



WORLDBUILDING MAGAZINE

CONFLICT

AND OTHER TOPICS

04 World Showcase

Arcturox's Eratoch, interviewed by Adam Bassett

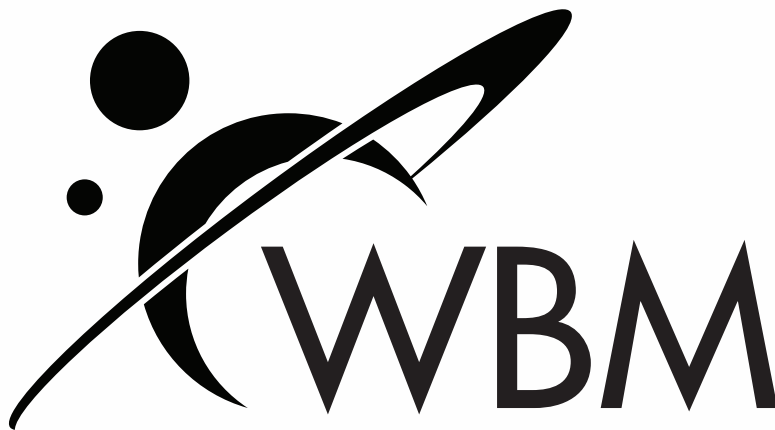
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LETTER FROM THE TEAM



Dear worldbuilders,

We are thrilled to share with you yet another issue of Worldbuilding Magazine! Inside you will find articles with a focus on the types of conflict that may occur in your worlds. The magazine team has been working hard for several months, putting together a quality publication for your enjoyment. If you would like to view any of our previous issues, you can check them out on our [website](#)!

Our next issue is themed “Creatures: Monstrous, Mundane, and More”. If you are interested in submitting a piece do not hesitate to contact us! We accept articles, short stories, art, and other types of worldbuilding content from the community. Stay tuned for more from us in August!

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, [Discord](#), or at contact@worldbuildingmagazine.com!

Cheers,



UNoahGuy and the Worldbuilding Magazine Team

We are bringing back Postantera the collaborative worldbuilding project from our first five issues. For this issue, we've added found documents from the world. Expect much more in July! Learn more on [WorldAnvil](#).

UNoahGuy

POSTANTERA WAS BIRTHED BY BLOOD.

WHAT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE OUR NEW BEGINNING, OUR FRESH START, TURNED OUT TO BE MORE OF THE SAME.

CAN HUMANITY REALLY BE ANYTHING ELSE THAN A RACE OF WARMONGERS?

MAYBE OUR SPECIES SHOULD NOT BE ALLOWED TO CONTINUE ON EXISTING. EVERY GENESIS HAS BEEN MARRED WITH IRRECONCILABLE CONFLICT. WE HAD TO LEAVE EARTH BECAUSE OF HOSTILITY BETWEEN MORTALS AND IMMORTALS, THE FORMER OFTEN EXPLOITED BY THE LATTER. INSTEAD OF DRIFTING INTO CONFLICT IT WAS THOUGHT THAT THE BEST PATH FORWARD WAS TO SEPARATE.

IT WAS PLANNED.

ALL PRECAUTIONS WERE TAKEN.

BUT, IN THE END, IT WAS OUR HUMANITY THAT RUINED THINGS.

MAYBE WE ARE DESTINED TO BE IMPERFECT BEINGS.

WITHIN HOURS OF CRASHDOWN OUR UNITED LEADERSHIP FRACTURED.

WITHIN DAYS IMMORTALS LAY DEAD.

WITHIN MONTHS HUNDREDS HAVE PERISHED.

IS IT OUR FAULT?

COULD WE CONTROL IT?

NOBODY WILL EVER KNOW, BUT EVERYONE WILL REMEMBER.

POSTANTERA WAS BIRTHED BY BLOOD.

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Cover and Logo: Tristen Fekete

WORLD SHOWCASE: ARCTUROX'S ERATOH

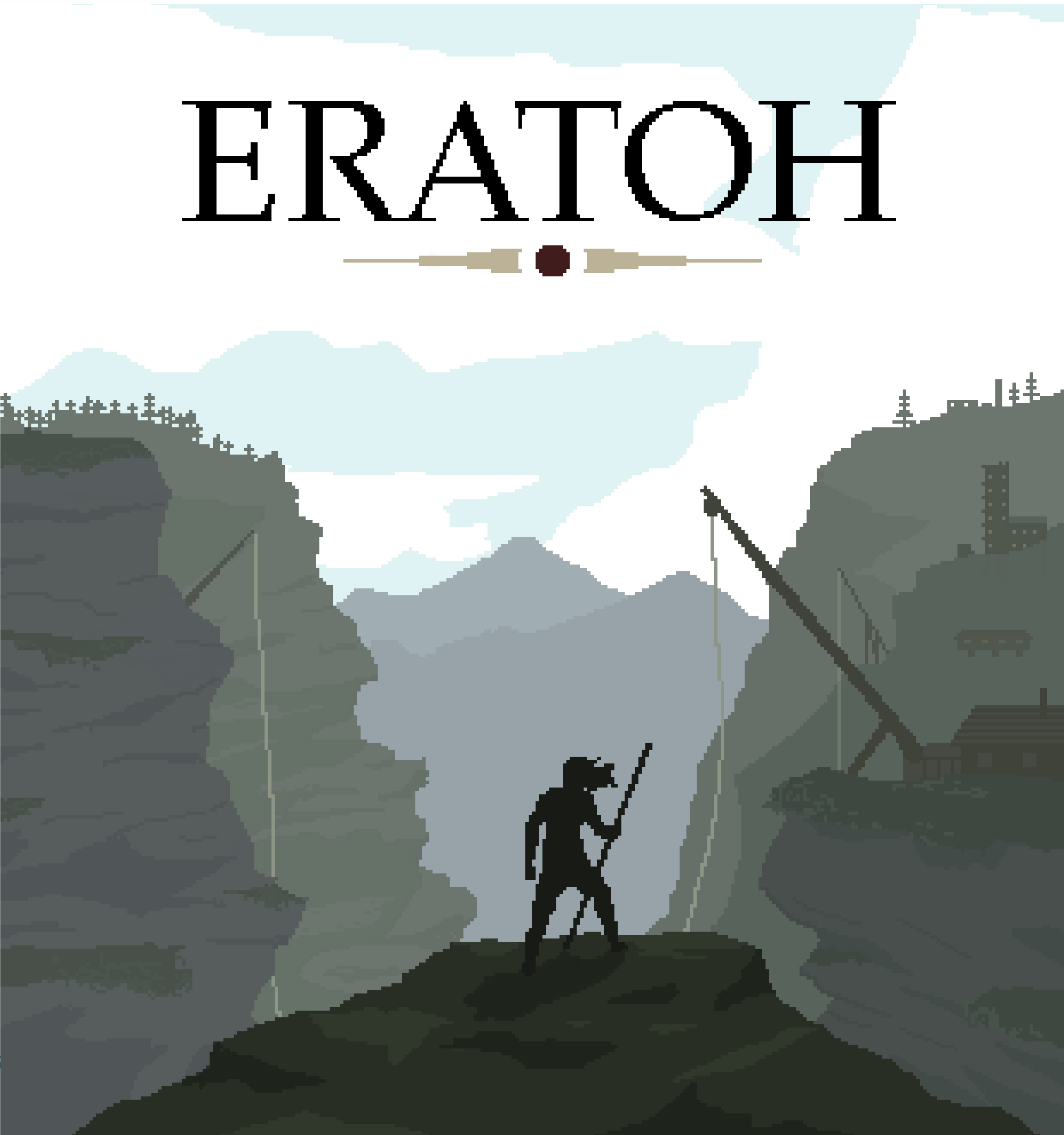
Interview

Interview conducted by Adam Bassett

Arcturox is a 2D artist who has been creating the world of Eratoh for about four years, though he began conceptualizing it ten years ago. He's gone to great lengths detailing the history of the world and given it life with beautiful pixel art.

We spoke about Eratoh and the creatures who reside in it for a while, discussing details such as the human and non-human races, the role of a few gods, and more.
This is what Arcturox had to say about his work.

ERATOH



Eratoh is a fantasy world especially inspired by alien fantasy settings like Morrowind and Another World. It was conceived of as a project with no definite end, which I could flesh out as much as I wanted without running out of space. I've been using it as a setting for a custom d20-based tabletop RPG and as a setting for a webcomic called "A Letter for Eko." A 2D video game version of the tabletop RPG is also planned for the future, but that's very much in the planning stage as of now.

Eratoh is a world built by a pantheon of four gods, which at the point of both the tabletop RPG and the webcomic are almost all deceased—killed in the First Era by Artura, an immortal human empress.



All Eratoh art by Arcturox

The rise and fall of Artura's civilization is what set the groundwork for most of Eratoh's modern societies. A lot of my own interest in worldbuilding comes from my fascination with how ancient cultures evolved into our own. I definitely based the core of Eratoh on that idea—the idea that nothing ever really dies, it just changes over time. The major human nations of the current era are both descended in some way from the Arturan Empire, and the non-human civilizations are also influenced a lot by Arturan culture in one way or another.

Tell me a bit about the human and non-human species of Eratoh. How do they fit with one another, and especially for non-humans, what are they?

There are a large variety of sapient non-human creatures. They are broken up into two major types: aetheric and non-aetheric. Non-aetheric creatures are beings which evolved normally, and aetheric are creatures born primarily from the influence of magic.

In the non-aetheric camp are the Arta, which are lithe, long-limbed monkey creatures; Tulosi, which are a type of giant snake; Kulpers, which are large amphibious apes; and Pirruk, which are squid-like creatures capable of walking on land.

In the aetheric camp there are Blackwing, which are dark, shapeshifting creatures that slowly take the form of creatures they live near to, and Wuld, arthropods that live in hives which develop into minor hiveminds over time. There are also many non-sapient aetheric species, anything from massive fish which can swim through solid objects to giant, multi-limbed swamp dwelling predators.

On the human side of things the two major players are the Theans, an ancient magic-infused culture which was the first to splinter from the Arturan Empire, and the Kūsians, the direct descendants of the fallen Arturan Empire. There is also a less prevalent race of especially large humans called Raleki, probably furthest removed genetically from ancient humans.

Thean humans have opened trade with most major non-human cultures, mainly the Pirruk and the Arta, which have powerful navies and equally powerful trade economies. But even though Theans are amicable traders, non-humans are generally prohibited from purchasing land or permanently moving into Thean lands. Additionally, the common Thean is ignorant of non-humans in general.

Kūsians are less friendly, generally regarding non-humans as beneath them in every way.

But these tensions between humans and non-humans are generally kept to uneasily ignoring one another, since the human kingdoms are separated by an ocean from the continent where most non-humans live.

There's a lot to unpack here.

Let's discuss the aetheric divide...what prompted this separation between aetheric and non-aetheric? Proximity to magic?

Yes. The aetheric divide is very much caused by proximity to magic. There's actually a sort of "aetheric equator," and most aetheric species initially come from the center of that equator.

When Artura first campaigned against the old gods she cut a rift into heaven to lead her armies into it. Aether has been leaking from that rift into the world since the end of her campaign. The rotation of Eratoh under that rift is what created the aetheric equator.

Interesting. That's a neat way to introduce magic to a world.

Let's discuss the humans. Could you tell me a bit more about their cultures and this Artura character? What was her role in history?

Well, to really understand the humans on Eratoh a little bit of creation myth is necessary. At one point humans were the only sapient species on Eratoh. Their society was relatively advanced, and the old gods believed that humans were close to being able to ascend to godhood alongside them. However, one of the four old gods, Goldran, believed humans were fundamentally flawed and should not be considered for ascension. He wagered with the other gods that he could prove that humans were flawed, and if he was correct he asked that the other gods give him Eratoh to attempt crafting gods of his own.

He came to humanity in the form of a man, granting limitless wishes to any who asked. It was less than a week before humanity essentially ate itself alive with increasingly power hungry wishes.

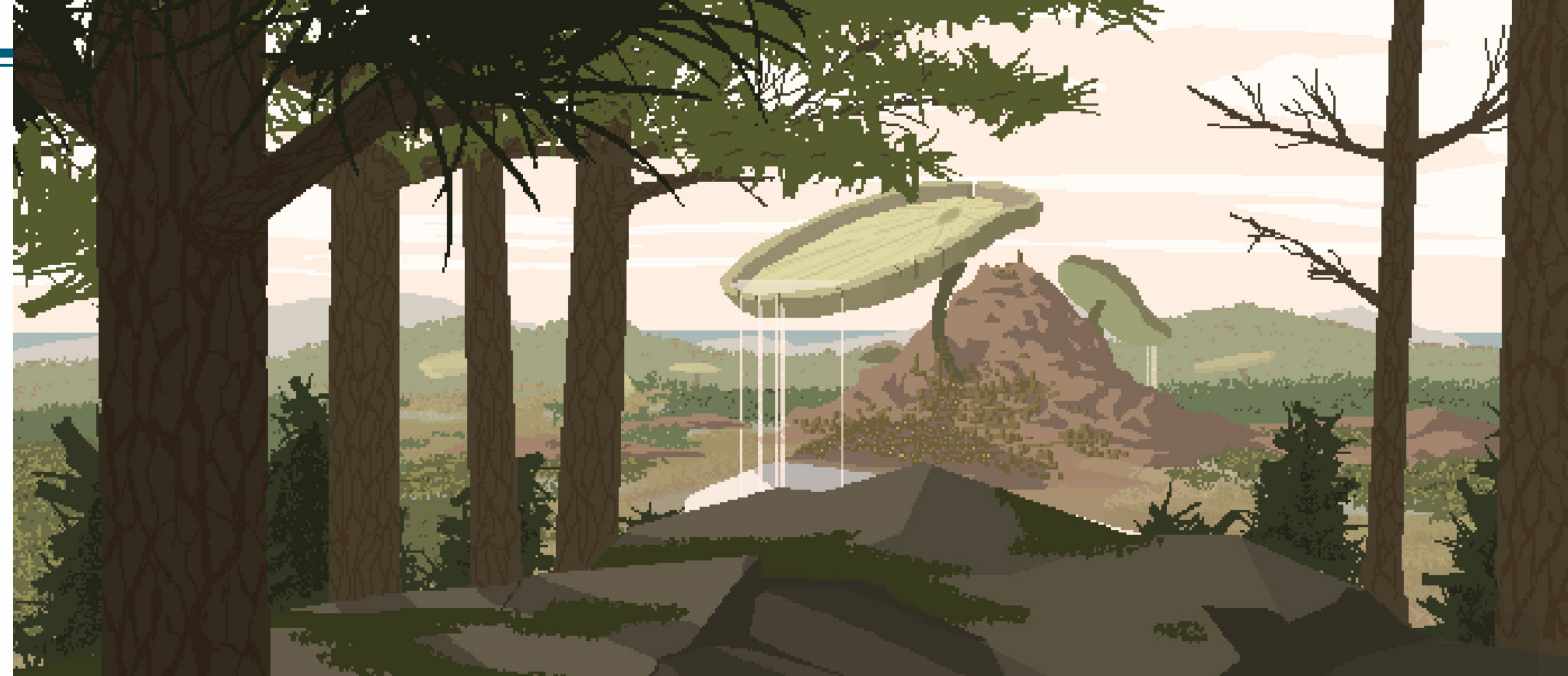
However, some humans survived this wish-fueled apocalypse by hiding deep beneath the ground. When Goldran presented the ashen world to his god-siblings and essentially said "Told you so," they pointed out that several humans still lived and that those humans had proven themselves even more capable than before. So Goldran waited several generations to be sure that people had forgotten his face, returning to these underground humans; again granting wishes, and again turning them against one another. Artura was among these descendants of old humanity and saw Goldran for what he was. She went to him and wished that her sword could cut through anything she willed it to. Goldran thought that wish seemed suitably destructive, granting her wish. She cut him in two and cast him into the depths of the world.

The other three gods saw Artura as a perfect example of what they saw in humanity and granted her immortality, hoping that she could be groomed over time to become a god like them. But when Artura found that the gods had essentially given Goldran permission to destroy mankind she turned against them, and waged her war against heaven.

Not surprisingly, an immortal, legendary empress gained a significant following. She founded the first human empire: the Arturan Empire.

I wanted Artura to be an exploration of how immortality would really affect someone over time, and she eventually found her limitations. She had her bouts of madness, her relationship with time was always fluctuating, and she grew very distant from humanity over the course of her life. Eventually she became paranoid that Goldran was still alive somewhere beneath the world and she led an army into the depths, never to return. She's probably still down there somewhere.

The human cultures that sprang from Artura's society definitely took a lot of influence from her ideas. Human cultures closest to the Arturan Empire like the Kūsians are generally anti-god and especially wary of magic, whereas those that split from Artura early on like the Theans have a lot more tolerance for magic and religion.



Alright, and how do the non-humans fit in to this?

Non-humans came to be after the burning of Eratoh and as the world slowly healed itself over time. It's also likely that even non-aetheric species were affected by the advent of magic and developed into sapient species faster than they normally would have otherwise.

Most of the non-human species became allies of the Arturan Empire while it was in its prime. The Pirruk and the Tulosi especially were both major military allies of the Arturans before the fall of the Empire. Generally I would say non-human kingdoms were eclipsed by the Arturan Empire's sheer size and power, and its fall opened a power vacuum that they quickly filled. The end of the Arturan Empire definitely kick-started a lot of otherwise minor societies at its periphery. Most modern non-humans are still affected by Arturan history to the same degree that humans are.

Arta mages take most of their fundamental knowledge of science and magic from old Arturan teachings; Tulosi took Arturan anti-power stances to an extreme over time, developing into aggressive anarchists; Blackwing were actually more affected by the Theans, which due to their early split from the Arturan Empire had very strong anti-Arturan sentiments—now the major Blackwing religion sees Artura as a sort of ancient demon, rather than a historical figure; the Wuld took a lot of their architectural inspiration from the Arturan Empire, and their craftsmanship still has a lot of Arturan symbology in it.

All of these species have their own unique cultures separate from the Arturan Empire, but one can see the Empire's influences even though it's been dead for well over a thousand years.

The burning of Eratoh was after the first time Goldran started granting wishes?

Yes. Generally most references to that myth say that the final wish that ended old human society was something to do with fire, or firestorms of some sort. The specifics of what happened then have been lost to time, and it's considered prehistory.

Let's talk for a moment about the style you're depicting this all in. I see some drawings but it's overwhelmingly pixel art. What made you decide to display Eratoh that way?

I spent a lot of my childhood with video games, specifically RPGs. At the time when I was growing up the norm were things like Pokémon Yellow and Final Fantasy 1, which were both top-down pixel art RPGs. I also loved point-and-click adventure games like Myst and Another World, both more serious and with more realistic styles. Specifically, Another World's realistically proportioned characters and landscapes, while still being very stylized pixel art, were inspirations. I wanted to have that sort of look and to bring out that feeling of old school RPGs. Besides wanting to make reference to the things I loved as a kid, I think pixel art allows for the viewer to fill in the blanks just enough. Even though a house in the background is only six pixels wide it still looks believable, because just enough is left to the viewers imagination that they're able



to fill in the blanks themselves and lend their own imagination to the world. I think simplified styles like pixel art and low-poly 3D both have that quality to them, and I find that very stylized art often ages better than hyper-realistic looks.

Nice. I definitely appreciate the pixel art. It's refreshing to see, especially as somebody who grew up with those old games you mentioned.

Let's discuss the comic real quick. *A Letter for Eko* is a work in progress that you're still developing. Could you give us a brief synopsis of that story as well as a few thoughts about writing a pixel art comic in *Eratoh*?

Certainly. A Letter for Eko is a comic about a young Blackwing named Eko. He is wingless, which is believed by current Blackwing society to be a taint on their bloodline. Eko is treated as a sort of second class citizen, allowed to live only because of the contributions his family made to the Blackwing's most recent war. The story of the comic is meant to follow him and his aging warrior grandmother as they both leave behind a society that has essentially abandoned them, entering a world they never really knew existed outside their closed-off community.

Making a comic is something I had never done before this project. I read a lot of comic books, and

I've learned a lot about how they're made over time, but nothing can really prepare you for making a comic better than just doing it. Even looking at the pages I've released so far I can tell there's a big difference between my first few pages and the most recent. I've learned a lot about making sequential art in the process, and I'm excited to see

how much I can improve on it as I continue.

Currently the comic updates are paused while I finish Chapter 2. I plan to continue releasing weekly updates once the chapter is complete and I have a solid backlog of finished pages.

Is there anything that you and I haven't explicitly discussed already? Perhaps there's something I didn't ask about which you would like to share?

One thing I'd like to mention is the d20 RPG system I made for *Eratoh*. It's a fully functional system that I am currently running test campaigns in with friends, but after some rebalancing I plan to release it as a free, easily-editable online resource for others interested in

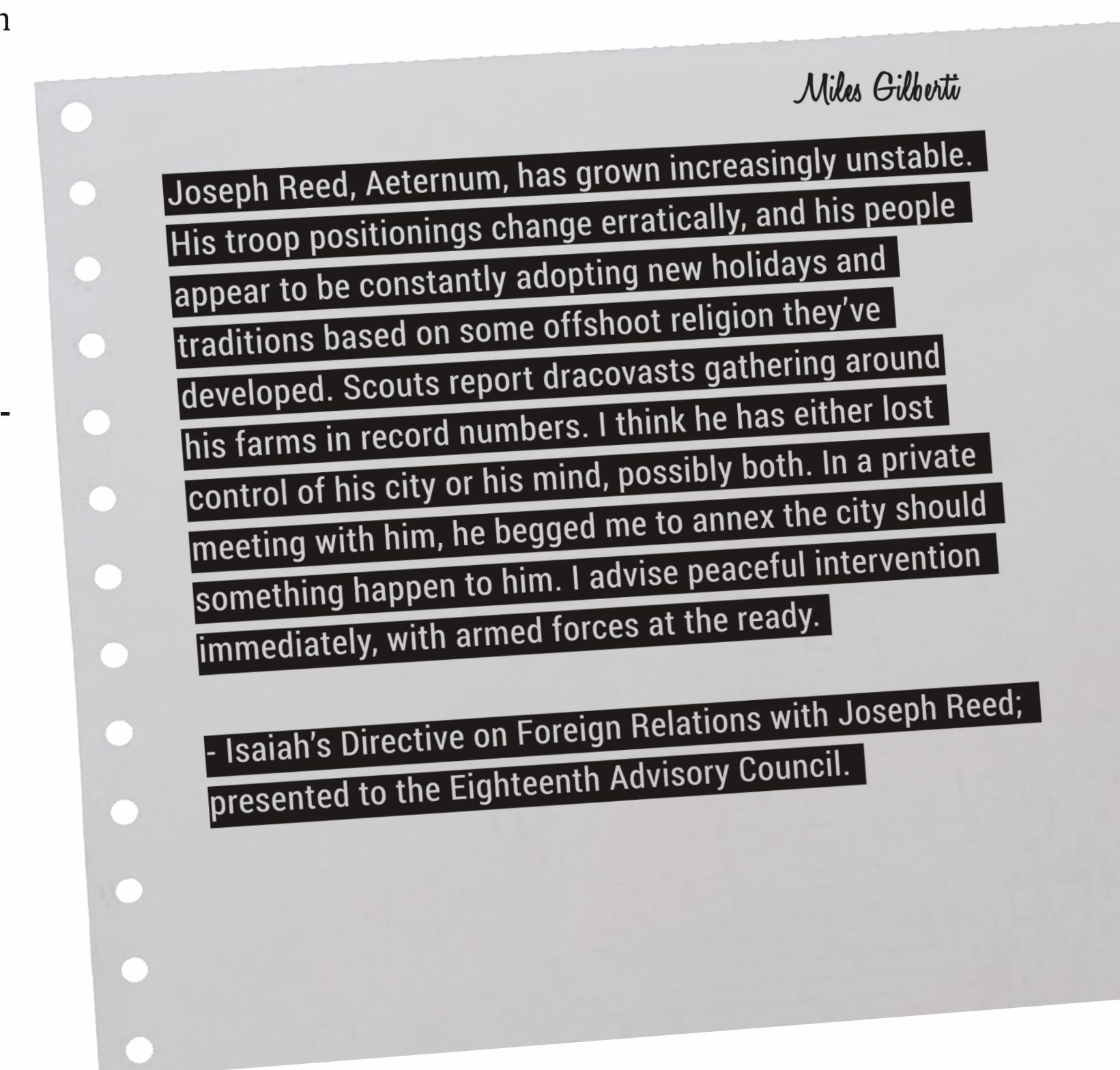
D&D-like games. It will come in the form of a wiki-style player's handbook as well as a first campaign book for prospective Game Masters.

Currently it is not online since there's still a bit of rebalancing to be done before I'm comfortable releasing it. But when it's finished I will be posting

it on the /r/worldbuilding subreddit as well as on my various social media sites. **In closing, I'd like to ask you what your endgame is. What would you like to see *Eratoh* become and at what point do you think you'll be finished? If you ever will.**

There is no real endgame for *Eratoh*. My most lofty goal is to create an in-depth RPG video game based in this setting. I currently work as a 2D artist for video games, so I'm learning some of the skills that could make that happen in the future. But even if that were to come to fruition I doubt I would be finished with *Eratoh* afterwards. There's always more corners of the world to probe and flesh out. On top of that, I just love worldbuilding. An open-ended setting like *Eratoh* is a fantastic place build in, I don't think I would ever want to be finished even if I could be.

Thanks to Arcturox for spending some time with me today and sharing a bit about *Eratoh* with us. If you would like to share your world in an upcoming issue of *Worldbuilding Magazine* please email or contact us on [Discord](#).



EXCLUSIVE: JAMES WOLANYK

Interview

Interview conducted by Adam Bassett

James Wolanyk is an author and English teacher from Boston, MA, currently living in Latvia. His debut novel, *Grid*, was released in 2015. This February, the titular first book in the *Scribe Cycle* was released.

James and I spoke about *Scribes* and the world it resides in, discussing details such as the tribal culture, currency, a bit about his experience in the world of publishing, and more. In particular, he and I spoke about his unique magic system, which is a prominent feature of *Scribes*.

This is what James had to say about his work.

Scribes was my attempt to create a story (and world) that reflected many of the global themes I encountered in the last decade or so.

It follows Anna, a young girl who's able to grant total immunity (both to aging and physical harm) using the scars she leaves on others.* The catch, however, is that Anna, and those who are similarly able to grant such powers (known as scribes), are unable to access any of their own magic. They exist at the mercy of others. Anna attempts to save her younger brother during a kidnapping raid on her village by making a deal with one of the attack's trackers, but the deal falls through, and Anna is left at the hands of an immortal tracker. She's taken to Hazan, a lawless desert expanse, where she becomes the reluctant figurehead for the tracker's cadre of war criminals.

Anna marks the officers of a burgeoning army, granting them immunity while they carry out merciless strikes in the city. Soon enough, however, she realizes that she's in over her head. It's blood in, blood out. Anna finds guidance in a cryptic Hazani assassin named Bora, who leads her toward a path of insight that begins to change the nature of warfare and reality itself.

Someone once called it *Dune*, plus *The Witcher*, with a dash of *Lucy*. Seems fairly appropriate.

Feels a bit surreal to be talking about it as a completed project after so long in the formative stages, but here we are.

Sounds great! I did manage to find time to read the first chapter this morning and it did a great job of explaining—through example—what *Scribes* can do.

Just to clarify, though—when you say scribes are unable to access their own magic, do you mean she cannot cast this sorcery on herself? Could another scribe make somebody like Anna immortal for a time, or is that impossible?

Thanks for the confidence boost! It was definitely my first literary attempt at working with presenting magical powers without hit-you-on-the-head explanations. Up until that point, I'd mostly worked with short sci-fi pieces and literary

fiction, where that sort of narrative guiding hand wasn't so integral.

Scribes are wholly unable to benefit from the magic (which is referred to as hayat within the series). There are reasons for this that become apparent in later books, but for the time being, it's correct to say that scribes are completely locked away from their own gifts. Additionally, scribes are unable to be "marked" by another scribe. Essentially, there are no "blueprints" visible on a scribe's body. Each "normal" person carries a unique pattern, much like a snowflake's design or camouflage print.

Great, thanks for clearing that up. I'm curious, though, why do you call magic Hayat?

Hayat is actually taken directly from Turkish; it translates to "life." This book has a lot of cultural influences that felt absent from what I'd been reading, namely Baltic, Slavic, Tibetan, Turkic, Hebrew, Assyrian, and so forth. In fact, I traveled to Istanbul for the first time well after writing the book, and a lot of my local friends were thrilled to see the language crop up in fantasy.

In *Basachai*, the world of *Scribes*, a select few can grant limited periods of invincibility. How long does it last, are there limits, and is there any other type of magic?

In the novel, the initial vagueness of this question has left a lot of people scratching their heads, but I wanted discovery of these facts to mimic Anna's. She is still learning about her abilities as well. The magic is essentially something that's beginning to appear for the first time, though there are hints that it was once harnessed by an older, extinct civilization.

Scribes are only women, and in essence, their power and ability to grant longer-lasting marks is correlated with their level of mental focus. Meditation is the primary vehicle for progression with the scribes' markings; it takes ample focus and patience to trace the person's essence (their unique pattern) with accuracy. But, as the book and series go on, you also learn that scribes can tap into their own primordial energy through meditation, and then grant secondary abilities to those who they mark with branching runes. It's sort

of like learning home-brewed spells in an RPG, I suppose. The branching rune can't be recreated by anybody except the scribe who discovered it. Even if two runes accomplish the same effect, the rune itself would be made differently by two people.

As for Anna, her markings seem eternal, for all intents and purposes. Which is not as great as it might seem, of course.

And are there other types of magic in *Scribes*?

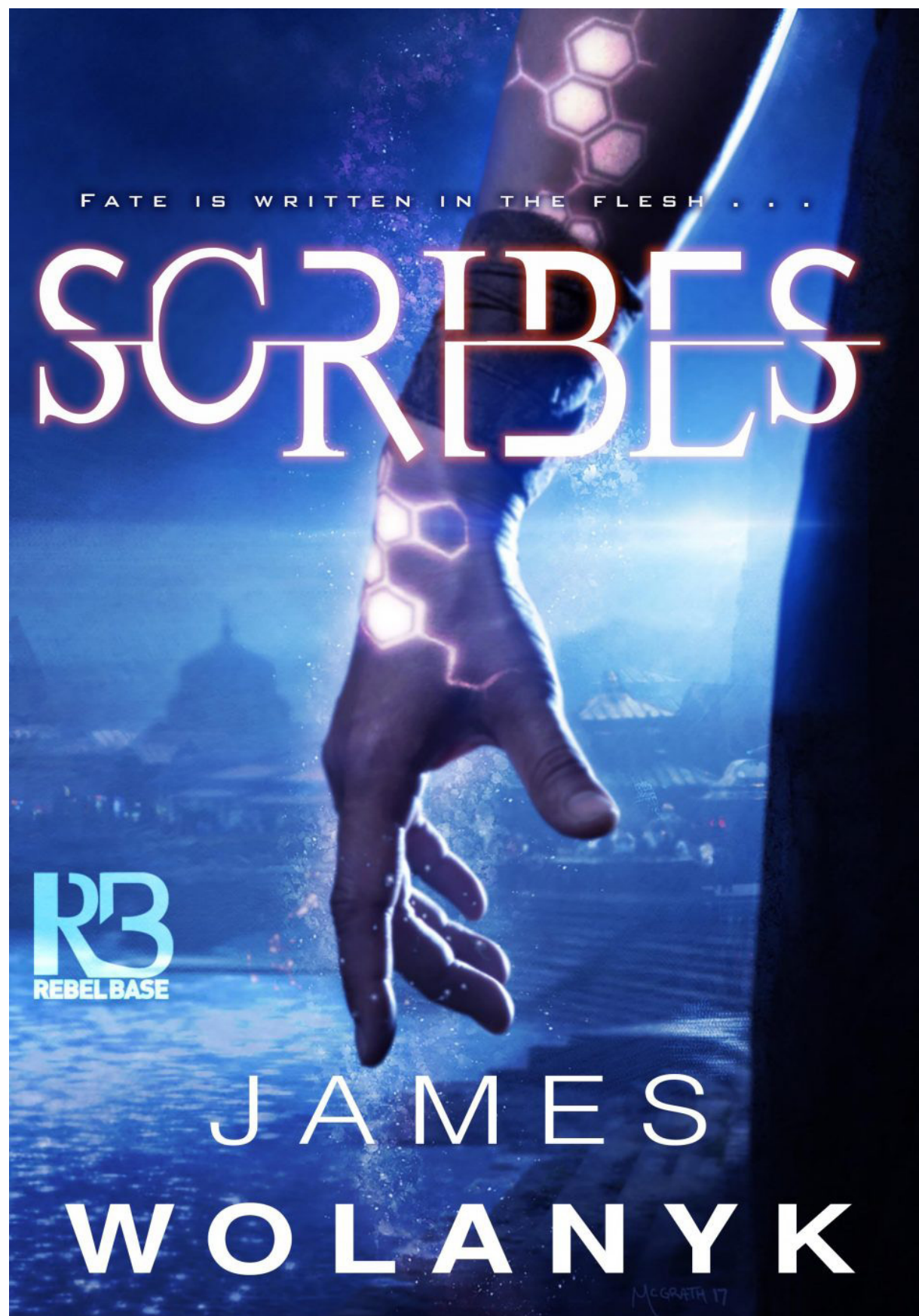
A strong YES. The first book gives an indication that other types of magic are only possible, but now a game-changer for scribes who are beginning to see an opportunity to forge a new world order.

There's a chaotic, inconsistent nature to the markings that scribes learn to apply. Some of them level entire cities by accident. So there's a real theme throughout the series regarding the relationship between recklessness and unintended consequences.

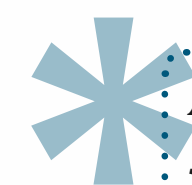
Let's move on to the world. You've already mentioned the desertscape of Hazan, and the first chapter takes place out in a swamp area. What else is in this world you've created?

Right, so, the swamp area is in a region called *Rzolka*, which is in the aftermath of this brutal civil war. Entire families from both sides of this multi-clan war were strung up, dismembered, you name it. So it's a bit of martial law, a bit of dog-eat-dog for them, but there are also tensions fuming with the surrounding regions. Every faction blames another for the war, and nobody is able to trust anybody anymore. In addition, *Rzolka* (and Anna by extension) are experiencing the immediate results of a society that was forcibly stripped of its pagan religion. So now there's no money, no food, no gods. Things are rough.

Hazan, surprisingly, has pockets that are even worse. It's an enormous collection of independent families (named **qora** in the series), cartels, banks, and other entities. Hazan has been stripped of most of its resources for decades, including the magnetic material that allows the world to have things like railgun rifles, magnetic trains, etc. They're not flawless, of course, but they're the only pieces of technology keeping Hazan from



Cover: Chris McGrath



Anna can see people's essence, which is displayed as a unique symbol only they have. These symbols are visible only to scribes such as Anna. The scars she leaves on others are in the shape of their essence, and when accurate, can give the bearer prolonged immortality.

being leveled by its neighbors.

The third main region is *Nahora*, which exists as a self-declared living body known as the State. Nahora has one of the only functioning governments in the world, though it comes at the cost of autonomy. Additionally, you don't see much of Nahora until the second book—you mostly see where their special operations units have been.

I'll want to discuss the technology a bit later, but first: how did the Rzolkan civil wars end, and who is stripping them of their religion?

Everybody is out for themselves, and Anna is one of the only people looking around and saying, "Aw gee, we should probably get ourselves together before we roll off a cliff." There's a running debate in Anna's head about whether the world is even worth preserving with all of this misery.

The civil war in Rzolka was predominantly between two clans: the Moskos and the Balas. These two head-clans had their own sub-families serving as armies and enforcers. The war was mostly about who would be able to be lead Rzolka as a united entity in the aftermath of the Weave Wars, which left Rzolka in a state of near-submission to Hazan and Nahora. Of course, the power vacuum started swallowing up everything. One side was claiming itself as the "old wolves" of Rzolka, and thus deserving to rule its "pups," while the other side was adamant about the need to abandon the old ways and progress as a means of survival. In the end, nobody really won; it just fractured everything. The victorious clan (the Moskos) started forcibly suppressing their own pagan practices (the Claw). Even the areas without any enforcement simply lost their faith, given the atrocities in the war.

So they're oppressing their own religion? Why is that?

In many ways, it's a result of seeing the absolute barbarism that resulted from the Claw being called upon in battle. You had individual fighting units sacrificing their neighbors in the name of an obscure god, forcibly baptizing (or beheading) villagers, etc. Another reason was just to cast off what were perceived as shackles by the new order. They felt that their superstitions were holding back their people, and as such, felt comfortable shedding them as a sort of scapegoat for Rzolka's predicament.

Hazan seems to be the place which will see a

lot of action next, as Anna is taken there by the tracker after the first chapter of Scribes. What can you tell me about that area?

After Rzolka, the first location Anna encounters in Hazan is a port city that acts much like a modern transport hub. It has individual mercenary bands guarding causeways and checkpoints, and people are funneled around to various railway stations and (as I imagine) tacky gift shops.

The main city, however, is *Malijad*, which is this enormous, skyscraper-laden monstrosity that's carved into various faction-based quarters. Malijad is where Anna encounters a Halshaf monastery, which contains male Alakeph (guardians of the monasteries) and female Halshaf sisters (devoted to vitality in all forms, maternity, preserving life, etc). To the Halshaf, Anna is a literal deity, thanks to her lifesaving abilities. Malijad is also home to some of the traitors who fled Rzolka after the civil war. The tracker and his cadre are keen on sending Anna's marked Dogwood Collective fighters (think Navy SEALs with Wolverine's genetics) to hunt these people down in the dead of night, regardless of civilian consequences. In Hazan, life is considered cheap and expendable. Violence is absolutely everywhere.

In the first book, Anna goes seeking what her markings are actually doing, and she comes across this black-site-esque detainment center where the Dogwood Collective has started to bring its captives. There's ash in the air, bodies shredded apart, the marks of mortar shells across the clay—I wanted it to reflect a more somber, chilling side of war. The main conflicts tend to involve random assassinations on the streets, explosives being detonated on train lines to disrupt the flow of water or metals, that sort of thing. It's a city where the smallest amount of salt (a universal currency in their world) can lead to murder.

In later books, you get to see more of the oddities and strange locales of Hazan....

I got a chance to read the first chapter this morning and was surprised at salt's use as currency. What prompted that choice?

Good question. Salt was used as a currency for so long, and has played such a vital role in human development, that I thought it would make for an interesting currency. Throughout the series, the currency slowly evolves with the world, turning from salt to metal bars, then to coins, then to

things like bank vault readings. In many ways, the currency is a reflection of the progress from scarcity to excess.

What's something about the Scribes Cycle / Basachai that nobody else knew before?

If I had to pick one thing in particular, it would probably be a detail I cut out of the final draft for book two (which is still very much "canon"). Nahora's top units, the borzaq, have a severe training process that's designed to either kill them or make them fearless. Their training culminates with a night in their ocean's choppy waters, kicking to stay afloat, trying to suspend a cage with a sparrow in it above the surf. If the fighter's sparrow lives until morning, they're admitted to the ranks. If their sparrow dies, they're encouraged to let themselves die with it.

It was influenced by the traditions of numerous warrior cultures, not in its exact details but in the theme of sacrifice over personal pain. The Romans had a strict view of what it meant to earn your citizenship and continuously uphold it. The Ottomans had military units that made combat their life's purpose rather than a profession. Nahora, ultimately, views every animal, sentient being, and parcel of land to be equally living and valid as a part of the State.

They're at sea without a boat or raft or anything all night? Just floating around?

Yeah, more or less. They can hold the cage at chest level, of course, but the important goal is just to prevent the sparrow from drowning. I think there was even a detail about them crowding together and intuitively selecting who was worth preserving, either by pushing them up or ensuring they didn't slip under you.

That's pretty intense.

What sort of research did you do for Scribes? Obviously you've put a lot of thought into it, and there are some elements of anthropological and cultural studies here, but what else can you tell me about this process?

To be honest, there was very little active research during the writing. It was, in many ways, a torrential flood of all those years of Wikipedia browsing, library rentals, and NatGeo marathons. I was tempted to get a minor in a Baltic Crusade

Studies program, but never ended up going through with it (funnily enough, I DID move to Latvia in the end). A lot of the worldbuilding process was just repeatedly asking "but why?" Questions create really fascinating, sometimes bizarre, outgrowths, such as fighters coating their armor in sand to prevent it from shimmering in the sun.

I'd like to ask about your path to publication. What can you tell us about finding your agent / publisher and the process you went through to get published?

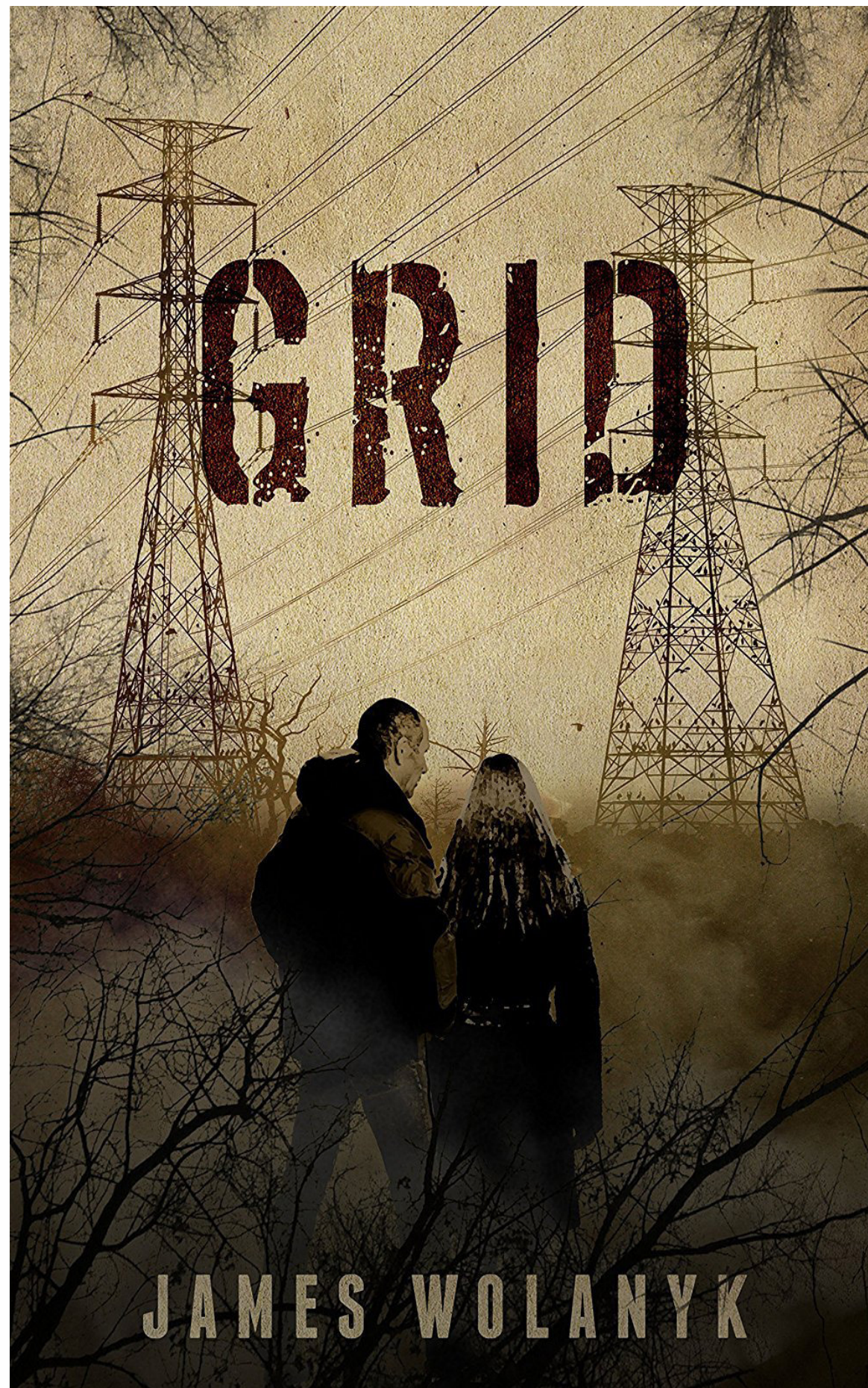
I got my agent, Lindsay Mealing, after tweaking my queries several times to make it more character-focused. I also specified that my draft contained elements she was seeking, such as court intrigue and some cultures beyond Western Europe. She actually turned my draft down several times, but ultimately kept giving me chances to rewrite and resend, which I did. She was relentless in securing a contract from Kensington. It was definitely surreal to go through the process, seeing as it's something I dreamed of for several years. My biggest advice is to look past rejections and focus on the pure fun of crafting your own stories. Fear and doubt kill creativity (and thus your odds of being accepted, oddly enough). Don't be afraid to write outside of what the market is currently into, because trends come and go. Your story will (hopefully) endure through all of them.

I think it's important to note that you did a bit of research on your agent and customized the query letter to her interests—making sure she would be a good fit for Scribes.

Absolutely. Agents do appreciate it, even if it feels like fluff material to the writer who's used to form rejections.

Now, I know you have published one book prior to this newer release—Grid. Can you tell me something you learned from writing / publishing that title which influenced Scribes?

Sure! *Grid* was written an incredibly long time ago, but it was my first foray into blending genre fiction with literary fiction. I know it's a dumb divide, but there tends to be this artificial gulf between say, Raymond Carver, and your average #1 fantasy writer on the New York Times bestseller list. People have preconceived notions of how the prose and story should flow in their respective categories. So, *Grid* was really just throwing caution to



the wind and trying out an emotional post-apocalyptic story. I don't think it reflects my current style much, but it's part of living history, in a way.

I mostly learned not to bite off more than I could chew with regards to plotting and character arcs, though I find myself still needing to examine those elements and scale back, at times. I think many writers are eager to shoot for GRRM-length plotlines and subplots. Feel free to be manageable, to be precise and detailed with your world rather than just bloating the scale for the sake of how "epic" it is.

For what it's worth, I like the length of Scribes. At ~300 pages it's very manageable. I love big books—I'm currently reading a 600 page novel that I adore, but they can take a while to get through.

Glad to hear it! It was much longer in the initial drafts, but I'm glad I was convinced to shave it

down by my editor. It made the narrative focus much tighter.

I know you touched on some inspirations already with your studies and Baltic & Turkish culture, but is there any specific work that you felt inspired you most?

Too many to name. If I had to select a few, it would probably be *Planescape: Torment*, *Dune*, *Sicario* (huge fan of Denis Villeneuve), Joe Abercrombie's work, Hemingway (oddly enough), the music of Tool, and some of the aesthetic choices from the Mad Max films. There's really a huge melting pot of influences, genres, and media going on there. Books are weird, man.

Earlier you made mention of some advanced technology such as railguns and magnetic trains. Could you expand on that a bit? I was surprised to hear that would be in the book, considering the Medieval-era feel it gives off at first.

Good catch on the outlandish aspect of it. Part of the reason it's not revealed until later is to give the reader a sense of the disorientation that Anna's experiencing, but also to glimpse how murderous this technology is. These devices are crude, so the railguns are firing bursts of heated iron shards rather than bullets. The trains are sweltering and built like old oil rigs. Hazan is definitely the heart of the production, but it's really Nahora that benefits from reverse-engineering their technology (or outright seizing their engineers). By the third book, you're looking at Osprey-type planes that can use vertical takeoff procedures, along with long-range rifles, enormous cannons, etc. So with every leap in technology, their world seems to devolve and turn to barbarism rather than achieving any meaningful development for those caught in warzones.

Is there anything we didn't discuss about the world of Scribes that you would like to?

One thing that may not come across in the written descriptions is the heavy mental focus that the series takes as it goes on. I have an enormous interest in Hinduism and similar eastern philosophies (even some of the perennial ideas that appear in Mesoamerican or shamanic cultures). So, with that being said, there is a deliberate attempt to expand fantasy into some of the more

abstract realms (much like William Gibson did with cyberspace in *Neuromancer*).

As I mentioned earlier, there's a relationship between this hayat magic and the culture that preceded Anna's. As the series progresses, Anna finds that cultivating mental states is equally as important as combat skills. Meditation becomes a weapon that's even more crucial than whatever high-tech gadgets are produced, because the powers that result from Anna's internal exploits have the potential to alter time, space, and so forth. It becomes cerebral by the third book, and those who are familiar with some of the more curious side effects of meditation (such as a loss of personal identity) will find material to dissect here.

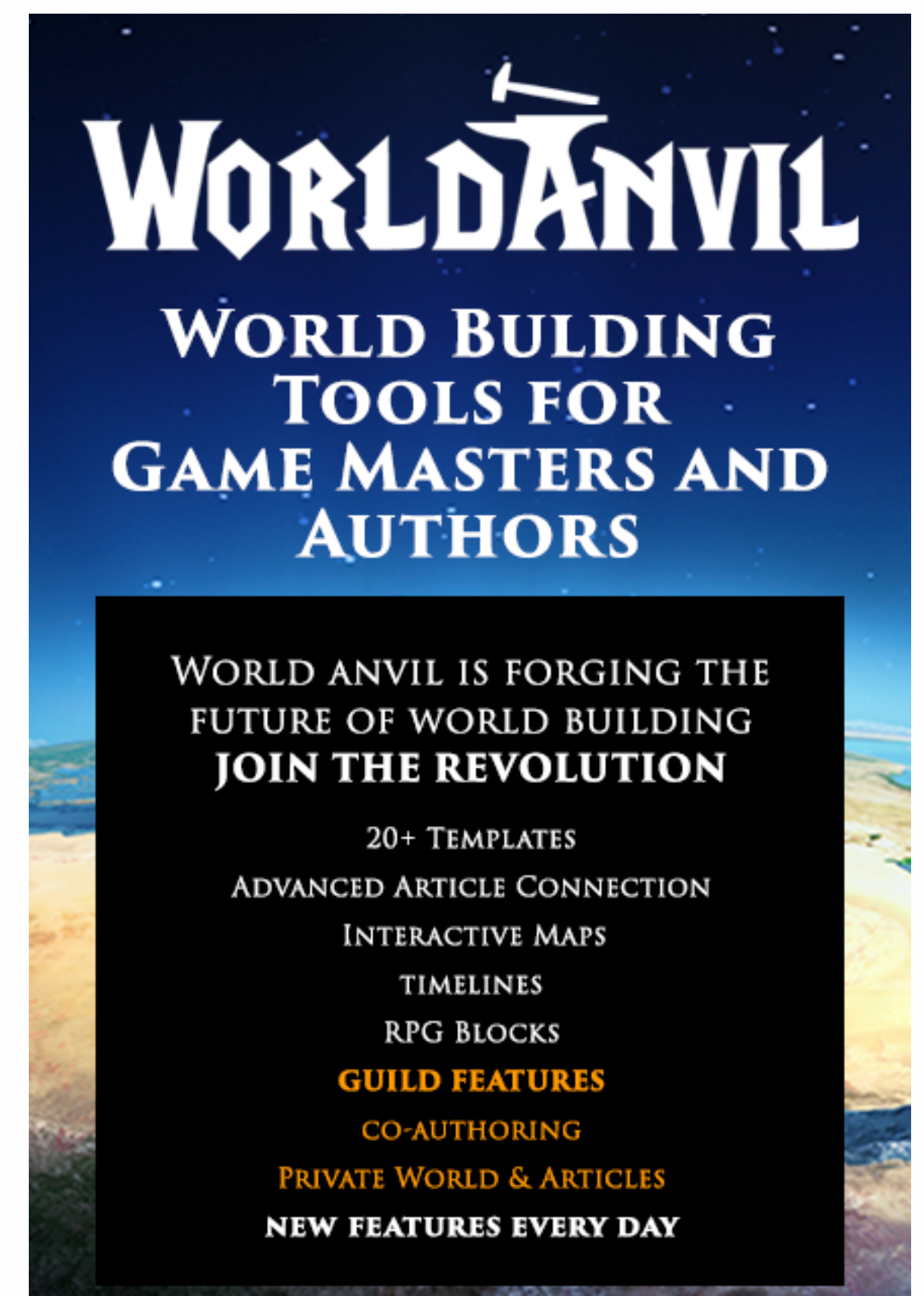
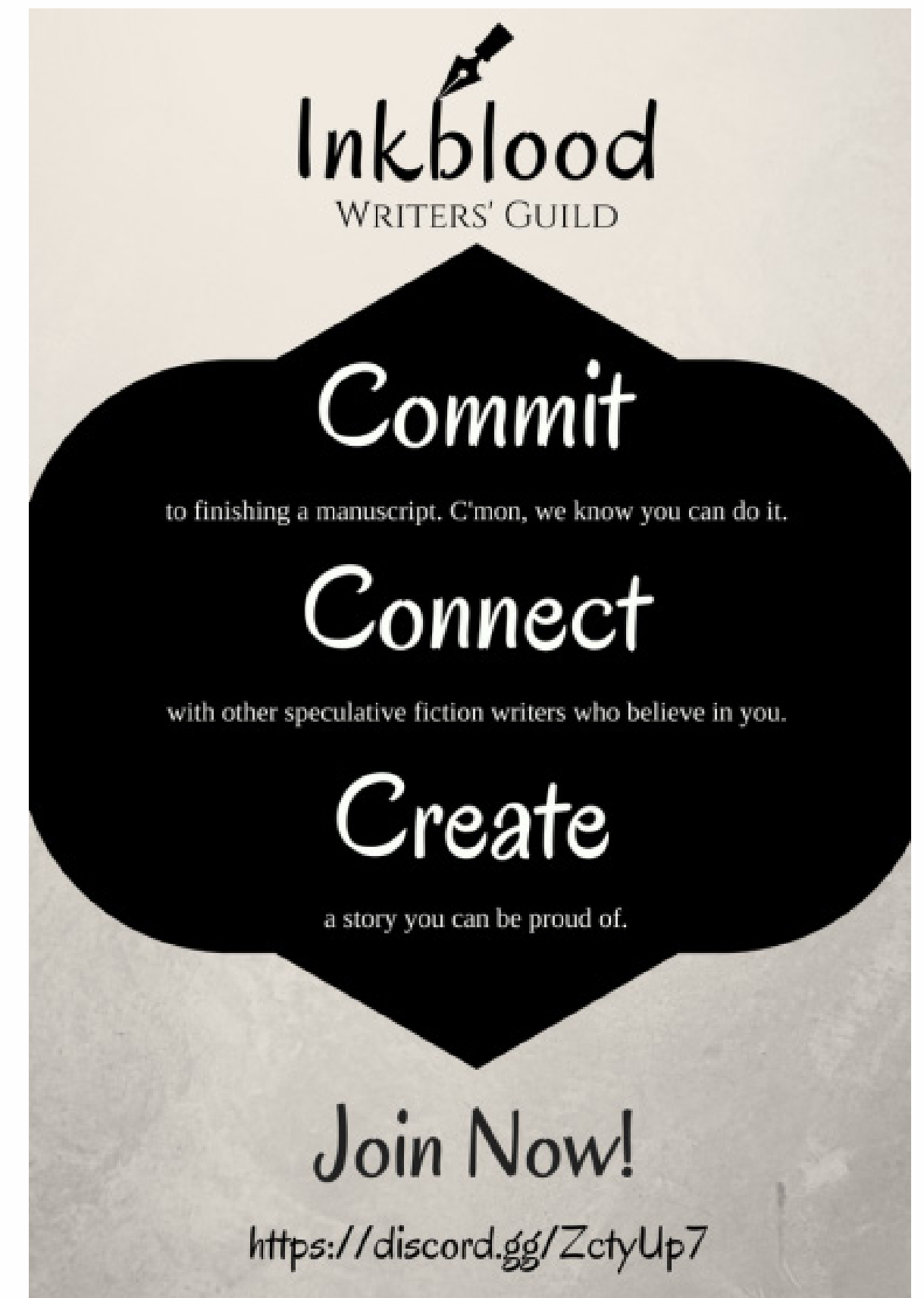
I've got just one more question for you, James.

Normally I ask what the end goal for a creator's world is—but you are already in the middle of a publishing deal and I'm sure working hard on the next few books. So instead I'd like to ask what you would like to work on after Scribes, if you have any ideas brewing?

To be honest, I'm not entirely sure what to work on next. I have a few ideas, some of them more sci-fi than fantasy. I think the theological aspects will definitely play a more direct role in the next project. Kim Stanley Robinson's **Red Mars** was a really fascinating take on religion mixing with the spacefaring age. As we move toward AI and related breakthroughs, that question is going to become even more worthwhile to examine.

Worldbuilding Magazine would like to thank James Wolanyk for taking time out of his schedule and agreeing to be a part of this issue. *Scribes* was released in February 2018, with three sequels to come later. The second book, *Schisms*, is planned for release in July 2018..

You can find James on his [website](#), or follow him on Twitter [@JPWolanyk](#).🐼



THE BATTLE OF PONTE

Fiction

Battle

History

Fantasy

Conflict

David Edwards

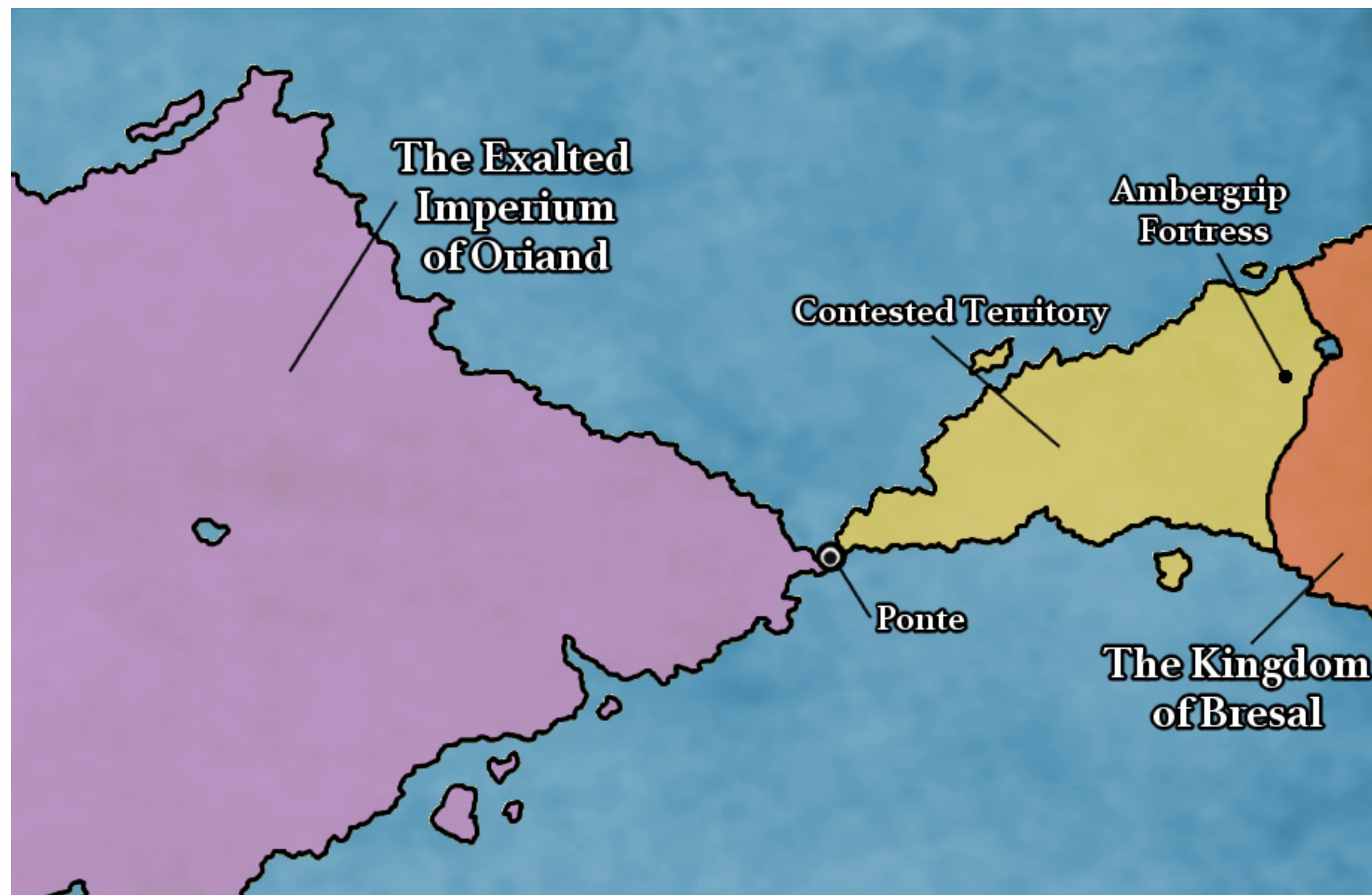
Resting above a narrow isthmus, the city of Ponte marks the divide between the continents of Gracia and Adari. It was here, over the course of three days, that two nations would fight for control of this crossroads: one an unprepared and beleaguered army, still limping from their last encounter; the other undefeated and numerous, with a centuries old grudge hard in their hearts.

This was the Battle of Ponte, and it may have saved the Empire. After decades of insurrection in the West, the Imperial borders on the East showed signs of weakness. The Kingdom of Bresal saw an opportunity to reclaim their ancestral lands, marching forty-thousand troops over the border. They were met with initial success, overrunning and securing much of the land east of Ponte. The Empire steeled itself and dug in around the narrow strip of land. When the Bresalians arrived, they were met with a reinforced and reinvigorated enemy—one that had no intention of limping away again.

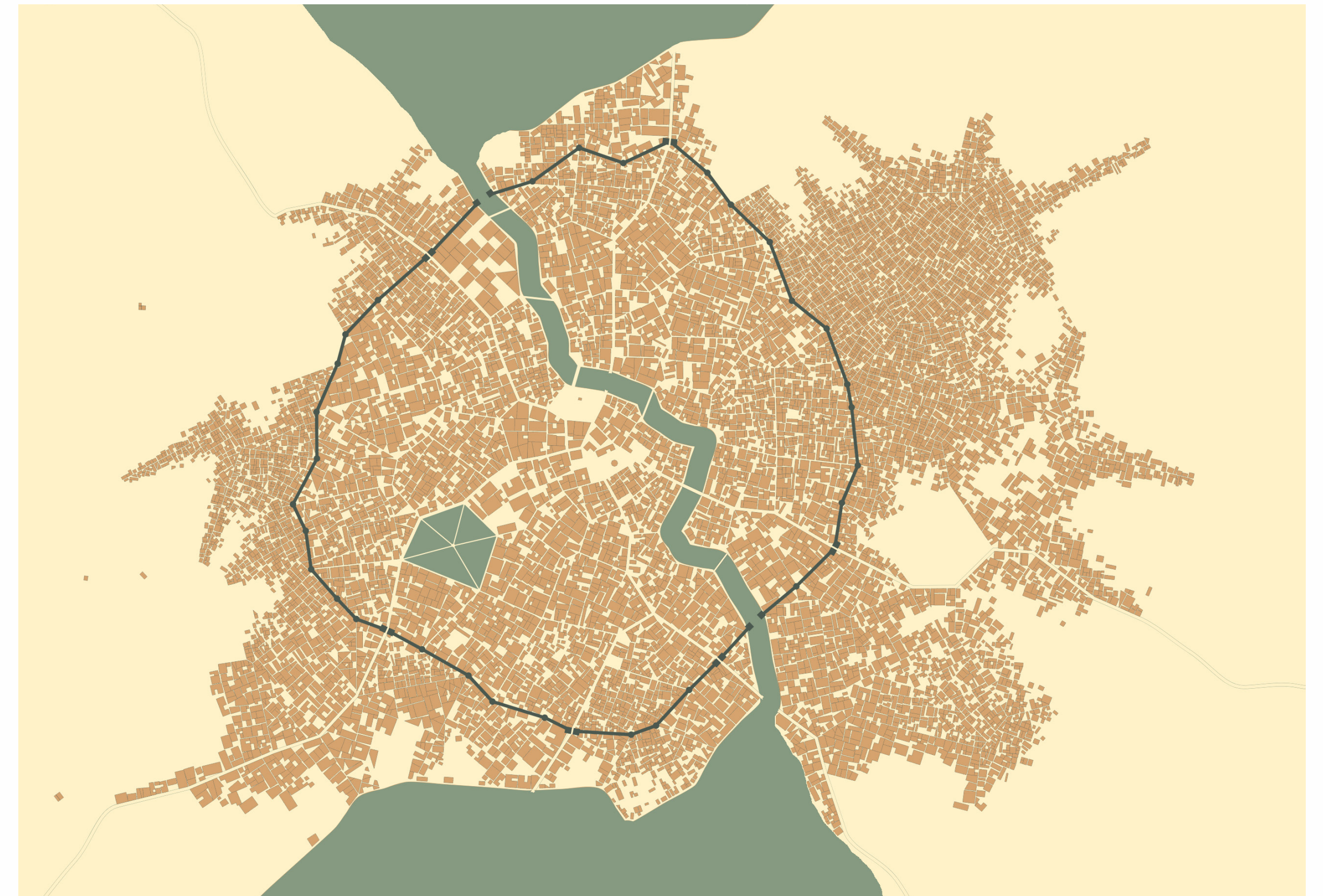
Background

Having been greatly weakened by prior military failures and in the midst of managing unrest on their western border, the Exalted Imperium of Oriand was ill-prepared for an attack on their eastern front by the Kingdom of Bresal.

Bresal sought to conquer Imperial holdings on Adari taken many centuries prior. The Bresalian army, moving swiftly through the largely undefended Imperial lands, was slowed during the First Battle of Ambergrip Fortress. Although Ambergrip Fortress, one of the few large Imperial military installations on Adari, was led by renowned Imperial leader Sabela Fenwynn, Bresal's superior numbers ultimately led to victory and forced the Imperial army to retreat to Ponte.



Artist: David Edwards



Artist: David Edwards

Opposing Forces

Imperial Army

The Imperium lacked a significant military force across the isthmus in Adari, relying solely on the troops at the isolated Ambergrip Fortress for defense. When the fortress fell the approximately 12,000 survivors retreated to Ponte, where High Constable Beldroth Valvaris led a 2,500 infantry garrison. This combined force was still outnumbered more than two-to-one, and so the call was put out for rapid reinforcement and the raising of fresh armies from nearby lands.

One region receiving the call to arms was the province of Kostimar, which included the dwarven hold of Saema's Rest. After previous Imperial military failures, the dwarves refused to spare any of their troops, choosing instead to expel the Imperial nobility from the city and declare their independence. Imperial military leadership diverted a new army of 12,500 soldiers raised from the Imperial heartlands to quell the rebellion, as well as meet up with the newly-raised Kosti army before going on to reinforce Ponte. Upon reaching Saema's Rest, however, the Imperial army was met with 18,000

Kosti soldiers siding with the dwarves. Led by Lord Ulric Staverton, a prominent Kosti noble, the rebel army entered into a tense standstill with their Imperial counterpart. What followed was two weeks of intense negotiation between Lord Staverton and Imperial nobility over the future of Kostimar. Ultimately, the two armies agreed to merge in return for assurances that Kostimar would, in the future, be raised above other Imperial vassals. This arrangement later resulted in the formation of the Duchy of Kostimar. Conflict averted, the united armies, along with a small contingent of 1,500 dwarven warriors, headed to aid the beleaguered armies at Ponte.

Bresalian Army

The Bresalian army, led by Prince Isaac Braunstone and General Rawlin Drakeroar, numbered 45,000 strong. After the First Battle of Ambergrip Fortress, Prince Braunstone split his remaining forces into a main force of 37,000 and a smaller, secondary force of 7,000 led by General Drakeroar. The General was sent to pacify the surrounding lands while Braunstone chased down the fleeing Imperial army.

This reorganization ultimately proved too time-consuming, allowing the Imperial army led by Field Marshall Fenwynn to successfully make its escape to Ponte. Prince Braunstone laid siege to Ponte, lasting for three months before receiving news of a large Imperial army headed East. Having sustained sizable losses in previous assaults, Prince Braunstone called General Drakeroar's army to join him as he prepared for a final massive assault.

Battle

First Day

The Bresalian army made its first attempt to breach the walls shortly after dawn, using the rising sun at their backs in an attempt to blind the Imperial forces. The defenders of Ponte rebuffed the attackers, who pulled back to regroup before launching another assault. This second attempt proved more successful than the first, and though the Bresalians were still not able to enter the city, they caused heavy Imperial losses. Seeing that the walls would not hold, Field Marshall Fenwynn ordered the bulk of the army to entrench itself on the western side of the city as they prepared to use the iconic bridges of Ponte as chokepoints.

Many of the minor bridges were destroyed to funnel Bresalian forces into areas where Imperial archers could easily shoot them, but Field Marshall Fenwynn also made the controversial decision to destroy Bronze Crossing. Though High Constable Valvaris strongly objected to the demolition of the third-smallest of Ponte's seven ancient bridges, Field Marshall Fenwynn asserted that holding all seven bridges would be impossible. She reasoned that the larger bridges could not be destroyed in time while the smaller bridges were easily defended and better used as chokepoints. Bronze Crossing was also located next to another bridge called Weathered Way. Both bridges crossed from the eastern half of the city into a large plaza on the western side, so leaving both intact would allow many Bresalian soldiers to cross at once and make it too difficult to defend such a key central location.

Second Day

Once again, the Bresalian army threw itself at Ponte. By early afternoon, the Imperial troops on the walls found themselves overrun. Field Marshall Fenwynn ordered a retreat across the bridges, drawing in Bresalian forces eager to finish the fight. Prince Braunstone commanded a charge across toward Western Ponte, only to be suddenly halted by Imperial fortifications. Faced with mounting losses, he ordered his troops to pull back and fortify the eastern side of the city.

A few hours before sundown, General Drakeroar's forces arrived to rejoin with the Prince's army. The fresh reinforcements made Braunstone confident his forces would be victorious, so that he chose not to press further that day.

Third Day

The Bresalian army, now greatly outnumbering the Imperial army, made a strong push toward the western side. Although they endured many losses, the Bresalians were able to take control of Roaring Winds Bridge, which allowed them access to the southwestern side of Ponte. The Imperial army, now flanked on two sides, was forced to retreat and regroup.

As the Bresalian army closed in, word reached both armies—the Imperial reinforcements were but a few hours away. After realizing that his reckless strategy had weakened his army too much to finish the Imperials off in time, Prince Braunstone sounded the retreat. Field Marshall Fenwynn took advantage of this opportunity to quickly push across the northern bridges, attacking the Bresalians in the rear. General Drakeroar led a detachment to cover the Prince's retreat, successfully buying time for their forces to escape the city. In doing so, his unit was surrounded. Unwilling to surrender, the General led his troops in a final charge against the advancing Imperial line. He was killed in action.

Aftermath

After joining the defenders of Ponte, the combined Imperial army chased after Prince Braunstone. The Bresalian army retreated to Ambergrip Fortress, incurring heavy losses on the way. Field Marshall Fenwynn laid siege to the fort, eventually retaking it in the Second Battle of Ambergrip Fortress where Prince Braunstone was taken captive. Using him as a bargaining chip, coupled with additional external threats to the Kingdom of Bresal, the Imperium was able to negotiate a peace treaty that brought an end to the war.

Legacy

The Battle of Ponte marked the end of the Bresalian offensive, though the Exalted Imperium was not in a position to press the advantage. Although it helped bring an end to the war, the Imperium still ended up ceding large amounts of territory on Adari to the Kingdom of Bresal. A new border was established two-days travel east of Ambergrip Fortress, commanded once again by Field Marshall Fenwynn. The loss of territory on Adari marked the first time since the Imperium was founded that its borders had shrunk, and many scholars consider this the start of the Imperial decline.

Though Bresal had not met its ultimate goal of taking control of Ponte and gaining a foothold on Gracia, the war was still recognized as a major victory over the Empire that had dominated the twin continents for so long. Prince Braunstone gained significant popularity for his valiant battles against the Imperial armies; however, some questioned whether his leadership had ultimately lost Bresal the Battle of Ponte. The death of General Drakeroar proved a serious blow to Bresal's military. He was given a full state funeral and posthumously awarded the Venerated Ivory Star, Bresal's highest honor.❧



Artist: Tristen Fekete

SPACE BATTLES AND HOW TO FIGHT THEM

Theory & Analysis

Conflict

LordHenry7898

Picture a space battle in your head.

Chances are, you've got a mental image that resembles the opening sequence to the film *Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith*: capital ships unleashing broadsides a couple hundred meters from each other, wings of fighters banking in and out of the chaos, and of course laser fire everywhere. When it comes time to write your own space battle, it might be tempting to try and capture that same energy and visual excitement. However, one must bear in mind that this portrayal is often woefully unrealistic, especially in audiovisual media. To forget this inconvenient truth presents two problems: firstly, your work becomes mere derivation of decades of television, film, and video games; and secondly your work now has the same glaring issues with realism. Let's take a look at an example scene from a typical sci-fi portrayal of a space battle. It might look a little bit like this:

Captain Spaceman sits in his captain's chair on the bridge and starts barking out orders. "Status report!" he yells as the enemy ship hits its target.

"We've lost a squadron of fighters!" cries an ensign, glancing at the screen.

There's another hit. Captain Spaceman swears as he fights to stay in his chair.

"We've lost our fore and aft shields, sir!"

"Reverse the polarity of the electron flow and get us out of here!"

"We can't, sir," announces the ensign as the enemy spaceship appears a few hundred miles away.

"Onscreen."

Is this scene acceptable science fiction? Depends on who you ask. Some people value the action and drama and see the "science" as a simple

storytelling tool, while others value realism and consistency in the "science" of science fiction. In other words, some prefer the "soft" science fiction most commonly seen in popular media, while others prefer "hard" science fiction. Neither is inherently better or worse than the other; to rank one above the other is a matter of personal taste. However, in either case, the less your audience has to suspend their disbelief, the better and more immersive your story will be. So let's examine some of the more common yet unrealistic tropes of space combat, and discuss more realistic alternatives.

It's a common misconception that space fighters need to be aerodynamic as there is no "drag" in space. However, an exception can be made for fighters designed to move seamlessly between space and atmosphere. For example, *Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare* features sleek fighter craft with a variety of airfoils which, along with the wings, can retract when not in use, giving way to gas jets and thrusters. Such design is ideal for moving from space to atmosphere and back again. A big, blocky fighter craft may be perfectly serviceable in space, but as soon as it hits the air it is going to drop like a brick. Likewise, a USAF F-22 will be helpless in space.

Another closely related problem with the portrayal of fighters is how they behave as though they are dogfighting. This depiction is derived from atmospheric combat, where many of those movements depend on friction slowing the fighters down. A plane, for example, turns by banking then using their flaps to change direction. A space fighter on the other hand would use gas jets to rotate the ship, then continue to drift in the direction they have been going in until they have built up enough thrust to change direction. Due to these factors a ship won't necessarily be looking in the same direction it's moving. This makes for interesting situations, such as a spacecraft rotating around to shoot back at its pursuer then pointing forwards again without a single change in its motion, as seen in *Battlestar Galactica*.

Next up are two problems that go hand-in-hand: the frequency of weapon impacts and the distance between ships in combat. In close proximity, two rival ships will hit each other quite often. However, space is massive. The chances of these ships even being within visual range are infinitesimal unless drawn together by certain points of interest. In atmosphere, there are certain factors limiting range: air pressure, crosswinds, and even gravity. These are all forces that drag the bullet off course, and none of them exist in space. When a weapon is fired, the projectile goes on until it hits something.

Now, a few factors limit range in space as well. The first is sensor range. Essentially, you're probably not going to fight something you don't know is there. Next up is gun accuracy. The way guns work is that at any range you can draw an imaginary circle that contains all of your shots. As your range increases, the size of the circle increases. Eventually, the the circle is so big and the bullets are so spread out that they won't hit anything. This is the likely scenario with long range space battles. Battles at closer ranges could arise near space stations or celestial bodies but most of the time spacecraft will be thousands or even millions of kilometers apart. While popular depiction would have you believe that space battles should be dense, in reality this is improbable.

Keeping in mind that generating a force field will always require massive amounts of energy, there are a few ways to portray this popular trope realistically. One such option is the plasma window, in which superheated gas is held in place using focused soundwaves. Gas on one side will be unable to pass through to the other side. Another aspect to consider is the intended function of the force field, which can change appreciably depending on the fictional universe. In *Star Wars* for example, force fields divert the blaster bolt *just enough* to miss the ship. In *Star Trek*, on the other hand, the purpose of shields is to dissipate energy blasts. However, as with any tool, humans will likely find creative uses for the technology never intended by the inventor.

One of the most exciting scenarios in any work of science fiction is when the hull is breached and the air starts to rush out of the cabin. Hollywood gets this right for the big holes, but what about the little ones? The gunfire of the pirate boarding party has pierced the hull; what happens now? Very little, actually. The air starts seeping out. Depending on the size of the ship, this could go on for a long time before it becomes a problem. As for the larger punctures there is an easy solution to prevent catastrophe, should the captain and crew have time to prepare: as soon as an enemy ship

is detected, have the crew don spacesuits and depressurize the ship. Not so much that the hull buckles, but enough to prevent the crew from being blown into space should a bomb go off nearby.

In light of this information, you might get the impression that there is no realism to be found

in popular science-fiction. However, there is one piece of technology that is portrayed more or less correctly: lasers! In space lasers and other directed energy weapons (not including sonic weapons) are more effective than guns and missiles. While guns can technically work in space, they have a number of problems. When metal objects are used, like anything, they accumulate damage over time. In space, however, this can cause metal objects such as the hammer and firing pin of a gun to fuse. On Earth there is a small pocket of air that exists in between the two objects preventing this. There is no such barrier in a vacuum, so two pieces of metal could actually "cold weld" to one another. You would need to replace moving parts almost constantly. Firearms also have recoil. In space, unless you're braced against something, firing a gun is going to send you drifting off into the wild black yonder.

Lasers don't fall victim to these problems, but do have some of their own. First and foremost, lasers take a lot of energy to function, so sustained use may be difficult or even dangerous. The other big problem with lasers is heat distribution. Sustained use of lasers will produce a lot of heat; however, this is easily addressed with little adverse effects to the weapon. In atmosphere, it just

One of the most exciting scenarios in any work of science fiction is when the hull is breached and the air starts to rush out of the cabin. Hollywood gets this right for the big holes, but what about the little ones?

requires the use of heat sinks or other radiative surface, which means that 1950s style finned laser guns could be feasible. Another method of cooling would be to use water or other liquids to cool the laser between or during uses. This would be much more practical for mounted cannons, as they could be affixed right next to their water source. Water-cooled lasers would be a bit more bulky, but could be cooled faster. Aside from heat, lasers also produce waste chemicals. The energy created within a laser that eventually becomes the laser beam is the result of a chemical reaction. The other result of this reaction is a collection of wildly toxic chemicals. Again, this is more of a problem for small lasers. Large mounted lasers could have a crew to service them. In his book, *War in 2080*, military theorist David Langford explains that man-portable lasers would require the user to wear a hazmat suit to avoid contact with the toxic chemicals.

With all that we've discussed in mind, let's consider what a space battle might actually look like:

Master First Sergeant Spaceman floats up to the command deck.

"Status report?" he calmly asks.

"Nothing yet. They've taken a few shots at our fighters, but no casualties yet."

The ship fires again, narrowly missing them.

"That's good. Seal off and depressurize the command deck before they get lucky."

The door hisses shut, as the crew in the command deck fixes their helmets onto the connections in their flight suits.

Master First Sergeant Spaceman is the last to affix his. With a hiss, the visor fogs, then the condensation disappears.

"Let's find them. Anything on long-range sensors?"

"We have a bogey about a million kilometers out."

"Charge up the lasers."

The airman in charge of the laser begins rerouting power from nonessential systems.

Injecting realism into a fictional space battle can be a difficult but rewarding exercise. While the pace of the action may be slower than what audiences have come to expect, it has the potential for just as much excitement and drama. 🐼

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Adam Bassett

Year two, day eighteen.

We total about sixty-thousand now, assuming the union went well on all sides. We'll have to take a census soon, but that's tough to manage when we're on the move. Most important for now is keeping the peace; a handshake doesn't wipe away the problems of the past. Keep your eyes open and keep me informed, Ryan. I'm counting on you.

I don't trust Isaiah, those who follow him, or the others. He's a fine man. He's not right for these people, though. They need strong leadership, even if some don't know it now. You understand, I'm sure. It will take time, but I will give them what they deserve.

-Fredricka

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OVERARCHING CONFLICT IN A DUNGEONS & DRAGONS CAMPAIGN

Tabletop Gaming

Theory & Analysis

Plot & Structure

Fantasy (High)

Ianara Natividad

Demons have appeared in the vast Underdark and threaten to destroy the material plane in its entirety should they be unleashed upon the surface world. An unfortunate group finds themselves trapped in Barovia, a realm ruled by the vampire lord Strahd von Zarovich, where the only way to leave is to destroy him and free the land of his terror. A spreading curse makes all resurrection impossible; the heroes must search the lands of Chult for the cause and stop it so that people can be brought back to life again. Each of these scenarios corresponds to the hook of an official adventure, or module, published for *Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition* (D&D; D&D 5e) by Wizards of the Coast (WotC). More importantly, they represent a vital part in any campaign narrative: the overarching conflict.

From a broader standpoint, overarching conflict refers to the main problems of the setting or the adventure. This type of conflict functions as the purpose of the campaign and the driving force for its major events. A campaign is a string of consecutive and often related adventures that the Dungeon Master (DM)—a unique player role that manages the rules, story, and world's occurrences in D&D—runs for a party of Player Characters (PCs), which serve as the other players' avatars in the game world. The setting is generally where the players engage the campaign; its scope can range from a dungeon to a village or even encompass an entire realm. Thus, the DM may ultimately task the PCs with addressing the problem(s) afflicting the world around them.

The term overarching conflict implies predicaments on the grand scale, the meaning of which shifts with the campaign's context. The problem may be a massive affair in the world, like an international war or the spread of a deadly plague. Traditionally, grand conflicts appear in novels, films, and television shows where the dramatic proceedings eventually lead to its resolution.

Similarly, central tensions drive the stories of D&D campaigns; they act as the hook that pulls the adventurers to brave perils.

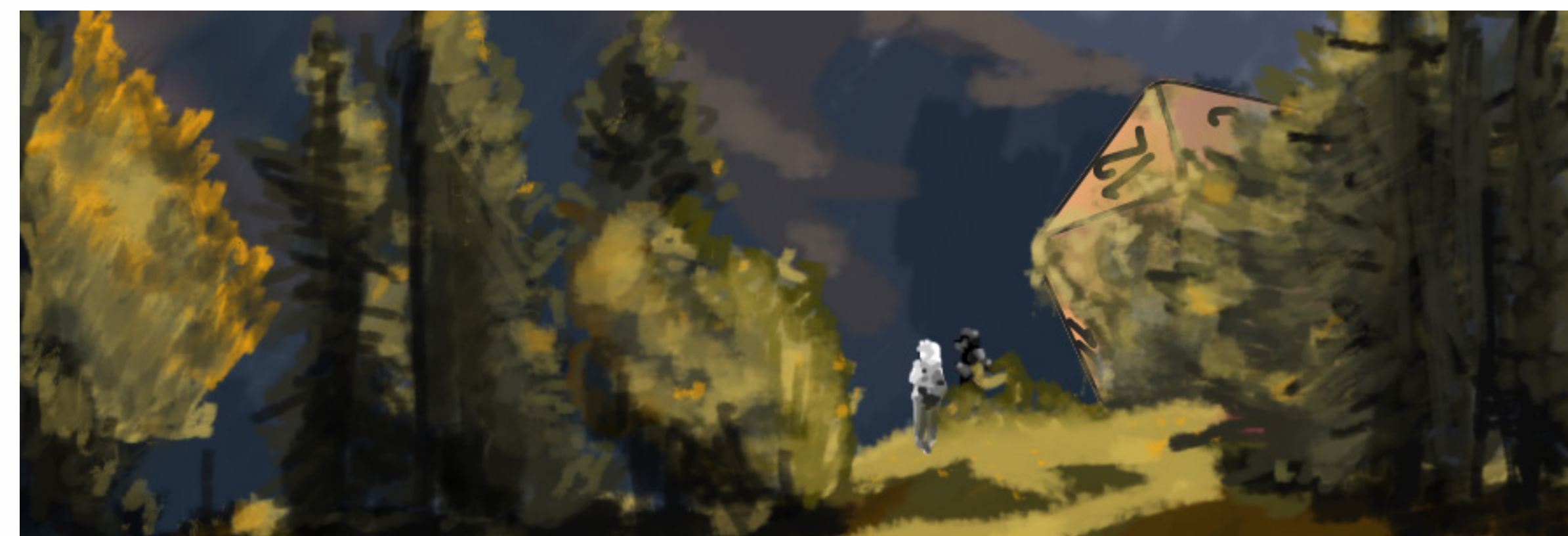
However, overarching conflict in campaigns does not only encompass large scale altercations. In *Against the Cult of the Reptile God*, a module for an earlier edition of D&D, PCs address a cult that has infiltrated and assimilated the people of a village. The adventure ultimately results in a confrontation between the party and the cult's leadership. In that example, the module's main struggle addresses the problems in a small-scale area. It is not a war or plague, but it does give the players a focus for their characters' efforts.

The introductory segment for my campaign led the PCs to defend a town called Duford from invading forces, like roaming orcs and bandits. The party also encountered evil, supernatural monstrosities known as the Scourge, foreshadowing much riskier encounters. For that portion of my game, the players focused on the town's affairs until they had sufficiently aided the settlement and became its heroes. The characters then moved to another part of the world, expanding the campaign's scope. From the problematic circumstances in Duford to the aftermath, I built upon the character's experiences to fashion a plausible and engaging narrative for the players. Beyond the campaign, the overarching conflict provides a framework through which the DM molds the overall setting.

This framework can be relevant at any point during the campaign, and by introducing this sort of conflict, a DM accomplishes several things. First of all, establishing it early on provides a direct avenue for the DM to worldbuild and display the world they created to their players. In my personal campaign, a massive war that grips the continent of Varia has pulled most of the realm's major powers into its throes. This conflict existed before the PCs were even conceived in the world. Through the

web of complications created by that event, there laid the possibility for expanding upon numerous elements of the setting. I fleshed out locations, factions and their ideologies, geopolitical cultures, and the systems of magic and the technologies used—simply a rabbit hole of topics that bolsters the world's sense of reality. Locking down those major facets of the setting not only filled it out but helped me prepare how I wanted to run my campaign.

Overarching conflict creates a repository of lore and theoretical situations that all remain plausible because of the established context, though implementing it is not the only method to worldbuild for a campaign. The details that spawn from an overarching conflict will serve the DM more than the players, at least initially. Players will not have an encyclopedic understanding of the setting since



Artist: Adam Bassett

their knowledge ideally reflects their characters'. At my campaign's onset, I provided my players with enough information for them to believably play their characters, like common histories, details for hometowns, and associated factions. However, as different topics become relevant to the PCs, I oblige their desire for knowledge within the limits of the characters' experiences but otherwise do not share details not of relevance or interest to them. For example, I had drafted out a prominent city called Wiltide, the surrounding region, and its invasion, but the campaign went on for nearly a year before Wiltide played a direct part in the adventure. One of the party's allies assigned them a quest that made Wiltide their next destination. I already had a considerable basis for the area, so I could then extrapolate more details that might interest the characters. A DM confident in the aspects of their world will more likely succeed in presenting it in a believable and immersive fashion

to their players.

The second thing overarching conflict brings to the game is altering the manner that players engage the campaign and the setting. Introducing the central tension before or during the players' character creation process provides a narrative-driven source of control over the resulting characters and party. In this case, the DM can forewarn the players that the PCs will ultimately be affected by the hook. They may even set the direct expectation that characters should have some motivation to interact with the conflict. Ideally, players will create PCs that accommodate the setting and have some awareness of the world's major circumstances. For example, my campaign has a player who created a former soldier that partook in the warring in Varia before becoming an adventurer. The character's backstory then gives

her insight on the scale of the struggle and possibly motivation to get involved in the proceedings, or utterly avoid them. In *Curse of Strahd*, the module suggests how to introduce Barovia to the PCs, and characters become privy early on to Strahd's antagonistic role in the adventure.

Implementing large-scale conflicts can emphasize a DM's worldbuilding and control over the game's events. However, taken to the extreme, a DM may create a railroad scenario where the central problem appears as the exclusive option for campaign progress. The players find themselves trapped in a situational box in which they have limited control over their circumstances; resolving the conflict may only come in a plotted, possibly linear process that ignores player creativity. This approach may cause the DM to step over the players' agency and their sense of impact upon the

campaign. Published adventures often follow a rail-road structure to an extent since they provide set encounters that eventually lead to the module's end. Having a detailed outline for how the conflict unfolds and what the characters experience on the way is a great resource, but it should be taken as a guideline, not a script. The players will interact with the world in unpredictable ways, and the DM's role then is to ensure the game proceeds smoothly while taking their actions into account. In that regard, the main conflict helps frame the decisions made and their consequences in the campaign. There is no singularly right approach to narrative direction, and the best choice for any given table depends on the group's overall preferences.

When the DM introduces the central conflict also affects its impact on the campaign. If presented early on, this type of conflict formalizes a campaign's direction and gives players a more solidified impression of the setting. Integrating PCs sooner than later into the overall narrative also helps players immerse themselves quicker into the world. A DM who takes this approach gains leeway in their independent worldbuilding because they can assume that players will abide by the campaign's focus. However, a DM may opt for subtler ways of introduction, where overarching conflict only becomes known gradually. With this way, the players have more time to get invested in their characters and the setting. Familiarity increases the impact of the conflict coming to affect them. When organizing a game in this manner, the campaign's direction initially seems more abstract for the players, who may unintentionally create characters completely unrelated to the main quest. Yet, the DM can take advantage of the aspects of the world or the characters that interest players by finding a way to connect them back to the overarching conflict. Accommodating the players' narrative preferences and making those feel important lead to a more collaborative form of worldbuilding and campaign design.

Engaging specific player interests enhances the investment that they develop for their characters, their places in the world, and the setting itself. At this approach's extreme, the DM effectively designs the campaign around the PCs. The greater attachments players have in their own characters and the campaign, the more likely they are to interact with the setting beyond their initial interests. The DM hooks the party onto their intercharacter dynamics and the world itself. Then, they muster this investment to enhance the stakes for the long-planned introduction, if not integration, of the overarching conflict. Take for example a campaign I played in called *Out of the Abyss*. In it, the PCs began as prisoners who had to free themselves from their captors and escape the Underdark. While that situation provided the central tension for the first half of the campaign, the module's true conflict became increasingly apparent as the characters traversed the lethal Underdark. They became firsthand witnesses to demon lords and their lesser kin wreaking havoc in the subterranean system. The threat would no doubt bring chaos to the surface as well. Powerful factions then sought to enlist the PCs to defeat the demons after they escaped the Underdark. Though my character was traumatized by his previous experiences, he nonetheless felt an obligation to his companions and loved ones, leading him to continue adventuring and save the world.

Modules with set encounters and results create expectations for campaign progression. The reasons why characters brave great dangers, such as facing demons and braving the Underdark in the previous example, represents a wider ideology. When the players and their characters feel threatened by a problem posed in front of them, they are more likely to address the matter. This mindset proves particularly useful for a DM that has been plotting the overarching conflict for as long as the campaign has gone on. Admittedly, this approach is better suited to longer running campaigns. The DM

gambles on the players developing an investment and a sense of accountability for their surroundings while they prime the central problem. Yet, designing and playing out an overarching conflict that emotionally grips the players merits a more fulfilling sense of accomplishment for everyone at the table. What the characters have done becomes important to the players because they made the choice to address the conflict themselves. Their decisions grow more organically from their relationships or interest in the setting and the characters therein, as well as with each other.

Creating a setting and a campaign can be an intrinsically independent pursuit. In any given game of D&D, the DM serves as the keeper of their world's secrets. However, to have a legitimate campaign, the players must act their way through the adventure; their ability to abide and contribute to the setting's narrative gives the world a sense of reality. Simultaneously, the DM becomes the one who pulls away the veil, enlightening players to the world around them. Each table will differ since any given group brings its own approach to maneuvering through the story and the game's methodology. Overarching conflict is a multipurpose tool that builds up a DM's world. For players, it generates investment. Though this type of conflict comes in varying forms, adequately using overarching conflict may mean the difference between a good campaign and a great one. 🐉

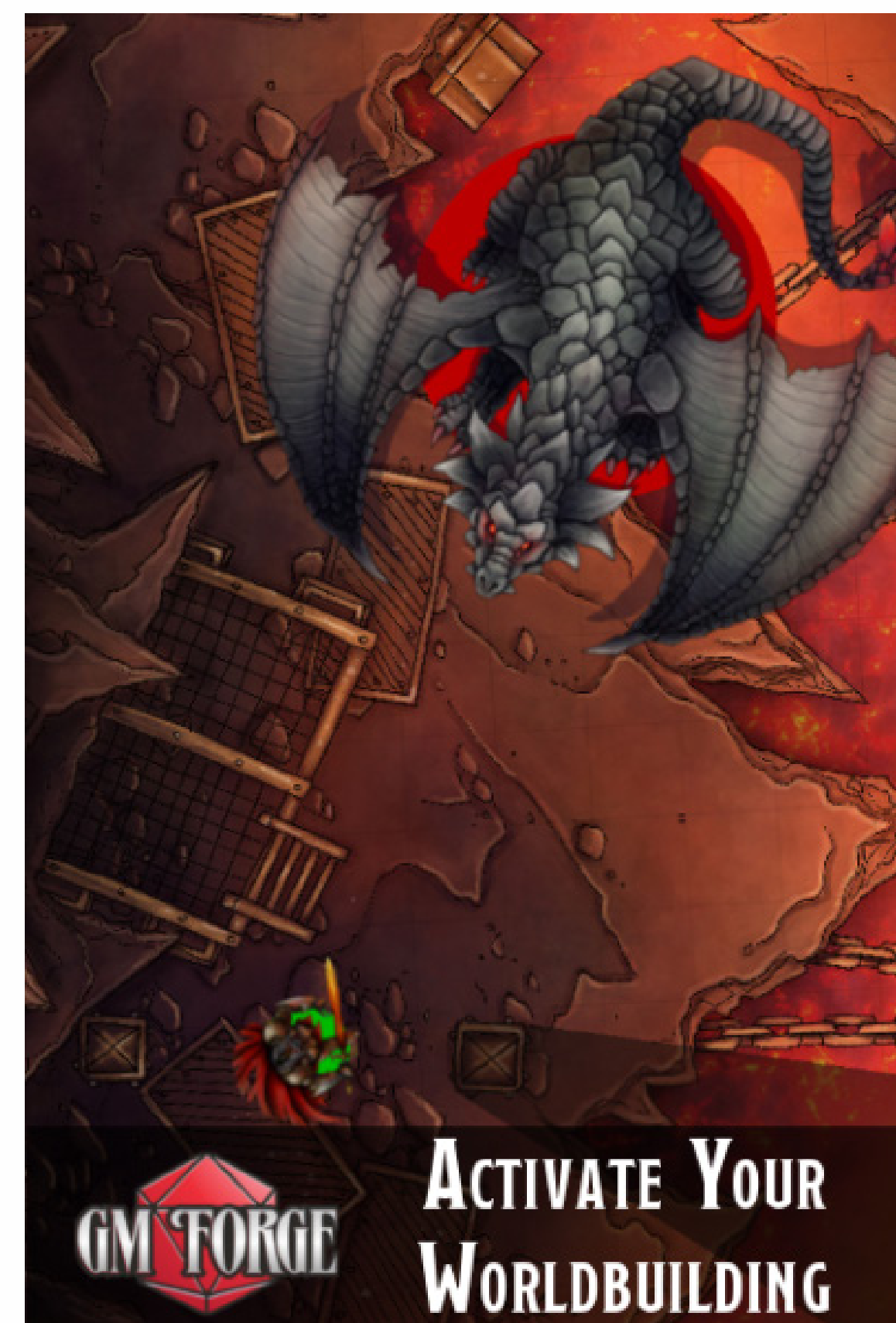
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GM FORGE **ACTIVATE YOUR
WORLDBUILDING**

ART FEATURE: TOMAS MUIR

Art

Feature

Curated by Wynter

My name's Tomas Muir, I'm a concept artist and illustrator working in the games and movie industry since the summer of 2017, although I've been painting digitally since 2011 while still in middle school. I was raised with a lot of exposure to video games and movies, but the franchises that really stuck with me were the ones with fantasy themes, particularly *Lord of the Rings* and the *Legend of Zelda*. I would draw cards and make comics when I was eight years old, sometimes even writing out lore for them even though I've always been a primarily visual person. At a later age, the *Souls* series from FromSoftware sparked an almost uncontrollable passion for a darker type of fantasy that relied on ambiguity and environmental storytelling. This, combined with a childhood lived in two radically different environments (Houston, Texas and the countryside of Portugal), led to an obsession with imagination. After that I just kept painting and painting for about five years, until people noticed. My main focus has always been on environments, landscapes, and paths, to the point that whenever I do paint a human figure they usually have their backs to the viewer, heading into the world that's been created. I try to convince people that these painted places are real by using impressionistic colors and strong contrasts.

About a year ago I started making concepts for my relatively ambiguous project titled "Wind." At first I only wanted an excuse to paint expansive environments and maybe elaborate on them with prop designs, then the idea kept growing in the back of my head, involving various layers of depth. I've never been a very conscientious artist, so the only way I have managed to keep myself interested in the setting has been to keep adding things to it. This procedural process has led me to an almost coherent world. The purpose of "Wind" has always been to be an anchor for my personal work and to learn how



Forest Area

to think beyond just "pretty things," a problem that many visual artists face. This is my first attempt at proper world-building, so it is also primarily a learning process.

"Wind" consists of a single continent divided into five areas: The Forest of *Ligni*, The *Taismer Desert*, The *Ferto Plains*, *Mignos*, and *Aush*. Each has its own distinct feel, color palette, and local culture except for *Mignos*, the volcanic area. I developed the idea for these various areas by remembering how open world games like *Dark Souls*

and some of the *Legend of Zelda* games handle environmental variety. Each area always felt different and new, always leading to a certain sense of awe that is rarely inspired by non-open world games. So that's what I want to get out of "Wind:" environments that feel new and different, combined with a message of sustainability and the relationship between chaos and order. Hopefully one day I'll be able to turn the project in to an actual video game. There's still a ton left to be done though, which I think is a good thing!

The journey is more important than the destination, right?🐾

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Special thanks to Tomas Muir for letting us share his work. If you are interested in being featured in an upcoming issue of Worldbuilding Magazine please [email](#) or contact us on [Discord](#).

Left: The Aush Village
Below: The Ferto Plains



DESIGNING SYSTEMS FOR COMBAT

Gaming

Psycho Romeo

What good is a combat system for a world-builder? The most obvious application is for gaming and tabletop RPGs. However, a combat system can be used for far more than that. In a story-driven world, a worldbuilder might create two nations in conflict with each other, already knowing who they want to win and how to go about doing it. But in a world constructed more organically, perhaps the builder doesn't know who comes out on top, what kind of losses they suffer, etc. If the military strength of each combatant can be measured, the worldbuilder can use a framework to simulate the outcome. Some of the processes involved in designing such a framework will be the topic of this article.

What is a combat system? This might be easy to define by saying “the rules that determine how much damage something does.” But does the game checkers feature one? What about Chinese checkers? Rock paper scissors? Tic tac toe? While they lack any of the violence expected from combat, they are just as significant of a system as one that features swords and guns.

Systems are methods for comparing and modifying data, or the application of some kind of rule. Designers employ such methods for all kinds of things, whether it be for the mechanics of magic, an economic structure, culture and population growth and decay, or the gastronomical process of gluten digestion. This article will focus specifically on systems used for combat, but the design principles we'll be exploring in this article can be employed to simulate a variety of mechanics.

What's a combat system made of?

A combat system consists of three main parts—the innate properties that define a combatant, the kinds of actions a combatant can take, and the rules that dictate how these two aspects operate and interact.

The most fundamental aspect of any combat system is describing the combatants. Some compare body size, using weight and height to describe combat participants. This framework could then ascribe statistics to taller, shorter, heavier, or lighter combatants, making a balanced system where each quality brings its own benefits. Systems that define combatants with aesthetic qualities might qualify combatants with colors and shapes. One could then say that a certain color-shape combination would score higher than some other color-shape combination. Likewise, what we use to define combatants in a combat system might be innate stats like strength and defense power. Whatever they may be, these values will be used for various calculations and rules, leading to all sorts of outcomes. However, our first step will be to define these descriptors.

The most common and iconic combat systems use six generic stats that identify the physical and mental prowess of the combatant—Strength, Constitution, Charisma, Dexterity, Wisdom, and Intelligence. Sometimes a combat system will have Luck, Agility, or Spirit accompanying or replacing these stats, while other ability score frameworks might combine and reduce these stats into just three or four. Typically, these stats influence some sort of secondary set of skills and attributes, such as hit points, evasion score, armor rating, etc. These, in turn, influence other aspects of the system. This structure is especially common to see in games where the combatant is some kind of creature, or in fantasy games such as *World of Warcraft* or *Dungeons and Dragons*. But what if our combatant is not a creature but rather an army, or a city, or something else? In combat systems that feature vehicular combat we might see attributes such as Armor, Firepower, Speed, and other less fleshy sounding words. For battles involving fleets of warships or battalions of soldiers, we might see stats like Morale, Supply, and Fatigue. A combatant like a castle might have stats like Income and Population. Regardless of the exact words chosen to describe the innate elements of our combat system, their function is exactly the same—they are part of what defines the combatant.

However, many combat systems also have passive traits that can be used to describe a combatant. For example, if a green slime and a blue goblin have all the same stat values they would be functionally identical as far as the combat system is concerned—combat using the slime or the goblin would have more or less the same outcome. To distinguish these two creatures a combat system can include things like elemental affinities for earth and water, or racial types such as formless and demihuman. Depending on how significant the rules behind these passive traits are, they could greatly influence how combat plays out between these two otherwise identical combatants: for systems involving armies the battalions from polar



Photo: Michal Parzuchowski on Unsplash

regions would have the cold resistant property; for combat systems that feature infrastructure, ports from jungle and forest regions might be able to repair ships faster. Mixing numeric properties with non-numeric properties is a great way to make combatants feel distinct from one another without adding too much complexity. We will revisit the topic of complexity again when we begin to craft our rules.

What about spells and special attacks?

While innate stats and traits might be the foundations of a combat system, the most impactful elements will be the choices that the combatants make: the actions, abilities, skills, and items that the combatant has available to them, and their role in achieving a glorious victory or harrowing defeat. While less important for combat systems that are meant to simply simulate an outcome, the ability for a combatant to make decisions and take actions is a very engaging element of playing a game.

When we think of abilities, skills, and items, the most obvious things that come to mind are special techniques like a phalanx formation, magic spells such as fireballs, and handheld objects such as grenades or healing herbs. As awesome as spells, elixirs, and technology are, many of the most basic elements of combat systems are often overlooked as being abilities. Such elements might include the ability to move or change distance from the enemy on a battlefield, or the ability to choose one target over another target to attack. While these things may seem simple or given, they are no less important elements to consider than more complex skill and magic systems. For example, Chinese checkers uses nothing more than a simple movement system to carry the entire game. Rock paper scissors boils down to choosing one action out of three. Despite this simplicity, these are iconic systems that have stood the test of time.

Typically, the use of such abilities or items spend some sort of resource such as energy, stamina, magic points, or the item itself. Also popular is the method of putting these actions behind some sort of cooldown, where these item has only so many uses within a particular time frame. Game balance won't be discussed in this article, however more information on this subject can be found in [Volume 1 Issue 7 Intro to Game Design for the Worldbuilder](#).

Additionally, remember that combatants are more than their collective stats or abilities, but can also be described by the equipment or tools they might have with them. It is expected that fighting with a dagger is distinct from fighting with a two-handed hammer. Despite this, being hit by a hammer and being pierced by a dagger might both be equally lethal, and it would not be out of the question that the two weapons could have very similar stats. To make these weapons distinct perhaps the dagger wielder might have the ability to parry incoming attacks, whereas the hammer wielder would be able to crush through blocks. Or, perhaps the crossbow-equipped battalion and the longbow-equipped battalion both have the abilities that all ranged combatants have access to, but the longbow battalion can attack considerably faster.

And finally, unlike descriptive elements in creative writing, there is no use for fluff in a combat system. Hair color probably has no influence on the outcome of a fight, therefore is a completely useless element to consider in a combat system.

If not green hair, then what are the useful elements to consider?

Now that we've been introduced to the building blocks that comprise most combat systems we must decide what we want our system to describe. What actions do we want our combatants to be able to utilize? What innate properties will define them? What rules will influence how these other aspects play out? Some combat systems are very simple—subtract your attack power from an enemy's health pool and repeat until zero. Other combat systems have more complex rules for more specialized circumstances, such as flanking, political pressure, and special weapons or armor properties.

To approach this part of the design process I suggest using the all-powerful "movie moment" method. Imagine what kind of movie moments your combatants will have while engaged with each other. Describe them in two or three sentences. Play out a handful of scenes and scenarios, construct awesome upsets or epic triumphs that you'd want your combat system to be able to simulate. We will then attempt to

reverse engineer this movie moment, in the end we should have a combat system capable of recreating such a scene. Consider some of the movie moments below, along with a quick attempt to reverse engineer a combat system to recreate them.

- Instead of receiving a fatal blow, the Ratman Warrior executes a dodge roll—which due to their small size allows them to slip right between the troll's legs. Now, directly behind the troll, they get an automatic critical hit with their attack.

- To recreate this moment, we'd need a dodging action, a size property, and a rule about attacks against a target's back. The small size property will also have a rule that allows for special interactions against larger opponents when using the dodge action.

- A pious city has recently completed construction of a large house of worship. This accomplishment increases the commerce in the city for the next few years.

- To recreate this, we'd need actions that allow for the construction of buildings. Some kind of rule would need to be in place that creates a relationship between the building constructed and an increase in commerce—for example, visiting pilgrims.

- The ogre uses a heavy smash, but the defender had prepped a counterattack stance. By turning the ogre's considerable attack

power back against them, the defender knocks them down. They are momentarily unable to act.

- To recreate this moment, a smash and counterattack stance ability are needed. Counterattack will reflect the attacker's damage and put them in a knockdown state, perhaps making the ogre skip its turn.

- The gunnery officer appraised the target as slightly farther than they were, but the navigation officer caught the mistake and corrected it with a

sweep of the sensors. Now with a perfect lock on the enemy position, the military star base lands hits against the pirate star base, piercing the first layer of its armor.

- To recreate this moment, a combatant chooses actions that each of their officers can take. Such actions include the gunnery officer's rangefinding ability and the navigation officer's sweep ability. A rule involving armor piercing with accurate hits is in place.

Having trouble formulating your movie moment? Is that cool moment just not resonating or transitioning well into mechanics? Try one of the following:

Find a very specific aspect that you absolutely refuse to go without and expand from there. Many of the combat systems I've worked on start from one singular premise that all other parts of the system are designed to enhance. For example, consider a combat system where combatants can steal the turn from the enemy when they defend perfectly. This might get reinforced by a very fluid turn order, or by noting when combatants "fail to defend" instead of "succeed to attack." Alternatively, consider a system that instead of using the typical you-go-I-go-you-go-I-go format, two combatants take their turn simultaneously and clash their attacks together. This one could get backed up by simple, easy-to-follow rules and mechanics that lead to quick turns and explosive results. Finally, maybe you really don't want to use traditional life point values and instead want to find a way to represent health using a handful of dice. This system might focus more heavily on having physical components to the game (such as cards and cutouts) instead of just written numbers and values.

If that doesn't work find some combat systems you do like and copy them, adding your own flair. One of the earliest lessons I learned was that having an original idea pays off far less than having a good one. An original idea is nothing more than that—an original idea. It's not necessarily a fun or engaging idea. But if there's already an existing combat system that's fun and suits your needs, use it! Being creative doesn't mean making something from scratch, it can also mean adopting a new perspective on an existing concept. That being said, ensure the system you imitate is actually appropriate for whatever it's being used for. Just because it worked in some other game doesn't mean it'll work in yours.

In conclusion, there are many strengths to using the movie moment method to design a combat system. By describing the scene in two or

three sentences the designer is less likely to make inappropriately complex rules. Having the coolest moment that a combat system is capable of creating as the focal point of its design helps ensure that the designer does not get lost with superfluous features, instead staying focused on the system's main selling points. And of course, knowing what those selling points are up front helps tremendously when trying to explain it to others.

My idea is really cool—but now what?

With our movie moment defined, and a basic outline created for some of the more important rules, the next step is designing the rules and inner workings of the system itself. To do this we'll take some of the building blocks we identified earlier in the article and assign them to various moving parts in our combat framework, then we will describe how these mechanics interact with each other. In doing so we will create rules by which our combat system will operate.

While combat systems can be wildly different from one another, there are a few elements that almost all combat systems will have. These serve as good areas to begin defining rules.

- How are combatants defeated? Without the ability to lose a combat system is just an exercise. In most games winning and losing is determined by the health of a combatant, while some others use fuel or morale. Consider what kind of actions will bring a combatant closer to defeat and what sort of stats, such as constitution or population, or abilities, such as repairing, can stave it off.
- How is the combatant's position represented? While not all combat systems may have explicit movement mechanics, most of them have some ability to determine or change a combatant's location or spatial relationship from an enemy (near, far, flanking, etc). Some systems take a more boolean approach. For example, in traditional Pokemon only one creature could be active at a time and the rest would be kept on a bench.
- What will determine when a combatant can take action? Maybe teams just take turns, or maybe a particular stat influences how often one can act, or maybe it's a game played in

real time on a computer or console. This is a very important aspect to consider alongside active elements such as actions the combatants take.

- What sort of information is available and hidden to the combatant? The decision making process takes on a completely new twist when the playfield is obscured, or if there are hidden stats or skills that could cause certain strategies to succeed or backfire.
- How can one combatant be stronger than another? Growth can take many forms—the act of gaining mastery at a profession, the experience required to make better decisions, or the increase of stats and abilities. The former tends to be more natural, more accurately describing real life progression. The later is important not only to reward and invest players in a game, but also to get a quick gauge of how difficult a fight might be.

While this seems like a daunting process, once one gets going it begins to come together like a Sudoku puzzle. The more complete a system gets, the more obvious the next answer becomes—so just pick a rule and begin! With a strong movie moment, a firm grasp on the tools available, and some practice, the rules for combat will practically write themselves.

How will I know if the rules I design are sound?

One of the most common ways that combat systems fall short is when its rules do not form meaningful and holistic relationships with each other. A mechanic is meaningless if the difference between a combatant using it or not using it is not all that significant. For example, say a combat system has a rule that allows a combatant to choose to be at close range, medium range, or long range from their target. If there are no components or mechanics that relate what range the combatant is to the damage or accuracy of an attack, then being close or far is effectively as meaningless as their hair color. And even if there are mechanics that describe what range the combatant is at, if there is no meaningful difference in between them then there still is no meaningful relationship. To address this the designer would need to have rules, stats, or abilities that cause combat at close range to be fundamentally distinct from combat at long range.

When the concept of creating meaningful relationships between mechanics is at its peak *misperformance*, a combatant doing something that should be helpful actually makes them weaker. This is a step beyond a simple unimportant relationship, it is actual dissonance within the system; an unintended consequence of what may be an otherwise sound design decision. One would think this would be obvious and easy to spot, however unintended consequences tend to sneak in unnoticed.

For example, I've designed a system where a defender can don several layers of armor to prevent attacks from dealing damage to their health. When an attack is received the attack power is compared against each armor piece's defense. If the attack power is lesser than that armor piece's defense threshold, it does nothing. However, if the attack power is greater, the difference is subtracted from the armor's durability until the armor breaks and the player's health bar is exposed again. Sounds neat, right?

An unintended consequence of this system might be that the more layers of armor a combatant wears, the more armor is checked with each incoming attack. As a result, a combatant wearing four layers of armor could take four times as much durability damage as a player wearing one layer of armor. One would expect that wearing additional layers of armor would be more protective, not put them on the high-score board for repair fees. This is an example of dissonance within the system.

Addressing an unintended consequence requires no small amount of critical thinking and problem solving. Perhaps, in our example above with armor, only the first piece of armor is checked and the next is checked only if damage bleeds through. Or maybe, weapons have a penetration value that determines how many layers of armor they can damage in any one attack. Or maybe neither of these solutions are going to work within this particular combat system, and the entire multi-layer armor mechanic has to be re-evaluated.

Evaluating a combat system to ensure it has meaningful relationships and is free of unintended consequences is one of the most important aspects to designing them.

Say my rules are sound. Are they actually interesting?

Were I tasked to describe how to make a combat system *interesting* I'd say to make it reasonably *unsolvable*, while ensuring it is not too complex. How "solvable" something is speaks to how predictable it is; it's the quality that describes how easy or difficult it is to see the one right answer within the choices that can be made in any given situation. For example, after some experience with tic tac toe, the players learn which moves will secure their victory or condemn them to defeat. There are only so many choices each player can make in tic tac toe and so many possible outcomes, and they're not hard to memorize. On the other hand, chess is a much more complex game with many more possible decisions at each turn, and even the best chess players can only consider so many of them. This means that tic tac toe is far more "solvable" than chess. When a combat system is "solved" it's because a combatant realizes that there is one optimal choice out of the many available to them, to the point that they don't really see the others as choices at all.

Probably the most effective way of combating solvability is by adding randomness. Randomness makes outcomes much more difficult to predict, calling on the combatant to be both strategic and adaptive with their choices. Whether it be a number generator, dice, face down cards, a spinner, or even a flipped coin, randomness adds a layer of risk assessment to the decisions the combatant makes. This, in turn, makes each event that much more meaningful. In a battle an ability might deal six damage, and in another it might deal twelve. In a third, it might miss completely. While this singular event might be insignificant, there will undoubtedly be a moment where the difference between victory and defeat will be decided by twelve points damage.

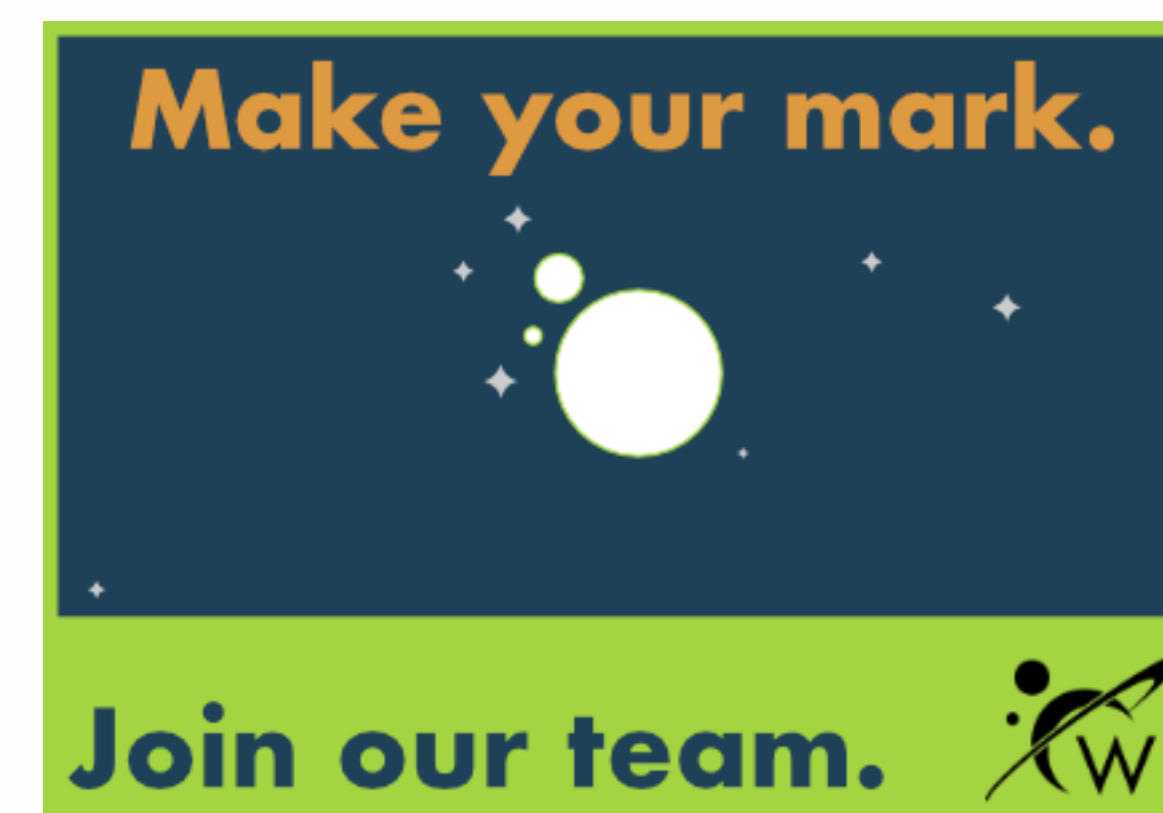
However, there is such a thing as too much randomness. In the basic version of the card game "War" all the player does is flip a card and hope it's higher than the enemy's card. There's nothing they can do to influence the card drawn. This is about as interactive as slots, and does not make for very engaging combat. To deal with too much randomness many systems allow for certain mechanics to modify the outcome, returning some interactivity to what would otherwise be pure chance. Some of the more basic ways are to simply add or subtract to a randomly generated number. In dice systems this is commonly expressed as "2d6+4", which means "roll a pair of six-sided dice and add four to the total". A more complex example would be a

concept sometimes called "advantage". If a combatant was going to draw three cards with two "advantages", they would instead draw five cards, out of which they picked the three they wanted.

Another method to reduce solvability is to simply give the combatant a greater number of choices to make in any given scenario. Creating balanced and attractive choices is a great deal harder than just throwing dice (especially when we need to consider meaningful relationships and unintended consequences), but goes a long way towards filling out what would otherwise be a straightforward game. However, remember that addressing solvability also makes the combat system more complex.

There's so many things to consider!

Unlike the design of other things such as art, music, or literature, a system is very measurable. At many points throughout the design process evaluate the numbers and ensure they're playing nice with each other. Consider the relationships between different stats, items, or actions and balance them to have the same impact on the system that was outlined in your movie moment. A system comes together like a machine—if there's a moving part interfering with another part, all the designer has to do is adjust the way they move and allow them to work freely again. In essence it is no different than worldbuilding—the height of a world's mountains are no different than the damaging properties of a combatant's axe, and the rules regarding space flight are no different than the costs and consequences of casting a spell in battle. Just as characters act on and are molded by a setting, a combatant acts within and is governed by the combat system they participate in. 🚀



CONSTRUCTED LANGUAGE: INTRODUCTION AND IPA

Linguistics

Daniel Baker



“Progress, far from consisting in change, depends on retentiveness. When change is absolute there remains no being to improve and no direction is set for possible improvement: and when experience is not retained, as among savages, infancy is perpetual. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” —George Santayana

George Santayana’s timeless aphorism offers many interpretations. The final line, presented alone, seems to be about learning from one’s mistakes. When placed with more of its context, however, it submits an essential principle of culture—language makes society. Without the ability to communicate knowledge, the knowledge possessed by one man dies when he does. Language grants cultures the ability to retain information and experience across generations, and it is by this retention of information that culture is possible.

In the realm of worldbuilding, as we craft histories and continents, we have the unique opportunity to turn that principle of culture on its head. We can create languages ourselves. To have cultures in your world, you need to have language. As language is such a prominent aspect of culture, building a constructed language will give your world and its peoples an unparalleled sense of immersion and depth.

Several constructed languages have become highly successful outside the realm of worldbuilding. Esperanto and its original dictionary of 900 words were constructed by L. L. Zamenhof, an ophthalmologist, in the late 19th century. 130 years later, Esperanto has garnered more than 2 million speakers, including some native speakers. It has even earned an ISO 639-1 code, indicating that it has been recognized internationally as a major world language. Other constructed languages such as Loglan/Lojban have been created for scientific

purposes, gaining a small following. While this information may be of interest to the linguist, it is unlikely to be of use to the worldbuilder. Many famous works of literature and film have had languages constructed for or around them. “Klingon,” named after the fictional Star Trek race that speaks it, is a widely recognized fictional language constructed by writers and fans. Its influence led to the creation of HolQeD, a quarterly academic journal published by the Klingon Language Institute between the years of 1992 and 2000.

“The invention of languages is the foundation. The ‘stories’ were made rather to provide a world for the languages than the reverse. To me a name comes first and the story follows. I should have preferred to write in ‘Elvish.’” —J. R. R. Tolkien

No one person can better attest to the efficacy of constructed languages in fiction than J. R. R. Tolkien. The Lord of the Rings trilogy and associated literature feature a world rich in linguistic variety and depth. Upwards of fifteen languages are mentioned throughout Tolkien’s legendarium, and two have enough grammar and vocabulary to function entirely as languages. Quenya and Sindarin are spoken by Tolkien’s Elves at various points in Middle-Earth’s history. Each language functions as a complete language, with detailed inflections, a complete or nearly complete grammar,

and detailed instructions for the use of language roots and the invention of new words to be added to the language. Each language also includes a constructed history of the changes that the language underwent throughout the vast annals of Middle-Earth, dialects of the languages, and their own systems of writing and spelling. To this date, Quenya and Sindarin are considered by many to be the two most detailed languages ever to be published for fiction.

Conlang Beginnings

This guide to constructed language will cover many topics and aspects of a language over several publications. For an alternate tutorial, please consult Worldbuilder’s Guide to Conlanging: Introduction by Alex L. It can be found in [Issue Three](#).

Language is both a spoken and written medium, and as such it is important that there be a way to define the association between the spoken and written aspects of language. Most people have intuitive knowledge of how sounds relate to letters and words in their own language, but the language constructor finds that such a relation is not a universal truth. Each language has different rules for pronunciation so that, when trying to share their language, others find their explanations to be ambiguous. How do you convey a universal standard of pronunciation in written form?

IPA: International Phonetic Alphabet

In 1869, Dmitri Mendeleev knew of 63 elements—he organized them all into an elegant Periodic Table. In the famous Challenger expedition, the crew of the HMS Challenger discovered some 4,700 unknown lifeforms—in time, they were all given names and taxonomic classifications. The countless stars in the sky are not seen as a daunting task by humanity; we continue to name them all.

Human speech is quite complex, but Earth’s scholars are very familiar with classification and organization. Shortly after its founding in 1886 the International Phonetic Association developed the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), aiming to establish an international notational standard of human speech.

The IPA is a key asset to the linguist, the language learner, and the language constructor. It is fully phonetic: its 107 letters and 52 diacritics comprise every phoneme—the base unit of spoken sound—used in human language. 107 letters can seem like a lot to memorize, but thankfully for us each form is conveniently organized in tables. The consonants are organized into two categories of articulation—the Place and the Manner.

The *place of articulation* is defined as the location along the air channel which experiences

THE INTERNATIONAL PHONETIC ALPHABET (revised to 2015)

CONSONANTS (PULMONIC)												© 2015 IPA	
	Bilabial	Labiodental	Dental	Alveolar	Postalveolar	Retroflex	Palatal	Velar	Uvular	Pharyngeal	Glottal		
Plosive	p b			t d		ʈ ɖ	c ɟ	k ɡ	q ɢ		ʔ		
Nasal	m	ɱ		n		ɳ	ɲ	ŋ	ɴ				
Trill	ʙ			r					ʀ				
Tap or Flap		ⱱ		ɾ		ɽ							
Fricative	ɸ β	f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ	ʂ ʐ	ç ʝ	x ɣ	χ ʁ	ħ ʕ	h ɦ		
Lateral fricative				ɬ ɮ									
Approximant		ʋ		ɹ		ɻ	j	ɰ					
Lateral approximant				l		ɭ	ʎ	ʟ					

Symbols to the right in a cell are voiced, to the left are voiceless. Shaded areas denote articulations judged impossible.

the most constriction during the articulation of a phoneme. This is represented in the IPA consonants chart as columns. The *manner of articulation* involves both the *degree of stricture*—the distance over which the air channel is constricted—and the *aspect of articulation*—the path or routing that the air flow takes around the anatomy of the throat and mouth. The tongue and teeth are essential in the aspect of articulation. The manner of articulation is represented in the consonants chart as rows.

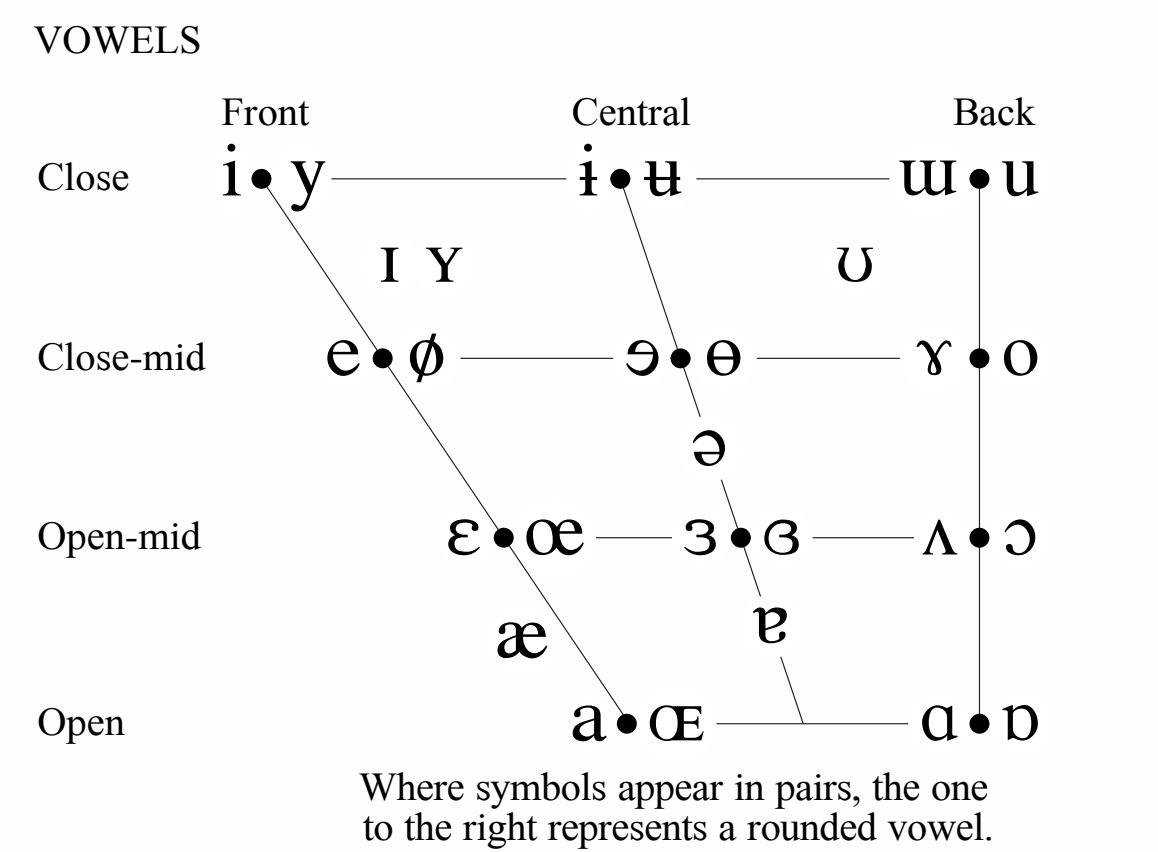
When two IPA forms share the same place and manner of articulation, the rightmost consonant has a voiced *phonation*. Phonation refers to the state of the vocal cords during articulation. Voiced consonants are pronounced when the vocal cords are vibrating, while unvoiced consonants are pronounced when the vocal cords are at rest.

The chart above classifies pulmonic consonants. Most consonants used in human language are pulmonic, meaning the sounds are made by an obstruction of the glottis or oral cavity while exhaling. Non-pulmonic consonants are made without the use of the lungs. English speakers may find it difficult to think of a non-pulmonic consonant—this is because none are used in English speech. The non-pulmonic consonants are organized in the IPA differently than the pulmonic consonants. The non-pulmonic consonants are arranged into three categories—Clicks, Voiced Implosives, and Ejectives.

CONSONANTS (NON-PULMONIC)

Clicks	Voiced implosives	Ejectives
◌ Bilabial	ɓ Bilabial	ʼ Examples:
◌ Dental	ɗ Dental/alveolar	pʼ Bilabial
◌ (Post)alveolar	ɟ Palatal	tʼ Dental/alveolar
◌ Palatoalveolar	ɠ Velar	kʼ Velar
◌ Alveolar lateral	ʄ Uvular	sʼ Alveolar fricative

Vowels are organized in a much different diagram detailing the state of the tongue within the mouth during the vowel pronunciation from front to central, and whether the mouth is open or closed.



The full chart can be found on the [International Phonetic Association website](#) and contains additional markings, such as suprasegmental marks and diacritics. These additional symbols provide additional information such as syllable breaks, stresses, and accent information. These are not essential but provide extra precision.

Knowing this, it is theoretically possible that one could find an articulatory phonetics textbook detailing the anatomy of the throat, mouth, tongue, and vocal chords and with it learn the consonants and vowels from their locations on the charts. It would certainly result in an above average knowledge and memorization of the phonemes, their names, and their associated IPA forms. For those less interested in finding an articulatory phonetics textbook and making bizarre noises to oneself for an afternoon or two, resources can be found online.

Each language recognized by the International Phonetic Association has an associated Wikipedia Help page that lists every IPA form for every phoneme used by the language. Additionally, next to each form is an example in the language in which the phoneme is used. This is immensely useful, because the forms and phonemes can be learned by association with sounds you already know. The pages also contain footnotes detailing dialect mergers that have occurred throughout the language’s history.

Breaking Ground

The first thing to do when beginning a new constructed language is to choose the phonemes used in the language. The number of phonemes in any given language varies depending on dialect. In English, you usually find about 24 consonant phonemes and 20 vowel phonemes. I don’t like my finished languages to have much more than this—it becomes difficult to keep track by memory and there will certainly be non-native phonemes borrowed from other languages. These might be difficult for me to pronounce, personally. If you speak a second language that has few overlapping phonemes with your native language, you are likely to be able to create a language with many more phonemes and still be able to speak it easily.

I will be using a completely arbitrary list of six vowels and ten consonants to begin with. This is simpler than most languages, because the smaller the *phonemic inventory*, the more ambiguous the language becomes and the longer words have to be. For convenience, I am beginning with only consonants I can pronounce: those present in English and Welsh.

Vowels	Consonants
u: ʊ e: a: i: ɪ	v z θ s d ð l ʔ n ʃ

These consonants will give us a starting point with which to begin. With the use of the extended IPA chart (found at [internationalphoneticassociation.org](#)) and your online pronunciation guide of choice, attempt to pronounce all these vowels and consonants. Note that while all the consonants are found on the pulmonic consonants chart, the vowels have additional information not found on the simple vowels chart. The character “:” can be found on the “suprasegmentals” chart and indicates a long vowel.

Special characters such as the theta (θ) and eth (ð) are difficult to type on a keyboard that does not support them, as is the upsilon (ʊ) and long vowel indicator (:). For convenience, I will select

characters located on a United States keyboard to represent each. For variety and an extra challenge, I will allow those characters to deviate from English orthography. It is often easier to loosely base the associated characters for each phoneme on how they are written in your language, and I often base my writing system on English orthography.

Vowels	Consonants
u: ʊ e: a: i: ɪ	v z θ s d ð l ʔ n ʃ
r e v a f o	u z - s t b l c y m

In most realistic writing systems, a single character usually does not correspond to a single phoneme, nor is a single phoneme usually represented by a single character. This is a simplified language, however, and I prefer to begin with such a system until the roots of my language are developed. Diphthongs, digraphs and other complexities will be added in time.

Now that we have a system that connects Latin characters to the phonetic pronunciation that will be used in our mock language, we can begin to create words! They will look bizarre for the time being, but as the language is developed it will be much improved. For convenience, rules for creating syllables will be loose and mostly based on what I can pronounce. Here are some samples:

Latin	Pronunciation
cotlay	/ɦɖla:n/
bvst	/ðe:sd/
rla-t	/u:la:ŋd/
tvyma	/de:nʃa:/
lf-t	/li:ŋd/
mruo-tbrzal	/ʃu:vɪŋdðu:za:l/

The sample words above are absurd. They don’t have markings to denote syllable breaks. You get to guess. I haven’t provided any meaning either. That’s all because these words aren’t meant to

have any meaning, nor be included in the final stage of the language. These words were simply created so I could experiment with the sound of a language created with these phonemes. It doesn't sound all that great, which is to be expected with only sixteen selected phonemes. What does that mean for the language?

The best thing that can be done for a language at this state is not meaning or vocabulary. Right now, a language needs revision. Continue to develop new sets of phonemes, this time with between twenty and thirty phonemes. Create rules for more complex interaction between the Latin characters and the phonemes. Continue creating sample sets of words. Your first tries will not be perfect, but each successive iteration will be another step towards the sound you want for your language.

To demonstrate this, I spent a few more minutes experimenting with basic form combinations. In the development of this phoneme set, I used a larger set of phonemes to begin with and more closely correlated their written forms with English orthography. As you can see, it is much improved and sounds less contrived. The rules are simple enough for an English speaker to understand without too much difficulty, even without a key. Try and notice the cases in which the Latin to IPA transliteration is not a 1:1 conversion!

Latin	Pronunciation
ileccil	/ɪl.ɛɪ'kɒl/
adossad	/'dɒʊs.əd/
natceteto	/nɛt.tʃɛt'ɛɪʔɒʊ/
salaf	/ʃəl.ɑ:v/
nitcoasl	/nɪtʃɒʊ.ər'əʒ/
dwtsaicl	/'du:'tɑ:ʃaɪər.kɑ:ʒ/

Good luck!

Part II of this serial will discuss language typology, orthography, and morphology and continue the development of a constructed language. I can be contacted at sailingyarddb@gmail.com.🐦

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ASK US ANYTHING

Additional Materials

BH Pierce

This Ask Us Anything feature is presented by a Senior member of the Amalgamated Order of Interdimensional Persons, Percival Aluminus Illuminus, Adjunct Professor of Gateways, 3423 WestNorth Street, Dunny-on-the-Spire.

I'm really passionate about building one or two aspects of my world, and now it's getting a little lopsided in terms of depth. What can I do to flesh out the parts of my world I don't enjoy writing about as much?

Ah yes, this old chestnut: The world with a meticulously detailed Navy, but with no seas to sail it on. The elaborate monetary system with no markets for it to be spent in. The Worldbuilding impulse leads us first through territory that is both familiar and interesting to us, which means there are always a few dark and shadowy areas in which we hesitate to tread. But fear not friend, there is a way through. Those areas which you have lavished attention on will influence and be influenced by those which you have yet to explore. Take the naval example above, a glorious fleet of three-masted ships-of-the-line armed with heavy cannons for spectacular broadsides, its crew divided up by ranks, each crewmember wearing their own marks of service. From this foundation you can begin to build the rest of your world. Cannons imply knowledge of chemistry and metallurgy, a large fleet means a state that has the finances the build the ships and the logistics to keep them supplied and maintained. If the fleet is meant to sail on long voyages to far-flung locales it implies knowledge of the greater world and perhaps a tradition of seamanship. Nothing exists in a vacuum. What you have already built will tell you a great deal about what you have yet to build.

If you would like to have one of your questions answered by me, please send it to one of the following locales: contact@worldbuildingmagazine.com, [Discord](#), [Twitter](#)
Some Junior members of the Amalgamated Order of Interdimensional Persons will sort through them and select the most pertinent ones for my perusal.

Do you believe in following a formula or framework for starting and/or building your world?

To be specific, yes and no. Frameworks and formulae are all well and good for engineers and mathematicians, but the craft of worldbuilding is not precise as those happy professions. One could even say it is an art that contains sciences. If someone tells you about "the best way to build a world," they are merely telling you the best way for them to build a world. As you delve deeper into the craft you will find yourself developing a formula of your own, honed to your own talents and interests. For example, an old Oxford man named Tolkien built his world around languages, as he had a peculiar passion for them. You will inevitably begin with what you love and expand into the unfamiliar. The nature and course of your expansion will become your formula.

Why should I give a rat's ass about your conlang?

I must say, I'm impressed. Despite your seeming propensity for vulgar, unimaginative cliches you've somehow managed to pose a pertinent question. The key here is to tie your constructed language (commonly—and needlessly—referred to as a "conlang") into something people can envisage—or, "grab hold of." A well-organized chart of consonants and vowels doesn't exactly fire the imagination of most. Once you have all the bones of your constructed language sorted out start putting flesh on it, in the metaphorical sense. How would one greet another in your constructed language? What are common naming conventions? What are the words for kinship, social, and economic relationships? To go even deeper, what about your language would flummox a neophyte? Does it expatiate rare sounds or omit common ones? While conjuring up exotic phonemes or ruminating about arcane diphthongs is a splendid way to wile away an afternoon, relying too much on jargon can drive away people who aren't as devoted to the craft. Presenting the common and everyday uses of your constructed language in relatable scenarios will win you a wider audience.🐦

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 worldbuildingmagazine@gmail.com or [social media](#).

Submission Requirements:

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

Worldbuilding Prompts:

- Describe a conflict between two factions that are ostensibly on the same side in a greater conflict. Examples: Theological arguments between sects in the same religion, power struggles between leaders within the same army, splintering within a political movement over the best way to achieve a social goal.
- What sort of behavior is considered unacceptable within a conflict? Is there such a thing as a war crime, and if so is there a way to punish those who commit them? Was there a time in history when those crimes were not committed? Are there limits to what is allowed in political campaigning? Espionage? Honorable one-on-one combat?
- When is violence considered an acceptable response to conflict, who is allowed to commit violence, and what sort of violence is considered acceptable? Does sex, age, social standing, etc. affect whether or not someone can justify violence against someone else? Does the state reserve the right to commit violence for itself? Is socially acceptable violence different from legal violence?
- What major events in your world are commemorated in childhood songs, nursery rhymes, or are otherwise known by a great deal of the population? Has the original meaning been lost? *Credit to Secondhand Samurai from the World Anvil Discord server.*

Writing Prompts:

- Describe a catastrophically one-sided engagement from the points of view of both the loser and victor.
- Imagine a character who has the opportunity to make an argument for or against their nation engaging in an armed conflict. Make that argument.
- One of your characters writes a letter home from the frontlines.
- Give someone in your world the most vicious and brutal verbal dressing down you possibly can.

STAFF PICKS

Title Name: [How to Fight Write](#)

Author(s): Starke & Michi

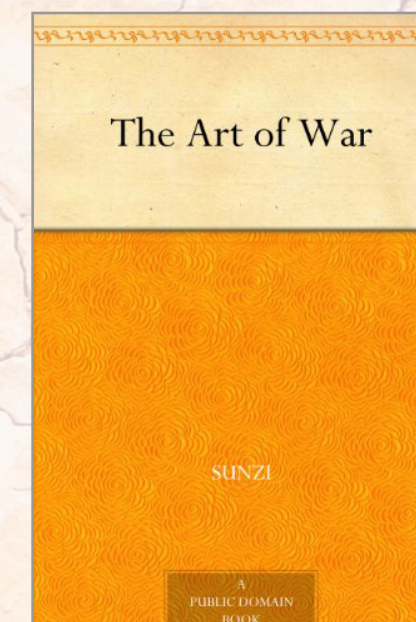
Original Publisher:

Self-Published

First Edition: 2013-Present

How to Fight Write is a blog and tumblr page which provides long, thought-out answers to combat-related questions sent in by writers. Even if you don't have a specific question for them they already have hundreds of informative articles for you to pore over.

Chosen by: brotato



Title Name: *The Art of War*

Author(s): Sun Tzu, Alleged

Original Publisher: Unknown

First Edition: Approximately 200 BCE

The Art of War is an iconic text about war tactics that purportedly dates back to the 6th century BCE, first translated for Europeans in the late 18th century, since then becoming a valuable text for business, sport, and other areas of life where you want to outthink others. It is a short read structured as notes rather than prose, often paired in recent publications with additional discussion or analysis of Sun Tzu's writing. If you'd like to read just the translated text it is available online for free at a variety of sites such as this one.

Chosen by: Adam Bassett



Title Name: *The Prince*

Author(s): Niccolò Machiavelli

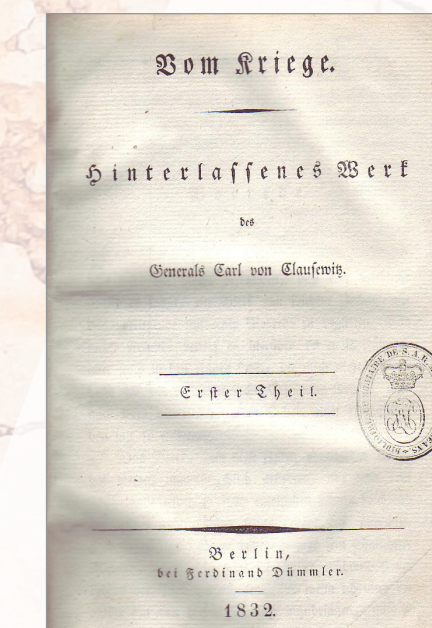
Original Publisher: Antonio Blado

First Edition: 1532

The Prince is the work that made Machiavelli synonymous with the concept of "the ends justify the means", especially when the ends involve political manipulation. This relatively short work is full

of practical advice for rulers and conquerors, carefully organized by type of principality, situation, and ruler. Using examples from Greek, Roman, and Italian history, as well as philosophical reasoning, *The Prince* lays out when, why, and how to avoid conflict, as well as advice on managing the violence of war when that's the best strategy. However, some consider *The Prince* to be a satirical take on the concept of rulership, remarking that a good leader is necessarily not a good person.

Chosen by: Cathy, the Overprepared GM



Title Name: *On War*

Author(s): Carl von Clausewitz &

Marie von Brühl

Original Publisher:

Ferdinand Dummler, Dummler Publishing House

First Edition: 1832

The West's Sun Tzu, von Clausewitz was a Prussian

general who wrote extensively on the psychology of war and developed an overarching theory on its place in human civilization. The work was unfinished at the time of his death, but it was completed and published by his wife Marie von Brühl and remains one of the principle references for students of the topic. In addition to a psychological study of war, von Clausewitz covers a broad number of military strategies in terms that are specific enough to be directly applied but are not reliant on antiquated technology.

Chosen by: Bokai

MEET THE STAFF



LordHenry7898, Writer

I am a history student and science fiction writer. I originally began worldbuilding for my book, but eventually began doing it for fun. When I'm not writing or worldbuilding I enjoy video games, movies, classic science fiction, and wordplay of all sorts.

I have four worlds: *Pariah*, my book; *[SPACE:2018]*; *Vindication*; and *Uncle Acid's Spookshow International*. *Pariah*, my first world, is a military space opera largely inspired by classic sci-fi, such as Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*, as well as the Humanity F*** Yeah (HFY) movement on 4chan and Reddit. Mankind's failed colonization of the planet Vij caused a chain reaction, ending with us upsetting nearly all of the galaxy's factions: the Magisterium, a theocracy who worships life itself; the various syndicates that plague the lawless Free Business Zone; the Eth, a race of cannibalistic hunters; and the We, a mind-controlling fungus. The galaxy is about to learn something very important: never anger the human race.

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