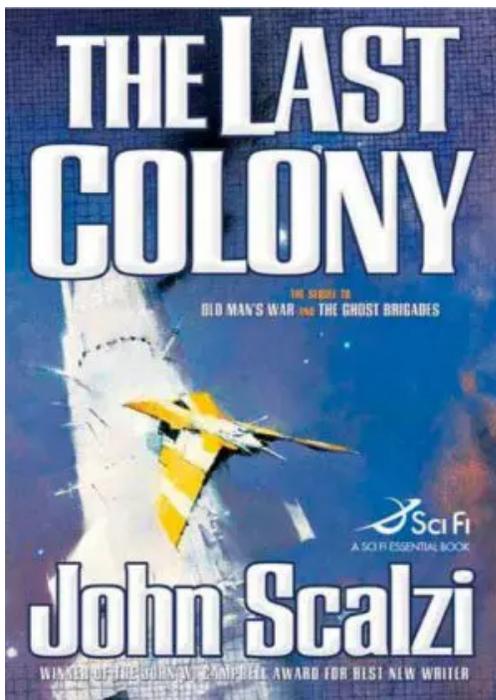
Separating stories can be problematic when they come together in the end – but it can still be done. Take John Scalzi's [The Last Colony](#) and [Zoe's Tale](#) as an example. These are two stories happening concurrently, and they stay completely separate until the end, when the outcome of Zoe's Tale becomes crucial to the end of The Last Colony. Scalzi could have intermixed them, wearing on his reader's patience as they wondered when Zoe's story would have some relevance. Instead, he separated them so readers of The Last Colony could choose to read about Zoe if they wanted to know more about how the ending came together.

If you have a story that absolutely demands multiple viewpoints characters on separate continents, it's better to start the characters together, à la [Wheel of Time](#). Then when the characters hear about what's happening to their old buddies on the other continent, it can effect them on a personal level. In addition, the audience has time to become attached to the characters before any of them must carry the story alone.

But that's still second best. If you want to keep your audience riveted, don't interrupt the story they love to start a new one they might not.

Comments

1. **Carly**

   June 8, 2016 at 10:27 am

   I've never read Ender's Game, but I have read the first book of Harry Potter. I tried reading the second, but it didn't quite work out.

   1. In reply to Carly

      Cay Reet

      July 5, 2016 at 3:00 am

      Harry Potter is mostly centred on Harry … except for a handful of chapters overall which are necessary to establish some facts before Harry can know them (like his arrival at the Dursleys' as a baby or Voldemort's time in the house of his father at the beginning of Goblet of Fire). No real multiple-viewpoints issue.

2. **Christopher Hawkins**

   July 4, 2016 at 11:14 pm

   I'm curious to hear your thoughts on Omniscient POV's. I just finished reading Robert E. Howard's – The Hour of the Dragon. It's mostly omniscient, and at times it's somewhat arbitrary whose head we don't have access to. But it leaps continents and still it doesn't feel like the story is broken. Is it possible the issue mentioned in the article is more with multiple "tight thirds" rather than multiple points of view? Like in Song of Ice and Fire – we're Danaerys for a little while. Like we're really an oppressed abused younger sister of a madman for a bit. And now we're Caetlyn We really have a bunch of kids and a bastard. Whereas with omniscient there's enough distance to do something like – Here's

what the Starks are up to, here's what the Lannisters are up to, etc. Is breaking the story eased by pulling the focus up a little?

1. In reply to Christopher Hawkins

   Cay Reet

   July 5, 2016 at 3:04 am

   I think it depends on the story you tell. You have to make it very clear whose eyes you're seeing through at any given moment … but then, if you don't jump throughout a scene, that shouldn't be too difficult to tell from several points of view throughout a story which profits from it. Song of Ice and Fire with its many characters and story threads demands several viewpoints, I think.

   I'm no fan of the omniscient point of view myself, neither when it comes to reading it, nor when it comes to writing it. Either the narrator knows everything, but then where's the sudden twist going to be? Or they don't know everything, but then they're not really omniscient.

2. In reply to Christopher Hawkins

   Chris Winkle
   July 5, 2016 at 8:16 am

   I think writers using limited perspective are more prone to adding viewpoints they probably shouldn't, just because it can be difficult to convey information the viewpoint character doesn't know without bringing another viewpoint in. Writers using omniscient can insert whatever info they want without investing in another viewpoint character. However, this problem can happen in omniscient too. The real issue here is the fracturing of the book's plot into pieces that don't relate or interact with one another, and that problem is independent of perspective. I'd be interested to hear how Robert E. Howard kept the viewpoints on multiple continents tied together.

1. In reply to Chris Winkle

   Christopher Hawkins

   July 5, 2016 at 9:20 am

   I think it feels like it works to me because the switches are always setting up some challenge about to hit Conan, or showing the effects of Conan's actions on the antagonists. You could remove the chapters where Conan isn't present and the only thing that would be lost (usually) is the feeling of escalating stakes. I don't want to say it's just foreshadowing though. The antagonists are interesting fleshed out characters on their own dealing with their own themes. Part of Howard's appeal for me though is that he can be kind of sprawling and comic-book-y – "Meanwhile, in Aquilonia…" It feels like a convention of a style in a way, so maybe it's more a case of me expecting it or tolerating it, rather than it being necessary.

   Chris, in your pov debate ep, which was pretty great, you mentioned you were editing a story that you felt did multiple pov right. Is it out yet? Can you share what book that was? It sounded like what worked is that the POV's were in a relay race of sorts, so the baton was handed off to precisely where the story was going.

   1. In reply to Christopher Hawkins

      Chris Winkle

      July 6, 2016 at 6:25 am

      That sounds like a good example of multiple viewpoints done right, I'm impressed that Howard managed to do it across continents.

      Unfortunately, the story I mentioned in the debatecast got caught in revision limbo. I know the author still wants to get it out, but I can't say when that will be.

      I can tell you that the viewpoints in that book worked primarily

because its focus was intrigue. It centers on a struggle between two factions, both with incomplete information about what's really happening. It has several viewpoint characters in each faction, and their viewpoints focus on their role in the greater struggle. The whole thing takes place in the same valley, and much in one city, making it easy for them to interact.

3. 3Comrades

July 5, 2016 at 11:01 am

I'm weird in that I really loved the later books in the Ender series. (Not speaker for the dead though, all the other ones) and I felt those did viewpoints really well. Because you already grew attached to all these characters in previous books, so seeing how each one is tactically fighting the others always held my attention. When the main players in a war are characters you enjoyed, it was fun to see them match wits and change viewpoints as they respond to each other's tactics.

4. Bryony

September 13, 2016 at 2:40 pm

I'm trying to plan out a series at the moment which has multiple viewpoints, and have so far decided to remove one viewpoint character and give them their own continuous story. However, I don't think their story is long enough to be a full novel without adding padding, which I'm not really prepared to do because that would ruin the pacing just as badly. Considering many of the issues seem to stem from having the viewpoints in quick succession – chapter about or even within the same chapter – how would having them within the same book, but self contained, fair as a solution? (Like Before the Awakening which has Ray, Poe and Finn's backstories as three separate and complete stories within the book.)

1. In reply to Bryony

Chris Winkle

September 13, 2016 at 5:03 pm

Once you extract the viewpoint, it's a separate story. I'm not sure exactly what you have in mind, but you wouldn't want to present it as part of your novel, because that will confuse your readers a lot. Rey, Finn, and Poe are central franchise characters that fans will want to know about. Once you extract that viewpoint, the starring character will become less important to the novel, and

your separate story will probably feel tangential.

 That doesn't mean you can't package in the same binding or ebook with the larger work. However, that's mostly a publishing question; it'll depend on what you're planning to do with the story once it's finished. If you want to market your story to traditional publishers, it's possible they won't accept anything short of novel length, and that they also won't want to raise the printing costs of the novel you do have by throwing another story in there. However, requirements for each publisher will be different, it may take some researching to sort it out.

 Luckily, online publishing has created a lot of opportunities to market and sell works of different lengths. It's possible some publishers will take novellas now, and if you're thinking of publishing independently online, I don't think novella length will give you much trouble – just price accordingly.

 If it's the size of a short story, then you can either submit it to a periodical, or you could make a larger collection of short stories in the same world, and package them together as an anthology. Sometimes writers also use short stories to market their novels.

 There's a lot of options these days for stories, good luck choosing one. But however you publish or package it, I think your choice not to pad the work is the right one.

5.
Dave L

August 3, 2018 at 10:32 pm

 The otherwise forgettable movie "Best Defense" had an interesting take on multiple POV. Dudley Moore was a military weapons engineer, Eddie Murphy a tank commander. Murphy's scenes took place in Kuwait a couple of years after Moore's US scenes. The two stories were interspliced

 Moore is trying to expose and repair flaws in a device he'd built. Murphy's life directly depended on this device. So when Moore is running around trying to get his device to work properly, Murphy is the one in danger. The climax is basically Moore redesigning the device, and so Murphy survived

 This is a bit of a simplification, but I don't think I've ever seen/read a story where one main character's life depended on what the second main character was doing YEARS earlier, and we saw the two stories unfold simultaneously, except possibly some time

travel stories

6. Nibelung

   March 5, 2021 at 4:39 pm

   Lord of the Rings. /thread
   JK
   Tolkien had 1st half of books 2 and 3 be Aragorn's strory
   and 2nd half of books 2 and 3 be Frodo's story.
   He did what you suggested and split the story.