

## Urban Landscapes in Animated TV Serials. TV Fiction Format and Possible World in *Arcane* (2021–)

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### Abstract

The first novelty of this article is an analysis of the animated TV show *Arcane* (2021–) based on fiction format theory from a narrative perspective. On average, each episode of *Arcane*: takes place over 22 scenes lasting about two minutes each; features around twenty settings, mostly urban; has roughly four plots that unfold with a high level of continuity; features about four main and twelve secondary characters. The format theory is drawn from possible worlds theory, which makes it possible to delve into the narrative and symbolic value of urban landscapes in the series. This is the article's second contribution: showing how *Arcane* deals with the clash between the upper city of Piltover and the undercity of Zaun, two worlds defined by their spiritual and operational centres, reflecting different forms of understanding existence, and thus governed by different social orders.

### Keywords

Animation; *Arcane*; possible worlds; serial; settings; TV fiction format.

### 1. Introduction

There are different concepts of both genre and format within TV Studies and Film & TV Narrative. From the perspective of television production, a genre refers to a type of audiovisual work with a set of production characteristics that affect the way the narrative is structured (Creeber, 2024; Saló, 2003). In this case, examples of genres would include the dramedy, the sitcom and the daily serial. Format, on the other hand, would be the particular copyrighted title (Chalaby, 2016) that falls under a certain genre; the format of *Friends* (David Crane and Marta Kauffman, 1994–2004), for example, would fall under the sitcom genre. The meaning of these terms changes when we consider them from a storytelling perspective, where genre holds the meaning it has in film theory, while format refers to those narrative conventions that characterise, for example, the dramedy, the sitcom or the daily serial (Gómez Martínez and García García, 2010; Gutiérrez Delgado, 2023; Masanet et al., 2023, p. 27). This does not preclude the fact that, within large formats, there may be very specific, detailed ways of producing works that become their own form of copyrightable intellectual

property; for example, the format of *Friends*. This research uses the term 'format' in the narrative sense we have just explained.

Although for live-action series the taxonomy of formats is well-developed, in the case of animated series the moratorium persists on this aspect. Apart from rather general ideas, such as the terms 'Saturday morning cartoon' and 'limited animation'; beyond the belief that television animation has its own subgenres (Wells, 2024, p. 251)—*anime* subgenres would be a starting example of such classification—and well-established conventions, such as episode length, which is usually around 20 minutes; there is still a lot of work to be done in terms of the poetics of television storytelling in order to delimit the different formats in animation and identify their most common narrative features. This is work that we have begun by studying animated procedural series from the 1990s (Encinas Cantalapiedra and Morgado Gonçalves, 2024). Determining a clear answer in this regard would not only provide vocabulary and concepts to those who study TV

fiction, but it would also provide a foundation from which to study certain aspects in greater depth, such as the narrative use of landscapes, mythic structures used in plots or the underlying ideas expressed by works of this type.

One proposal has been to qualify the name of established live-action formats by adding the epithet 'animated' (Prado et al., 2020, p. 3). This raises two question marks. The first is that adding 'animated' does not tell us anything about the specific narrative parameters that define, for example, 'an animated dramedy' which, first off, has episodes that are half the length of the live-action dramedy. The second issue concerns animated series with episodes that are around the same length as those in live-action series. Even in this second case, the particular narrative features of animation would need to be studied, as the differences in production compared to live action would presumably impact significant aspects of storytelling. Our research falls under this second case.

In order to help provide a clear answer, and given the in-depth study that a fiction format demands, we have selected *Arcane* (Christan Linke and Alex Yee, 2021-), inspired by the video game *League of Legends*. This series, in principle, would have narrative characteristics that are similar to those of a weekly serial. Existing research (e.g. Encinas Cantalapiedra, 2023, p. 303; Fedele et al., 2021, p. 5; Gómez Martínez and García García, 2010, pp. 155-166; Gutiérrez Delgado, 2023, pp. 130-133) suggests that the serial format has the greatest plot continuity and the most extensive dramatic arcs, where the characters—whose psychology, while purporting to be realistic, sometimes borders on the implausible—experience significant development and strongly feel the weight of their past history. The daily serial format usually contains the most plots (up to twelve), the most main and secondary characters (between twenty and thirty) and the most settings (around twenty) in each episode. The weekly serial offers fewer of all these aspects, although episodes are longer, sometimes over an hour, while the daily serial lasts between thirty to forty-five minutes (however, this may vary depending on the country of production). The primary aim of this research is to explore the format of this weekly animated serial.

The second aim of this article is to shed light on the poetic and narrative impact of the use of space in *Arcane*, a venture that cannot be undertaken without first determining the characteristics of the series' format, as the dramatic meaning of its settings can only be understood in connection with the overall structure of the work and its content. This accordance between the fiction format and the thematic content of the textual world continues the age-old discussion on the 'relationship of convenience' between the type of world in the work and its 'ideal channel of representation' (Rodríguez Pequeño, 2008, p. 76). Research on this 'relationship of convenience' has already offered some results in relation to animated series (Encinas Cantalapiedra and Morgado Gonçalves, 2024), and there is also some more specific research on how the frequent narrative uses of urban landscapes in fictional series—which could be considered a characteristic of the format—reflect or imply the characters' experience of the world (see, for example, García, 2017). With regard to the creation of settings, animation offers artistic possibilities that may hold a unique significance for the weekly serial. In the case of *Arcane*, we can advance that its conflict is centred around the clash between two cities, such that the city imagery is possibly one of the main attractions of the work.

## 2. Methodology

With a view to studying the TV fiction format of *Arcane*, four parameters are measured that are significant for the series' storytelling aspect, some of which were touched on previously. Firstly, the number of plots, determined by the number of dramatic questions or conflicts (McKee, 1997, pp. 210-213; Sánchez-Escalonilla, 2014, pp. 232-241). For each plot, the level of continuity is also indicated, which varies on a scale of self-conclusive to total continuity (Newman, 2006; Gómez Martínez and García García, 2010, pp. 17-19), as well as the parts it develops (Chion, 2011, pp. 261-265). The second parameter is the number of main and secondary characters in each episode. Thirdly, the number of scenes (Figuro Espadas, 2019, p. 271; Bordwell et al., 2020, p. 504; Chion, 2011, pp. 258-261) and their duration. The final parameter is the settings, in terms of both quantity and type: usual (five or more

episodes), occasional (two to four episodes) and exclusive (one episode).

These quantitative parameters will provide the material basis for exploring the city imagery used in *Arcane*, a qualitative aspect. This phase is addressed from the perspective of poetic possible worlds (García-Noblejas, 2005; Abellán-García Barrio, 2023), an approach that seeks to identify the mimesis of our everyday world in works of fiction. In the case of *Arcane*, it is clear that the series takes place in two opposing cities, Piltover and Zaun. This plot premise calls for the exploration of a possibility: the world analogy offered by each city, the things they have in common, how they are different and how they interact. The urban backdrops, characters' lines and their courses of action provide the primary material for this study which, in principle, explores two aspects. The first is the idea of the centre of the world, a concept which originates from the phenomenology of religion (for example, Eliade, 2012, pp. 32–36). The centre provides the world with its structure and dynamism. The qualities of the centre will determine the type of world that expands around it. The second aspect refers to those dynamic and anthropological roots that exist in every world—within the textual world itself—and which present themselves as a deep, persistent truth. Here it is important to address a certain mimesis of thought (Abellán-García Barrio, 2023, pp. 263–265), that in some way could be connected to the system of ideas, beliefs and opinions in a city or society (Marías, 1955, pp. 125–178).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. *Arcane*'s TV fiction format

For each episode, Table 1 indicates: the number of scenes, followed by the lengths of the longest and shortest scenes in parenthesis; the total number of settings followed by their classification as usual (U), occasional (O), and exclusive (E); the number of plots, labelled as A, B, C, D, etc.; and the extent of their dramatic development, which may have three parts (+) or fewer (-); and finally, the number of main characters (MC) and secondary characters (SC).

From a structural point of view, the series is split into three acts—released once a week by Netflix over three weeks—containing three episodes each. Each act is made up of

several dramatic structures in three parts, which start and end in the three episodes that compose it. The first act is separated from the second by a time lapse of several years. Between the second and third act there is no major lapse in time, but instead a significant change of circumstances. This general structure of the season is replicated in several episodes, beginning with an event from the past lives of Vi, Powder/Jinx and Vander (1x01), Jayce Talis (1x02), Silco and Vander (1x03), Caitlyn Kiramman (1x05), Viktor (1x06) and Mel Medarda (1x08), although the rest of the episode takes place in the present narrative of the series. These fragments, in the form of early flashbacks, along with the first three episodes of the series, serve to shape the motivations of the seven main characters in the series: they recall a past that sets their courses in the present. The placement of this brief glimpse into the past at the start of the episode gives way to the dramatic material that comes later, and provides the viewer with their interpretive framework.

Although each episode typically has between twenty-two and twenty-four scenes, lasting an average of one minute and a half to three minutes, in some episodes this number may vary; the most extreme case being episode 1x05, which has thirty-one scenes. This total number of scenes also includes parallel editing and montage sequences, which tend to appear around the half-way mark of the episode (1x02, 1x05, 1x07, 1x08) or towards the end (1x02, 1x05, 1x06); usually there are one or two per episode. These montage sequences, which usually last around two minutes, bring together dramatically relevant moments of different storylines, interweaving them and suggesting contrasts or connections between situations that seem to have no link. The montage sequence, due its synthesising nature, serves as a recap of the textual world at that particular moment in time; it seems as if the implied author wants to remind the viewer of the number of dramatic questions going on at the same time.

If, in some episodes, more settings than scenes are observed, this is due to the continuity of time afforded by animated series: if the characters pass from one backdrop to another immediately adjacent one, where no time has elapsed, then strictly speaking there is only one scene

Episode	Scenes	Settings	Plots	MC	SC
1	22 (4'10''-37'')	26: 2U-11O-13E	A (+) / B (-) / C (-)	2	14
2	24 (5'07''-15'')	27: 3U-14O-10E	A (+) / B (+) / C (-)	3	16
3	18 (5'20''-8'')	16: 11O-5E	A (+) / B (+)	5	14
4	20 (4'11''-9'')	24: 4U-6O-14E	A (+) / B (+) / C (+)	3	13
5	31 (3'50''-10'')	26: 2U-9O-15E	A (+) / B (+) / C (+), D (+) / E (-)	6	10
6	22 (5'20''-12'')	17: 5U-3O-9E	A (+) / B (+) / C (+) / D (-)	4	7
7	24 (5'9''-4'')	19: 3U-7O-9E	A (+) / B (+) / C (+) / D (+) / E (-) / F (-)	4	11
8	26 (2'32''-18'')	21: 4U-7O-10E	A (+) / B (+) / C (+) / D (-) / E (-) / F (-)	5	12
9	14 (10'13''-1')	12: 4U-8O-4E	A (+) / B (+) / C (+) / D (+) / E (-)	4	10

**Table 1.** Parameters of *Arcane's* fiction format. Source: Compiled by author<sup>1</sup>.

taking place across various settings. At the same time, there are some notably large backdrops, which may even have several levels of height or contain various open rooms; each of these is identified as a single large setting. This huge variety of settings makes the fact that some of them are repeated particularly interesting, such as Silco's office from 1x04 onwards or the bridge between Piltover and Zaun, which is sometimes on screen for around eight minutes in a row (1x07).

### 3.2. The cities in *Arcane*: possible worlds connected to and at odds with each other

Upon studying the structure and dynamism of the cities of Piltover and Zaun, we discover that each has a centre, where its leadership is focused, giving each city a dynamism that distinguishes it from the other (see 3.2.1.), although certain dynamics are undoubtedly common to them both (see 3.2.2.).

**3.2.1. The centre of the world, its structure and dynamism**  
Both cities have a leader at their centre, although each is different. The centre of Piltover is the Council with its six councillors, most notably the tricentennial Heimerdinger, founder of Piltover and head of the Academy. 'Piltover was founded to escape the warmongering of mages, not cultivate it' (Shoola, 1x02). For this reason, Heimerdinger

promotes scientific culture as a cohesive and guiding policy for the destiny of the upper city. Piltover being governed by a council places it politically between an aristocracy and a democracy. The new centre of the city is the Hexgate, the tallest, most visible place, a symbol of both success and danger, since it harnesses both magic and science in order to function. From 1x04 onwards, it is clear that this council is not immune to corruption, which does not seem to seriously affect Piltover's quality of life or prospects for growth.

Piltover's leadership is idealist: the city is governed by a project, an idea—for Ambessa Medarda its inhabitants are 'those soft-spined idealists overseas' (1x08). The city seems more like an abstract concept in the mind of Heimerdinger than a real city. The only time it appears to be inhabited is when the citizens of Zaun cause some kind of problem there; otherwise, it is a beautiful, progressive, ornate city, with background characters that seem to move along hidden rails. The scenes that take place in public places in Piltover, such as the Progress Day fair (1x04) or the performance at the opera (1x05) are subject to such ritualistic strictness that it is difficult to believe that this city is 'alive'. On the other hand, the scenes in more private places, such as bedchambers, rooftops, laboratories or the Council chamber, are awash with human passion.

1 - There is a potential margin of error that may apply to this collection of data, although it would be small or insignificant. Given the quantities dealt with, any potential inaccuracy between twenty-two or twenty-three scenes, or between twenty-six and twenty-seven settings, does not fundamentally change the usefulness of the results achieved in this research.

<b>Vander</b>	<b>Silco</b>
<i>Moral authority, judge, tribal leader, hero founder.</i>	<i>Druglord and leader of the Chem-Barons mafia.</i>
<i>Pact with Grayson, leader of the Piltover Enforcers, based on trust and honour.</i>	<i>Pact with Marcus, leader of the Piltover Enforcers, which he does not honour: 'Deal's changed' (Silco, 1x03).</i>
<i>Guarantees a degree of social cohesion that is falling into crisis: 'Without you down here, it all falls apart' (Grayson, 1x03).</i>	<i>Imposes some social conditions.</i>
<i>Protects his citizens. 'I can't offer up my own people' (Vander, 1x01).</i>	<i>Puts his citizens in danger. '[Power] comes to those who will do anything to achieve it' (Silco, 1x02).</i>
<i>Avoids violence and war, meaning nothing changes.</i>	<i>Uses violence to gain respect and change for Zaun.</i>

**Table 2.** Comparison of social order in the undercity as led by Vander vs Silco. Source: Compiled by author.

The first act of *Arcane* (1x01–1x03) deals with the aftermath of Vander's leadership in the undercity. Zaun's governance does not seem as prominent as Piltover's, nor as ambitious, although it is socially effective and is found in The Last Drop tavern, run by Zaun's central leader. After Vander dies, another chief takes his place, Silco. Both are the centre and source of a certain social order, although each with a very different focus. The leader's personality defines the spirituality of the nation of Zaun (see Table 2).

Both Vander and Silco establish a leadership in Zaun with a clear social and relational focus. It is no surprise, then, that the undercity, unlike Piltover, does actually appear to be inhabited. Its streets and markets are brimming with life and activity. The scenes take place in taverns, street food stalls, arcades, brothels, docks, and in all these places the bustle of citizens interacting with each other is palpable, conveying a sense of being alive. In effect, the design of the two distinct urban settings in *Arcane* raises the classic duality of high and low, ideal and material, mind and body, light and dark, 'oil and water' (Vi, 1x08).

The symbolism of the bridge is paradoxical in this pattern of opposites. On the one hand, the bridge is an element of culture that overcomes the natural separation between two riverbanks, those of Zaun and Piltover. The engineering work is evidence of the firm desire for connection and movement. On the other hand, the bridge, which is the first backdrop we see in the series, has connotations of armed, bloody conflict. The first event seen on the bridge is the explosion of some anonymous Piltover Enforcers' firearms.

From the bridge, Vi sees the immaculate Piltover, as the war has not reached there. That is a distance that no amount of purely technical ingenuity can overcome. The bridge that 'unites' Piltover with Zaun represents a failed reconciliation between cosmic opposites.

Both Vander and Heimerdinger each accept their respective terrestrial and celestial roles in this possible world, and propose policies they consider correct in the balance of opposites. Enforcer Grayson thus describes his dealings with Vander: 'You keep your people off my streets, and I stay out of your business' (Grayson, 1x01). This approach kept both worlds relatively isolated from one another. Later on, the successors of both Heimerdinger and Vander would implement different policies, almost antagonistic towards their predecessors—'We were once one tribe. Now we are Houses divided' (Heimerdinger, 1x06)—that would jeopardise the very idea of harmony between the upperworld and the underworld. These successors question whether the possibilities that the founders of the two worlds sought to avoid—due to their unnatural character or their likelihood to cause conflict—should be reconsidered: approaching the Northern city (1x01–1x02) and investigating and using the arcane talents (1x02). Jayce controls the upper city with Hextech, while 'Silco controls the undercity with Shimmer' (Vi, 1x08).

3.2.2. Sacrifice, replacement and respect: three dynamics that are common to both cities

'Some things are the same topside and bottom' (Vander, 1x01). The possible world of *Arcane* is governed by three broad dynamics, both in the cities themselves and in terms

<b>Name</b>	<i>Powder</i>	<i>Jinx</i>
<b>'Father'</b>	<i>Vander</i>	<i>Silco</i>
<b>Conflictive sister</b>	<i>Vi</i>	<i>Sevika</i>
<b>Location of the 'Father'</b>	<i>Bar, The Last Drop</i>	<i>Office, in The Last Drop</i>
<b>Bedroom</b>	<i>Small, cosy and shared with Vi</i>	<i>Huge, industrial and for her only</i>
<b>Gang/group</b>	<i>Vi, Millo and Claggor (Vander's people)</i>	<i>Sevika and Silco's other henchmen</i>
<b>Pyrotechnic abilities</b>	<i>Attempted, but not achieved</i>	<i>Expert</i>
<b>Explosion event</b>	<i>Ends Vander's rule over Zaun</i>	<i>Aims to destroy Piltover Council</i>
<b>Steals Hex crystal</b>	<i>From Jayce's lab</i>	<i>During the Progress Day fair</i>

**Table 3.** Comparison of content in the world of Powder and the world of Jinx. Source: Compiled by author.

of the relationship between them. One of these dynamics is sacrifice, of which there are two kinds. The first is the sacrifice of the guilty: 'Those who did this will be dealt with' (Vander, 1x01). Execution has a social function: 'The Council needs someone to make an example of' (Grayson, 1x01). The second kind is the expiatory sacrifice of the leader as a response to a situation of citizen unease. This mechanism may involve the literal death of the leader, sometimes successfully, such as in the case of Vander (1x03), or sometimes unsuccessfully, as occurs with Silco (1x09). It may also be a symbolic death, as seen with Heimerdinger's expulsion from the Piltover Council (1x06).

Another dynamic in the world of *Arcane* is the mechanism of replacement, whereby the character loses an important figure in their personal world and seeks to substitute them with another figure who performs functions similar to those of the figure they have lost. The transition between the undercity ruled by Vander and the one led by Silco plays a role in the dynamics of substitution. The clearest example is Powder/Jinx, a reflection of the two phases of this urban environment that shows how, in the transition from one world to the other, there may be a change in content, but not in the structure of the personal world (see Table 3):

It seems that Powder has a sort of template of a world that remains empty at the end of 1x03, as the people and figures that inhabited it disappear.

The third dynamic aspect in this region of Runaterra is the pursuit of respect. Zaun is a squalid city that creates

citizens with a major inferiority complex, provoking their need to prove themselves to others. The young Vi, after a day where everything has gone wrong, tells her sister Powder: 'And one day... this city's gonna respect us' (1x01); other characters express themselves in a similar vein, such as Silco through his vindictiveness towards councillor Jayce Talis (1x09), or the hapless Huck when he explains why he became addicted to shimmer: 'I just... wanted to feel what it was like... to be somebody. To make other people afraid' (1x06). The pursuit of respect is also seen in Piltover, both on a general level, since the city seeks to command respect from other cities, as well as on a personal level, being central to Mel Medarda's family conflict (1x08), for example.

Both Zaun and Piltover have discovered a sort of 'enhancer' that helps them to achieve the respect they desire. Zaun's 'enhancer' is shimmer, which was supposedly developed by Signed, while Piltover's enhancers are Hextech crystals, engineered by Viktor and Jayce. From 1x06 onwards, Viktor and Signed start to work together and in 1x09, Viktor takes shimmer which combines with Hextech in his body. The developers of these 'enhancers' from both sides are, in fact, the same; they work together and are connected. It is no coincidence that both of them reject their common master, Heimerdinger, the former leader. The rivalry between both 'enhancers' is clear, from the Council's own words (1x08), the conflict in the shimmer factory (1x08) and the fight between Vi and Sevika (1x09).

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

In terms of the TV fiction format, understood according to the narrative perspective set out at the start of this research, *Arcane* is a weekly serial. The continuity of its plots is strong, with a few being concluded while the majority remain open-ended. Each episode develops two to six plots, ordered according to their on-screen time and impact on the dramatic development of the episode. Throughout the season, there are two main plots, each linked to one of the two cities: in the world/city of Zaun, the protagonist of the story is usually one of the sisters, Vi or Powder/Jinx, and their conflict is relational, since it focuses on the bond between them or between them and their environment; in the world/city of Piltover, the young scientist and politician Jayce is the protagonist, and the central dramatic question is Hextech technology and control over Zaun. Both main plots give way to subplots, focusing on characters such as Silco or Viktor. As such, the design and delivery of the plots in this format enhances the opposition between the two cities.

The characters also follow the conventions of the weekly serial, as they have psychological depth, experience a development arc towards a certain path, and their past history holds a very strong influence over their present motivations. Each episode contains two to six protagonists, and there are often seven to sixteen secondary characters per episode.

Besides a few exceptions, each episode consists of twenty-two scenes, each lasting an average of one and a half minutes to three minutes. In each episode there is usually some montage sequence that condenses highly significant moments going on at the same time in the various plot, a narrative device that highlights the duality of the cities and separation by contrasting 'distant' plots, characters and settings.

Perhaps the narrative factor that most distinguishes the format of the live-action weekly serial from the weekly serial in animation is the number and extent of the settings. The number of settings used in one season is roughly one hundred and thirty. This means the number of settings per episode is also high, with three to four usual settings, seven

to nine occasional and about ten exclusive ones. It is no wonder that several backdrops feature in a single scene, since animation allows for movement between adjacent spaces without needing to resort to ellipsis.

The urban imagery in *Arcane* is characterised by a rivalry between two conflicting sister cities, which are a reflection of certain dualities that are more or less established in the political collective imagination. The structure and dynamics of each depend on the particular nature of their centres where leadership is exercised. However, common to both are the advancement of sacrificial mechanisms (whether for punishment or aimed at eliminating the central leader of the city/world), of replacement mechanisms (which reveals a template of a personal world which must be replicated in order to survive) and of evoking respect from others who are considered enemies ('Everybody wants to be my enemy', hook from the title song of *Arcane*).

#### Conflict of interests and ethics

The author declares no conflict of interests. The author also declares full adherence to all journal research ethics policies, namely involving the participation of human subjects' anonymity and/ or consent to publish.

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