WORLDBUILDING
MONTHLY

GAMING
and other topics.

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Readers,

I am proud to announce that the seventh issue has finally arrived! During these past few months our team has been hard at work writing, editing, and compiling articles into a magazine about gaming that I truly hope you will enjoy.

We will continually strive to provide the community with content that is useful and entertaining. With that in mind, our next issue revolves around nitty-gritty details!

In this issue, we have an interview with the creators of World Anvil, a new online worldbuilding tool that is extremely easy to use and free! The Magazine is partnering with World Anvil to help all worldbuilders brainstorm and to create a collaborative and supportive worldbuilding community! Don't forget to check out our website to see all of our issues!

We are always happy to meet new creators who are part of this community; if you are interested in worldbuilding, or want to help out in any way, contact us on reddit or at contact@worldbuildingmonthly.com.

Cheers,

u/UNoahGuy

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WORLD SHOWCASE - TEETEEGONE'S TAKIRAAH

Adam Bassett

"These tales aren't always happy ones; the *Takiruun* and the beings surrounding them undergo much hardship and suffering, but I find something beautiful in their strife." - Teeteegone

***Teeteegone and I discussed the nature of his world and its inhabitants, the Takiruun, as well as their abilities, competing ideologies, and their interest in what Humanity left behind. We spoke for over a period of more than ninety minutes during which Teeteegone shared some interesting worldbuilding tactics, details about using this world as an anthology, and an in-depth chart on how he structures supernatural abilities. This month's world showcase will look into Teeteegone's artfully depicted stories; welcome to the world of* Takiraah!

"The canon of Takiraah is best described as a collection of stories set across the stars, spanning thousands of years of history. Each one deals with a different cast of characters, locations, and events, but all follow the same overall conflict between two opposing ideologies. Although many of the central characters are machines and non-human lifeforms the narrative is ultimately about humanity."
- Teeteegone

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Before this interview I saw you mention a "hard reboot" for humanity. Could you go into more detail on that?

Right, that's a basic way of explaining it. Before much of the story takes place, human civilization has collapsed almost entirely. Few remnants of the Old World—our world*, so to speak, remain. The humans that exist were reborn on another world, some gifted with the potential for supernatural abilities. These are the Takiruun, humanity's present form, who are completely unaware of those that came before them.
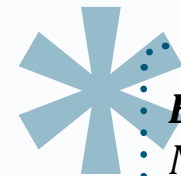
The Takiruun lived on Takiraah for thousands of years—building a civilization of their own entirely from the ground up. A few hundred years ago they developed interstellar travel of their own and began to expand once again unto the stars. Shortly afterwards, in an event they call the Exiling, Takiraah was ravaged into a cold and withered wasteland. The Takiruun have not returned to their homeworld since, instead becoming very protective of their interstellar colonies.

Takiraah has been abandoned for hundreds of years, and the Exiling is a dark event that hangs over their culture. The Takiruun have no idea that Earth exists, nor that Takiraah is not their true home. The Takiruun are remnants of humanity, but exactly how, why, or when they were separated from the greater empire and were able to survive remains a mystery.

So humanity - our kind - had been exploring space and colonizing before the collapse?

We had almost a thousand years of exploring and conquering the stars before our fall. Thousands of worlds and stars under a grand, united banner; that of an empire vast and immeasurable. The world that the Takiruun found themselves upon, Takiraah, was remarkably similar to Earth but very distant.

You mentioned supernatural abilities.

The only true difference [from us] is their potential for possessing supernatural abilities, which can sometimes cause distinctively colored markings to appear on the body. The true reason [for this] ties into the greater narrative of the world—all Takiruun are naturally born with the potential to wield these abilities, but their origin is artificial somewhere down the line. The type of ability one will possess, such as pyrokinesis, electrokinesis, or photokinesis, to name a few, is determined by one's genetics.

Very few are ever able to perform anything substantial with their powers, but through a lifetime of intensive training and focus one can achieve mastery.

At the start you mentioned there were two competing ideologies.

Ah, this is where the real meat of the world lies.

Since the Exiling [many of] the Takiruun have a deep, tightly-held fear of Old World [human] ruins. They believe that messing with them was part of what caused the event to happen—so they choose to avoid them as much as possible.

Despite the massive timeframes in between individual stories, each story follows a conflict that has raged for centuries in many different forms. One side, [the Followers,] believes that the Takiruun should live to reclaim the glory of the old world before its collapse—to restore their artifacts, reverse-engineer their technology, and uncover the mysteries of those that came before them. They believe that the Takiruun are flawed but display great potential. With proper guidance they could become worthy successors to the vast empire that collapsed.

This faction tends to be much more subtle and has many ways of attempting to reach their goals. Takiruun loyal to them are called Followers and carry out the will of a higher-order entity they call the Light. Followers
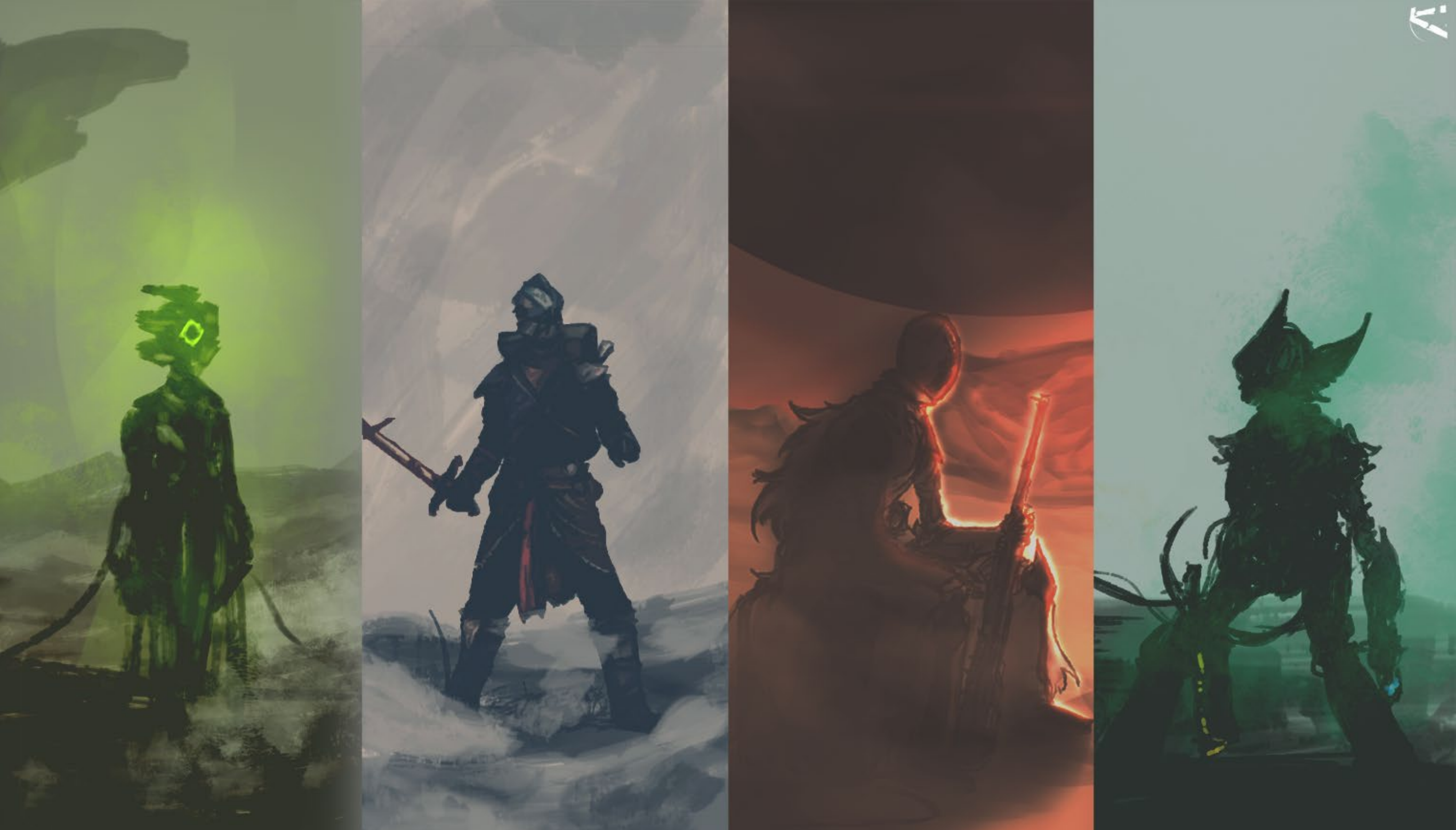
Artist: Teeteegone

are many things—everyday folks, politicians, military leaders, researchers, even political extremists and terrorists.

The other side, [the Guardians,] believes that the Takiruun should forge their own future; one independent of the Old World that predated them. They believe that, while human, the Takiruun don't have any obligation to inherit the civilization of their ancestors. Instead they must learn to survive in the harsh universe in their own way.

Their ways of working are more blatant than those of the Followers. They organize themselves almost exclusively as an Order of warrior-monks. Guardians all possess an incredible potential for using the Takiruun's abilities—called *Takitrics*—and are excellent warriors as a result. They were much more active during the Takiruun's early history, but, in order to maintain their guise, have become much more subtle and secretive as time passes. Their work is centered around opposing the Follower's influence. Unbeknownst to them the leader of this faction has sinister goals that, if revealed, would make the Guardians seem hypocritical.

[Their] power has largely dwindled for the past few centuries to the point where, for a lot of the story, only one individual continues to support it: Sirius—a survivor and the last of his kind and an old machine from times long past.

Care to explain that cryptic note about the Guardians' leader?

The leader was a being called an Architect—ancient creatures of immeasurable power. Little was known about him or his exact motivations, but I can tell you that his true goal *was* to defend the Takiruun from Followers and other foreign influences.

But what he didn't tell the Guardians was exactly *how* he intended to do this. The Guardians' heightened abilities and the Order's military-like organization all were part of a grand scale plan to assemble the Takiruun into a strong, powerful race of warriors. They would be mighty enough to defend their history, culture, and plans for the future from any threat, but would, in turn, be denied any true accomplishments of their own as everything they've ever done was all, in part, orchestrated by the Order's influence.

They don't know this, of course. The Takiruun remain blissfully unaware of the millennia-old battle over their destiny that is raging around and amongst them.

Would the Architect use the Takiruun to fight against other Architects?

Not necessarily. Just anything that isn't the Takiruun - mostly Old World influences and remnants. This isn't about desire for power - more about a desire to protect the Takiruun, though with the wrong way of going about it.

The Architect itself died during the Exiling. Prior to that it likely resided somewhere hidden amongst the stars.

What exactly is Sirius?

Sirius is completely artificial; an Old World combat machine, a Sentinel. He lives largely in secret and away from big population centres—after all he's still a Guardian, and his work requires less-than-legal activities.

Are Sentinels like him empathic?

Depends which one you ask. Four major Sentinels are present in the story, each with a different view on this. Sirius does exhibit feelings and deep thought as a human would, but centuries of combat and isolation have left him largely apathetic and distant.

What do you think inspired Takiraah?

Destiny is a big inspiration artistically; the almost-mythical feel everything has is exactly the kind of vibe I'm going for. If I had to name a few [others] it'd be Titanfall, Metal Gear, the works of Talros and Kuldar Leement, and the music of Porter Robinson.

Oh, and Star Wars too, just for good measure.

Artist: Teeteegone

Artist: Teeteegone

Artist: Teeteegone

Of course. Now, let's talk about what the end-game is for this project. What do you hope it will become? At what point will you look at it and say "I think I've done what I set out to do."

My biggest dream would be for Takiraah to be realised as some big-name game or film project, but given how difficult and expensive this would be it's little more than just a dream. More realistically, I'd like to make a webcomic series at some point, or something similar. Whatever it is, it'd be very visual-based. For now, it's just a few snippets of writing, artwork, and passion. If people like whatever I do then that's all I can ask for.

[Takiraah has] changed a lot over the years, since I could never quite figure out what I wanted to make a story about, and it'll continue to change. For now, however, I feel like I've found what [it] is meant to be.

And that's a story that spans many locations, exploring the struggle between those two ideologies?

[Yes]—each story is more about the characters in it than anything else, but I love this way of connecting them all together. These tales aren't always happy ones; the Takiruun and the beings surrounding them undergo much hardship and suffering, but I find something beautiful in their strife.✎

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Worldbuilding Magazine and I would like to thank Teeteegone for spending a morning talking with me about Takiraah. If you would like to apply for a chance to have your world showcased in an upcoming issue please fill out this form:

If you would like to see more of Teeteegone's work, or to reach out and ask more about Takiraah, you can visit the following websites:

- Tumblr Art Blog
- Takiraah Wiki
- Reddit

Artist: Teeteegone

Artist: Teeteegone

Worldbuilding as a Dungeon Master

Artist: Tristen Fekete

THE ART OF COLLABORATION: THE GAME MASTER AND THE PLAYERS

Hexarch

At first glance, worldbuilding and running a tabletop game seem to go hand in hand. If your players are making fantastical characters what better thing to do than make a highly detailed setting with deep lore for them to play in? This is a trap a fair amount of new game masters (GMs) fall into, along with trying to tell an epic story that the player characters (PCs) are spectators to and not the driving force of. Tabletop games are an exercise in collaborative storytelling, so your players will need to make their mark on the game's world as much as on the game's story. A world made for a tabletop game needs to be engaging, flexible, and above all else conducive to the story. To make this kind of setting, a worldbuilder must know their players and craft the world to their tastes. The true challenge is that every gaming group is unique and wants different things out of a world. Fortunately, there are strategies a GM can apply no matter what type of game they are running.

When building a world for a game one must first take into consideration what the players want. When gaming with a group of friends that one has known each other for years this is easier; if a GM has new players that they don't know very well this is harder. Players, luckily, fall under three archetypes based around what they enjoy most about gaming. The first type is the Thespian, who draws most enjoyment from being part of story. A game with lots of social intrigue and well-developed non-player characters (NPCs) is their bread and butter. The second is the Tactician, who loves the martial aspect of gaming. Give them unique and dynamic combat encounters and they'll be happy. Third is the Comedian, who's at the table for good times and wacky hijinks. You won't have to introduce humor and mirth into your game because they'll do it for you. It's important to remember that not every player is purely one type or another, most are an uneven mix of three with one partially dominant aspect. The same goes for the overall group. If one is a deep worldbuilder a party full of pure Thespians would be perfect, but there's going to be a Tactician and a Comedian in there that

won't care much for the ancient history and social etiquette you spent so much time on. Before you build the world for a game, know what parts will give players the most enjoyment.

Once a GM knows their players they can start to build the world for the game. This will be done in two steps, the Broad Strokes and the Minutiae. The Broad Strokes are what one decides on before bringing the idea to the players. Is this going to a globe-trotting, planes-spanning adventure? Or is it going to be confined to the borders of a single city? Are there undead armies rising from the earth or are aliens sweeping in from the stars? Will they spend most of their time delving into dungeons or dancing at royal balls? Once you know the Broad Strokes, give them to the players and tell them to start making their PCs and backstories.

I'm going to stray from worldbuilding advice here and stray into general GM advice for a moment, because it meshes well with this stage of building a setting for a tabletop game. Never, *ever*, tell players that they can do or be anything. If you do someone is going to be that guy and try to play as the color orange. This is why the Broad Strokes are important, it forces PCs into having common themes that makes the next stage much easier. When players are making characters ask them to include a few plot hooks in their backstories for you to work with. This will be easy with Thespians, but you might have to work a little harder to get useful ideas out of Tacticians and Comedians. Once you have these backstories you can delve into the second stage: Minutiae. Using the backstories and plot hooks that player's have provided start working on the smaller scale aspects of the world. One character has a powerful thirst for knowledge? Looks like there's going to be an order of scholars in this world. One character's family was killed by demons? Time to make demon-worship a rising trend in society. It is vitally important to use your player characters as a central building block when creating an effective world for a game.

By now, you're ready to start the first session. There's a world and a story, the players are eager to start, and now you come to the hard part. As a GM it is one's job to make sure everyone has fun and to keep them engaged in the world and story. Even though each group is different there are fortunately three ways to keep the PCs interested; play to their type, incorporate their story and use their input. Say that, for example, there is a festival with importance to the plot that you want to make sure the players pay attention to. To do so a GM has to make sure that the festival has events that will play to their players' types. Give the Thespian a subplot of feuding families using the festival to one-up each other, have feats of strength that the Tactician can use to show off their perfectly-built character, tell the Comedian the festival is there to celebrate belly flops. It can be a challenge to play to all their strengths at once but realistically you're going to have to focus on one player over the others sometimes.

We already touched on using their backstories to build the world, but one can use them to draw the PCs into it as well. Suppose that the party needs to care about a company of mercenaries; if a character thirsts for glory one could make it a legendary company which admit only the best among their ranks. Maybe a character has a missing father who is either a current, or former, member. Baking backstories into the groundwork of the setting like this will ensure that a player will be invested in aspects of the world.

We finally come to using player input, an aspect of running a game which can be difficult for GMs who are overly invested in their world. Flexibility is key to making a dynamic game world; you have to be ready and willing to change things based on player action or requests. For example, suppose your players seek out a druid for advice and your Comedian suggests that the druid's name is "the Corn Elder". You adopt a funny voice and after having the druid give them special items based on corn you've all had a very memorable session.

Afterwards you look at your future plans and realize that down the road they were going to meet a plot-important golem maker. In response you could substitute the unmet golem maker with the Corn Elder and get all kinds of benefits from it: a future session that instantly grabs the attention of your players, and the Comedian gets the satisfaction of have made his mark on the game and the world. Making your players care about the world is a challenge, but using these strategies will make it easier to pave the way for fun and memorable sessions.

Worldbuilding as a GM is not an easy job—building a world of one's own is a challenging endeavor, but when the wants and desires of four or five gamers are thrown in the task becomes nearly impossible. A GM must remember that the world is not built by them alone, but that it is a collaborative effort between everyone sitting at the table. Build the setting with the needs of your players in mind and above all else learn to think on your feet, this is the most valuable skill a GM can have. Your players are going to have ideas you never would have thought of; *use them*. If a Thespian manages to talk down two opposing factions you were planning on having go to war, let them be talked down and advance other plot points. If a Tactician rips apart an enemy you expected would force them to flee, give them an in-game trophy and start working on new monsters. If a Comedian wants to go lard-sledding, then lard sledding is now the national sport of the Kydonian Republic. Your group is made up of more than players, they are *contributors*. Use them well and together you'll come up with something incredible.

MADE UP RULES FOR MADE UP WORDS IN MADE UP FANTASY/SCI-FI WORLDS

MNBrian

Whenever I open a science fiction or fantasy novel, I begin reading with a certain sense of apprehension. It's not because I don't like fantasy or science fiction—the last four novels I purchased were written by Patrick Rothfuss, Marie Lu, Hugh Howey, and Pierce Brown—but regardless of the particular subgenre the apprehension persists, and on occasion I will find myself completely lost in a new world. And no, I don't mean the fun kind of lost where reality melts away. I mean the kind of lost where I put down the book because I do not understand what a humdrum is or why the Flang are attempting to destroy the world of Elderon with the great Omen. As a writer I often want to know what exactly makes me set down a book like that, a book that some writer has clearly spent a lot of time creating, that just doesn't make me feel "the magic".

The problem, in my opinion, has a lot more to do with a particular disconnect that exists in between when the idea is created and when the idea is presented to the reader. For a writer, long before words hit a page, an idea is floating around in our head. We daydream about our idea. We think about it when we should be working, or when we can't sleep, or when we should be listening to our co-worker tell us this super awesome story about her cats. Because of this, when it comes time to actually start writing, our idea isn't new to us at all. Yet when we share that work with a new reader they're experiencing it all for the first time.

Sometimes when we write we forget this. We forget that we are perpetually ahead of our readers, and that being ahead can give us wonderful insight into how we can lead a reader by the hand and make them fall in love with a setting. Other times the insight on the world results in the core of the idea, the part that made us fall in love, being forgotten. And when we forget to expose the basics of the world, the core, by focusing on all the wrong things first we make everything too convoluted for our readers.

This happens all too often. We toss a reader into the midst of a battle scene, or of a conflict dripping with depth and in-world meaning, and yet that isn't exactly where we began falling in love with our idea. Our reader misses all the romance and the feeling of newness, instead going right into the meat and potatoes—the fleshed-out details and minutiae of the idea that came so much later. You can tell, usually, when a writer is heading down this path. If you ask the writer falling into this trap about their book they can talk about it for hours.

> *For a writer, long before words hit a page, an idea is floating around in our head.*

They'll tell you details that aren't yet relevant to the plot, and when they're done explaining their world you'll still have no clue what the book is actually about, or why you should care.

Say, for instance, you have this core idea: a medieval retelling of Cain and Abel. You open with two brothers, then one kills the other. But there's a problem; what is the context of the murder? Jealousy, sure, but how can we make it deeper? Perhaps you decide the brothers aren't fraternal, maybe they're step-brothers instead. Perhaps the brothers come from rivaling lands. But why do these two cultures, on the whole, not get along? You need a history and a reason for these cultures to hate each other, so you develop one: The king of culture A stole the princess from culture B a hundred years prior. But your story has nothing to do with this backstory, it only influences parts of characters interactions. Do you see the rabbit hole? Now, if someone asked me what this book was about I could tell them all about what happened a hundred years before my book began. But that's not really what my book is about. At that point my

conversation is going to end swiftly,most likely out of pure confusion. This prospective reader is not asking me how I solved all the various intricate problems in my book, or how I added depth to a story that was much simpler; they're asking me what my book is about. And it's about a guy who kills his step-brother and incites a civil war.

Now, I'll be the first to admit, sometimes this level of depth is what our readers want. I know I enjoy it. But no one, I repeat, no one will get to that depth if they don't first fall in love with the thing that got you excited about in the first place. No one will eat the best tasting cake in the world if it's covered by a thick layer of garbage. And that process, the process of discovering a world, can be so beautiful and enchanting for a reader. But it only happens when you enchant them first;when you show them something simple, something primal, a thread of an idea that is interesting and then you let them slowly dig deeper.

In light of these revelations I have created a how-to guide for writers who create such rich landscapes, deep histories, and uncharted worlds. And this is it, these are my made up rules for made up words in made up fantasy and sci-fi worlds.

Rule Number 1:
You Get 3 Made Up Words Per 20 Pages

Okay, so maybe I don't actually count. But if your story sounds like this—I'm out.

"In the city of Eldorath there was a therapin who had twelve children. The one with the mark of Hoxy and another with the mark of Moxy were the two most devastatingly beautiful of the children,

and under the order of Kaldrobian, they were the first to be ritualistically sacrificed."

I'm overdoing it, I know. That's five made up words in two sentences but you get the idea. If the point of reading a high fantasy book or a sci-fi book is to escape the real world, then adding a bunch of words that you've made up in a short period of time is a good way to remind your reader they're reading a book—and you don't want them to remember that. You want them to read, to get caught up in the story, to not be confused or struggle to follow what is happening.

Listen, we'll get to where Eldorath is, talk about a therapin and inquire about the order of Kaldrobian and how they ritualistically sacrifice kids into volcanoes to serve the god Plogbar *later*. But for now, let's stick to simplicity. Remember that all of these names came after you fell in love with your idea, and only when you realized you needed to name all these things. What got you to love your idea first? Don't confuse us in the first few pages.

Perhaps a better way to convey only the essential pieces of the above information would be to say this: "In a small city at the base of a large volcano there lived a therapin who had twelve children. Due to circumstances outside this poor father's control, the two youngest and most devastatingly beautiful of his children were the next in line to be ritualistically sacrificed."

Give us clarity. Establish your setting and why we should relate to it in language we understand. And *then* throw us out of the plane. When reading a book becomes work, when I have to write down the definitions of things just to follow what is happening, then you've lost me.

Rule Number 2:
If It Isn't New Or Important, Don't Explain It

So you've got a group of space explorers who use thera-fuel made out of asteroid bits and water? And they put their thera-fuel into a Hydrogodroid engine? *And* then they can travel faster than the speed of light? Great! Tell me all about it, but ONLY if it is central to your plot.

If you're just developing your own names for things that already have names, and that people already conceptually understand then don't tell me all about it. For example, my Hydrogodroid engine is essentially just a warp drive, or a teleporter, or a time machine. Just create a scene where the engineer of the Hydrogodroid breaks it down in Layman's terms for that idiot newbie engineer—

"It's a warp drive, idiot. *Okay?* Are we done? You put the go-go juice in the warp drive and it goes."

If you're not being overwhelming with made up words you have to give the reader the benefit of the doubt. Let them figure out what a Hydrogodroid engine is and what it does from context clues; heck, if you call it a Hydrogodroid Engine, the reader won't even care. It's an engine, they're with you. Let's move on to space battles and explosions.

Rule Number 3:
Assume Your Reader Will Catch Some, Not All, Of Your Context Clues

When it comes to new words a lot of it comes down to feel. You need to choose your battles. Using a new word to describe the main enemy can be cool to just throw in and not explain—because

the explanation comes later. In those cases less is more: Game of Thrones did it brilliantly in Old Nan's stories. Spiders the size of horses? Giants? Zombies but they're called White Walkers? Oh dang, this is gonna be good. Kingkiller did it in an excellent way as well. You've got these dark shadowy things called the Chandrian? Cool, Chandrian equal bad. Got it.

You want to leave your reader with half-an-understanding about the stuff that is coming later. Give them a simple explanation that doesn't really fully explain it, leave them wanting more. But when it comes to the things that are goal-driven, like the hydro-fuel with asteroid bits that I talked about above, only go into it when you need to explain or drive character actions. A writer doesn't need to tell us everything about thera-fuel; it doesn't need to be all in one place and it doesn't need to be extensive, but tell me what it is and why it's important. And tell me why only certain asteroid dust works, that way when the protagonists fly into the Z-sector, where there are a lot of juicy asteroids with mountain landscapes and space-alien Humdrums I'll know why they don't just go somewhere safer. And I'll know why Esteban regrettably got his helmet torn off and his brains eaten.

Made up words in fantasy and science fiction novels are wonderful, glorious things. Just make sure you aren't dumping them on a reader all at once in the first chapter. Give the reader time, space, and a hefty helping of breathing room. Give them explanations slowly, along with something to remember. Make them fall in love with your idea before you bury them in depth, history, and made up words. And, as always, beware the Humdrums.

INTRO TO GAME DESIGN FOR THE WORLDBUILDER

PsychoRomeo

Creating a world that is robust enough to be featured as the setting of a game could be considered the greatest crowning achievement for many a worldbuilder. It's one thing to merely observe a world through text or some other less interactive medium, but when an external actor is allowed to *interact* with a world, it takes on a whole new level of palpability.

But a well crafted world and a well designed game are two different things entirely—to marry the two, we'll be embarking on an introductory crash course in **GAME DESIGN FUNDAMENTALS**.

One of the most important elements of game design is to understand the concept of "fun" and how it's actually used in a well designed game. On the surface it seems like a simple relationship—shooting aliens with powerful weapons absolutely sounds fun, so shooting twice as many aliens with twice as powerful weapons will be twice as fun. And while it may briefly hold true, this mindset is ultimately destructive to a game.

To understand this, we must first abolish the idea that "fun" is some kind of static emotional state like "happy" or "sad." Rather, "fun" is a living process or experience. You can give a subject some candy, and they will be happy they received candy. If you turn the act of receiving a candy into a well designed *game*, the subject will begin to have *fun*. But the mere act of receiving candy is not fun in and of itself. So the trick is to create a game that brings the player into the *fun* zone.

So how do we bring the player into the fun zone? Consider music—you can play a high pitched note and call that "happy," and you can call a low pitched note and call it "sad." We can add to and keeping playing these notes as much as we want, but it's probably not going to become a very good song. It is only after these notes are put into a sequence that toys with our expectations and engages us in its form that they ultimately become an experience we enjoy: music. Just as music is

a combination of complementary notes, having fun involves experiencing a combination of complementary emotions. This arrangement is called *cognitive flow*, and is the most important element to a well designed game.

How exactly does cognitive flow translate into "fun?"

Every aspiring game designer will at multiple points in their career be asked to study and dissect a graph on cognitive flow. There are *many* ways to represent this data, however the following is my favorite:
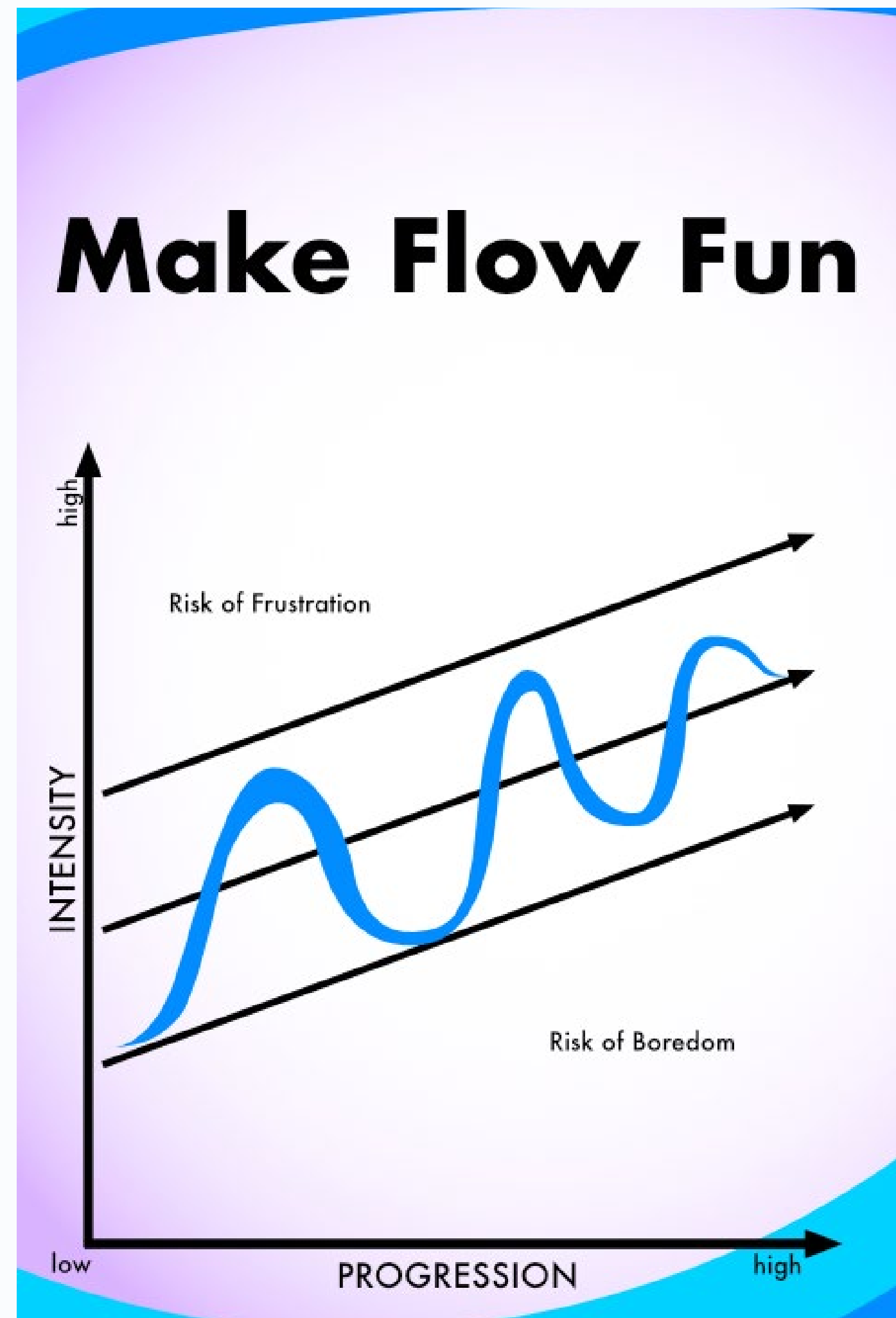
Let's consider the the vertical axis, "intensity" (left). High intensity represents stress, anxiety, or challenge. A high intensity situation will exhaust the player mentally, and test their skill with the game. When intensity is at maximum, the player is very prone to burning out from frustration, throwing the controller, and rage quitting. Conversely, low intensity represents a lull in gameplay, monotony, or ease. A low intensity situation will provide very little stimulus, and when it reaches rock bottom, the player loses interest and stops playing.

Along the horizontal axis (bottom) is "progression." Simply put, this represents the time the player spends in the game, the player's completion of the game, or the player's mastery of the game mechanics.

The lines on the graph represents a game's ideal relationship with intensity and progression. First, consider the blue lines. As the player progresses through the game and spends more time with the game's mechanics, their skill level will increase. As a response to this, the game's intensity and the challenges the player faces should increase as well. This boils down to a very simple concept: keep testing the player with bigger challenges.

However, intensity should not just steadily rise as the player progresses through the game. This would be the musical equivalent of a straightforward ascending scale. Rather, a game's overall intensity as well as the intensity of individual parts (missions, levels, chapters, etc.) within the game should rise and fall many times. This motion is represented by the red line on the graph. Maybe your game is an adventure game, and between each high intensity dungeon there's some opportunity for low intensity shopping or upgrading. Maybe your game is a survival game, and after doing some low intensity material gathering you have to complete a higher intensity timed minigame in order to craft something. Or maybe in one of the shooter levels of your game there are open areas with high intensity gunfights followed by low intensity hallways where you can reevaluate your supplies and plan your next move. The rise and fall of intensity is an important step in making sure that our game is engaging, and ensures that the gameplay does not start feeling predictable, stale, or stagnant.

Consider the roller coaster. They're not very interesting if they sit at their highest or lowest point for the entire ride. Rather, what's fun is when the roller coaster slowly builds up to a high

point, then suddenly gains speed and does crazy loops and what not. Roller coasters are designed to bombard their riders with a wave of psychological experiences. The rider anticipates what's coming next as they roll over the top. They fear the (apparent) danger as they rush to the ground or go upside down. They get a momentary relief as the roller coaster slows down again, and then the process repeats. The roller coaster combines a variety of emotions in a very intentional arrangement. Just like games, this flow is the process that makes the experience fun (and terrifying). These feelings of anticipation, fear, and relief draw the player into the moment and get them invested in the experience they're having. They become intoxicated by the flow, and have a hard time turning away or putting the controller down.

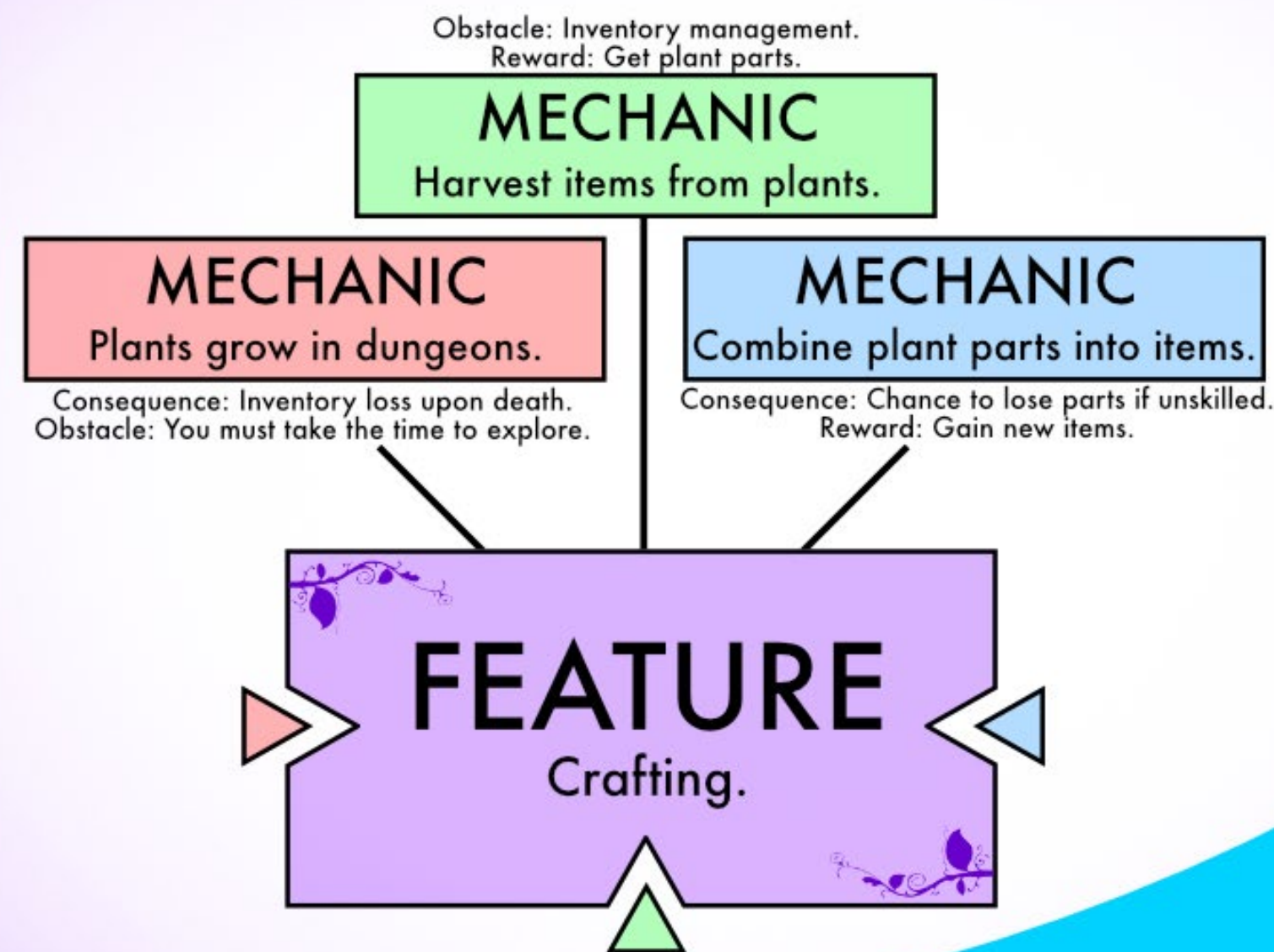**But how does this theory of fun end up as something I can play?**

Now that we understand "fun," our lesson turns to *game mechanics* and *game features*. These are the building blocks for all games and outline the rules by which the game operates. Different mechanics are combined in various ways to become our game's features. Alongside elements like story and art, mechanics and features make up the body of our game.

Mechanics can be broken down into the following components: *rewards*, *obstacles*, and *consequences*. *Rewards* motivate us to do something. *Obstacles* make doing this thing difficult. And finally *consequences* make our attempt to do this thing meaningful. All game mechanics will bring some amount of rewards, obstacles, or consequences to whatever *feature* they end up being a part of. Consider the simplified breakdown of a crafting feature on the following page.

This crafting feature is built out of a plant growth mechanic, a plant harvesting mechanic, and an item combination mechanic. We can see that this feature has some danger, time investment, inventory management, skill level requirements, and item rewards. Breaking down mechanics and features into their smaller parts like this helps keeps us objective and objective.

Earlier I used an example of how handing someone candy makes them happy, but isn't innately fun. That's because there are no obstacles to test them, and there are no consequences to make this activity meaningful—there's no game, just a

Crafting as a Feature

Obstacle: Inventory management.
Reward: Get plant parts.

MECHANIC
Harvest items from plants.

MECHANIC
Plants grow in dungeons.

Consequence: Inventory loss upon death.
Obstacle: You must take the time to explore.

MECHANIC
Combine plant parts into items.

Consequence: Chance to lose parts if unskilled.
Reward: Gain new items.

FEATURE
Crafting.

Artist: Adam Basset

reward. It's an incomplete experience with only one emotion, a song with only one note, or a rollercoaster that only goes in one direction. To turn it into a game, we're going to throw some mechanics in here. To do that, we'll need to become a little sadistic. We're going to say things like "the candy will be in a tightly sealed box hanging in the air." We're going to add limitations and say "the only way you're allowed to touch the box is with a long, heavy stick" and "you'll be blinded and disoriented." We'll scare them by saying "if you fail to open the box, you lose your chance." Now tell me what sounds more *fun*—having candy put on a plate in front of you, or beating it out of a stuffed piñata?

A game designer must get very hands on with the emotions their players are experiencing. Negative emotions such as loss, fear, or anxiety are just as vital as positive emotions like joy, relief, and excitement for creating a full and rewarding experience. This often means being a sadistic emotional terrorist. I'll share my favorite quote from one of the most successful emotional terrorists of all time:

> *"Always make the audience suffer as much as possible." - Alfred Hitchcock*

I really want to stress how important it is to be an evil, sadistic villain when designing games. If you ever find yourself drawing a blank, if something doesn't seem fun, or the player is asking themselves, "Why am I doing this?" the first thing you should do is reevaluate the *consequences* behind your features. It's very easy to forget to subject your player to negative emotions, but this is without a doubt the most powerful driving factor in a game. Nobody walks away from a memorable fight and says, "Wow, that fight was so crazy, I came that close to losing nothing of value." While there definitely is such a thing as *too much* consequence, this is generally much easier to spot and avoid than *insufficient* consequence. Too much consequence is known as "fake difficulty" and is where consequences start overpowering your obstacles when it comes to game challenge. Some examples include blatantly cheating AI, insufficient checkpoints, or situations that are impossible to overcome without getting lucky.

Enough lecture, when can we get started?!

Now that we understand some of the underlying fundamentals of game design, we'll break down the actual process of designing our game. This is the

creative process and there is not one right way to go about this. The following four steps are how I approach the task.

1

1) Define the game's high concept. How would you write its elevator pitch?

This step essentially boils down to "what kind of game do I want to make?" For those familiar with games, it's very easy to say "*I want it to be like Diablo II but with guns*" or "*what if Wii Sports was a life-or-death gladiatorial competition?*" This is a great place to start. However, eventually we'll want to define our game without referencing others. Consider the following examples:

> An action adventure game where you shoot a path through a sea of demons and battle with the great evils of the world.
>
> A gruesome competitive card game where you train gladiators and have them compete in lethal sports for the crowd's entertainment.

Ideally, a high concept should outline what about the game is going to be fun (such as shooting demons or lethal sports). It will briefly mention the game's genre or structure (for example, action adventure or gladiatorial themed competitive card game). It might also make a reference to the game's overall goal (battle the great evils of the world). However, it doesn't need to be comprehensive and shouldn't be longer than one or *very rarely* two sentences. Consider it a succinct summary of the game.

Reevaluation of a game's high concept mid-development isn't unheard of, but it should be taken very seriously. No progress should be made in step two until you have 1000% confidence in your high concept, what it means to you, and how it will become a game.

2

2) Identify your game's core mechanics and features, and how they'll be used.

Many worlds are robust enough to already have very prominent and easily identifiable features and mechanics. For example, maybe your world has a magic system that uses spirit energy to create fire. Or maybe your world has the technology to travel to distant planets in a few minutes. To begin creating a game within your world, you should identify your world's core mechanics and features and work outward from there. While doing so, it's important to remember that each game design decision should bring you a step closer to realizing your high concept. As a worldbuilder, it may be very tempting to pursue errant, wandering ideas. While building up a nation's political structure, you can sometimes lose yourself in a story from a politician's childhood. For a worldbuilder, this is a very effective way to organically create content. But as a game designer, this can become a very counterproductive force called *feature creep*.

Let's look at an example: say I have a rather normal world, except aggressive hypnosis and other forms of subconscious extortion is about as common as knife related violence. Say my game's high concept is "*a mystery game where you solve puzzles and investigate crimes using advanced psychological abilities*." My game's mechanics might include cool mind control abilities, switches and levers that open doors or move platforms, and maybe a truth/bluff/coerce kind of charisma minigame. After identifying these (and other) mechanics, I can shape them into puzzle room levels like in the Zelda series, platforming levels like the Uncharted series, and non-linear dialogue trees like in the Neverwinter series. All of these features and mechanics are relevant to the idea of "mystery puzzle game."

On the other hand, regardless of how awesome and unique my world's airplane technology is, pursuing this topic is probably not going to bring me any closer to realizing my high concept. There's absolutely no need for me to invest time and energy designing plane flying features and mechanics (though it'd probably make for really cool backstory!). Since my game isn't about flying

planes, this would be an incarnation of feature creep. Feature creep will not always be this obvious, so if in doubt you should probably cut it out!

3) Arrange your mechanics and features into fun game content.

Now we apply our newfound knowledge of game design fundamentals to the mechanics and features we've identified in the previous step. This is the part halfway between "*magic system that uses spirit energy to create fire*" and "*spend 3 SP to inflict 7 fire damage*." We'll begin to dial in the details and get hands-on with the rewards, obstacles, and consequences of the various parts of our game. It's where we begin to give form to our game's level design. This step is probably the most difficult and time consuming, especially for those newer to game design.

First, let's recap. We understand that "fun" comes from well-designed cognitive flow. We also understand that well designed cognitive flow comes from bouncing our game's intensity level between boredom and frustration. By getting a good rhythm going, we draw the player into the game. The tools we'll use to create this rhythm are mechanics and features. We know that we'll be able to identify and play with the rewards, obstacles, and consequences of our mechanics and features to fine tune how our cognitive flow plays out.

To approach this part of the design process, imagine what kind of awesome "movie moments" your game will have, evaluate them against our game design fundamentals, and then work backwards to recreate them. Maybe your movie moment is turning the tables of a difficult battle by using your game's signature counterattacking mechanic. Or maybe it's a special aerial skill that the player used with perfect timing as a shortcut through a difficult platforming level. As an example, let's go back to our psychological mystery puzzle game and define one of its "movie moments."

Our protagonist's face glimmers faintly from a dim torch. They've spent hours underground and are lost deep within

the cultists' underground labyrinth. They open the door to the next room and find a floor switch, a locked door, and a lever behind a gate.

Testing the switch, our protagonist finds that the gate opens while the switch is depressed. Finding this challenge almost too simple, they grab some rock debris from a corner and use it to hold down the switch.

The gate retracts into the ceiling. Confident, our protagonist walks over and pulls the lever. They hear a click. Was that the door unlocking? But something's not right—there's a low rumble, and suddenly the floor gives way!

Reacting quickly, our protagonist scrambles to cling on to any stable surface they can, but to no avail. As they fall into a seemingly bottomless abyss, they slow their descent by nimbly grasping onto outcroppings and roots that protrude from the walls of the pit.

Finally, our protagonist manages to grab hold of a vine and watches as rocks and bricks fall past them and into the abyss. They can see a faint light coming from a window across the way, and a small ledge they can carefully navigate to get there.

Now that we've outlined this moment, we evaluate it using our game design fundamentals.

- What do our intensity levels look like throughout this moment? Are we achieving ideal cognitive flow?
- What mechanics can we leverage into creating this moment? What are some of the rewards, obstacles, and consequences they can bring to the table?
- What other tools can we use to enhance or modify the moment's cognitive flow?

Let's go through our example moment and pick it apart.

Our protagonist's face glimmers faintly from a dim torch. They've spent hours underground and are lost deep within the cultists' underground labyrinth. They open the door to the next room and find

a floor switch, a locked door, and a lever behind a gate.

Our atmosphere here is a perfect setup for the feeling of anticipation. We can capitalize on an activity as simple as opening a door to pan the camera and communicate exactly what the player should be finding significant in the next area. By doing this, we can limit unintended spikes in frustration due to the player missing a critical piece of the puzzle. This is important considering the next bit.

Testing the switch, our protagonist finds that the gate opens while the switch is depressed. Finding this challenge almost too simple, they use some rock debris from a corner to hold it down.

Since we'll soon be pulling the rug from under the player's feet, we'll want to lure them into a false sense of security. Our intensity level should be pretty low and stable to maximize our trick's effectiveness. Consider how the player will feel as they approach the switch. Have there often been consequences to pressing switches, and will the player be apprehensive to do so? If so, we may need to bring in an element that reinforces the safety of this particular situation—maybe the player has some way to see its mechanisms in the wall, or has some other way to ascertain the switch's purpose. Also, consider the debris pile. We don't want to shake up our intensity too much yet, so make sure there are not a lot of obstacles getting in the player's way of completing this part. We only need enough to keep the player from becoming suspicious of the whole event - for example, having to jump and throw the debris over a small hole.

The gate retracts into the ceiling. Confident, our protagonist walks over and pulls the lever. They hear a click. Was that the door unlocking? But something's not right - there's a low rumble, and suddenly the floor gives way!

Our big moment has arrived. Intensity is going to spike to maximum as the player realizes they've been bamboozled and the action picks up after a satisfying lull. Keep in mind that this event could add the "might be a trick" consequence to our "pull lever" mechanic, which will absolutely affect future parts of our game. We may need to deflect this

association by making this lever unique (adding the consequence only to the "pull unique lever" mechanic), or explicitly attributing the cave in to some external factor (such as a malfunction in the mechanisms, or age).

Reacting quickly, our protagonist scrambles to cling on to any stable surface they can, but to no avail. As they fall into a seemingly bottomless abyss, they slow their descent by nimbly grasping onto outcroppings and roots that protrude from the walls of the pit.

In this moment we can use something like a quick time event to add interactivity and allow the player to influence how this sequence plays out. A quick time event is a series of button presses that the player has to execute within a time constraint. We can add consequences like "the player takes damage with every failure" or "if the player doesn't succeed on enough button presses they get a game over screen" or "the better the player performs, the less climbing they have to do afterward." We can use the natural intensity of the situation to create obstacles, such as obscuring the button the player has to press with a shaking camera or requiring complex, simultaneous button combinations.

Finally, our protagonist manages to grab hold of a vine and watches as rocks and bricks fall past them and into the abyss. They can see a faint light coming from a window across the way, and a small ledge they can carefully navigate to get there.

Here we start dropping our intensity levels back down from maximum. The player is not completely safe yet as they still have this perilous ledge to cross, and this will serve as a good transition down from the high we just had earlier. Our ledge climbing mechanics might have obvious consequences such as "you can fall to your death" but remember that our intense moment was the collapse, not this part. We want to make sure we don't steal too much of that part's light by making this one too intense.

This evalualuation is by no means complete, but it does illustrate many of the ways a game designer has to think about the different parts of their game as it comes together.

4) Execute, reevaluate, refine, repeat!

An idea is just an idea - the part that turns your idea into something playable is called *execution* or *implementation*. This article won't go into heavy detail about actual development; that you'll need to research on your own. But I do want to take a moment to talk about prototyping, playtesting, and the process of refining and balancing your game. These are absolutely vital elements and is also some of the more intimidating and painful parts of game development.

Let's presume you get some sort of playable prototype of your game made. Maybe you've made crude mockups of your card game on index cards, or maybe you scripted out a quick feature demo in your programming language of choice. Most people's approach to testing their game is to plug numbers into their mechanics that sound somewhat reasonable and hope for the best as they test it out. Don't be like most people! We're going to take a much more methodical approach.

First we'll need to establish our initial *time to kill*, or *TTK*. This is a number that represents the typical amount of unit of measurement it will take to overcome a controlled obstacle in the game. Our unit of measurement can be turns, resources, or money, but most often it's a unit of time, usually seconds. Our obstacle can be things such as an enemy, a quest item the player has to retrieve, or a platforming segment. Once we establish our baseline TTK, we'll use it as a standard against other elements of our game.

As an example, let's say that we want our basic hero with a basic weapon to defeat the basic slime in 6 attacks—in other words, our basic slime's TTK is 6 attacks. If we decide on a good starting health value for this slime—say, 100—then to achieve this TTK our basic weapon will need to deal between 17~19 damage per attack. Any other value would be more or fewer than 6 attacks. We can calculate how long it takes to do 6 attacks and also get our TTK measured in seconds, if we wanted to create a standard with that metric instead.

Let's say that our game features combat abilities as a mechanic, and one of the abilities is called bash. To figure out how much damage bash should deal, we simply ask ourselves, "How do we want this ability to change our TTK?" If we want bash to be rather rewarding to use, maybe we would want it to cut our TTK from six attacks to three - so it would deal about 50 damage (half the TTK and so half slime's health). If we want bash to not be so prominent, then maybe its use would only reduce our TTK by one attack—so it would deal 34~38 damage (twice that of a normal attack).

Say we want to add a defensive stance mechanic that reduces incoming damage by an amount. But by how much should this stance reduce incoming damage by? We again ask ourselves: "How do we want this to change our TTK?" However, maybe our answer isn't as simple as "three attacks" or "one attack" this time around. Maybe it's something more dynamic and complex, such as "a smaller amount at lower current health values but a larger amount at higher current health values." We might land on a ridiculous formula like "(currentHealth / maxHealth + 1) * currentHealth$^{0.6}$"—but nobody can look at this and immediately see what this means for our slime. Instead, we can crunch the numbers (good luck) and see if this formula has a good relationship with our TTKs. Finally, we define the defensive stance mechanic as increasing our TTK by "approximately one and a half times". This is much easier to digest than the algebra we started with.

Using TTKs to measure things is effective because it keeps us grounded. It's easier to comprehend "I want another enemy that's twice as hard to defeat as the basic slime" than "I want another enemy with 163 health." This becomes especially true when non-linear mechanics (such as our defense stance mechanic) start getting thrown into the mix and complicating these relationships. It's a powerful tool to keep track of how our game is playing out as things change. As our game grows in scope, we may end up defining several baseline TTKs—for example, a "basic" enemy of each level can serve as the standard TTK which every other enemy of that level gets measured against. We can calculate a recommended character level for each game level based on that level's "basic" enemy and our intended TTK.

Some other things to consider as your game becomes more playable:

- Is your game successfully passing its intended intensity levels to the player?
- Do your game mechanics have interesting and meaningful relationships? For example, can a defensive stance *actually change the outcome of a scenario* or does it merely delay the inevitable?
- Are there any instances of dissonance between your mechanics? Do mechanics that are supposed to fight each other or work together do so as expected?
- Are the obvious parts of your game obvious enough and are the obscure parts obscure enough? Do things progress smoothly and according to plan, or is the player stumbling?

And most importantly...

- *Is the game actually fun?*

Having sound game design fundamentals does not automatically make people care about what's happening within your game world. It doesn't magically mean your mechanics are interesting. And the experience you deliver isn't going to be immersive just because your game is perfectly balanced. Areas of your game that you thought might be huge hits might turn out to be awkward or unintuitive. Parts that you think are really cool might need to be cut out. Some mechanics might end up clashing in way that can't be rectified without large sacrifices. And when that happens, reevaluate. Add some new mechanics or change existing ones. Maybe using a wealth stat to determine a nation's attack power ended up not being the best idea, and you decide you need to add a military stat (but be mindful of feature creep!). Don't think of these things as signs you have a bad game, this is just the process. As they say:

"No plan survives contact with reality."

So where do I begin my anime themed open world PvP survival MMO with crafting and base building?

Congratulations, you've completed an introductory crash course in game design fundamentals. Don't worry, there's only four years, five dozen employees, and a ten million dollar crowdfunding campaign separating you and your dream game. But that's nothing a little determination and effort can't overcome, right?

You're now armed with enough knowledge to begin designing games out of the worlds you've created as a worldbuilder. But don't expect to become the next millionaire indie developer! Like all things, developing this skill will take lots of practice, and being successful in this field requires no small amount of luck. Not to mention that many games have other requirements, such as programming knowledge or the ability to fabricate game pieces.

For most worldbuilders, one of the easiest ways to create a game out of their world is to make a homebrew tabletop RPG. Worldbuilders are already storytellers, which is the half the job of a GM in a tabletop RPG. The other half is marrying this story with fun and engaging mechanics that suck the players into the world you've created. Tabletop RPGs require few pieces beyond sheets that outline characters, simple maps that can be drawn on paper or a whiteboard, and little figures that can represent different characters. Thanks to the magic of the internet, these things don't even need to be physical anymore. I'd like to give a shout out to Tabletop Simulator, GMForge (made by /u/noobulater!), and roll20.net.

For those wanting to make a video game, remember that you might need art and sound assets in addition to programming skills. Consider game software such as GameMaker, Godot, and Unity. These tools have great communities behind them and are very useful to both novices and vets.

In the end, remember that game design is an art form not unlike worldbuilding. Like all art forms, they can be their most powerful when you break their established rules. So be creative—as long as it's fun, you're doing a good job!

WBSPN: IN-WORLD SPORTS

UNoahGuy

*H*ello and welcome to the first airing of WBSPN! The Worldbuilding Sports Network is dedicated to the creation and maintenance of the wacky, or otherwise unusual, sports seen throughout the worldbuilding community!

In most worlds, including this one, sports frequently develop from ancient military practices or from children messing around. In the real world sports such as sprinting, wrestling, archery, and boxing seem to come directly from the military traditions in the ancient Near-East. Other ancient sports such as lacrosse and the mesoamerican ball game rely heavily on team building elements, also necessary in battle. Later sports built off of elements of earlier games to change them up or improve on them, as can be seen in the divergence in between rugby and American football.

Think about your own worlds' histories: what military activities did early armies have to train for? Dragon-riding? Tree-climbing? Rock-throwing? No matter what the activity is, try to use it as a base for your future sport. Sports are a product of not only history, but also anatomy and biology. Maybe some of your races have special appendages that can help them do certain things like hang from trees with a tail. Think of these possibilities when coming up with your sport! In settings with multiple sentient species consider that different species might play different, specialized, roles. Then again, one of more of the species do not even have to be sentient for the game to be enjoyable. An example in the real world would be horse racing, as the sport tests both the human jockey's and the horse's natural racing ability. Also, if you have a multi-race world, some sports might be exclusively played by one race.

Perhaps one of the leading factors in how sports become popular is if the rules, play, and type of game is compatible with the culture it was created in. Cultures that value communication and teamwork will tend to have sports that reflect those characteristics. For example, soccer is an easy-to-play team sport played by most of the world. Americans for the most part have shunned one game of football for another more bellicose version. On the other hand, cultures that value individual achievement might have more personal based sports where each person is their own team. However, this does not mean a collectivist culture will not enjoy these types of sports.

Rules determining the pace of, and amount of effort required in, each game might also change depending on the larger culture. Take the United States for example. As the culture becomes more connected and concerned with fast-paced excitement slow sports lose their popularity. Take the continual rise of fast paced hockey compared to baseball. Baseball was once considered America's Pastime, but faster paced sports have begun to eclipse it.

Sports also have the effect of changing the cultures that play them. The sheer economic effects of the Superbowl and the World Cup cannot be understated. 1.25 billion chicken wings are eaten on Superbowl Sunday in the US alone. Sub-cultures of soccer fans, such as hooligans, can form around certain teams and cause much trouble. Sports can be so universal in a culture that everything else could cease operating on a major gameday.

Think about how it will be played and how it is won. Is there a point system? If not, how does a team consider themselves to be the victors? How often are points scored and how long are the games are intended to last? These can also be important factors to decide on. In high scoring games, like basketball or football, the audience does not erupt into the same kind of madness as when a soccer star scores what may be the only goal of the entire game. Also, will you allow ties? Making every game a fight for victory, even beyond a regulated end time, is fun but can be tiring on the players and fans alike.

There are some games that are terrifying for the players and amusing to the audience. Gladiatorial games or other "blood sports" can also exist in a culture. Maybe the people that originated the sport are particularly bellicose, or their religion requires unique and exorbitant sacrifices. These sports can develop from religious rituals or act as a cruel form

Photo: Marvin Ronsdorf on Unsplash

of execution for prisoners. Fighting to the death could be a way of determining a winner in many high-stakes games.

If your world is set within the fantasy or sci-fi genre be prepared to go wild. Sports that involve magical or fantasy elements will always have a unique flair to them. Think of Quidditch, for example—however fun it sounds, Quidditch is a poorly designed game relying too heavily on two players and one ball. However, you must always make sure your sport makes sense within your world; a high fantasy world with curling as their favorite past time might turn some heads, but as long as there is proper reasoning and it just *feels* right, you'll be fine.

Lastly, look up different rules for major sports in the real world and take inspiration. You must be prepared to write down the rules, so hypothetically you and your friends could play it after perusing the rulebook and not get confused. People always love to play games, why should your world be an exception? But then again, exceptions are kind of the rule when it comes to worldbuilding.✎

FEATURED ARTIST: XANTH THE WIZARD

My name's Logan and I'm a third-year student in Illustration. I run a tabletop and fantasy inspired blog on Tumblr where I discuss a variety of topics I and post my own custom content twice a week. I consider myself a storyteller and have been drawing and writing since I was young. I've always loved fantasy and got my first chance to play Dungeons & Dragons in college; I've been hooked ever since. I've even started running my own campaign. Most of my work is digital and has a fun cartoony look, inspired by animated films and shows. I'm most interested in drawing fantasy characters, monsters, and magical items.

Despite having a serious and developed D&D campaign, my world can be completely ridiculous. A psychic squid that can only be activated by slapping someone? Sure. A magic talking mushroom that lives in a log? Why not? I love being able to craft my own world, it gives me the freedom to push my imagination and be silly. I love to surprise and delight my players, while also breaking the serious fantasy conventions set by media like Lord of the Rings.

Often my inspirations for designing custom magic items or monsters comes from art that I find online or from my spontaneous thoughts. But when I'm out of ideas I often use random word generators and force myself to come up with a way to put the words/ideas together, no matter how awful. After a few rounds of having done that I look at what I've got and throw away the bad stuff. It's a lot of fun and will impress your players.✎

See more work at:

- Tumblr
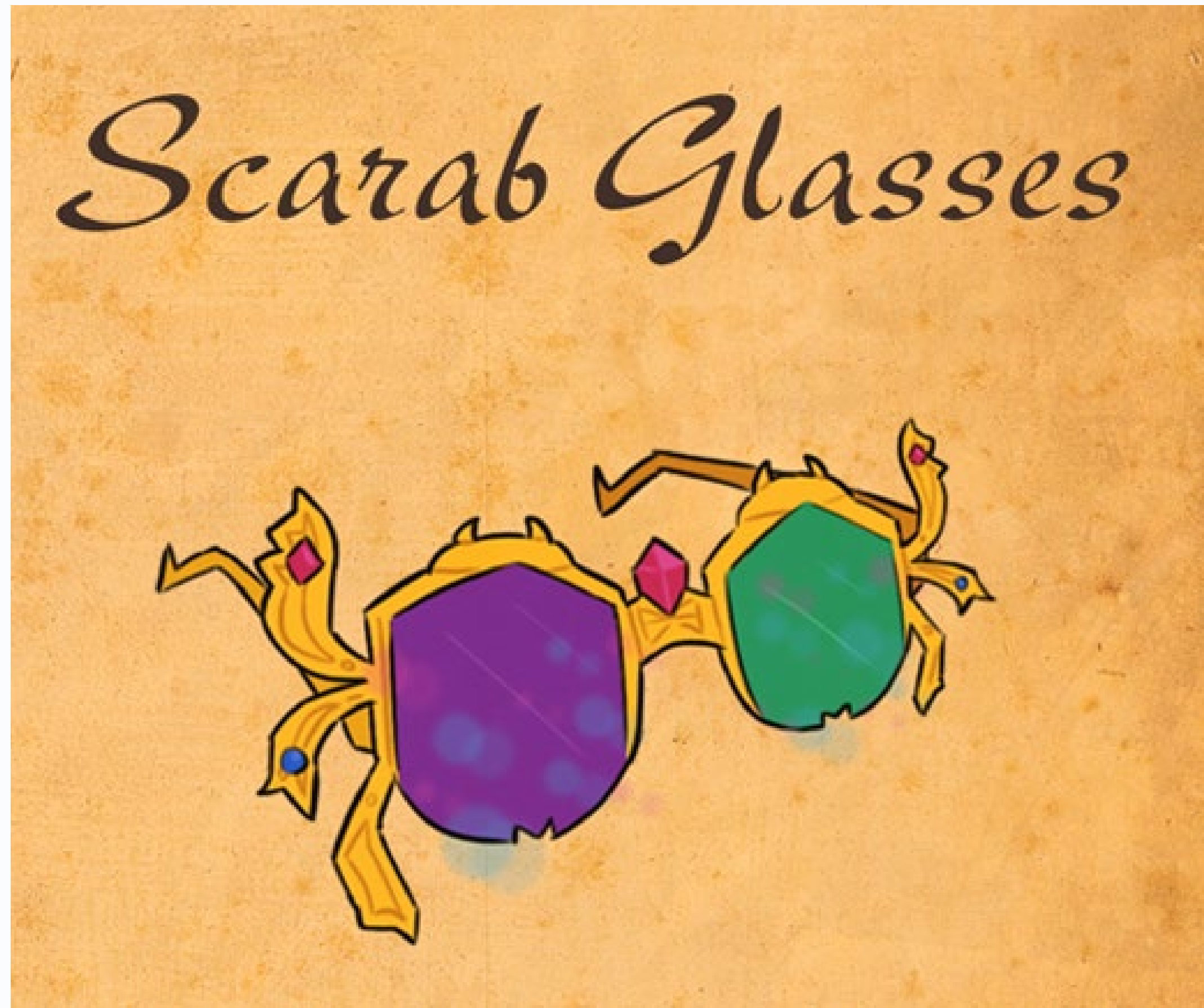
Digital.

Digital.

Cake the Wizard, Digital.

PROMPTS

It's easy to get stuck, hit writer's block, or overlook small details. We would like to try and combat these troubles by asking questions about your world that you may not have thought of, as well as by offering writing prompts. If you would like to write a short story based on one of the writing prompts, or have a prompt you would like to share with us, please submit it to us at contact@worldbuildingmonthly.com or social media. Submitted stories must be based on the following prompts in order to be eligible for reproduction in the next issue.

File Requirements:

- The file must be no longer than 5,000 words
- The file must include title and author(s)

Worldbuilding Prompts:

- What games do people in your world play?
- What festivals exist in your world?
- How advanced are the basic systems of infrastructure? (Roads, sewers, water systems, etc)

Writing Prompts:

- *It was a whistling sound, echoing, drawing nearer...*
- *The minstrel plucked her lute and her words drew tears to the eyes of drunken men, all the while her companion had his fingers deep in the pockets of a lord.*
- *At the edge of the shore he signed off on a package marked only with a purple eye—no other address or names were necessary.*

THE WIZARD AND THE SOLDIER

StronglyOPlatypus

Ostovios stretched a feeble hand out to grab one of the bars. The cold metal on his skin felt almost soothing compared to what he knew he was about to endure. He rapped his ring against the steel as hard as he could, then held onto the bar for dear life. Soon enough, the cart stopped, the cage shook, the lock opened, and a guard stood inside the cage before the wizard. Just like clockwork. Ostovios pretended to claw at the young sentinel's shin and the man instinctively kicked. Then he kicked again. And again, more uneasy this time, but no less painful. Over and over the ornate iron boot struck the old scholar's chest, over and over the guard mouthed "I'm sorry," to Ostovios's deaf ears, and over and over Ostovios prayed to make it stop, briefly regretting the choice he had made. But like he always did, he endured it.

When the onslaught was over Ostovios lay on the floor, still holding the bar, coughing up blood. His features contorted in pain. That face was one he did not have to fake. He released the bar he had clung so tightly to and waited for the soldier to leave. When he was sure there was no one watching him, that the door was locked and the cart was moving again, Ostovios inspected the leather strap he had pulled from the guard's greave. That was all he needed: an anchor to his soon-to-be ally. The guard was a boy, really, couldn't be more than twenty-five in age. He was a baby compared to Ostovios's two hundred and sixty-four, unused to war or keeping prisoners. One day, under different circumstances, the boy might have learned to follow his superiors' orders blindly. But now, with a young mind harboring ideals, scruples, and misgivings, the sentry had his doubts. Or, that was what Ostovios was counting on. Hopefully the guilt would delay the next beating long enough for Ostovios to win his freedom.

With the child gone, Ostovios began the spell. First he closed his eyes. Sight was always the most powerful sense, and even with the lids closed tightly little glimpses of light peeked through. He buried his head in his arms until everything was black, until even the blackness turned to a complete lack of any color at all. The wizard felt his mind begin to wander, begin to free itself from the illusion his senses fed him. He was glad to rid himself of the taste of blood in his mouth, to shed the smells he had from his days in the cage, smells that he would rather wash away and leave to the death flies for their vile sustenance. Finally, Ostovios forced out the pain from his ribs. If he had not already numbed his senses, he thought, he might've felt a relieved sigh escape his mouth. He muttered a small prayer to draw out the spiritual essence of the leather, then abandoned the chill of the wind, the gentle droop of his skin on his old bones, any hint of the corporeal world that limited his abilities until only the Void remained. Everything except his mind. His mind, and the leather he had taken from the pitiable boy.

No one truly knew what the Void was. What primal gods had created it, or why it remained even after Reality was created. There was no direction in the Void, no space or time. Ostovios and everything else in the accursed place, if you could call it a place at all, existed as a single point. This made it very easy to find what he came for. Powerful magic, like the spell he was about to perform, came at a price. Ostovios had once paid with his ears, decades ago. He banished his sense of hearing to the soundless Void, severing his ears in a profane ritual so that the sensation would have no connection to his body in Reality. Now he had come to retrieve his hearing. He willed it to him, to join with his disembodied mind and that of the leather strap. The spirit of his ears in tow, he returned to the real world.

Ostovios rushed back to Reality, but stopped short of returning to his body. His body contained his eyes and skin and nose, his muscles and bones. If he entered it, again he would be a mere old man at anyone's mercy. So long as he was ethereal the universe was his body, and it was malleable to him. He could see nothing and feel nothing, but he could hear. This was enough; the world tended to cater to one's senses, and what could be sensed could be changed. What Ostovios would have seen, felt, and smelt under normal circumstances he now heard. And so it was that the trees around him, the

hills, the horses pulling the cart, the cage and the wood, they all began to sing. It was a cacophony, an endless sea of noise. Very good. Now all that was needed was to find the noise he wanted.

The leather was emitting a small hum, plain as day to Ostovios. The leather, after all, was bound to his soul through magic. It was child's play to tune in to it, just as it was child's play to hear the louder yet similar hum being emitted from, presumably, the guard. Yes this would do; Ostovios set to work. He willed a melody into existence, replacing the hum: the soldier boy would dance to the wizard's tune now, not his own. A crescendo there, a decrescendo here; the guard's feet would march to Ostovios's beat, the speed of the song would decouple his age, the notes would chisel the young man's face, and Ostovios would be free. Satisfied with his master composition, only to be heard by himself and his thrall, the wizard returned to his physical form awaiting liberty.

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Raloh stared at the blood on his shoe, gripping the reins of his horse in one hand and scratching his chin with the other. It didn't feel good, kicking an old man like that. The guilt came over him in cycles. First he saw the blood; it always took a moment for him to process that. Then he walked away; it would be too much to look the prisoner in the eyes as he suffered, to stare at his bloody stomach, the glistening tears, and the rough, blackish scars that sat where ears should. Then he would try to forget about it, and like any time one tries not to think about something the wizard would be the sole thought in his mind. His contemplations would fester in his brain, breeding guilt and anger and something resembling remorse, but before Raloh could determine exactly what he felt the prisoner would make too much noise. Or make too little. Or something would rub Fayel the wrong way and it would be time to beat the breath out of a helpless old man and begin the cycle anew. He wondered whether their guest would break first, or him.

Raloh thought back to the maxims he'd learned as a child, that the noble teachers would preach to him, that his caregivers would repeat whenever he did something wrong. "Never take that which is not yours." "Spill another's blood only when they have spilt yours." "Make true your promises, and hold others to their word." The list went on and on. He wondered how many of them they'd failed to honor with their capture of this prisoner. Raloh's veins were still shut, so that was one. He could only imagine how much had been stolen from the captive, on top of his freedom and his home, of course. And promises, he could only guess… No, he shouldn't think about the wizard. The sun had gone down and the stars emerged in the time Raloh was pondering the wizard. The wizard! It was past time to break Ostovios's concentration again, but for some reason Raloh's feet didn't let him stand. Instead, a tear rolled down his face.

"What's paining you, Ral?" Fayel turned and asked. "I see it on your face, you're not still thinking about the battle are you? There was nothing you could have done."

"No, it's not that, just…"

"What is it? Tell me, that's an order."

"The prisoner! He's an old man and we're sending him to die, if what we're doing doesn't kill him beforehand! I doubt he's even of tactical importance; Jiryg probably just has a grudge against the guy."

"Did you forget what they told us? He's a wizard, dangerous, useful, he could win or lose us this war. I'm going to ignore that last part and remind you that even though we're friends, I'm still your superior, and should have you dismissed for any hint of insubordination."

"Doesn't seem like a magician to me. They're supposed to be able to bend stone, freeze fire, make reality shift to fit their whims. Have you seen him do any of that?" Ral's face felt hot, though whether it was the summer sun, his fiery words, or both, he could not tell.

"How do you expect him to when we-"

"Wait. Do you hear that?"

Fayel made a quizzical expression. A soft melody began to fill the air from the direction of the cage, Raloh could hear it plain as day. For whatever reason Fayel didn't seem to notice it at all. She didn't give any sign of hearing it, even as the music grew louder and faster with each passing moment, as instruments joined the invisible symphony, as a strange feeling came over Raloh like he never felt before.

The music was beautiful, and sad, and happy, and angry, and calm, and every other emotion rolled into one. The music drowned out all other sound, all other sensation. Raloh felt nothing as his hand reached down to the blade by his waist. There was no pain, and not the slightest recognition of Fayel's abject horror as the music inexplicably drove him to sever his ears and twist the point until it pierced the eardrums. Neither did the music stop, even when Raloh had nothing left to hear it with. It just grew louder and faster

as he stood and approached the cage behind him, his foot falling to the beat of the drums. The music was almost solid now, it weighed heavy on his face like lead. He could feel it—feel the wrinkles appear on his face, the whitening hairs disappearing from atop his head and appearing on his chin like weeds. The soft strings fatigued him like nothing ever had before, robbing the muscle from his bones. Slowly the song faded away, imbuing him only with the strength and the overwhelming urge to open the cage door, wake the sleeping prisoner, usher him out of the door, lock himself inside it, and weakly throw the key at the feet of the terrified Fayel. His eyes shut and the world went dark.

When Raloh awoke, he was in a different cage. This one was wider, made of stone, and had a puddle in the corner. A soldier stood watch, a familiar face, but one Raloh could not quite recall the name of. She saw his tired eyes and said something. Raloh heard nothing, and brought his finger up to clear his ear. He felt a scab where cartilage should have been. Panic rose in his stomach, a fluttering mess of bile and worry. The woman spoke again. This time Raloh could see her lips form a word. "Wizard," they spelt.✒

STORIES OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR 1

Adam Bassett

Just *North of the City of Richmond, KY. August 30th, 1862.*

Horace whittled a lump of chestnut oak in a white wicker chair, contemplating the wheat field that swayed in the storm while listening to the distant thundering. Then he noticed the rider in black approaching his home. The man wore a long coat and a short-brimmed cap, which appeared heavy with the weight of stormwater glowing under the fading light of dusk. It couldn't have been anyone he knew, Horace reasoned. He was no good company, attested by the lack of visitors since his wife's passing. Besides, this weather would make even the dumbest folk stay indoors to comfort their families amid the booming cannons around Richmond. No, this man had to be a stranger. His riding was erratic and rushed—he nearly fell off the damn horse when while rounding the path that lead to the porch which Horace sat upon.

"Ed," he said sternly, knowing the boy would hear through the open window. "Get the rifle. Make sure it's loaded."

He heard Ed move around in the family room. The rider lead his horse through a winding road that lined the wheat and around a hill, the tall stalks almost completely obscuring him in the storm. Horace strained his eyes but they were not as keen as they used to be; once or twice he lost the man's position among the fields. Had he been able to harvest when he wanted this year, and had the rains not come so often, he would have had no such trouble. But alas, here he was with a field full of aging wheat, a whittling knife, and old eyes that made it hard to even see the stranger who lurched toward his home.

Horace could hear Ed arguing with young Robert inside. "Back off!" Ed commanded his little brother. "Hurry! No, you can't hold it Rob. Papa wants you to go to bed, lock the door. Just go! I'll get you a snack or somethin' later."

Robert raised his voice to match Ed's. "Why?"

"Because Pa said so!"

"But why can't I hold the gun?"

"'Cause you can't!"

The rider was near the foot of the stairs leading up to their porch when the two boys finally stepped outside. Horace gripped the whittling knife in his pocket and gave the man a nod, noticing the blood on his leg. The stranger's mouth opened, he grumbled something incoherent, and then tumbled ungracefully from the saddle. It spooked the horse, which whinnied and danced away from its fallen rider.

"Shit," Horace said.

Ed held tightly onto the rifle and pointed it at the stranger while Robert and Horace dragged the drenched and bloody man up the steps. Horace's back and legs strained under the exertion. Rob was not very strong yet, but he didn't dare let that boy hold a rifle. At six no boy was smart enough to handle that sort of responsibility. Ed probably couldn't pull the trigger if he had to, but at least he would be careful. Once the stranger regained consciousness he would be wary in the presence of a rifle pointed at his skull.

He lay on Horace's porch, belly-up, making all of his ugly features known to the three who stared at him. His cap was still out in the rain, having fallen during the struggle to lift him up the stairs. Horace had no desire to go fetch it. Where it had rested upon his head there was instead a small mess of brown hair, mostly dry at the top but dripping everywhere else. The dark coat, upon further examination, was in fact dark blue before the storm. Rows of brass buttons were sewn across his belly and chest, and yellow-lined bars were on each shoulder. Blood leaked from a hole in his left leg, a few inches above his knee, and a scar split his lip. The man's chin was wide and his nose looked broken, but there was no sign of blood around it. Horace stood over the tall stranger, grunted, and told Ed to keep an eye out for any others.

"He's an army man," Robert declared.

Horace nodded. The boy was right. No sense in lying; not about that, at least.

"Northerner," Horace muttered. He listened for any others which might be slithering through his wheat fields, but it was hard to pick anything out of the storm.

"A Yankee!" Robert shouted. "Robert Darren's Pa says they steal girls and all your stuff!"

"Mr. Darren's an idiot," Horace said.

"Keep him away from me!"

Ed adjusted his grip on the rifle, looking a bit less confident.

"He's just a man," Horace told his sons. "Just a man born in another part of the country."

"Not our country no more," Robert declared.

"Kentucky's still a part of Lincoln's States," Ed said.

"Nu-uh."

"Shut up Rob! It is."

"Boys!" Horace growled. They stopped. Through the rain he could hear men shouting like whispers on the wind. Every couple of seconds, rifles popped. Cannons thundered. Among the rustling leaves Horace could hear the cries of men at war. "Help me get him inside."

"But he's the enemy."

"Quiet, Rob," Horace yelled. He knew, when he looked at the child's reddening face, that he had lost his temper. Horace took a breath, collecting himself. He lifted the wounded soldier and told Rob to do the same, albeit more gently. Rob did his best. "I'm not leaving an unconscious man on my porch," Horace said. "Not what your Ma would have done."

"So?" Robert asked.

Horace pretended he hadn't heard the brat. Ed let go of the gun and helped lift the stranger. Horace inspected the wound after they set him on the round kitchen table, his feet and right forearm dangling off, not before spitting on his fingers and wiping the dirt off on his pants. Blood swelled where he prodded the leg wound, seeping into the uniform around it. There was nothing to be done about the leg, save perhaps amputation, but Horace didn't have it in him to chop a man's leg off. The procedure would most likely kill the stranger, scar the kids, and make a mess of his home.

"Ed," he said to his oldest son, "why don't you go and see if you can find Mrs. Harris. She should be home."

"Pop—"

"Go. Tell her it's an emergency. A southern boy badly wounded."

"But that's a *northern* soldier," Robert pointed out.

Ed nodded. "That's more than a mile away, though. It'll take all night to get there."

"No it won't," Horace sighed. "Forty minutes, tops. You're quick."

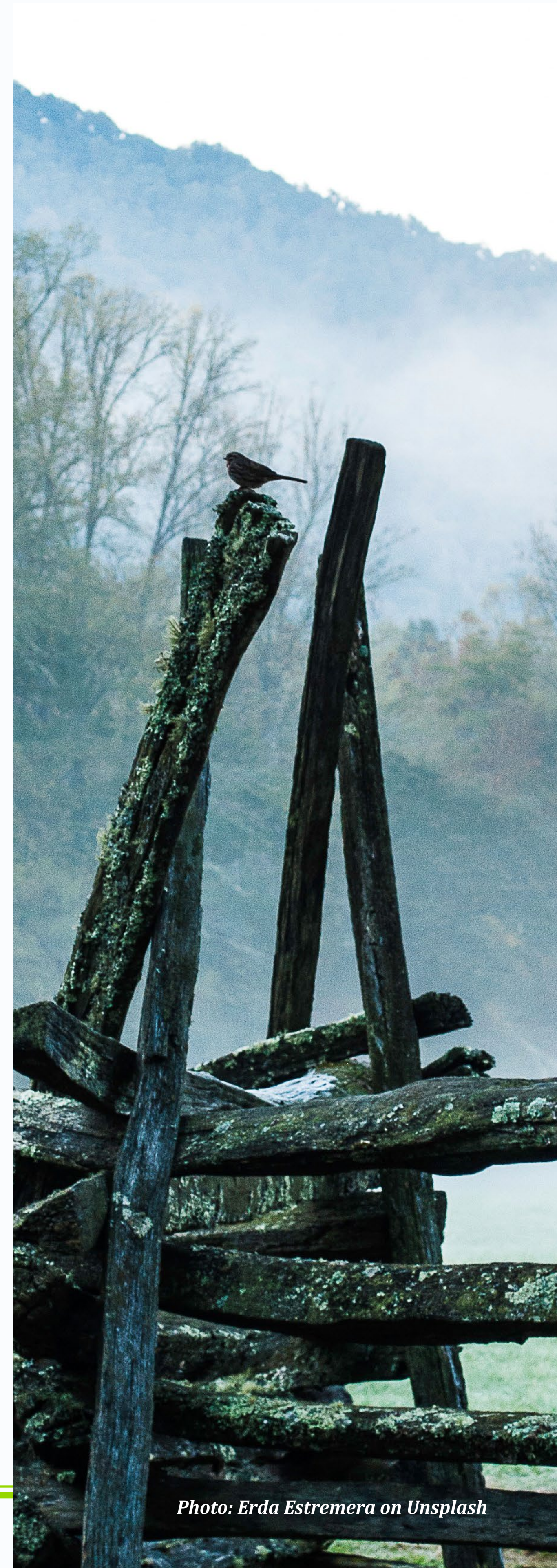"Best get movin'," Robert sneered. Though he looked conflicted.

Ed huffed and put on a raincoat. Horace thanked him but the boy said nothing back and walked out the door, tossing his Pop the rifle before slamming the door shut and running out into the storm. Horace tossed it on the couch. The rifle made a soft *thud*.

"Stay away from that," he said to Robert.

His son was already walking down the hall to his bedroom.

Horace inspected the stranger for any other wounds. There were a few scratches around his ankles and hands, and he noticed a bit of scorched fabric on the soldier's shoulder. Fragments of the northerner's uniform flaked into ash in Horace's fingers, which he smelled. He wondered why he bothered. It smelled like ash.

Horace yelled for Rob to go fetch a few of his clothes from the tall dresser in his bedroom, while starting to rifle through the uncon- scious soldier's pockets. He had a few spare minie ball rounds in one, and it occurred to Horace how fortunate the northerner was not to have been hit with one of those. He would have never made it to Horace's farm. He wouldn't have made it half that distance. In the other pocket was a wallet which contained two dollars, a hand- ful of coins, a slip of folded paper that when unrav- elled read *Jacob West*, and two small and worn pictures. The first was of a man who looked a bit like the man on the table, but without the promi- nent lip scar. The second was of a woman with the soldier, both smiling, standing beside a pond under a tree covered in small white flowers. Horace put the money into his own pocket, putting the rest back. He stopped and looked the young man over. He could feel a stinging panic begin to set in; he stared at the body on his kitchen table, still bleed- ing from the wound in its leg, blood beginning to pool on the wood. Instinctively he swept it away with a nearby rag—smearing the red in a thin film over the table—and soon he gave up. Rebecca would have been furious...

...Horace looked up as heavy footsteps approached from down the hall. Robert approached with hands full of old clothes. They were torn and sun-stained, and maybe a bit too big, but it would do. A pink stain was on one of the shirts Robert brought. Horace grinned, remember- ing that it had been the fourth stain he'd gotten in the course of a single week, just a few years back, when Rebecca wasn't yet ill. She'd beat him with her bare hands and shouted about how clumsy he was, how it just had to be the button-down one that she liked and how he better wish God was fond of him—if she couldn't get that out she would kill him.

He smiled at the stain. Lord, he missed his wife.

"Thank you, son. Stay close please, I may need you again."

Robert nodded and ran off somewhere. Horace took a pair of scissors from the drawer beneath the coffee pot and pulled the soldier's coat off, cutting his legs free of the soaked and bloody trousers as well. He tossed the ribbons on the floor. The buttons collided with the wooden boards louder than he expected. Horace looked through the windows, wondering what happened to the rest of the Northerners, stopping his work long enough to lock the front door. There had been thousands of men and a dozen cannons; Ed was ecstatic about it the other day, having claimed to see the glint of the soldiers' steel through the woods. The boys had wanted to go see the battle yesterday when they heard the thunder from the cannons and the chorus of rifles and shouts, before the rain began. He wondered if they'd ever learn how lucky they were to have a Pa who wouldn't let them picnic beside a battlefield.

Horace finished cutting. He'd exposed the wounded leg and left the other half of the strang- er's trousers intact. He explored the hole again. As grotesque as it was, the charred and torn flesh was also fascinating to behold. He prodded it with a finger and blood spilled down the soldier's leg, catching in his leg hair and dripping down onto the table. Horace wiped it off with a finger and dragged it across the stranger's coat. He heard Robert make a *yuck* sound, followed by his boy's feet beating down the hall.

The coffee was old and room-temperature but it felt good to hold the mug. He would have made a fresh pot for Morgan when she arrived but he needed to sit down more, and he had become accustomed to old coffee. He could always offer her some water.

> *Morgan looked up at the boys. "You may want to step aside. This won't be pretty," she warned.*

It still amazed Horace what a man could get used to. Used to be that every morning Rebecca would make a fresh batch of coffee. The house would fill with the scent of whatever beans he was able to find in town. She liked a dark roast, he liked milk and plenty of sugar; *a mean sweet cup*, she called it. He had that just about every morning for seventeen years, then he would tend the fields. She would settle into the couch and mend the clothes of whoever left them for her. It was a small busi- ness, but she made a quarter for the little things and a dollar for major work. The others who lived nearby adored Rebecca for the service. Horace had gotten used to that routine—coffee, a bite of bread, working the fields, and coming home to see his wife in the couch mending one of the neighbors' garments...

...the slamming door interrupted his bitter- sweet memories. Ed walked in first, looking like he stopped to swim in the river on the way back, with a woman in tow. Morgan Harris was a tall woman and stepped inside with a sense of pur- pose. Her high boots stomped on the welcome mat, leaving mud behind where she scraped them. She carried a duffel bag over one shoulder and a small umbrella over the other. She set the bag half atop the welcome mat, the umbrella atop it, the slight incline allowing rainwater to pool around the base. Her coat was a pale green color and her thick framed glasses so closely resembled the color of her black hair that, to Horace, it seemed as if they had merged as one around her ears. She was drip- ping with water from the storm when Ed took her coat like a little gentleman, even walking a little straighter as he carried it to the hooks on the wall. Horace suppressed his grin.

"Morgan," he said. "Thank you for coming at such short notice."

"Ed said somebody was hurt?"

"Yes, this way. I believe the young man may have been caught in the crossfire at Richmond. A bullet, looks like. How he found his way here is beyond me."

Morgan took a minute to examine the man. She opened his eyelids—he made no response—and searched for any signs of injury beyond the leg wound that Robert pointed out the moment he walked back into the kitchen.

"Is his nose broken?" she asked.

"Not sure," Ed said. He stood with Horace, both leaning against the counter, watching the horse doctor work on the soldier. If she was struggling to decide what to do, she made a convincing show otherwise.

"Ed, grab that bag I brought please."

Ed moved quickly, presenting the duffel bag to Morgan as if it were a treasure. She was preoccu- pied for a moment, taking a glass from the sink and filling it with well water from a barrel beside the ice box. She thanked Ed when she returned to the table and pushed the soldier aside. She set the bag beside his head, unzipping and rifling through its contents. Ed rejoined Horace by the counter, crossed his arms, and returned to watching Mor- gan clean the wound. She poured water over it— Horace immediately became aware of the water damage that would be done to his table—and then retrieved her metal instruments. There were pliers, tweezers, scissors large and small, a few knives, and sutures together with a needle.

"The bullet is still in his leg," she announced. "I need to take it out. Horace, would you like to grab me a tarp or somethin' to catch the blood? It could get messy."

Horace brought her a few rags, which were still damp from doing dishes earlier, but would help at least. Together they lodged a few beneath the soldier's leg and wrapped more around the wound. They would be ruined, but the floral pattern was a bit much for his taste, and they were well-stained already anyway.

Morgan looked up at the boys. "You may want to step aside. This won't be pretty," she warned.

Neither moved.

"Suit yourselves," she said.

Morgan began searching for the bullet, now lodged deep in the soldier's leg, feeling for it with her fingers and moving the flesh aside with the smallest pair of scissors. She ignored the steady blood flow that had already soaked one of the rags with a steely determination, even when the soldier's eyes opened and a bellowing wail left his mouth. Robert left the kitchen, though he could still hear the boy in the family room. Horace walked forward when Morgan called for him and held the man still. He thrashed for a moment and Morgan took him by the face, putting aside her work for a moment, telling him that if he didn't stay still he would die.

"Keep up the pressure," Morgan instructed. She tossed a rag from beneath the man's leg at Horace and said, "He needs something to bite down on."

Horace set the part of the rag that hadn't been bloodied in the man's mouth and told him to bite down. He did. The shouts were muffled by the wet cloth and the stranger's tears rolled across his face, toward his ears. Morgan yelled back for the man to

keep still. Horace found a better grip and secured the young man's leg, already beginning to feel sweat run down his back. The man's hands gripped the sides of the table and held tight. Morgan made a noise—Horace looked up at her and found that he could not see her eyes beneath damp and disheveled bangs.

"Pa," Robert shouted.

"I've found it," Morgan announced.

The soldier was breathing loudly, his chest heaving.

"What?" Horace yelled to his son.

"I don't like this."

"I need to get the bullet out, hon," Morgan nearly shouted, not waiting for his response before going back into the poor man's leg with her tools. He wailed through the rag, looking up at Morgan the best he could. Horace saw tears in the man's eyes.

"Pa?"

"A minute," he said.

Morgan hissed a few cusses and the soldier cried out. She bit her lip and hunched down closer to the wound, slowly shifting her fingers and tweezers inside the man's leg.

"Pa."

"Ed! Do something!"

Morgan's lips curled into a smile and she slowly raised her hands from the wound. She cradled the bullet between the tweezers and a long middle finger, lifting it from the flesh it had bored into. She dropped it on the bloody rags around the man's leg and took a step back, grinning like a fool.

"We did it," she said.

The soldier lay there on the table, unmoving. Upon further inspection Horace discovered the man was once again unconscious.

"Pa," Ed said softly.

"I'm on my way."

"Is he okay?"

"Yes," Horace said, walking quickly to the hall where his sons hid.

Robert was crying. Ed held his brother's shoulder, looking out of place.

"What's going on?" he asked, sitting in front of his youngest.

"The - the-"

"It's reminding him of Ma," Ed said.

"Oh," Horace said, speaking to Robert. "I'm sorry, son. Listen—hey—there's no need for all of this. Listen, your Ma is fine. She's not sick anymore."

"I wish she didn't go."

Horace held his son close. Ed walked off. Robert cried for a while after that, eventually pulling away

from his father's embrace and telling him that he was hungry. Horace was glad it was over—is knees hurt from the way he was sitting and he hated these fits. They walked together back into the kitchen, where Horace noticed that Rob wouldn't look at the wounded soldier. Ed was talking with Morgan, his arms crossed over his chest and his voice cracking a little, asking about the stranger.

"Hey," Ed said, "Mr. Lewis was wounded like this... fella'. Think he'll end up in a wheelchair too?"

"Hard to say," Morgan said, looking over the wound once more. "We'll know more when he wakes. Even if he can't walk now there's a good chance he will just need time to heal. The wound was clean. Not sure exactly what comes next. I just didn't have the best tools for this — there I was, expecting to finish my coffee and read a little tonight, check on the horses before bed and such, when Ed comes out of the dark and tell me a man's been shot."

"Sorry," Horace said.

She laughed. "It's fine."

There was a moment of silence. Robert made his way into the kitchen, keeping far from the bloody table. He grabbed a piece of bread from a loaf on the counter and buttered it, declaring, "I think he will be okay," before walking back to his room with a mouthful. He said something else as he left, the word *wheelchair* in there somewhere, but it was muffled by his snack.

"I guess that settles it," Horace said. Morgan laughed.

She stayed up with him after the boys had gone to bed. Horace was sure it was due to the fact it was still raining. He knew that he made terrible company. He offered her coffee again, only remembering that she had already declined when she did so again by using nearly the same words. Horace idled in the kitchen for a minute while she made her way to the couch, deciding that it was good time for a smoke, and stepped over to the couch. Morgan was watching him while he set the rifle aside and sat down with his pipe kit, taking it out of the thin wooden box that Rebecca and the boys made for him one christmas. He put a leg up on the coffee table, then down on the floor again when he remembered some people thought it was impolite. Besides, one of the legs wobbled a bit. That would need fixing soon, before one of the boys made it worse. It was probably just a loose screw, he hoped. It should be a simple fix.

"Horace?"

He faced his guest, his fingers navigating the pipe kit without needing to look.

"How have things been?"

"Fine," he lied, stuffing the pipe with some tobacco from Teddy Wilson's shop in town. Might be the last he'll ever get from that man; he went south to join the Confederates a few weeks ago. If he died maybe his wife would keep the business up until their son could run it. "Ed's gotten over it. Robert will take longer, but he won't remember much of this later. Boy's lucky 'bout that."

She nodded. "Plenty of things I wish I could forget."

Horace lit a match and pressed at against the tobacco, watching it take on the flame. "Yeah," he said.

"They've grown so quick."

"Ed's gotten tall this year," he took the pipe into his mouth and sucked air in, letting the sweet smoke linger on his tongue.

"Oh my goodness, he has! Almost didn't recognize him when he showed up," she said, taking a sip from her drink. Horace couldn't recall giving that cup to her. He stuffed his hands into his pockets and looked past the woman to the soldier. He was moving the way somebody in a bad dream shifted in their sleep.

"That smells delicious," Morgan said, watching him closely.

He handed her the pipe. She put it between her lips and breathed in, an odd look in her eyes. Her fingers caressed the wooden pipe as the leaves blackened and burned, watching him. As she exhaled smoke wafted around her chin, and her nose, and her lips which generously wrapped around the pipe's stem once more. She breathed in again, her eyes fixed on his, and breathed out another slow shifting stream of grey sweet-smelling smoke.

He took the pipe back from her, which she allowed, and bit on on the stem. He could taste a change in the pipe. He could feel the heat from her breath on the stem and—he stood and turned away from her, staring out the window at the rain which poured mercilessly and listening to the wind which wailed against his home. The windows rattled and lightning tore at the sky over the trees and wheat.

Horace sucked in a deep breath of his pipe smoke, coughing.

The northerner grunted. Horace looked over Morgan's shoulder as he fell off the table. His descent was quick and resulted in a hard *thud*. As the man bemoaned the pain and gripped his leg, Horace took the rifle that he'd left on the couch.

He aimed as Morgan approached, putting the northerner's chest in line with the sights. When they rounded the bloody kitchen table the soldier was clutching at his leg, recoiling when his dirty fingers brushed the stitching. He poked Morgan's handiwork, a dumb expression on his face.

"Hey!" She swatted him. He pushed himself away from her along the floor with his good leg, his boots dragging in front of him. "Now I worked hard on that. Don't you go ruining it!"
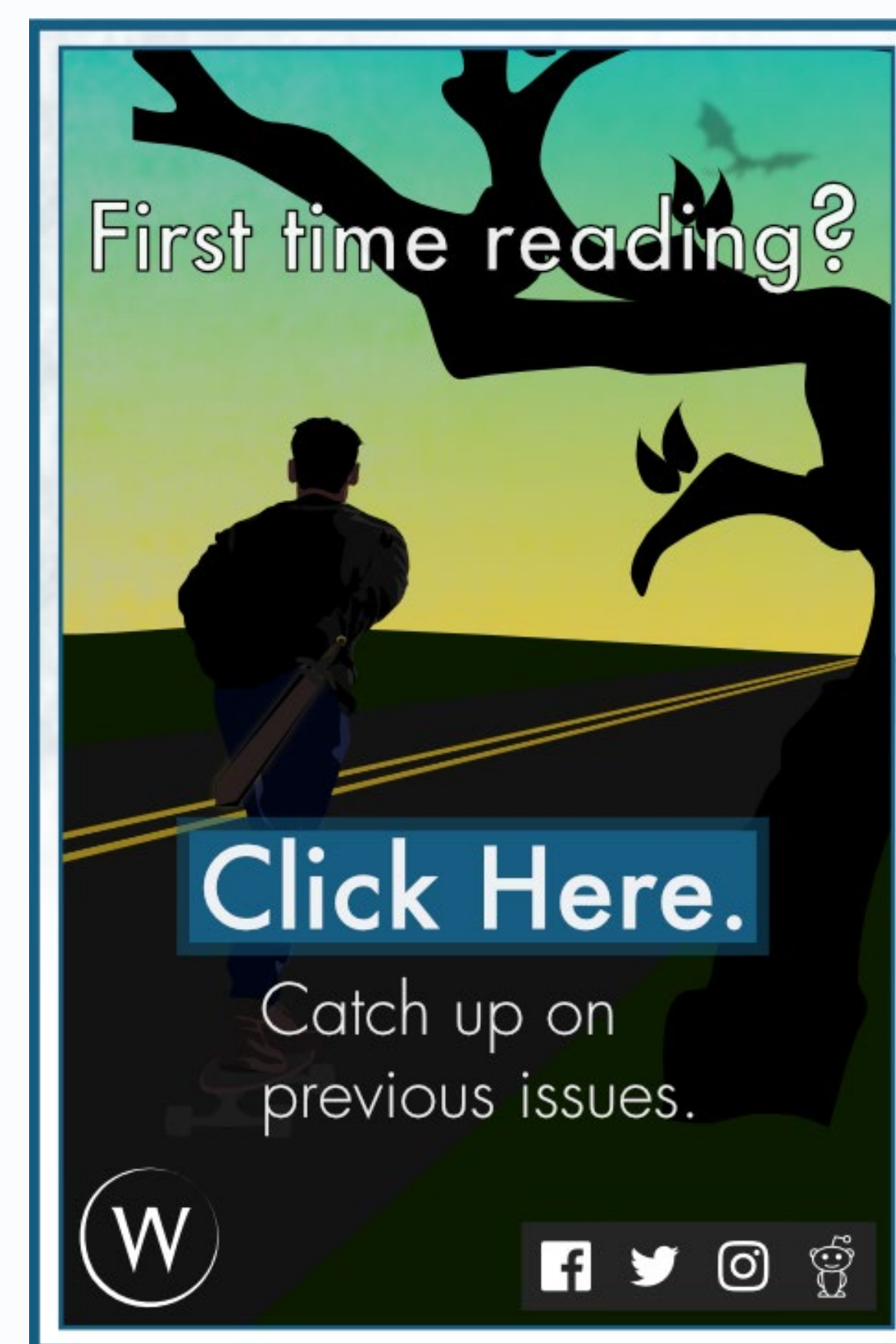
"No, no ma'am."

Horace was surprised to hear a Kentuckian accent in that shaky, young voice.

She paused. "Good."

"What time is it?" he asked.

Morgan's head swivelled looking for a clock.

"Quarter-past eleven," Horace told him. "Welcome back."✎

A UNIVERSE IN CONSTANT FLUX: BUILDING THE WORLD OF WARCRAFT

Casparata

The year is 1994. A few people have a meeting to discuss the marketing strategy for their current project. They're working for a company founded under the name "Silicon & Synapse" three years before that had a brief rebranding period as "Chaos Studios"; just recently it changed again to "Blizzard Entertainment". The project is called "Warcraft" and it's supposed to be a real-time strategy game. This is a new market to break into, there have been only one or two other titles of note in this emerging genre, and on top of that Warcraft is supposed to be the future of the company. There's only one problem: the team is divided over what the game should be about.

Allen Adham, one of the company's founders, would really like to turn this into a series of historic games with a white box design that's easily recognizable on the shelves: "Warcraft: The Roman Empire", "Warcraft: Vietnam", et cetera. Ron Millar and Sam Didier, two of the graphic designers present in the meeting, don't like this idea at all. "They enjoyed fantasy games like Warhammer and Dungeons & Dragons", writes Patrick Wyatt on his blog years later. He is the guy handling the game's naked code. In a clever bid Millar and Didier manage to sell the rest of the team on a fantasy setting by advocating innovation and differentiation; after all, wasn't a world populated by orcs and humans a much better canvas for the unique visual style that was to set Warcraft apart from its competition?

Everything that followed was about the exact opposite of systematic worldbuilding; no one laid the foundation for the world's cosmology, and nobody cared about new and interesting concepts regarding lore. The team was on a tight deadline and consequently all designs had to fit the game's mechanics. Stu Rose, another designer on the team, remembers the process as somewhat chaotic in *Stay Awhile and Listen*, a book retracing the company's early steps to success: "I took some initial ideas that Allen had, and ideas Ron Millar had about scenario designs, and pretty much fleshed out a lot of the names. I was pulling names out of my... uh, out of different orifices. 'I think I'll call

this Stormwind Keep!'" Together with Millar, Rose created the Kingdom of Azeroth that was set to be invaded by orcs—the premise of "Warcraft: Orcs & Humans" was born.

The World of Warcraft I

The setting became a melting pot of 1990s fantasy stereotypes, fueled by the golden age of pen and paper behemoths like Dungeons & Dragons. In a kind of magic-infused medieval period noble human knights rode into battle against brutal orcish hordes; sorcerers conjured water elementals and giant scorpions, while warlocks summoned fire and demons; ogres, skeleton warriors, giant spiders, gelatinous monsters and fire elementals all joined in; lizardmen, hobgoblins and halflings narrowly didn't make the cut because of budget reasons. From today's perspective you wouldn't call the result very original.

However, a fictional universe's character is not only defined by its overall setting and inhabitants but also by the stories told within it and how they're portrayed. While Blizzard may have faltered on the originality front they got to work on the narrative: the conflict between humans and orcs would go on to be the narrative foundation for all Warcraft games, and the portal through which the orcs invaded became the focal point for many story arcs. Yet, more importantly, was the development of the visual design of the world.

"We started out trying to make things more realistic. But in the game, the realistic stuff was thin and tall and just didn't look powerful. So we started squashing the characters so they looked better from the camera angle, and it just turned out that they looked cool and mighty", says Sam Didier in *Stay Awhile and Listen*. Bulky fantasy warriors would become his signature style and what is recognized today as the "Blizzard look". Interestingly a game with a license for the Warhammer universe was also briefly on the table at this stage, so the distinct design might have took some inspiration from it as well.

Its style, along with the flashy colors, gave the world of Warcraft a somewhat cartoony appearance that in turn opened up new opportunities in worldbuilding: if a world doesn't take itself too seriously in its appearance one might as well throw in some more crazy ideas. In the end this is what saved the inhabitants of Azeroth from their generic roots, and they would gain an increasingly distinct flavour in games to come.

Turning a Kitchen Sink into a Recognizable Universe

At the end of "Warcraft: Orcs & Humans" the Kingdom of Azeroth either repels the invaders or succumbs to the orcish hordes, depending on which of the two available campaigns is completed by the player. For the sequel, "Warcraft II: Tides of Darkness", Blizzard needed to make a decision on which ending would become canon. It became clear for the first time that Blizzard only really shines in its worldbuilding if the team is forced to make this kind of decision.

Azeroth is no more at the beginning of "Warcraft II", the human survivors have fled across the sea to the northern kingdom of Lordaeron. Here they forge an alliance with elves and dwarves while the orcs bolster their ranks with trolls and ogres to launch their next attack. When the game is released in 1996 the manuals of "Warcraft II: Tides of Darkness", and those of the expansion pack "Beyond the Dark Portal", provide detailed accounts of the conflicts: they describe the nations of humans, elves, and dwarves, as well as the orcish clans. They include maps that show how the stage now spans whole continents instead of a tiny kingdom. Leading figures on all sides are portrayed, and many of them would go on to become pillars of the Warcraft mythos: Gul'dan, Anduin Lothar, Orgrim Doomhammer, Uther Lightbringer, Ner'zhul, Deathwing. At last the derivative world from the first game transformed into something more.

If you play "World of Warcraft" today you'll find that many of these building blocks are still in the game, and this is in no small part thanks to Chris

Metzen. Metzen is a designer who first contributed a lot of art and then large parts of lore, later going on to become Creative Director of the sequel. How did Blizzard manage to build a consistent world over such a long time? How do all of the new elements that have been added over the years fit neatly into the existing picture? The short answer is that they didn't, and they don't. Blizzard is just really good at creating the illusion that all pieces fall into place. Only players who have experienced Warcraft over many years would notice how the world has changed and shifted from game to game.

The Weird Career of a Small Island

In "Warcraft II" the orc campaign features an island with the tomb of a certain Sargeras which, if one wants to examine the twists and turns of Warcraft's worldbuilding history, is an exemplary case. In roughly 20 years of game development the small island would grow to the size of Australia and change its location on the world map multiple times. When the island is first visited by the orc warlock Gul'dan in "Warcraft II" it is just off the coast of the kingdom-turned-continent of Azeroth. When the night elf warden Maiev Shadowsong tracks down her escaped prisoner Illidan Stormrage to the island in "Warcraft III: The Frozen Throne" it's suddenly part of an archipelago in the middle of the ocean, close to the unforgiving Maelstrom and far away from any coastline.

In the online role-playing game "World of Warcraft" the island didn't exist on the map at all until the latest expansion pack, "Legion", where it suddenly enjoys a spot on the center stage. As befits such an important location it has been blown up to the size of a small continent.

These geographical shenanigans are a byproduct of the overall expansion of the Warcraft cosmos. The island simply became more and more important as the role of Sargeras, the occupant of its ancient tomb, likewise changed and grew. In 'Warcraft: Orcs & Humans' demons were simply a source for the unholy orcish magic, dwelling in a vaguely mentioned underworld. In "Warcraft II" this was retconned and demons now lived in

the Twisting Nether, a kind of interdimensional plane. In this incarnation Sargeras was one of their mighty lords, once defeated and buried with his secrets on an island "a thousand years ago" according to the updated game lore.

In "Warcraft III", however, Sargeras is reintroduced as the leader of the Burning Legion: a vast, world-devouring army. The Legion had a similar fate in mind for the kingdom-turned-continent-turned-planet of Azeroth, for this purpose it enslaved the orcs as their vanguard to soften up the defenders. But in the timeline of "Warcraft III" this was already their second attempt at conquering Azeroth—the first one was foiled by the newly introduced night elves and their allies who killed Sargeras 10,000 years ago, who's suddenly he's been dead for much longer. This allowed Blizzard to recontextualize the human-orc conflict and to simultaneously de-villanize the orcs, who were just unlucky: forced to be pawns for the Burning Legion.

"World of Warcraft" picked up where "Warcraft III" left off, going on to expand on the world's cosmos enough to change Sargeras' origins to those of a fallen god. Several expansions gradually reveal the shaping of Azeroth by godlike Titans, of which Sargeras was one before becoming the leader of the Burning Legion. Sargeras outgrew his initial role by several magnitudes, along with his tomb—you can't have a god be buried on a tiny, unimportant island, *really*.

Telling Old Stories Anew

The creation of "World of Warcraft" fueled the biggest leaps in the franchise's worldbuilding. For the real-time strategy games of the past it was enough to show individual loosely connected locations of the world. However, for the massive and fully explorable world of an MMORPG, Blizzard now needed to fill in all the blank spots on the map and flesh out elements that had only been briefly touched upon before, if at all.

With the new immersive environments came the opportunity to retcon earlier lore and introduce new events to the long history of Azeroth—and Blizzard is still doing this with every new expansion. Players even got the opportunity to experience historic moments from the first Warcraft games first hand with a series of time-travel events. Only recently did Chris Metzen try to cement the history of the universe with the "World of Warcraft: Chronicle" series published by Dark Horse. For all intents and purposes this would serve as a world bible: a definitive and all-encompassing document representing canon lore rather than an evolving in-game world that can grow and change as new content demands it. It remains to be seen for how long its contents will endure unaltered—and how well they manage to contain the unwieldy nature of the *World of Warcraft*.✎

UNoahGuy

I recently had the chance to sit down and talk with the creators of the new worldbuilding community website WorldAnvil.com. Dimitris and Janet are a couple who have been worldbuilding for a combined fifty years between them.

What are your backgrounds?

Janet: I am a writer, I've always written. Since I can remember I was completely obsessed with fantasy, scifi, and everything that brought me into a new world. I have an affinity for Middle Ages fantasy, however, maybe because I have a degree in Historical Music and come from a family of historians. Right now I work as a musician but I still do a lot of writing.

Dimitris: I have a background in computer science, with degrees in both computing and social psychology. It has been interesting because I started my degree social psychology before the onset of social media, so I've seen a massive change in society before my eyes. Oh, and I am also a photographer!

What made you interested in worldbuilding?

Dimitris: My interest in worldbuilding started off when I was just five years old, with a journal in primary school that was filled with stories and worlds from my mind. Then I graduated to Dungeons and Dragons (D&D). I have thirty years of experience worldbuilding.

Janet: I see my worldbuilding, and interest in it, as an offshoot of my writing. As a writer I see worldbuilding as a requirement to support the plot that I create. Worldbuilding to flesh out D&D campaign settings is more to add suspension of disbelief. I have always been chaotic; always had bits and pieces of worldbuilding spread out everywhere, mostly on backs of sheet music.

Do you have your own worlds, and if so can you share their premises?

Dimitris: I am always building worlds so there are many underneath my belt. Worlds that I write always end up lost in mountains of notes. I just felt like I was not the only one: so many notebooks with brilliant ideas scribbled in them lost in piles of papers somewhere.

The world I am working on now is called Hydria. I would describe it as an era of reason in a sci-fantasy setting. A long time ago, there was a human galactic-wide empire. In their hubris the Empire tried to create terraformed planet. The colonists, however, lost contact with empire without knowing why. In turn they created a completely new world from scratch on which, after a while, gods appeared out of the sky. These gods were in fact a mothership; "Gods" that walk the world with regular people. It's a cool mashup of a space opera and classical worldbuilding.

Janet: My world changes depending on what I am writing. It serves the story. I am currently working with a low magic world inspired by the London Bridge bombings in April of this year. I wanted to create a story based on two different cultures finding a way to coexist peacefully. It has magic, druids, and the power of words, as well as linguistic elements. My world draws some inspiration from the Norman Conquest but it also has oppressed nomads. Concepts such as secret history and factors from the outside world bleed into the story. I am super excited for it!

What made you start World Anvil?

Dimitris: I made World Anvil for Janet, because she could not organize her thoughts when worldbuilding. I wanted to help. The project now known as World Anvil started in June, and I worked all summer to build something for her. I actually coded the entire thing from scratch. We spent a lot of time together during the process, going through what we needed it to be. Then we asked ourselves, *why are we not doing this for everyone else as well?*

Janet: Inspiration for worldbuilders comes from anywhere, so all notes are scattered everywhere. Many people lose 95% of what is written down in the heat of an epiphany. I could visualize the exact page where my ideas are written down, but I could not for the life of me find it. That is when Dimitris stepped in and World Anvil was born.

Can you explain to me what World Anvil is in terms of its features, interface, and community?

Dimitris: World Anvil is an online system that allows worldbuilders of all types to put thoughts together in an integrated way, so that ideas are not lost. This allows one to share what one's built with the rest of the world to get feedback. World Anvil is in open beta testing right now, so it is not open to the world just yet. However, all the basic features are there or almost completed. A lot more features are planned down the line; I actually have a list of wanted features in the hundreds.

Janet: World Anvil is not just a tool to store knowledge and share with the community—it also is a writing tool built to evoke thought in the user. Creativity comes from the crucible. Our project prods you to create more detail, not just showcase, your world; it helps worldbuilding.

Dimitris: One difference from other online systems is that World Anvil easily connects articles so that users can cross-reference them. It also supports maps, documents, timelines, and many more other features that others do not have.

How many people use World Anvil right now?

Dimitris: There are about 1,400 users in beta testing right now, with 500 more waiting to join. We are just astounded by the amount of people who signed up: right now there are 2,500 unique pages on the website!

Are there any features that you'd like to put in but haven't yet?

Dimitris: We want to include maps that you can place pins on, so that places and articles can connect. We also want people to be able to create historical records in articles, so as to represent population in different eras, like population growth, and wealth, among others. Our ultimate goal is for World Anvil to become a place for worlds that exist both in space and time. We want our users to have articles that exist at multiple points in their world's history.

How much time do you put into this?

Dimitris: I wake up at 5:00am and work until 9:00pm, with 2 hours break, totaling 14-16 hours a day. I get so much help from developers, like Discord mods and others, that help me out with the project. The community is really engaged with World Anvil, which is really nice.

What do you hope to see at the end of the project?

Dimitris & Janet: We really want to foster a community with common goals, challenges, and in the end, to make worldbuilding less lonely. Right now the community feels somewhat disjointed, we can go further than just spotlights on Reddit. We're hopeful for the future of the worldbuilding community!

Is there anything else that you would like to mention?

Janet: We've opened up World Anvil access—from closed Beta to limited open Beta—so that anyone can create an account for our WorldEmber 2017 Challenge. This is kind of like NaNoWriMo or Mapvember, but specifically for worldbuilding over December.

**WorldEmber 2017:
One world, 31 days, 6000 words.**

We're so excited to announce our new challenge—the WorldEmber 2017 Challenge! Inspired by NaNoWriMo and MapVember, we wanted to make a worldbuilding-specific event to get our creative juices flowing and animate the worldbuilding community. We hope this will give experienced worldbuilders a new focus and a chance for friendly competition, also inspiring potential worldbuilders to have set down the ideas which might have been percolating at the back of their brains. By reaching 6000 words you'll get a unique collectible badge for the WorldEmber 2017 Challenge displayed on your profile forever. To create friendly competition all those who complete the WorldEmber 2017 Challenge will also be eligible for our various prize categories.

We want the WorldEmber 2017 Challenge to reach the widest possible number of worldbuilders, so **we're opening up World Anvil access until 23:59 GMT on 15th December 2017**. This will be a limited open Beta and anyone can create an account during this time. This will allow you to recruit your friends and share your progress with them.

Go light up the forge and finish 2017 with a bang.

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