



February 2019

WORLDBUILDING MAGAZINE

Death & Taxes

And Other Topics
Featuring 200+ Worldbuilding Prompts

Thinking Sideways

About Burial Practices
by Robert Meegan

Beyond Human Sacrifice

A Worldbuilder's Guide to Mesoamerica
by Cathy, the Overprepared GM

World Showcase

Brandon Dixon's *Tikor*
Interview conducted by Adam Bassett

Analysis • Art • Interviews

A Community Publication

Prompts • Stories • Theory



CONTENTS



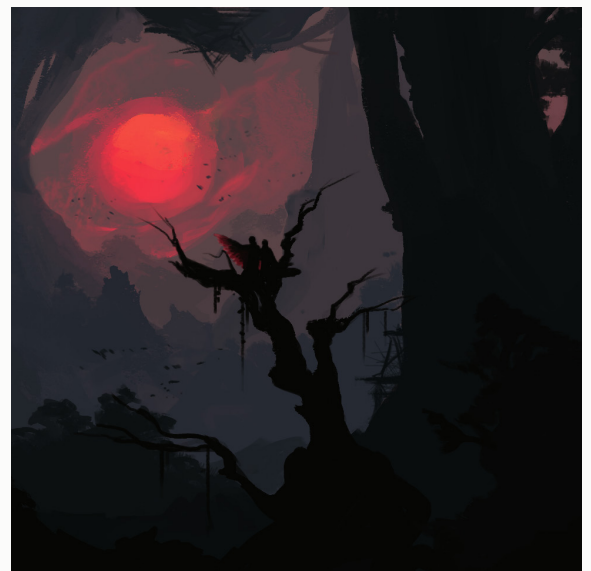
04
SHOWCASE
INTERVIEW:
BRANDON
DIXON'S TIKOR

09
Toxicology in
Worldbuilding

14
Death Incarnate:
Deities of Death
and The Afterlife

21
EXCLUSIVE
INTERVIEW:
STIAN OVERSEN
& CHARLES
LEADINGHAM
FROM IRON
COMPASS GAMES

28
Art Showcase:
Ondrej Hrdina



34

Beyond Human Sacrifice: A Worldbuilder's Guide to Mesoamerica

46

Thinking Sideways About Burial Practices



52

Funeral Customs

56

Ask Us Anything

58

2019 Worldbuilder's Checklist

64

Staff Picks

65

Prompts

66...Meet the Staff

67...Letter from the Editor

Cover: Anna Hannon

Logo: Tristen Fekete

The fonts Adobe Garamond Pro and Futura
PT are used with permission.



SHOWCASE INTERVIEW:

BRANDON DIXON'S TIKOR

INTERVIEW 

Interviewed by Adam Bassett

I got a chance to speak with Brandon Dixon, better known online as “Tikal,” who shared with us some details on his Afrocentric fantasy world. This is what he had to say about it:

I'm a lifelong nerd and have been into a wide range of subjects. I was also a philosophy major in college and am always looking for ways to merge those studies with my interests. *Swordfall* is a culmination of those things and a personal love of mine. I wanted to design a setting for books and a tabletop RPG that focuses more on Afrocentrism. A lot of properties like *Dungeons & Dragons* are very Eurocentric, which are very fun but limited in modern times. There's an amazing wealth of diversity that comes from the African continent and African diaspora.

One classic example is in the traditional European concept of what it means to be a king. The common conception is that the king is a male role. A female ruler is a queen, and there's an intrinsic power gap that's predicated on little more than gender.

In a number of pre-colonial African empires, the title of king just meant ruler. A number of them had matriarchal lines, so you had places where there were hundreds of years of female rulers—of female *kings*—and that was that. No need to make a difference based on sex or anything of the sort. It's a very common thread throughout Africa. So, in my nation of *Garuda*, their kings are female. I don't make any notes to the reader about this shift. I merely call them kings, and you find out through reading that they're women. There's a number of things like that. Deep, simple, fundamental shifts.

I also want this theme to be a part of the overall setting and not necessarily something that is preached. It just *is*.

You've got this interesting almost-Pangea landmass with a major divide between north and south hemispheres. Why don't you do a quick breakdown of each for those who haven't been following you on World Anvil?

Swordfall takes place on a planet called *Tikor*. The landmass is almost like Pangea but not quite. The Northern Hemisphere of *Tikor* has a more temperate climate containing jungles, valleys, savannahs, and volcanoes.

The land as whole would have had this sort of biodome across the planet, but the invasion of a dark god early on in [the world's] life changed the southern half of the world. Additionally, the Second Sun (*Adume*) seems to lock its orbit along the Southern Hemisphere. Because of this, the region turned into a vast desert.

Garuda and *Vinyata* are two of the four great nations of *Tikor*. They rule their respective halves, *Garuda* to the north and *Vinyata* to the south.

Garuda is named after their main god, *Garuyda the Phoenix*. The *Karu* people have a strong tie to the land and excel at weaving in nature with their lives and technology, such as constructing buildings in forest trees rather than clearing them¹. *Garuda* has many gods that they call *Divinity*.

Vinyata is a desert land and was basically forsaken by most of the world. The *Dracon* settled into the arid landscape and made a home for themselves. Excelling in a magical form of blacksmithing called *Forgewhispering*. It allowed them to build massive



Kevin Hou

domed cities to protect them from the elements. Vinyata has four spirit generals but only one god they look toward.

The main problem is that the Dracon originate from a dragon. One of the only good ones known to history. Garuda, however, lost their god to a dragon—not the same one, but the hate simmers over. The tensions between Garuda and the Dracon go back and forth like a cold war over the years. Until an incident tips it over, which is what *End of an Era* is about.²

One of the things I want to gently explore is some of the elements of Africa that get glossed over. Most of the cultures didn't understand each other. Different lands, different weather, different languages, and different customs. It wasn't one large happy family. I want the world of Tikor to represent that as well.

How does a second sun affect the passing of days on Tikor?

The day/night cycle on Tikor is longer than on Earth: about 36 hours. During the winter months this can mean 24 hours of night to 12 hours of day. The first novel from Swordsfall, *End of an Era*, details a war that broke out on the last day of the year. A day of two events that were so shocking they caused humans to end the era and start with a new date. The Day of Reckoning and [The Longest Night](#).

In this world gods and spirits are real. We've touched on this a bit but on your title page you mention that one was assassinated. Could you talk about that a bit?

One of the driving themes of Swordsfall is that the gods are alive and they are among the people. They don't live on another hallowed plane and look down at humans. They are real, though they come in

¹ All of the cultures are humanoid. In this world Humans are all crafted by a god. The Karu were crafted by a Phoenix, the Dracon by a Dragon, and so on. Each have different origins and scattered throughout the north and south. However, the people of Garuda are one of the oldest and biggest groups, so they drive the narrative. Throughout Brandon's World Anvil posts, because of the biased perspective, he points out contradictions in events depending on where you go.

² The book is not finished yet, but you can read about some of the (spoiler-free) events mentioned in it such as *The Long Night on World Anvil*.



Brandon Dixon

many many forms. Some are incorporeal. Some are animals. It all depends on the area. In Garuda, the *Divinity* (the name of their pantheon, so to speak) travel around the country once every ten years, just to make sure you see their faces.

However, those gods have always been immortal. The same gods who were there when Garuda was founded eons ago are still there. The gods have never died as far as humans have known. So, when the Divinity of Wisdom, Mime, is assassinated, it throws the world for a spin. The ramifications of gods not being immortal is really huge no matter how you think about it. How, why, and what happens afterwards are huge questions. The plot of *Swordsfall* will deal with that fallout and what it means.

Can you give us any details about killing gods?

Any eagle-eyed reader will occasionally see the term "Grim Arms" displayed and mentioned [in *Swordsfall*]. When the time comes to unveil those, then the reader will understand how to kill a god and the price you pay for such power. Also, Xavian (the [Withering King of Corruption](#)) is involved. He showed up and spoiled the party early in the planet's life. He's trapped in a pocket dimension called *Beneath It All*. He sits patiently, finding ways to poke holes in his prison and corrupt the world. If he can't come into Tikor, then he finds ways to send agents. He's where I play with the horror element of *Swordsfall*.

SWORDS FALL



Africa as a whole didn't really have a "one great evil demon king" or Satan-like figure. So Xavian is my way of satisfying a need to have a "Big Bad" but also to have fun with something else. He's not really a demon, or Satan. I imagined that if you had a great and good creator who can make planets and such, then there has to be someone of the opposite nature. He's corruption, he's decay, he can possess people with soul-consuming [Rakshas](#). He's the slow nasty stuff that you can never avoid.

Xavian was a character I wanted to completely make up. There's a history of taking African trickster gods and making them into Satan like figures which I wanted to avoid.

In regards to the mortal people of Tikor, who among them stands out in this world of gods, god-slayers, and such varied cultures?

Nubia was one of my first characters. I had just written up the land of Grimnest, very pirate themed. So, I wanted to do a pirate, but *cool*, which I'm sure every writer ever has said, but I'm always looking to deconstruct an archetype or stereotype in Swordsfall. I imagined your stereotypical pirate. White guy with a big ol' beard, peg-leg and everything. Then in my mind I instantly imagined this proto-typical pirate talking down to a little girl. He made the mistake of challenging the young Nubia after she pointed out a mistake he made. He challenged her to a fight, looking down on her because she was young. He thought he challenged her to a fist fight. Then he realized it was a knife fight after she slit his throat while he was still mocking her.

It's a different world in Swordsfall. Nothing is safe. Nubia from the get-go was someone who just didn't care for how the rules were supposed to be. She became captain of her own crew at 12. She's bald, black, and a woman. The crew respected her because she didn't ask for it, she took it. I base all my characters off certain principles. Nubia's is unbridled freedom, which is just a good pirate archetype.

The pirates of Grimnest aren't necessarily thieves either, though. They just don't want to be a part of the game between gods and men. They find freedom on the seas and would rather knock over a government ship than a merchant's, for example. I love the imagery of a huge corsair ramming a government ship, and this tall, mean-looking, bald black woman jumps onto the deck and just takes over.

Now that she's captain of this pirate crew, what is Nubia doing?

Nubia is the star of the first books I'll be writing in present-day (most of what's on World Anvil is considered past events). The captain of *Heaven's Fall* has three things she's working on.³ (1) She's being a pirate. She just enjoys the life. Truly. This means robbery. Expect ship battles and bank

³ *Heaven's Fall* is a full-fledged pirate organization. An empire, of sorts, and Nubia's at the head of it.

robberies with her and her personal squad, the Killer Krew. She's also (2) at the head of Heaven's Fall. However, one of the original founders, Greybeard, wants his namesake [sic] back. (3) The citizens don't love pirates as a whole. Ace bounty hunter, Lupita Oromo, is on a mission to end Heaven's Fall. She seems to have some sort of personal beef with Nubia. Atop all of this, the rival pirate crew, the Black Ravens, always hover...waiting for their chance.

What other works have inspired Swordsfall and the world of Tikor?

Some of it came from my own life. As a black guy, I've had to deal with years of awkwardly trying to figure out how to make a black character in...well, every game. I've had to see the awkward "Nubian" race or little country within fictional worlds. The same rehashed Voodoo, the same Witch Doctor. So when I started doing storytelling myself, I naturally started adding in all the things I wasn't seeing or getting.

Then *Black Panther* (the movie) came out. And wow. That hit like a ton of bricks. It felt like the culmination of all the things I had on a wishlist. I had an emotional moment at the end, I straight sobbed. I knew I definitely wanted to add that experience into something.

Swordsfall started out as a tabletop campaign, but I realized I had to do something more, something bigger and more complete. I wanted the bulk of my origin to be from Africa. I wanted to go as deep and detailed as *Black Panther* did.

There's a reawakening of Afropunk/Afrofuturism/Afrocentrism movement in pop culture, and I want to add my own stamp. Fantasy and tabletop is what I know. I think it's where I can help spread the movement in my own way.

Something else I'm doing is working on a series of Youtube videos titled *Swordsfall: Behind the African Diaspora* about some of the research I've found. There's so many unique tales from Africa that I realize haven't been spread widely in the West.

It will discuss, for example, cultures where "king" meant "ruler." Which meant that you had proud and powerful female kings. Also daytime lovin' vampires capable of possessing humans, causing light to pore from the orifices of the victim. There are so many wild, fascinating tales and origins that were being overlooked.

So starting sometime this year, on a periodic basis, I'm going to start releasing short YouTube videos detailing some of the information I've found in my research with citations (for all you data nerds, I got you).

Is there anything else you'd like to discuss?

Afrocentrism doesn't mean exclusionary to the rest of the world. This is just a way to show a different source of lore. A different way of looking at things. There's a lot of dark faces, there's a lot of women, there's a lot of non-binary people, there's characters with disabilities. It's a world that takes in everyone. Don't skip it just because it seems like a "black thing." I promise you'll enjoy the read. 🐾

Thanks to Brandon for taking the time to share a bit about Tikor with us. You can stay up to date on his work by following him on [World Anvil](#) or [Twitter](#). If you would like to share your world in an upcoming issue of Worldbuilding Magazine please fill out this [form](#). You may contact us with any questions via email or [Discord](#).

This interview has been edited for *Worldbuilding Magazine*.

TOXICOLOGY IN WORLDBUILDING: A POISON TO BLIND YOU, A VENOM TO OPEN YOUR EYES

RESOURCE 

HISTORY 

ECONOMICS & INDUSTRY 

CRIME 

M.S. Jenkins

The world is a dangerous place, especially for Roman politicians, Hellenistic kings, and babies; ironically all for the same reason. It may be hard to believe, but poison and venom use is archaeologically about as old as human society. Research suggests that early humans were on a quest to improve their ability to hunt animals and combat their rivals and this led to the use of both poisons and venoms to that end. Originally, one or two individuals in a tribe would have this secret knowledge which in time directly led to the role of witch doctor or medicine man. As society developed larger and more complex social structures and began consolidating more authority in government, the use of poison and venom to remove leaders and the antidotes fabricated to protect them became an increasingly important element in recorded history.

Mithridates was a Hellenistic king who lived in the area we now call Turkey, from around 114 to 63 BC, and was obsessed with the fear of being poisoned by his enemies. He used condemned criminals as guinea pigs for his research, and also applied small doses of poison to himself attempting to build an immunity. Ultimately, he developed a compound known as Mithridatum. Unfortunately, his built-up immunity to poisons ended up being a curse rather than a blessing, as he failed to commit suicide by poison when his country was invaded by Pompey, instead he died on the swords of his soldiers whom he ordered to kill him.

Roman politicians were in danger of being poisoned as early as 331 BC, and this method of assassination was not uncommon at the dinner table, whether in a common eating area, or in the home. Francois P. Retief and Louise Cilliers say in their article on poisonings in ancient Rome that,

“A growing incidence of poisoning is recorded in the 1st century AD, which reached an alarming peak during the reign of the Julio-Claudian emperors,” and that “During the late 1st century AD Juvenal described the moral decay of the elite and in his satires claimed that poisoning for personal benefit had become a status symbol.” The reason for these poisonings varied based on the motives of those involved, but the frequency with which people were ingesting poison had a direct effect on the development of antidotes and cures. A simple result of supply and demand.

Today, intentional poisonings are relatively rare compared to that of ancient times. The FBI homicide data for 2012-2016 indicates that only fifty-three individuals have died from intentional poisoning over four years of criminal cases, though accidental deaths by poison are much higher. The reality is that many of the ancient poisons have transitioned from weapons intended for murder to tools that make our lives easier. Products used in industry, agriculture, and (on a much, much more limited basis) in the home contain some of the same substances that were once sold by witch doctors and apothecaries alike. Though ancient poisons have now been long established in many productive applications, venom works on the human body in different and very specific ways, and is only recently on the verge of transitioning into the medical field beyond the creation of antivenom.

Though it differs from poison, venom’s application of nudging individuals toward the potter’s field is roughly the same. Venom, once it has entered the body, works to break down organic structures and is grouped into one of four general categories: **proteolytic**, **hemotoxic**, **neurotoxic**, and **cytotoxic**.



✎ *"The Poisoning of Queen Bona" by Jan Matejko depicts the Queen of Poland, Bona Sforza, unknowingly accepting a glass of poison given at the behest of King Philip II of Spain.*

Proteolytic venom breaks down proteins, *hemotoxic venom* attacks the heart and cardiovascular system, *neurotoxic venom* attacks the nervous system and the brain, and *cytotoxic venom* attacks cells in the immediate area of exposure. It should be noted that naturally-found venoms are a chemical cocktail of the above categories in addition to carrying many other substances that cause a wide variety of effects on the human body. For example, the black widow spider's venom is both a neurotoxin and a cytotoxin, while Mojave rattlesnakes exhibit the stereotypical hemotoxic venom common to other rattlesnakes, but also carry a neurotoxic substance with it. In spite of all the different effects venom can cause, the path any lethal venom takes to break down its victim is quite simple. Either the nervous system is attacked causing asphyxiation by paralysis of the respiratory system or damages to tissues or organs causes internal bleeding and death by blood loss.

Venom has developed in animals for both defensive and offensive purposes. We can see this manifested in a variety of iterations. A bee sting literally kills the venomous insect to cause mild irritation to its victim. On the other extreme, the ocellated carpet viper—who has a higher body count than all African species combined—can kill a human using its venom in less than an hour. When worldbuilding creatures that make use of venom, keep in mind that it must have utility for the creature that bears it, either for defense or for predation. The platypus is weird enough on the outside, but the venom stored in the spur on its leg has a very specific purpose which is to deter predators from eating it. Animals developed venom for various reasons and your own venomous creatures should reflect this truism.

If you're still confused about the difference between poison and venom, Stacy Venzel explains it this way, "If you bite it and you die, it's poison. If it bites you and you die, it's venom." Poisons and venom function in a similar fashion—introducing toxins into the body from an outside source—though their delivery method and effect vary widely. They can enter the bloodstream through open wounds or on contact, they can be absorbed through ingestion of liquids or solids, they can even be airborne. There are a lot of creative ways to ruin

someone's life with toxins and just like every kind of intentionally inflicted suffering, the only limiting factors are your moral compass and imagination.

Populating your world with toxins of both varieties makes for some interesting storytelling, but keep in mind how common poisoning and venom use are. The more common, the more likely an antidote or antivenom exists, as people in positions of power will employ others and seek themselves, like Mithridates, to create antidotes and antivenoms for protection. The prevalence of poisons and venom also influence the market, creating jobs for people such as that of the modern toxicologist, but also carving out a niche for those who deal in illegal substances.

Depending on what your world has to offer, these doctors, merchants, and criminals could produce some very interesting things. Some harmful and others helpful.

Here's a practical example: Let's say there's a decently common lizard called a *Xallin iguana* that lives in your fantasy setting that wizards and spellcasters really hate. Spells don't work on them, or rarely do, and they're a huge nuisance because they like to get into places they don't belong and eat spell components. By accident, it's discovered that one of their organs can be dried and ground down to powder and added to powdered acorns, a fiddlebender spider's web sac, and a little silver nitrate to make a liquid that immediately prevents any spellcasting upon contact with the skin or contamination of the blood. BOOM! Anti-magic poison.

The prevalence of this kind of poison would first cause an already agitated magic-using population further frustration, but also cause changes in fashion among spellcasters. This change would probably involve wearing more liquid resistant clothing like gloves, cloaks, maybe even leather armor, sacrificing mobility for safety. Wizards and spellcasters might spend time hunting the lizards attempting to kill them off, but poisoners and other ne'er-do-wells would be hunting them as well. Undoubtedly, a reduced population of lizards would have environmental consequences that might cause an overabundance of some other pest, or the death of

something helpful. The *Xallin iguana*'s subsequent endangerment would probably cause a shift in the economy related to the lizard's use, increasing the cost of such a poison, and also the fashion change for protection against it. Perhaps it would also result in laws preventing the development of such poisons. These laws would likely increase the traffic of such a substance on the black market, which then would have the ability to use the poison to gain an advantage over the wizards in their illegal activities.

Let's take it in another direction. Venom especially is starting to show up in experiments for medical purposes including dissolving blood clots, breaking down plaque buildup in arteries, fighting some forms of cancer, bronchial asthma, Parkinson's, Alzheimer's and even a substance that could overturn morphine as a painkiller. So, let's return to our example of the *Xallin iguana*. Say you substitute the acorns for some of the famous loam bananas of the Flaterton Moors and the silver nitrate for distilled water. The mixture is then imbibed. BOOM! Potion of magic protection. Sure, it gives you a really bad stomach ache, leaves a sausagey metallic taste in your mouth, and creatures from other dimensions whisper into your ear about something called Azathoth, but it protects you just long enough to remind the wizard in your party that the best class is, and always has been, the rogue.

Venom and poisons existed in nature long before humans started using them for personal or professional purposes. This should be considered when thinking about adding toxins into your world, because it could work as a powerful narrative device, create a backdrop for realistic conflicts, add some bitter flavor to your world, or simply act as a nice set piece for a great scene. Don't forget that as our society changed, these toxins began to work for us in different ways and are still having direct effects on industrial practices, economic production, and medicine. Knowing how venom and poisons work and have been used historically will give you a great foundation on which to develop your own unique concoctions for use by the king's cupbearer and the destitute peasant, the wealthy merchant and the desperate thief, the kind apothecary and the vile assassin. 🐍

REFERENCES

Thomas Holdsworth, et al. "Poisoning in Ancient Times." *Razor Tie Artery Foundation Announce New Joint Venture Recordings | Razor & Tie*, Rovi Corporation, Mar. 2007, web.archive.org/web/20070321025053/http://www.portfolio.mvm.ed.ac.uk/studentwebs/session2/group12/ancient.htm.

Thompson CJS. (1931). *Poisons and Poisoners*.

FBI UCR. "Expanded Homicide Data Table 4." FBI -- *Expanded Homicide Data Table 4*, FBI, 2017, ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2016/crime-in-the-u.s.-2016/tables/expanded-homicide-data-table-4.xls.

Francois P. Retief, and Louise Cilliers. "Poisons, Poisoning, and Poisoners in Rome." *God and Goddesses in Ancient Egypt: Creation*, University College London, Gower Street, London, WC1E 6BT, UK, www.ucl.ac.uk/~ucgajpd/medicina_antiqua/sa_poisons.html.

Stacy Venzel. "What Is the Difference Between Toxin, Venom, and Poison?" *Wide Open Pets*, Wide Open Pets, 3 Apr. 2017, www.wideopenpets.com/difference-toxin-venom-poison/.

Jerry G. Walls. "The World's Deadliest Snakes." *Reptiles Magazine*, 2014, www.reptilesmagazine.com/Snakes/Wild-Snakes/The-Worlds-Deadliest-Snakes/.

BASHEERUDDIN.SK. "MEDICAL USES FOR SNAKE POISON." *Research & Reviews: Journal of Agriculture and Allied Sciences*, Research and Reviews, 10 June 2015, www.rroij.com/open-access/medical-uses-for-snake-poison.php?aid=53290.

BUILD SOMETHING NEW WITH US.

Worldbuilding Magazine is always seeking writers, editors, artists, and other passionate worldbuilders!

Our **Writers** help by providing content for the magazine **Editors** refine it and provide invaluable feedback. The **Artists** breathe life into the magazine and our **Layout Artists** arrange everything into the final products you see. Last but not least, the **Meta** department assist with organization and the community. If you are interested in helping with our next issues? Email, or find us on Discord.



Alexander Andrews, Adam Bassett

DEATH INCARNATE: DEITIES OF DEATH AND THE AFTERLIFE

CULTURE HISTORY RELIGION *B.K. Bass**Art by deificat*

Cosmology and mythology often form the foundation of our fantasy worlds. The beliefs, myths, and traditions of a people can tell us a lot about their culture. Ancient Egypt is a prime example of this from our own history. When we think of the people living along the Nile River some six thousand years ago, images of hieroglyphics and statues depicting the likes of Set, Osiris, and Ra come to mind. Even the pharaohs, considered god-kings, were part of the religion for this culture.

“His divinity accrued to him from his office and was reaffirmed through rituals, but it was vastly inferior to that of major gods; he was god rather than man by virtue of his potential, which was immeasurably greater than that of any human being.”¹

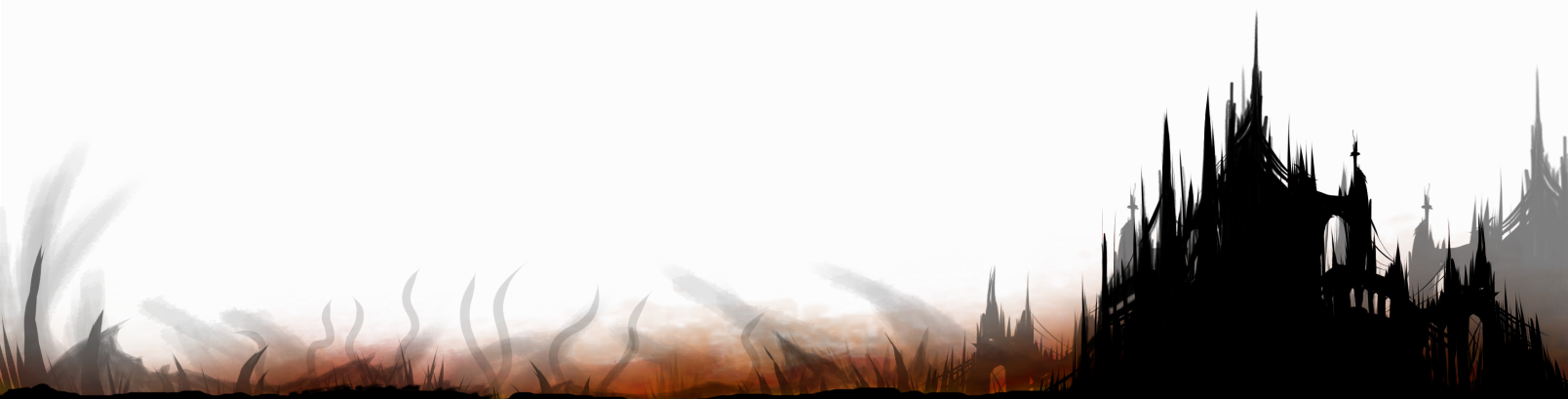
Divinity’s influence is not simply limited to the religious sphere, but is capable of spreading to many realms of public life, including government. The leadership of ancient Egypt was predicated on their belief structure. These beliefs carried not only through their day-to-day lives, but also their expectations of an afterlife. This is reflected by the other icon that springs to mind when thinking of this once-great culture: the pyramids.

Colossal structures that—according to the writings of Herodotus—took twenty years for 100,000 men to build.² The sole purpose of these great monuments was to preserve the revered dead and guide their spirits to the afterlife; having a great effect on the society in the form of labor and resource management, in addition to all of the other considerations that go into such a massive project. In fact, one could say that an entire multi-layered industry was spawned from this perceived need.

In keeping with this issue’s theme of ‘Death and Taxes,’ I chose to explore some of the specifics of cosmology and mythology from our own past that center around death itself. In developing cultures for our worlds—be it a fantasy realm or an alien world orbiting some distant star—taking a closer look at how people view death and the afterlife can do much to inform us about other aspects of their lives.

CUSTODIANS OF THE SPIRIT

The best place to start our journey into the afterlife would be with those figures who help to usher the spirits of the dead from the mortal realm to the next. These mythical figures are known as psychopomps: “a person who conducts spirits or



souls to the other world.”³ Our travels will bring us from ancient Egypt across the Mediterranean to Hellenic Greece to search for one of the oldest examples of these custodians of the spirit: Charon, the Ferryman of the Dead.

"But sail upon the wind of lamentation, my friends, and about your head row with your hands' rapid stroke in conveyance of the dead, that stroke which always causes the sacred slack-sailed, black-clothed ship to pass over Akheron to the unseen land here Apollon does not walk, the sunless land that receives all men."⁴

Charon was not a deity, but rather was a “daimon”—or spirit—who was charged with the task of receiving the souls of the dead and transporting them across the river Styx in his skiff, charging a toll for passage. Those who were not properly buried—with a coin placed upon the tongue of the corpse or upon each eye (depending upon the source, reports of these details vary)—would be doomed to wander in a realm between those of the living and the dead forever, haunting the mortal realms in spectral form.⁵ Oddly enough, Greek mythology has another figure who fills a similar role of ushering the dead to the afterlife. Thanatos was the deity or daimon (depending upon the source) of non-violent death. He was characterized as a bearded man with wings and was said to have a gentle disposition, similar to his brother Hypnos, the deity of sleep. Violent death, on the other hand, was the domain of the Keres, a trio of female spirits regarded to be sisters of Thanatos.⁶

Many other ancient belief systems had figures who filled the role of psychopomp. Among these were Anubis from Egypt, Ankou from Brittany, Azrael (Azrael) of Muslim beliefs, Archangel Michael of Roman-Catholic origin, Barnumbiir from aboriginal Australia, Epona of Gaul, and Freyja (Freya) of Norse myth, to name but a few.⁷

A figure still prominent in contemporary folklore structures is the Grim Reaper. Not a defined figure in any one religion, the Grim Reaper is actually a by-product of a series of cultural events. In the distant past, the figures responsible for guiding the dead to the afterlife were often represented as either benevolent or apathetic. In direct contrast, the grisly visage and accoutrements of the Grim Reaper came about as a result of the Black Death, an epidemic that was responsible for the loss of much of the population of Europe in the 14th century. This figure began showing up in artwork contemporary to the plague, but the name “Grim Reaper” did not appear until the 19th century.⁸ The images in which the Reaper was portrayed and the thoughts of this ghastly being coming to harvest the souls of so many dead were powerful enough that it pervades the common consciousness of the Western world to this day.

In developing our own worlds, there are several questions we can ask ourselves on the subject of psychopomps, and the answers to these questions will do much to develop our fictional cultures. If we choose to include one of these custodial spirits, this creates the sense that the afterlife is another *place* and that there is a journey to be undertaken after death. Should we choose to exclude one of these figures, we should consider how people view the transition from life to afterlife. Does the spirit simply appear in this other realm?

Another important consideration is the character of our spirit and/or deity. If this figure is kind and benevolent, this would reflect an outlook on death as a welcome transition to another phase of existence. Should the figure be menacing and terrifying, then perhaps the afterlife is a place to fear and the souls of the departed are taken there against their will. How these beliefs would reflect upon the day-to-day lives of those living in this culture is a fascinating concept to ponder. While these two questions only scratch the surface of what we can shape these figures into, they already provide groundwork for some interesting cultural ramifications.





LORDS OF THE AFTERLIFE

Once the spirit has been ushered or otherwise passed on to the afterlife, who is in charge? Almost all of the ancient polytheistic belief systems had a figure who was in charge of the afterlife: a god of death, king of the underworld, or lord of the afterlife. In some cases, the roles of psychopomp and ruler of the dead belong the same being, but in many more cases the roles are fulfilled by two separate figures.

Returning to Egypt, we find a convoluted tale that is a good example of how things are not always cut-and-dry regarding who is in charge of what—even among a pantheon of deities! Osiris ruled over the afterlife for much of Egyptian history, but a turn of events saw others vying to take his place. The exact details of the myths are lost to time, but what we can interpret from antiquity is that Osiris was murdered by Set, who wished to take his place. Osiris' son, Anubis, ruled the afterlife in his place for some time, filling both role of custodian and lord of the dead. Isis resurrected Osiris after re-assembling his body, the parts of which Set had scattered across the desert. Once reborn, Osiris took his place as lord of the afterlife and his son Anubis was relegated to his role as a psychopomp, as mentioned above. There are some inconsistencies depending upon the source of interpretation, but one interesting version suggests that Osiris became the god of death because he was the first one to die himself.⁹

Along a similar vein, Yama from Hindu mythology is also—in some versions of the tale—the first man to die. Because of this honorific, he was appointed as the king of the underworld and judge of all souls. He is neither benevolent nor malicious, but rather is viewed as a figure of careful study who presides over the fate of the dead in a setting similar to a trial; where the spirits are judged for their deeds in life. Because of this moral neutrality, how one feels about Yama depends on what kind of life they have lead. Indeed, some legends have him appearing as an unimposing humanoid to those with a clear conscience and as a horrifying monster to those who have done evil in life.¹⁰

Which brings us to a very interesting subject: deities charged specifically with the punishment of the damned. Not surprisingly—given the role of religion in maintaining civil order and establishing common codes of morality—there are quite a few examples of figures who fill this role. We are most likely all familiar with the figure of Lucifer from the Judeo-Christian traditions. Similar in purpose and tone are peers such as Hades of Greek mythology, Whiro of the Maori, and Hel of Norse myth.¹⁰ Another notable figure that filled this role was Orcus, an Etruscan god known as the lord of the underworld and punisher of broken oaths. He was characterized as a hulking, monstrous creature who often feasted upon those he was charged with punishing. The ancient Romans adopted the stories of Orcus and melded the Etruscan traditions with those of their Greek neighbors, and the figure was adapted to become a similar figure to Hades. The name has survived and changed over the years, notably as the French 'ogre' and the Anglo-Saxon 'orc', which was a type of daemon in their folklore.¹¹

As we can see, there are a lot of options other than just assigning a deity as the lord of the afterlife and god of death. Power struggles, family intrigue, and other drama can be taking place in relation to this role. There can also be a variety of figures filling an assortment of roles in regard to this sphere of influence. The examples given here are fairly simple, but if you dig deeper, you'll find that in some cultures—such as Chinese mythology—there might be dozens of characters involved in the management of the afterlife.

LANDS OF THE DEAD

Many of us are familiar with certain concepts of an afterlife, either from our own belief systems or those that pervade the cultures we reside within. Most common of these being heaven, the eternal paradise and reward for living a good life; hell, the eternal punishment for living a wicked life; and limbo or purgatory, a realm between the two where a soul might serve penance before moving on to a more rewarding realm. Many belief systems in the past had alternate views of what the afterlife might be like, some of them with much more complicated structures or more personal fates for the departed.

An iconic vision of the afterlife is that of the Judeo-Christian hell described in Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*, from *The Divine Comedy*. In this work there are distinct levels of hell for each of the seven deadly sins, each with their own type of punishment. For example; those guilty of wrath are forced to spend eternity in a watery swamp, constantly fighting each other to rise to the surface for air.¹² Another notable example of specific punishments to fit the crime is the story of Tantalus from Homer's *Odyssey*. After having killed and served another human as a meal to the gods, he was given a special punishment by Zeus himself. He was cursed with eternal hunger and thirst and forced to stand in a lake of freshwater that would always recede should he bend down to drink; and above him hung enticing fruit that seemed within reach, but would draw away should he try to grab it. It is from this legend that the world 'tantalizing' originates.

"I saw also the dreadful fate of Tantalus, who stood in a lake that reached his chin; he was dying to quench his thirst, but could never reach the water, for whenever the poor creature stooped to drink, it dried up and vanished, so that there was nothing but dry ground—parched by the spite of heaven. There were tall trees, moreover, that shed their fruit over his head—pears, pomegranates, apples, sweet figs and juicy olives, but whenever the poor creature stretched out his hand to take some, the wind tossed the branches back again to the clouds."¹³

Other cultures had a variety of separate realms to where the spirits of the dead might travel, rather than one realm—or two—with specific fates awaiting them. A good example of this would be the realms of the dead in Norse mythology, of which there are four, each catering to a specific set of individuals. Valhalla is probably familiar to many as the hall of the honored warriors, those who have fought bravely and fallen in battle. There is also Fólkvangr—the domain of Freyja—where half of those who die in battle are chosen by her to reside. Then we have Hel, wherein resides the goddess of death by the same name. This was seen as a land of darkness and shadow. Some sources suggest it was a realm of punishment, although this is not entirely clear. Most often, it is simply referenced as the destination of those who did not die in battle.

Finally, we have Helgafjell—the holy mountain—another concept of an afterlife for those who did not die in battle. Legends of Helgafjell usually paint the picture of a more pastoral afterlife where the spirits of the dead continue to live a life like that experienced in the mortal realm. It is interesting to note that the only 'paradise' promised is for those who died in battle, reflecting the warlike society that this religion was attached to.¹⁴

While in many traditions the fate of the deceased was eternal, this was not always the case. Returning again to the Hindu deity Yama—who was also a figure in Buddhism—we see an example of punishment for wrongs committed in life that does not last forever. Once judged guilty by Yama, the punishments prescribed to the spirit only lasted until their karma was balanced. Depending on the specific tradition, the spirit would then either pass on to a more pleasant afterlife or be reincarnated.¹⁵

As we can see just from these few examples, we have a lot of inspiration to draw from when creating our own afterlife. Different archetypes might include separate realms for reward or punishment, individually tailored fates, rewards for a specific ideal—such as dying a warrior's death, and temporary penance for one's crimes in life. These, of course, are only a few options to get the creative juices flowing.

WEAVING THE TAPESTRY OF FATE

Now comes the real challenge for all of us: tying all of these threads together. When we start thinking about the afterlife in our worldbuilding, there's a lot to consider! Depending upon how detailed you wish your world to be, you could spend days shaping this aspect of your world or simply writing a few paragraphs outlining the broad strokes.

Either way, I feel it's a great idea to at least consider this aspect of the cultures you are creating. As we have seen, beliefs regarding the afterlife do a lot to shape a society, such as with the Egyptians creating an entire construction industry around it. On the other side of the coin, beliefs in the afterlife might be shaped by parts of the society, such as how the Norse valued a warrior's death over any



other, and focused less on punishment for wrongs committed during life compared to other cultures.

Beyond considering the questions of psychopomps, gods of death, and the afterlife itself, there are a lot of other threads that we can weave

into these basic elements. An entire hierarchy of supernatural figures might preside over various aspects of life-after-death. Alternatively, we can create culturally-specific ideas that jump outside of the established archetypes.

One example from my own work would be the beliefs of the nomadic Taerwyn tribes in my sword and sorcery series *The Burning Sands*, which is set on a world covered in deserts. The Taerwyn believe in reincarnation, but also that while waiting for the next life, they spend time in the 'Spirit Sands', where there is no thirst or hunger and where men, horses, and other benign creatures spend their time running free across the endless desert.

When we take a closer look at some of these details, it helps us to create cultures that feel more genuine. The ideas a culture has about the afterlife, combined with other concepts both mundane and supernatural, all are part of building a people who feel truly alive. While we may or may not deal with aspects of death and the afterlife once our worlds are built, having these concepts fleshed out provide the foundation for cultures that have beliefs, motivations, fears, and ambitions beyond those of the mortal realm. 🐉

WORKS CITED

- ¹ Baines, John R.; Bowman, Alan K.; Edouard, Alan; Edward, Samuel; Wente, F.; Dorman, Peter F. "Ancient Egypt." *Encyclopaedica Britannica*. Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. 14 October 2018. Web. 22 November 2018.
- ² Herodotus. Translated by Macaulay, G.C. "Book 2: Chapter 124." *The History of Herodotus – Volume 1*. London & New York: MacMillan and Co., 1890. *The Gutenberg Project*. Web. 22 November 2018.
- ³ "Psychopomp." Def. 1. *Dictionary.com*. Dictionary.com, 2018. Web. 22 Nov 2018.
- ⁴ Aeschylus. Translated by Smyth, Herbert Weir. *Seven Against Thebes* (Greek tragedy circa 467 B.C.) Harvard University, 1922. Perseus.edu. Web. 22 November 2018.
- ⁵ Atsma, Aaron J. "Kharon." *Theoi Greek Mythology*. Theoi Project, 2000-2017. Web. 22 Nov 2018. <http://www.theoi.com/Khthonios/Kharon.html>.
- ⁶ Atsma, Aaron J. "Thanatos." *Theoi Greek Mythology*. Theoi Project, 2000-2017. Web. 22 Nov 2018. <http://www.theoi.com/Daimon/Thanatos.html>.
- ⁷ Strong, Laura, PhD. "Psychopomp Guide - Psychopomps from Around the World." *Psychopomps.org*. Laura Strong, PhD, 2008-2018. Web. 22 Nov 2018. <http://www.psychopomps.org/psychopomp-guide.html>.
- ⁸ Prof. Geller. "Grim Reaper." *Mythology.net*. Mythology.net. 2018. Web. 22 Nov 2018. <https://mythology.net/mythical-creatures/grim-reaper/>.
- ⁹ Editorial Staff. "Osiris | Egyptian God of the Underworld." *Ancient Egypt Online*. Ancient Egypt Online, 2018. Web. 22 Nov 2018. <https://www.ancient-egypt-online.com/osiris.html>.
- ¹⁰ Wiggington, Patti. "Gods and Goddesses of Death and the Underworld." *ThoughtCo*. DotDash, 13 August 2018. Web. 22 Nov 2018. <https://www.thoughtco.com/gods-and-goddesses-of-death-2562693>.
- ¹¹ Editorial staff. "Orcus." *By the Gods!*. By the Gods!, 12 May 2018. Web. 22 Nov 2018. <http://www.bythegods.net/post/704904551>.
- ¹² Alighieri, Dante. Translated by Carlyle, Oakey, and Wicksteed. "Infernus: Canto 7." *The Divine Comedy*. Random House, 1950. Print.
- ¹³ Homer. Translated by Butler, Samuel. "Book XI." *The Odyssey*. Canterbury Classics, 2011. Print.
- ¹⁴ Various. "Death in Norse Paganism." *Wikipedia*. The Wikimedia Foundation, 21 September 2018. Web. 23 November 2018.
- ¹⁵ Editorial Staff. "Religion Library: Buddhism – Afterlife and Salvation." *Patheos.com*. Patheos, 2008-2018. Web. 23 November 2018. <https://www.patheos.com/library/buddhism/beliefs/afterlife-and-salvation>.

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW:

STIAN OVERSEN & CHARLES LEADINGHAM

INTERVIEW 

VIDEO GAMING 

MUSIC 

Interviewed by Adam Bassett



I got a chance to sit down with Stian Oversen and Charles Leadingham, two of the many talented folks working at Iron Compass Games, an independent studio based in the UK. They were kind enough to share a bit about their process and experience working together.

Stian: Currently, I am developing a couple of projects. I serve as the lead designer, writer, and worldbuilder on a project called *Neoshift*; as well as senior writer and game designer at *Iron Compass Games*.

I've always been a huge fan of storytelling. It's something I've wanted to do since I was just a little boy. My enthusiasm for it began with books, where reading aloud was a nightly ritual I had with my parents, starting with *Harry Potter* before going over to denser works such as *Lord of the Rings*. It didn't take me long before I found the joy in writing as well. I still remember when I was just 9 or 10 years old and inherited the computer my mother had used for freelance writing. It was an old Windows 95 computer. I quickly discovered two pieces of software that would bring me much joy and entertainment in the years to come: WordPad and Paint. My first project was a fanfiction sequel to *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, which I had just read, titled *Harry Potter and the Silver Key*.

Later on I became infatuated with cinema and dreamt of becoming the world's greatest director. This little dream of mine continued for quite some time. I went the Media & Communication route through Videregående, where my fellow classmates and I got to make use of proper equipment and software. As I started working within groups I sort of grew out of my dream of becoming a director, mostly because I had several talented class mates who also fancied that role, and I started getting more into screenplays.

After Videregående, I earned a Bachelor's Degree in Film and Media Studies, meanwhile getting into game development on a project called *Dark Relic*, a MMORPG that's since been put on ice. It was during my time on *Dark Relic* that I first got into worldbuilding, rather than only focusing on linear narratives.

I started working on games in 2012, and have since worked on 5 games—two of which have been cancelled, one published, and two still in development. The two projects I'm working on at the moment are *Neoshift* and *Espial Online*.

Neoshift is a stealth adventure, similar in genre to games such as *Thief* (2014), in a futuristic cyberpunk setting. Development started just a few months ago, but we've made a lot of progress in such a small time. The game takes place in Neoshift City, a dystopian metropolis located in the southern United States. It's a pretty common premise, and the setting is not overly original. We decided early on that we wanted to pay a tribute to the cyberpunk-genre and its conventions rather than trying to reinvent the wheel.

ESPIAL



2Busy

2Busy

The other project I'm working on right now is *Espial Online*. It's been in active development for over two years now (I started working on it in March 2017). *Espial* is a 3rd person fantasy MMORPG that uses a blend of handmade and procedurally generated content. It's an ambitious project for an indie team such as ourselves, not only for its scope but also because we've tried to make a game that encompasses all playstyles, rather than relying on the classical approach with a primary playstyle (combat), and secondary playstyles (crafting, trading, etc.). We want to bring content to everyone, whether you're interested in fighting tooth-and-nail through dark and misty dungeons, exploring the world, seeking rare resources, or becoming an expert craftsman of magical trinkets. One of the greatest contrasts between *Espial Online* and other MMORPGs, is our naval focus. All players are able to sail wherever they want across the sea.

The world of *Espial* is based around the fictional continent of Aberis and the Isle of Romarth. Around

them, however, is and a never-ending array of procedurally generated islands. Each is furnished with engaging quests, a large variety of biomes, and expansive dungeons.

With regards to Espial Online, could you go into some more depth on your role and how you approach worldbuilding from the standpoint that you're creating a world for an interactive game and 3D world? Has the medium affected the way you work or display the world much?

Yes, certainly. There are two things that are really important for me to remember when developing the world. First of all is the actual development. If you're an author, or a designer working on a pen-and-paper game, you're most likely working alone, or within a small group. This means that you as the creator have an incredible amount of freedom in how you develop and organize the world. I'm aware of authors who approach worldbuilding in a very spontaneous manner, adding objects, historical events while writing. As a writer working on a video

game with a large team, that's a luxury I cannot afford. One of the most important things is how you portray the world and how that portrayal is organized. The work I do has to be accessible and understandable for all kinds of talent, ranging from level-designers to programmers, from artists to composers, and so on. There's just so many people involved.

At the same time, I'm working on a tight schedule. This isn't unusual for writers of any kind, but due to how intertwined all aspects of game development is, I'm put in a position where I've got to get it right early on. An author, upon completing a first draft might think: "hmm, this chapter really isn't working for the story. I'll either have to delete it, or do a complete rewrite." By the time that I'm seeing the faults of my writing, the team has already dumped loads of hours into creating the scene, sculpting the characters, and so on.

A lot of the worldbuilding in *Espial* started with short fiction writing. I prefer to build the world by starting at a small location, such as an establishment, then I expand outwards from there. Short fiction is perfect for that kind of thing. The best such example is the University in Aostum, the largest city in the game. It started with a short story mentioning the University off-hand. Ideas surrounding it started to fester, and I incorporated more detailed bits and pieces in later short stories. Now the building and students/faculty is thoroughly outlined.

How do you address issues discovered after the team begins to develop work based on your worldbuilding?

By being prepared to kill my babies. A lot of what I write doesn't work out. Sometimes it's due to technical limitations, other times it's because I thought I had something brilliant, but it turned out to be rubbish. I've got to keep the world adaptable, and quickly find workarounds when things turn sour. Luckily, such episodes are avoidable.



Communication is key. Making use of short, but frequent meetings to catch up on progress and discuss the immediate direction helps us to catch missteps early on and correct them. As I'm the only worldbuilder on the project I'm continuously talking with artists, designers, and composers on a daily basis; reviewing sketches, discussing work that's still in progress, and so on.

Working with such a broad variety of talent is also what makes my job such a delight. It truly is hard to describe how wonderful it is to see your work come to life. I might spend hours upon hours writing about a mythical underwater creature, and in my mind it's this fantastical being that truly belongs in the world. But it's just words on a paper; everyone who reads it is bound to interpret it differently. However, bring in an artist and let her do the interpretation, and the creature springs out of the page and becomes alive.

Can you share any examples of work you've done for Espial Online?

Many of the quests in *Espial Online* pay tribute to other great works of literature that's had a great influence on me. One such work is *Red Shadows*, a short story by Robert E Howard. In the story, the protagonist comes by a young maiden in a forest, who lies fatally wounded on the forest bed. Upon learning what's happened to her, the protagonist makes it his goal to exact vengeance on her behalf, and chases the scoundrel across continents before fulfilling his promise.

This basic premise of the story intrigued me so much, I ended up writing my own version of it. The players find a wounded woman on the road, and experience the final moments of her life. Now, because *Espial Online* has a multi-option consequential quest system, it is up to the players to decide what to do with the information given. As I kept writing, I also kept adding depths of possibilities and consequences. Some branches of the quest happen much like the book, with the players chasing the culprit across sea and land in order to exact vengeance, while other branches may result in an alliance between the player and culprit. Such a path will exclude the player from certain quests in that region, but also open new ones with the bandits.

To the dread of the level-designers, it has since become one of the most branched quests within the game, and it really portrays what the adventures in the game truly hold, being more similar to pen & paper RPGs than the typical theme-park approach that traditional MMORPGs follow.

What other people have inspired you or your work?

I'm inspired by a lot of things, sometimes by the style of writing, other times by an interaction between characters. It has to do with thematic. If I'm creating a macabre graveyard mystery, it's easy to turn to authors such as Edgar Allan Poe, H. P. Lovecraft, and Algernon Blackwood for inspiration. Meanwhile J. K. Rowling, Terry Pratchett, et al. are suitable for the more quirky slice-of-life scenes of any fantasy world's metropolis. I do however find a lot of inspiration from short fiction, because I often use the same medium to outline quests before I rework them into a branching narrative.

You have some personal work in the form of short fiction as well, right?

I have written many such pieces, but none of them have been submitted for publishing yet. I'm working on a short fiction anthology at the moment, but I'm reluctant in releasing any of the stories before they have a shared unity of style.

Most of the stories are centered around characters interacting with each other rather than the plot itself. Very much slice-of-life. Plots themselves often need a more tailored approach, because I'm writing on a product of interactive media, with choices and consequences. However, the stories are incredibly useful to breath life into the characters that the player encounters.

Thanks. I'd like to bring Charles into the conversation as well. Tell us a bit about yourself, if you don't mind.

Charles: My name is Charles Leadingham. I've been playing [music](#) for most of my life, Trumpet and Tuba primarily, although my interest in composition didn't come until high school. I was introduced to a man named Billings at a technical high school in my area. He is the instructor for a computer game development and animation program. At this

technical school, I specialized in music—soundtrack composition for student projects. It seemed natural to sit behind a keyboard, but the instructor is who really pushed me forward. His own interest in music, video game scores or otherwise, guided me to trying new composition techniques and exploring different styles/sounds. His feedback was invaluable to me, and I don't believe I would be taking part in this interview were it not for Mr. Billings' motivation some years ago.

Regarding the project Stian and I work on together, *Espial Online*, the majority of my work falls under [score composition and music production](#)! I communicate with the development team to bring the ideas and feelings of the game to life through the soundtrack. My main focus day to day is gathering information on environments and bits of lore pertaining to the game setting so that I can truly emulate the theme of each setting appropriately. It's not uncommon for me to rework and improve previously composed tracks daily.

Stian: Charles and I work together a lot, but our workflow doesn't really follow any standardized pattern. In some cases, there are tracks that are specifically needed, in which case there's a lot of back-and-forth between the two of us early on in order to set the goal for what we want to achieve with the score. One of the most recent examples is the development of the Kalcian Empire, which is the antagonist faction in the game, specifically in the desert area.

It usually starts with me laying out what I've done on worldbuilding for the region, explaining its geography, societies, political system, and its people. Often times I'll paint a picture through some brief paragraphs of fictional pieces, such as a historical account from a diegetic character. We'll both come up with what types of instruments we would like to hear in the piece, and often reference other music to further go into detail on the nuances we want in the track. Then it's an iterative process of sketches → feedback → adjustment → feedback → refinement.

Charles: Stian is spot-on regarding our process. I tend to draft many versions of a song before the *Espial* team even hears it. If I get to a point in production at which I can close my eyes, listen

to the track, and transport myself to the desired scene, I will then send it to Stian or the general development team for feedback. We take a good deal of time to work out the themes of each piece by exploring the lore of the region, climates, geography, and much more. The world of *Espial* drives my creative process to a degree. I believe it's my duty as a composer to tie the more abstract ideas of the given area together using music. Each instrument is usually chosen to be evocative of that area. A recent example of this would be the track "*Sands Grow Cold*" which was an attempt at evoking the cold, lonely, mysterious nighttime desert.

Stian: In other cases, whenever Charles doesn't have any specific tasks to work on, he takes what he knows of the world and start building upon it himself, through musical expression. There have been numerous occasions where I've woken up one morning, log on to my computer, and see that little red notification on Discord, and to my pleasure find some messages from Charles:

"Here is a song I've been working on for [insert location/object/society]. How does it feel to you?"

And it's just wonderful, because often it's a track for some lore that I haven't fully fleshed out yet (and sometimes even an original creation). When this happens I just close my eyes and follow where the music is taking me, experiencing how its story progress, and out of that I'm able to bring in something new to the world. Often my interpretation is not what Charles originally had in mind, but that's okay because we have forged a new element into the world together.

Could you tell us in a bit more detail what one of your favorite pieces is and the process to create it?

Charles: If I had to choose one it would be the sailing theme: [Royal Blue](#). It has endured a long life with many drafts preceding the current version, however, it holds one of my favorite feelings of any track.

I started with the main riff. I immediately knew what it sounded like to me to be exploring the high seas. Most of the issues arose from song structure, and trying to make the song flow in such a way



Lukas S.
Lukas S.

as to be dynamic and amusing without being too attention-grabbing.

Would you say, then, that the medium of a game can limit what you're able to do in some cases?

Charles: Rather than limiting, I see the medium to be a foundation for the music.

The sound track should build on top of the game experience, and add more depth to the gameplay and world. Of course, what one could call limits and restrictions, I think of as direction. The locale is what guides the music, and they should fit together as such.

We haven't had any audio producers with us before. Are there any particular challenges or aspects of the process that you could share with us?

Charles: Writer's block is not uncommon for any creative type, and can be bothersome when composing especially. Listening to other great composers such as Howard Shore can often help me climb out of a rut.

My process is rather dynamic, and often ties into the needs of the project. Battle music? I'm likely to drive the piece with drums and heavy percussion elements. Sometimes for more peaceful sounds, I'll begin with a simple flute melody and build off of it. A scene of betrayal in a dark ruin? Slithering bassoons, ambient hits, and well-timed shrill strings come to mind. I'm a firm believer that the narrative of a given world drives the creation of music for a soundtrack.

Do you have any advice if somebody is interested in doing this sort of work?

Charles: My advice is directed to anyone with a passion for their work: *keep trying*. Everyone needs to start somewhere. To produce music specifically, you could use as little as a laptop loaded up with a digital audio workstation and a pair of headphones.

Stian: I'm not sure whether this applies to composing, but in fiction writing it's a good idea to find an author you like and imitate him/her. Then imitate another author, and so on and so forth. As you learn the various styles of successful authors you will eventually come up with your own style and voice.

Charles: I couldn't agree more with Stian. If you have a passion, you should have an inspiration. Jeremy Soule was my first. I'm not sure how much it shows, but a number of my pieces are heavily inspired by his work.

What avenues do you explore in your personal work that you can't (or haven't yet been able to do) in your work for Espial? Can you give us an example that you're particularly proud of?

Charles: *Espial* is a vision to this team. We're working to bring a plan to fruition. Music intended for the soundtrack should add to the experience of the game, whereas my private tracks are their own stories. They are a no-holds-barred outlet for me to experiment with any sounds I choose. I primarily use Soundcloud to post tracks that are in their infancy, that I will return to and work on later.

[Emperor's Tirade](#) is an experiment in power. A bombastic tune.

Finally, Charles, we've already touched on what has inspired Stian but what works influence your work?

Charles: When I mentioned earlier about trying to portray abstract ideas through music, I think of *Lord of The Rings*, primarily. The film scores are truly inspirational, however there is far more happening behind the scenes than any of the films portray. The scores give us a taste of the true splendor of the world, epic battles, harrowing journeys, and the stakes of the events depicted.

The Elder Scrolls and *The Witcher* both do a great job of storytelling through music as well. I'm inspired by the worlds that can take the player, reader, or viewer away from reality. With the right

soundtrack, a world can come to life, betraying details that are only hinted at otherwise. 🎧

Special thanks to Stian and Charles for taking some time to talk with us about their work and methods. You can find out more about Iron Compass by visiting their [site](#), or feel free to listen to Charles' original compositions by clicking [here](#)!

This interview has been edited for Worldbuilding Magazine.



Once upon a time there was a daring storyteller who sought the secrets of masterful writing, deep worldbuilding, and engaging roleplaying. That storyteller ventured to mythcreants.com and lived happily ever after.

mythcreants

Where Storytellers
Level Up

<https://mythcreants.com>





ART SHOWCASE:

INTERVIEW 

ONDREJ HRDINA

Curated by Wynter

Hrdina 16

My name is Ondřej Hrdina. Don't worry if you can't pronounce that. I was born and raised in the Pilsen area, Czech republic. Now I live in Prague.

What got me into worldbuilding was worldbuilding itself. I was exposed to it when I was little, finding it in movies, TV shows, and videogames. The fantastical worlds I saw fascinated me and inspired me to create one of my own. So I did, using what I loved the most—drawing and painting.

At first the world I created was just something that could give my art context. Images needed to have thought and emotion behind them, and tying my own stories to them was the easiest way. Now, it's almost the opposite. The stories exist, and the art accompanies them. Be it paintings, short stories, novels or comics. Together they construct a picture of the world they all have in common: **Thaluuria**.

IDEA CREATION

I use a specific process in creating my work, as messy as it can be. I would describe *it as going big or small, and then the opposite*. It starts with an idea. This idea can either be big: how did the universe come into existence? What is the physics system? What was the movement of the population through history on this particular planet?, etc. Or a small idea: Who lived in this house? How did all their crop come to burn? And how did it affect the village where the weird and mysterious man lived? By going big first, you can lay the foundations for your world and then go smaller to fill in all of the details that follow. However, when going small first, you focus on a specific sliver of the world that you find interesting. You can then extrapolate and expand upon this portion to further worldbuild.

That is, if you want the world to behave logically.

My process always alternates between big and small ideas, and everything in between. Most of my small ideas come from spontaneous pictures or art that didn't have its contents planned. I think of the story as I paint. The story may be something new







that doesn't fit into the established universe, so I go big and alter the universe just a bit so that the story fits. The other times I go *intentionally* small, so I can fill the world with detail that follows the rules of the bigger universe.

The small changes the big, and vice versa. Thus, *Thalwuria* is ever changing. I'm not afraid of it losing its coherency. I feel like the two approaches lead toward one another, and over time, the changes I make are less and less drastic. It can never be truly static, though. That would mean the universe is complete and full, which I don't think is possible given the scale it operates at.

THE MEDIUM

Most of my work consists of digital art. It's what I do for a living, but my ambition doesn't end there. While I think it's possible to show the world through a series of illustrations, they act more like windows rather than continuous stories.

That is where comics enter: they sacrifice visual quality to quantity. What comics and illustrations have in common, besides the visual form, is the story. I prefer to put them on paper, establishing a narrative around the artwork. When the visual form is removed, stories can also come alive with

prose. Poetry, short stories, novels, or entire series of them—whatever format fits the topic best.

THE OBSTACLES

Every medium has its benefits. Though visuals are closest to my heart, Thaluuria started to really take form when I began working on a novel. It is still not finished. In the past 7 years or so of working on it, Thaluuria changed a lot. I have learned so much and I know I still have a lot to learn. Thus the only complete written works I have are a few short stories—none of which are translated into English yet.

With comics, it's tricky too. First, the story lies at the core, and writing a good story is an art in itself. When focusing on humanoid characters, the artist also has to know the ins and outs of the creature's anatomy. That is still something that I'm learning, and I hope I will reach a point where I am confident enough in my anatomy skills to finally finish some stories.

Illustrations are more straightforward. Every once in a while, I release one on the internet with extra written context. Sometimes I think that my largest obstacle is my reluctance to finish or release finished content. But then, if I'm

not happy with a piece, it's not really finished. I'd rather provide a short, clear look on the world than a muddled and broad one.

No, my largest obstacles include time management, procrastination, and just plain foolishness or unrealistic expectations. What I can say is that for many people, having clear goals is the absolute best way to achieve them. My goal is clear. I seek to evoke emotion and questions. I believe that, while everyone is on journeys of their own, we all have one journey in common; the journey of discovery and understanding. I don't think we

ever stop, even if we think we do, and I hope that my art inspires others to continue on that path willfully. I know that everything in this craft can be learned, and if not truly understood, then masterfully approximated. I'm 21, hopefully I have a lot of time left to do so. 🐉



Special thanks To Ondřej for taking the time to speak with us and share a few pieces. You can keep up with him and look at more of Ondřej's work on [Artstation](#) or [DeviantArt](#). If you have an illustrated world of your own, [apply for one of our future art features](#).

This interview was edited for Worldbuilding Magazine.

BEYOND HUMAN SACRIFICE: A WORLDBUILDER'S GUIDE TO MESOAMERICA

CULTURE



HISTORY



Overprepared GM

When the Spanish conquistadors visited Tenochtitlan in the sixteenth century, they wrote in horror of the city's *tzompantli*, a gigantic rack of skulls. The Spanish estimated it held 130,000 human skulls. Modern archaeologists assumed the Spanish greatly exaggerated to justify their conquest, but in 2015, archeologists discovered the destroyed *tzompantli* to be larger than a basketball court and four to five meters high. They are currently still excavating the skulls and are no longer so sure how much the Spaniards exaggerated.¹

About the Aztecs,² *History Today* writes, "This was a culture obsessed with death... When the Great Pyramid of Tenochtitlan was consecrated in 1487 the Aztecs recorded that 84,000 people were slaughtered in four days. Self-sacrifice was common and individuals would pierce their ears, tongues and genitals to nourish the floors of temples with their blood."³ They're not exactly wrong to stress this aspect of the culture. Human sacrifice, self-sacrifice, a religious preoccupation with death, whether the death of an individual or the death of the world... these notions characterized the Aztec Empire. In the rare times that Aztecs are depicted in popular media, their entire culture is usually flattened into a single, problematic image—the feather-costumed, bronze-skinned, jungle savage cutting out the still-beating

heart of his captive with an obsidian blade atop a stepped pyramid. It's an evocative picture, but it's not a very complete one.

To worsen the flattening, this depiction of the Aztecs casts a firm shadow across the region. Mesoamerica is one of the six cradles of civilization⁴ and, like the other cradles, is home to an exceptionally rich tapestry of cultural complexes. Unfortunately, Mesoamerica is also an area that's rarely used as inspiration for worldbuilding, at least among English-language works. Part of this problem may be a lack of familiarity. Schools, libraries, and popular books don't feature ancient Mayan mythology or Zapotec folklore in the same way they do ancient Greek mythology or Arthurian fairytales. Another part of the problem may be a desire to avoid offense—there are still modern-day Mayans, Zapotecs, and Tlaxcalans. Drawing inspiration without exoticizing or appropriating can be a careful line to walk. That's a shame though, because Mesoamerica is as rich, distinct, and inspiring as the Balkans or the British Isles.

So, if you're interested in drawing inspiration from the historical civilizations of the region, here's my Completely Unofficial Layman's Guide to Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica for Worldbuilders™.⁵

¹ WadeJen, Lizzie, et al. "Feeding the Gods: Hundreds of Skulls Reveal Massive Scale of Human Sacrifice in Aztec Capital." *Science* | AAAS, American Association for the Advancement of Science, 2 July 2018, [10.1126/science.aau5404](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aau5404)

² "Aztec" is the Spanish term for the people who built the empire. It's a little misleading because that's not how they called themselves. Mexica is somewhat more accurate, but I'll use Aztec in the article to avoid confusion. By the way, they weren't the only people in Mesoamerica who had *tzompantli*.

³ "Two Cheers for the Conquistadors." *History Today*, 3 Mar. 2011, www.historytoday.com/tim-stanley/two-cheers-conquistadors.

⁴ A cradle of civilization is an region where human civilization arose independently. The commonly accepted cradles include Mesopotamia, Mesoamerica, the Peruvian Andes, the Yellow River Valley, and the Indus-Ganga plain.

⁵ Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica mean before the arrival of Europeans in the late fifteenth century.



SACRIFICE & THE APOCALYPSE(S)

To the ancient Mesoamericans the world had already been destroyed and reborn multiple times, and it would be destroyed again in a predictable way. Different cultures had conflicting ideas of which incarnation we were on, how this world would end, and what the next people would be like. However, all of them agreed that this was neither the first nor the last world, and we were neither the first nor the last people that would people a world.

The idea of a recurring apocalypse affected how they envisioned the relationship between humanity and their gods. Unlike Ragnarok or the Christian Apocalypse, the Mesoamericans believed that the gods survived each world ending. For the gods, an apocalypse merely marked a change. A new god would take a turn being in charge, but otherwise they would survive. Consequently, it was humans who kept the world from ending by their ongoing blood sacrifice. Some gods may have helped if their

* All political boundaries represented are approximations.

personality or divine politics inclined that way, but they were not obligated to help. Humans were the ones who fed the sun, the gods, and the universe with their sacrifice, and thus put off the next apocalypse a little longer.

Sacrifice was a recurring motif in Mesoamerican cultures, involving more than just killing. The brutal process for joining the ruling senate of Tlaxcala provides a great example. There were usually 50-100 senators at any one time, and any distinguished warrior could become a candidate for the senate once he proved his bravery in battle.⁶ Even immigrant refugees of foreign ethnicities could join, as long as they fought for the city. But to become a candidate, a noted warrior first had to present himself naked to the public plaza while calmly withstanding beatings and insults from the gathered crowd. If he succeeded, he would study moral and legal code from priests for up to two years at the temple. Throughout his tutelage, he would be starved, whipped, and sleep deprived while regularly sacrificing himself in bloodletting rituals. Only when he had proven himself could he join the senate.

THE CYCLE OF TIME

Their culture's cyclical understanding of the universe had ramifications beyond an obsession with sacrifice and an assumption that the end of the world was not a tragedy to their gods. Mesoamericans methodically tracked these cycles to better understand and predict their world. Their civilizations had complex calendar systems which changed somewhat from culture to culture, but they always had a 260-day religious calendar and a 365-day tropical solar calendar. Together these calendars interacted to form a roughly 52-year Calendar Round.

Mesoamericans painstakingly charted the stars because they believed that a deity or aspect

watched over each day. Days were precipitous or unlucky for a given activity, and calendar priests studied astronomy and astrology to predict these influences. They believed people inherited specific tendencies, weaknesses, or supernatural powers based on their birthday. For example, a **nagual** is a Mesoamerican shapeshifter witch. However, unlike the European werewolf who gets infected by a bite, or the medieval European witch who gains power through pacts with Satan, a nagual is born with the ability to change shape into a wolf or puma or donkey, or whatever, because their birth fell on a day strongly affiliated with that animal. It's like Western astrology, except with magical results and 260 major influences rather than 12.

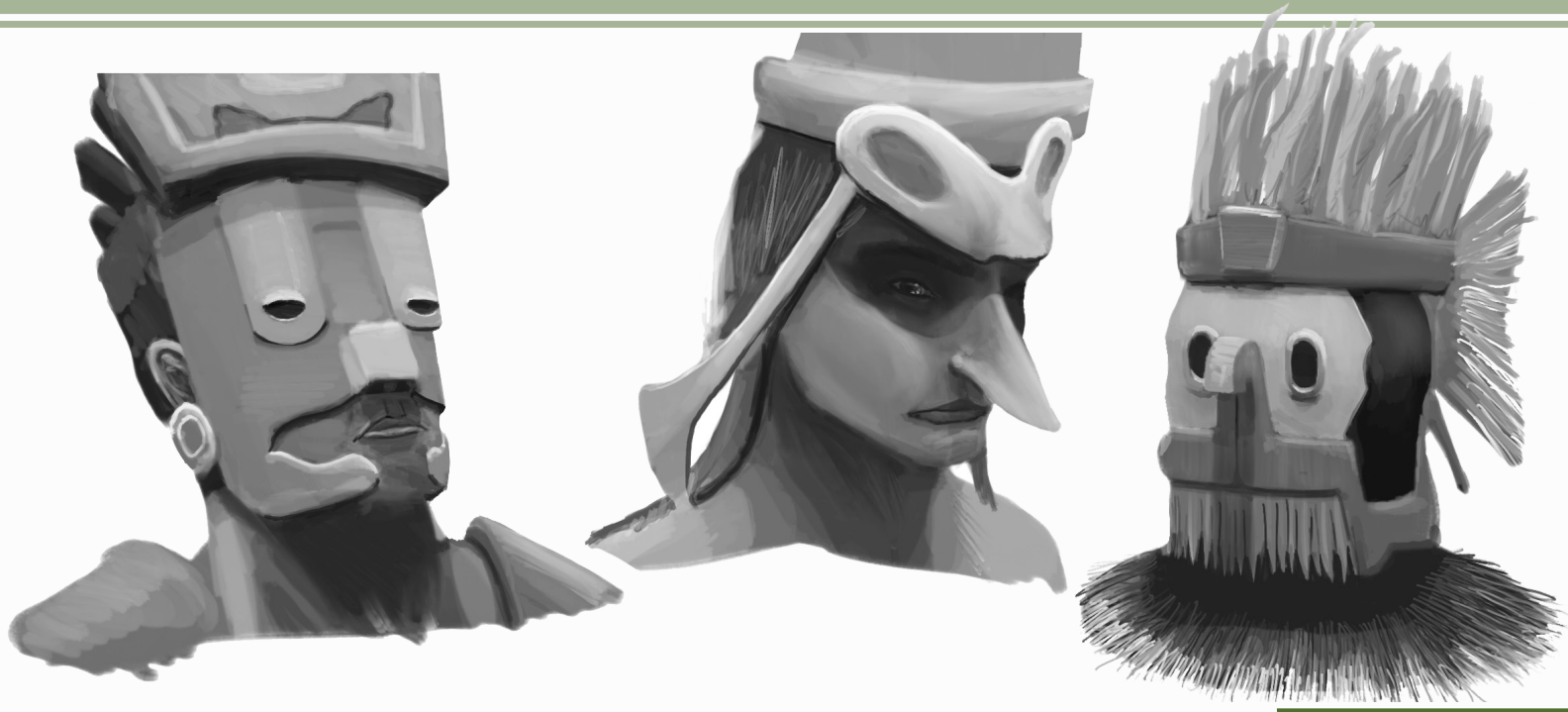
Probably because they deeply believed in astronomy's power, Mesoamericans were sophisticated mathematicians and famous astronomers.⁷ The Mayans developed the concept of zero early on and calculated astronomical predictions for the synodic (or lunar) month and the solar year to great precision.⁸ They used birthdays as their names, comparable to calling someone "July 13, 1992." Also, they tracked cycles beyond the two calendars common throughout Mesoamerica, and their long count date kept track of the current calendar round within an approximately 5,200 year cycle. They raised monuments with the long count date inscribed on them as part of founding a new city or settlement.

One great mystery is that of the end of the Mayan classic period, when the Mayan people abandoned most of their cities-states to migrate mostly northward. The northern Mayan cities, where the population thrived on the coast, remained vital, but the central heartlands were abandoned. New trade routes bypassed the regions and squatters lived in former royal palaces. Weirdly, the Mayan cities that remained populated stopped raising long count monuments, and scholars don't know why.

⁶ WadeMar, Lizzie, et al. "It Wasn't Just Greece: Archaeologists Find Early Democratic Societies in the Americas." *Science* | AAAS, American Association for the Advancement of Science, 8 Dec. 2017, [10.1126/science.aal0905](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aal0905).

⁷ Interestingly, they used a base 20 (rather than our base 10) system. Egyptian Mathematics - The Story of Mathematics, www.storyofmathematics.com/mayan.html.

⁸ The first recorded their Mesoamerican zero is from the pre-classic Mayans in the first decade AD, shortly after the first recorded instance of the Mesopotamian zero and about four centuries before its first recorded use in India.



 Tristen Fekete

THE CRADLE ITSELF

The region of Mesoamerica spans from central Mexico to Costa Rica. It's tropical in terms of latitude, but the landscape ranges from the humid jungles of the Mayan homeland, to the marshy lake of Tenochtitlan, to the rugged highlands of the Sierra Madres, to warm, Caribbean beaches on the Gulf of Mexico.

Tropical doesn't necessarily mean steaming jungle. For example, the highlands are cool and often arid. However, this tropicality does mean that the seasons don't have the same cultural implications as they do in folklore from temperate climes. Winter isn't marked by cold, so mesoamerican folklore doesn't have anything like a snow queen or a winter court; although they do have vegetative deities that focus on aspects of harvest or rebirth. Changes in precipitation, temperature, or length of day define the seasons. Near the Gulf Coast, for example, June through November is hurricane season, a time when sunny summer mornings are regularly punctuated with afternoon thundershowers. Consequently, rain gods are typically powerful within Mesoamerican pantheons, like Tlaloc of the Aztec and Teotihuacan, Chaac of the Mayan, and Cocijó of the Zapotecs.

The tropical climate of Mesoamerica also has implications that go beyond folklore and religion. Mild to hot temperatures, heavy precipitation, and a continuous growing season impact everything from clothing to building techniques. For example, cotton armor was the standard, and **Pints of History** makes an interesting argument that Aztec cloth armor was comparable to, or better than, contemporary European steel armor for the climate.⁹

ARCHITECTURE & BALL GAMES

Mesoamerican architecture varied according to culture and landscape, but it was generally known for large open plazas, carved stone friezes, stelae, and stepped pyramids with temples at the top. The need to deal with heat, sun, and rain constrained architectural design. They typically used limestone and basalt stonework for buildings and sculptures, as well as wood and maguey. Homes of the rich might even feature frescoed walls. The most distinctive Mesoamerican architectural development, however, was the ritual ball court. Unlike the other architectural motifs, ball courts are unique to Mesoamerica. Archaeologists have found more than 1,300 so far and expect to find more as they continue to research newly-found ancient sites.

⁹ "Pre-Columbian Cotton Armor: Better than Steel." *Pints of History*, 14 Jan. 2018, pintsofhistory.com/2011/08/10/mesoamerican-cotton-armor-better-than-steel/.

Ball courts were generally built in the center of the city, within the sacred precinct, adjacent to temples and shrines. They vary in size and shape, but most are I-shaped: a long narrow alley flanked by two walls. Earlier cultures left the ends of the ball court open while later ones walled them in. The courts were predominantly used for ball games, but they sometimes held other functions, such as feasts and wrestling matches.

Men, women, and children sometimes played the ball game purely for recreation and competition. It was a cultural obsession. People gambled on the game with some selling themselves into temporary slavery to pay off the gambling debt. However, it went beyond an ancient version of futbol. The games also had a profound religious and spiritual aspect; participants played the games to re-enact cultural myths. These ritualistic games possibly ended with either the winner, or the loser, or the coach (scholars aren't sure which), being sacrificed. Someone, of course, had to be ritually sacrificed, otherwise it wouldn't be ancient Mesoamerica.

MATERIALS & MERCHANTS

Although we don't know the exact rules of the ball games, we know ancient Mesoamericans played with a hard rubber ball. Their material science didn't extend to iron or bronze working, but they did master rubber early. They used it in different formulations such as rubber bands, shoe soles, glue, and book bindings. And, of course, bouncy balls.

Without metal, their selection of edged weapons was limited to either sharpened stone weapons, or wooden ones studded with obsidian shards. Probably as a result, deities associated with obsidian were endemic in their pantheons and were often powerful. These obsidian gods ranged from a gentle god of medicine, Ixtlilton, to the omniscient creator god-sorcerer, Tezcatlipoca, to the earth goddess, Itzpapalotl. Besides obsidian-studded weapons, Mesoamericans also fought with bows and arrows, blow guns, slings, spears, throwing spears, and clubs.

Some silver and copper metalwork existed, especially after the fifth century CE, but it was largely used for ornamentation and tools rather than weapons. Other materials characteristic of Mesoamerican cultures include gold, carmelite, pearls, amethyst, rock crystal, shells, jade, mica, turquoise, and maguey fibers. Not all of these were indigenous to the region, however. Mesoamerican cultures had thriving international trade despite lacking beasts of burden or wheeled transport, and several of the Mesoamerican cultures had special subcultures of professional, long-distance merchants. The Aztec Pochteca and the Mayan Ppolom were the most famous, impressing the Spaniards with their organization and competence. The Pochteca traded as far as the American Southwest to the north and comprised a separate class, neither peasants nor nobility. They lived in their own neighborhoods, had their own laws and ceremonies, and worshipped their own god of commerce, Yacatecutli. In addition to being a separate class, they were also a tightly controlled, hereditary guild with closely guarded information about routes, sources, and connections.

The Pochteca had a complex relationship with the nobility. The nobles valued their ability to obtain rare and exotic goods, but the Pochteca would often be escorted by armies in foreign lands, sponsored by the Aztec emperor, and given the full support of the empire. However, they also often trained warriors to be used as spies by the emperor, especially to reconnoiter future military targets. Because of this possibility, domestic warrior-politicians and foreign nobility alike mistrusted them. The Pochteca were seen as a perpetual first sign of invasion, even though foreign states welcomed the trade and information only they could bring.

The Yucatan Maya Ppolom traveled along the coast in great canoes, reaching as far as the isthmus region of Colombia to the south and the Caribbean islands to the east. Interestingly, the Ppolom and the Pochteca didn't trade directly with each other despite being contemporaries. Instead they each traded with intermediary groups to exchange goods.¹⁰

¹⁰ Maestri, Nicoletta, and Nicoletta Maestri. "Ancient Traders and Merchants of Mesoamerica." Thoughtco., *Dotdash*, www.thoughtco.com/merchants-of-mesoamerica-171651.

JAGUAR, MAIZE & MAGUEY

Mesoamerica's fauna and flora also affected the worldview and beliefs of its ancient inhabitants. Jaguar gods and deities associated with obsidian were common. In general, eagles, jaguars, hummingbirds, frogs, snakes, coyotes, monkeys, cacti, and grasshoppers loomed large in Mesoamerican stories and culture. Interestingly, wolves, deer, owls, falcons, cats, and oak trees may have been important in real life Mesoamerica but featured less in their stories than in European folklore. Lions, tigers, bears, horses, cows, pigs, goats, sheep, chickens, swans, rowans, willows were not native.¹¹

Maize (corn), squash, and beans were the staples of the Mesoamerican diet. Unsurprisingly, maize gods were common. Wheat, rice, potatoes, pasta or leavened bread didn't exist until European settlers brought them. There were tortillas, though, and chile peppers were a staple condiment in recipes. Ancient Mesoamericans also enjoyed popcorn, and used chocolate substantially. In some cultures, only the upper class could indulge in a bitter, spicy chocolate drink. Other cultures used chocolate as currency or saved it for religious occasions. To my knowledge and disappointment, there were no gods of chocolate. They also domesticated turkeys, ducks, dogs, bees, amaranthe, avocado, chia, papaya, sweet potato, and tomatillo for food.

Ancient Mesoamericans had pulque (or octli), a beer-ish drink made from fermented maguey juice, so gods of pulque were common among Mesoamerican pantheons. However, these deities were depicted a bit differently than wine gods such as Dionysus and Bacchus.¹² The maguey plants' fibers were used to make paper, rope, and clothing, and the sturdy leaves served as a building material. Mesoamerican pulque gods had aspects of crafts, order, and civilization that Western wine gods usually lacked. Also, getting drunk wasn't a passtime like in the tavern-rich environment of typical European fantasy and Wild Western settings.

Many Mesoamerican people were abstemious, careful to not overindulge. Drunkenness among Aztec warriors, for example, was punishable by death.

In an interesting contrast to European legal systems, Aztec and Mayan law often punished nobility and men more harshly than commoners and women for the same offenses. In another example of this tendency, Mayan men guilty of adultery were punished by death, while Mayan women were punished by public shaming.¹³ Although what we know of Mesoamerican legal systems indicates societies that were more lenient to the less privileged, they were also brutally strict for everyone, by our standards, with many infractions resulting in death or severe punishment. Although I don't have any scholarly support for the following theory, I have to wonder if this isn't tied into their conception of sacrifice. Perhaps, they might have believed that nobility and privilege weren't signs of divine favor as much as an obligations—that they had been given much so that they would have much to lose. As a worldbuilder, it's an intriguing possibility. Additionally, as long as I'm searching for inspiration rather than attempting to be historically accurate, I can run with that theory in my own world.

GODS, FLAYED & FEATHERED

The flayed gods personified sacrifice to ancient Mesoamericans, who worshipped many gods whose aspects are comparable to deities in other pantheons, such as death, the sun, and fate. But there were some gods whose motifs characterized the region. Possibly the most Mesoamerican gods of them all were the flayed gods, who wore layers of skins flayed from a human. In addition to being gross, they invariably were associated with sacrifice and rebirth, ideas intrinsic to the Mesoamerican worldview. Although many vegetative deities combine the ideas of sacrifice, rebirth, plants, and agriculture, the Mesoamerican flayed gods were particularly nuanced—their living body, wearing

¹¹ *Mexicolore* has a very readable page on the region's flora and fauna at <http://mexicolore.co.uk/aztecs/flora-and-fauna/> if you want to know more.

¹² Cartwright, Mark. "Pulque." *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, Ancient History Encyclopedia, 15 Dec. 2018, www.ancient.eu/Pulque/.

¹³ "Tarlton Law Library: Exhibit - Aztec and Maya Law: Introduction." Aztec and Maya Law, tarlton.law.utexas.edu/aztec-and-maya-law/intro.



old skins, symbolized a seedling sprouting from a seed husk. Xipe Totec, known as the Flayed Lord, was the most famous of such gods. His domains included of fertility, spring, and seeds. He acted as a source of diseases and a patron of goldsmiths. The Aztecs, Huastecs, Mixtecs, Tarascan, Tlaxcaltecs, Zapotecs, and, later, the Mayans all worshipped him.¹⁴ Without his skin, Xipe Totec was depicted as a golden god, the beauty and perfection of his form likely representing the promise of the seedling.

Flayed gods weren't the only distinctive divine motif. The other major one was the feathered serpent god. Most, if not all, old Mesoamerican cultures revered some feathered serpent god, whether Mixcoatl of the Tlaxcalans, Quetzalcoatl of the Aztecs and Zapotecs, or Kukulcan of the Mayans. We don't know the names of older Mesoamerican deities, but we can tell from carvings that they were also feathered serpent gods. The distinctive art form of featherworking is probably related to this motif. Mesoamerican societies considered featherworkers skilled artisans comparable to goldsmiths, and their creations were valuable commodities akin to, but distinct from, jewelry.

ART & MUSIC

In addition to featherworking, Mesoamerican cultures had most of the arts we're accustomed to—painting, jewelry-making, ceramics, music, theater, and sculpture. The Olmecs were particularly famous for their sculpture, not for their smaller pieces (which are nonetheless excellent) but for the mystery of their giant buried stone head sculptures. Archeologists have so far found 17 of the beautifully carved, helmeted basalt heads in several locations. Each were at least 10 feet tall and weighed 30-60 tons. The Olmecs transported the heads up to 25 miles through hills and swamps until they reached their destination and were buried. No one really knows why, although scholars have proposed myriad theories.¹⁵

Music also had a special place in ancient Mesoamerican cultures, serving multiple purposes. Sometimes it simply entertained people or accompanied dances and other performances. In warfare, sometimes it provided distractions for a surprise attacks, helped with intimidation and posturing, or acted as a signal to coordinate fighting. The most select of the Aztec warrior societies, the Jaguar and Eagle warriors, practiced songs and dances in the House of Song.

Mesoamerican music also had a deeply religious side. Priest-musicians didn't just provide accompaniments to ceremonies, but the music itself was seen as an integral part of shamanistic magic. Flutes and whistles were carved into the shapes of animals and often imitated the sound of the animal they represented. Mesoamerican cultures believed that playing instruments invoked the spirits and deities associated with them. Scholars hypothesize that the rhythmic sounds of drums and the high tones of the ceramic wind instruments could induce a trance-like state among participants and onlookers.¹⁶ Typical instruments included flutes, whistles, shell trumpets, rattles, rasps, drums, and slit drums. Towards the Postclassic Mayan period and later (after, say 900 CE), pan pipes, bells, and gongs were also used.

Early colonial records also described processions, dances, and comic theater. Unlike our modern understanding of plays and dances, they emphasized participation over spectatorship. They were often performed within a religious context rather than purely for entertainment.

APPLIED WORLDBUILDING

Now here's the practical part. How do we take this mass of information about Mesoamerica and use it to build our own worlds?

¹⁴ Xipe Totec has to be one of my favorites for pure strangeness. The Ranker has an amusing take on the spring festival in honor of Xipe Totec at <https://www.ranker.com/list/facts-about-tlacaxipehualiztli-aztec-skin-flaying-ceremony/kellen-perry>

¹⁵ Cartwright, Mark. "Olmec Colossal Stone Heads." Ancient History Encyclopedia, *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, 12 Dec. 2018, www.ancient.eu/article/672/olmec-colossal-stone-heads/.

¹⁶ Music, "Music: and Religion in Mesoamerica." "Music: Music and Religion in Mesoamerica." The Columbia Encyclopedia, 6th Ed, *Encyclopedia.com*, 2018, www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/music-music-and-religion-mesoamerica.

First, decide how closely you want to be inspired by a specific civilization. If you want to build authentic fantasy Olmecs, or alternate history Tlaxcalans, or space-faring future Mayans, then you need to start by doing more research. There are too many details unique to each culture to include in this article, and any of them might provide inspiration. Plus, if you're mostly familiar with traditional Western cultures as worldbuilding framework, then it's easy to be led astray by assumptions. For example, fifteenth-century Aztec society had compulsory education for everyone—commoners and nobles, males and females. Maybe that won't be relevant to your story, but knowing that opens up a lot of Harry Potter-style possibilities, doesn't it? Aztecs were also a very clean people, typically bathing twice a day, and nobles bathed up to four times a day. Again, maybe it wouldn't be relevant, but if you're creating a story in this setting, and you want a homey scene during which a character reflects on their day, then doing so while bathing makes sense for the Aztecs in a way that it might not for, say, the fifteenth-century British.

On the other hand, if you want to build a completely new culture inspired by the pre-Columbian Mesoamerican cultural complex, use motifs that are common among Mesoamerican cultures and create your own version of them. If you're having trouble remembering everything from the article, just keep in mind the following:

- Mesoamerica is in a tropical latitude. Try looking at online travel guides to get a good sense of weather patterns and inspiration for interesting landforms and species.¹⁷
- Create a polytheistic pantheon with a feathered serpent god, a powerful rain god, a flayed god of fertility, as well as gods of death, war, the sun, maize, obsidian, jaguars, and pulque. Feel free to also create a god of chocolate, just for me.
- Eschew metals as core materials in favor of stone, obsidian, latex, and fibers. Even if you're building

a futuristic world, their polymer science may be further along than their metallurgy compared to standard sci-fi settings.

- Magic and theology should be intertwined, and magic can be based on calendars and sacrifice. Astrology is a strong part of the culture but has more to do with the passage of time than with the movement of stars. Calendar priests or scribes should be a specialized and highly educated job requiring sophisticated mathematical abilities. Additionally, math uses base 20. Build into the worldview that the apocalypse is a recurring phenomenon, and blood sacrifice is the only thing holding off the next one.
- Featherworking and ball games are distinctive aspects of the culture. Heavy drinking is not.
- When making your own names and languages, look at words, phrases, and names from Mesoamerican languages to get a feel for sounds and spelling patterns that evoke that region.¹⁸

On your third hand, you can adopt individual ideas from Mesoamerican cultures and combine them with others to create something completely new. Perhaps your culture has the architecture of Tenochtitlan (complete with wide plazas, frescoed pyramids, floating gardens, and canal-roadways) but also the bardic traditions of the ancient Celts, the social mores of Victorian England, and the politics of the Chinese Warring States period. It could work.

Then you come to the hard part. Let's say you've done research and are inspired to create your own setting using elements from ancient Mesoamerican cultures. How do you do so in a thoughtful way without exoticizing, appropriating, or insulting readers who have ties to those cultures?

- **Be wary of colonization** as a story element, especially if you have the weaker, more primitive Mesoamerican-ish nation conquered by the technologically more advanced Western-ish nation. It's possible to deal with colonization themes thoughtfully, but it's difficult and not

¹⁷ <https://www.worldtravelguide.net/country-guides/>

¹⁸ If you want to look up mesoamerican-sounding names, you can try *Indigenous Mexican Baby Names* or the *Fantasy Mayan Name Generator*.

¹⁹ *Restall, Matthew; Florine Asselbergs (2007). Invading Guatemala: Spanish, Nahua, and Maya Accounts of the Conquest Wars. University Park, Pennsylvania, US: Pennsylvania State University Press. ISBN 978-0-271-02758-6. OCLC 165478850*

recommended unless you're very certain of what you're doing. If you need to include conflict, treat Mesoamerican-based cultures as equally powerful and sophisticated to European-based ones. Or avoid European-based cultures altogether. For example, you could create a world where a Khmer-based empire and an Aztec-based empire split the known world between them, but each constantly try to undermine the other. Keep in mind that, in real life, the Spanish invaders succeeded in conquering the Mesoamerican polities only after diseases wiped out 75-90% of the population. Even then, they relied heavily on allying with specific Mesoamerican polities against others for soldiers.¹⁹ In other words, they didn't win because of inherent or technological superiority.

- **Don't exoticise.** Avoid having a well-developed, main European-ish culture contrasted by an exotic, distant Mesoamerican one. If you have multiple races, don't make the humans from the European-ish one and the non-human race from the Mesoamerican-ish one. If the Mesoamerican culture is not going to be your main one, then treat it as just another neighboring country with people, politics, and traditions that are just as familiar or exotic as other neighboring countries.
- **Ignore Race.** Race is a social construct. Skin color is a phenotype, and dividing people into groups based on that makes as much sense as doing so based on hair curliness or nose size. Now that we can better study genetics, we have an even better appreciation for how little race has to do with biological reality.²⁰ In particular, ancient Mesoamericans didn't conceptualize race the way we do, so don't have them splitting the world into white and brown people or judging people based on skin lightness. They surely had their own prejudices or ways of categorizing humanity, but it's more likely to be based on alliances than on race.
- **Don't describe brown people in terms of food colors.** It's an overused cliché. Even though chocolate or coffee are perfectly fine color descriptors in general, so many awful

and prejudiced writers have ruined the use of those words for the next couple decades at least. Try using non-food descriptors. Better yet, use descriptions that don't focus on coloring, such as "flinty" or "wide-mouthed smile" or "high forehead."

Most importantly, keep in mind that I'm not an expert on either Mesoamerica or cultural sensitivity. I recommend reading [Kit de Waal's thoughtful essay](#) on thinking through issues of privilege and appropriation on your own.²¹

So, are you ready to go beyond the cliché of a jungle priest ruthlessly sacrificing a human captive? Bring your world alive with real details of art, religions, politics, food, technology and materials that made Mesoamerica so distinct. But don't forget the sacrifices altogether.

Or the world will end. 🐉

APPENDIX: WHO'S WHO IN PRE-COLUMBIAN MESOAMERICA

For brevity, I'm only mentioning a few standout pre-Columbian cultures. Keep in mind that, like for Egypt and Greece, some of these cultures both reference a past civilization and modern descendants with their own societies.

Olmec (1600 BCE - 400 BCE). With a name that translates roughly to "the people of rubber," Olmecs were the earliest known major civilization of Mesoamerica. They were also the source of many technologies and cultural motifs adopted by later Mesoamerican societies, such as latex manufacturing and ball courts. Their homeland is in the swampy river basin draining into the Gulf of Mexico divided by hills and volcanoes.

²⁰ Gannon, Megan. "Race Is a Social Construct, Scientists Argue." *Scientific American*, 5 Feb. 2016, www.scientificamerican.com/article/race-is-a-social-construct-scientists-argue/.

²¹ Waal, Kit de. "Don't dip your pen in someone else's blood: writers and 'the other.'" *The Irish Times*, 30 June 2018, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/don-t-dip-your-pen-in-someone-else-s-blood-writers-and-the-other-1.3533819>.

Zapotec (500 BCE - Present Day). The Zapotec homeland consists of three valleys in the highlands of Central Mesoamerica. In their own language, they called themselves the “Cloud People.” The Zapotec have always been divided into three separate societies: the Valley Zapotec, the Sierra Zapotec, and the Southern Zapotec. Originally they were rivals, but around 500 BCE they banded together, possibly under pressure from an external threat. The Zapotec alliance built the city of Monte Alban in the no-man’s-land between the three homelands, and it quickly became their capital and largest city. Over time, the alliance came to dominate the Oaxaca region, conquering and colonizing territories far beyond their home valleys. The Zapotec civilization was the major power in that part of Mesoamerica until they abandoned their capital city of Monte Alban at around 900 CE. Scholars don’t know what forced them to relocate; there is no evidence of fire or destruction. The Zapotecs then built a new capital some distance away and remained an independent state, albeit with a smaller sphere of influence. Eventually they lost a war against the Aztecs shortly before the Spaniards came.

Maya (500 BCE - Present Day). The Mayan civilization has a reputation as the most sophisticated of the ancient Mesoamerican cultures. Centered on the Yucatan peninsula, their homeland is characterized by humid jungles, southern highlands, and idyllic coasts. The Mayan elite were literate, and despite the best efforts of the Spaniards to destroy extant works, we still have examples of their books and writing. Politically, the Maya organized into city-states with complex relationships of politics and trade between the polities. The civilization flourished in the Classic Mayan Period (250 CE - 900 CE) with major cities housing 50,000–120,000 people. This ended when, for reasons scholars still don’t understand, the Mayan people abandoned most of their city-states to migrate mostly northward. The northern cities remained vital and the population continued to thrive on the coast, but the central heartlands were abandoned. New trade routes bypassed the region while squatters lived in former royal palaces, and other civilizations eclipsed their prominence in Mesoamerica. Keep in mind that we treat the Mayans as a single culture, but they (and their modern descendants) see themselves belonging to

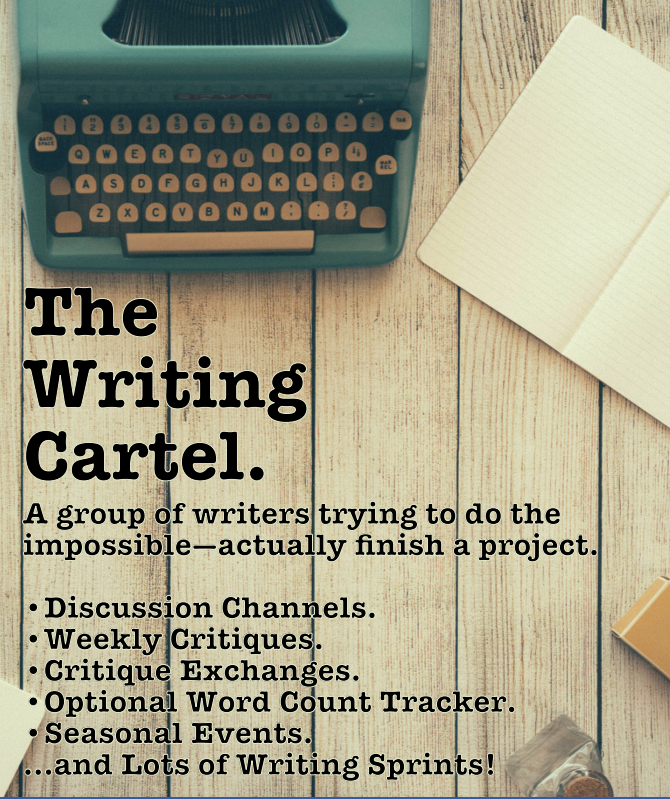
different, often competing, nations rather than a single culture. They had completely different dialects and histories and would be no more the same culture than, say, France and Spain are.

Teotihuacan (100 BCE. and 650 CE). Teotihuacan means “birthplace of the gods” in the Aztec language and refers to an enormous ancient city. Scholars aren’t certain who the original builders were, though evidence points to Nahua, Otomi, Totonac, and Toltec peoples. One theory has waves of immigrants seeking new homes there in the wake of volcanic eruptions. Many scholars believe Teotihuacan was an intrinsically multiethnic and multilingual society. At its height, the city at the heart of their cultural complex had 100,000–250,000 residents and covered 8-11 sq miles, making it one of the largest cities in the world at the time. They had enormous influence over a large swath of Mesoamerica. Scholars debate whether their influence counts as a true empire, but the rulers at least set up puppet rulers in neighboring Mayan city-states, if not ruled them outright. Scholars remain unsure what caused the decline of Teotihuacan, but centuries later, the Aztecs found the enormous city of pyramids and plazas and believed it to be the place where the gods sacrificed themselves to create the current world. For them, Teotihuacan became a place of pilgrimage and tourism. Few written records survive, so scholars don’t know the details of their language, history, politics, or what they called their deities, but their pantheon seemed to have been led by their Great Goddess, a goddess of war and the underworld.

Toltec (900 CE - 1150 CE). The Aztecs believed that the Toltecs (“Artisans”) ruled a golden age and invented civilized life. Scholars believe the Toltecs of legend were based on a real people that migrated from the deserts of northwest Mexico to settle among the reedy marshes and adjacent uplands of the Tula and Rosas Rivers. They brought new militarism to Mesoamerica, eventually conquering vassal states and influencing a broad region outside their direct control. Many scholars believe that they either originated or popularized the custom of military orders, establishing the Jaguar, Coyote, and Eagle warriors. Their capital of Tollan encompassed 5 square miles and had a population of 30,000 to 50,000 before being attacked and destroyed in the middle of the twelfth century.

Republic of Tlaxcala (1250 CE - 1520 CE). The thirteenth century saw Chimichec tribes migrate south into Mesoamerica. Over time they founded a variety of city-states, among which was Tlaxcala in the arid altiplano shadowed by the volcano Malinche. As the Aztec empire grew, Tlaxcala successfully fought the Aztecs in a perpetual war, eventually becoming the only polity in the region free of Aztec control. The republic was multi-ethnic and welcomed refugees fleeing Aztec domination as long as they participated in defending Tlaxcala. Because the Aztecs imposed a trade blockade to weaken them, the Tlaxcalans relied heavily on internally-produced goods. When the Spaniards were defeated in their first attack on Tenochtitlan, they sheltered the Spanish army and helped plan their next, this time successful, attack. Their alliance was crucial to Cortés' success. In return, Tlaxcala received preferential treatment when the Spanish took over Mexico and remained mostly intact.


Aztec Empire (1345 CE - 1521 CE). Like the Tlaxcala, the roots of the Aztec Empire began in the migration of the Chimichec people into the Valley of Mexico. They founded three key cities on the marshy land around Lake Texcoco. They established the city of Texcoco on the east bank, Tlacopan on the west, and Tenochtitlan in an island in the middle of the lake. Without wheels or riding animals, boats were crucial—especially in Tenochtitlan, a city of canals and floating gardens which, at its height, teemed with 200,000–300,000 people. In 1430, these city-states formed the Triple Alliance—a military union powerful enough to eventually conquer most of Mesoamerica. The Spaniards called it the Aztec Empire. By the time of the Spanish invasion, Tenochtitlan had come to dominate the Alliance.





The Writing Cartel.

A group of writers trying to do the impossible—actually finish a project.

- Discussion Channels.
- Weekly Critiques.
- Critique Exchanges.
- Optional Word Count Tracker.
- Seasonal Events.
- ...and Lots of Writing Sprints!

Join us 



WORLDANVIL

An amazing worldbuilding platform to create and showcase your homebrew world!

Interactive maps let your players explore the world of your campaign
Keep track of your NPCs, secrets, plot hooks and timelines
Support for all RPG systems and genres

www.worldanvil.com

THINKING SIDEWAYS ABOUT BURIAL PRACTICES

DEATH



CULTURE



FANTASY (LOW)



Robert Meegan

Art by Adam Bassett

There are orderly people with a clear vision who can plan out their world from the top down, knowing everything that is going to go into it. For them, worldbuilding consists of creating an outline and then filling in the details. I am not one of these people. I look upon them with awe and admiration and then wander off to my own strange, chaotic places. What I do is less worldbuilding and more discovery. I don't know what's in all the corners of my world. Exploring them (and myself) is most of the fun.

I have the good fortune to interact with worldbuilders of all kinds, and the number one comment that comes up is *I have an idea, but I can't quite get it to work*. When I ask to them to tell me about the idea, it's usually not bad, but I can see where they ran aground. Their problem usually falls into one of a few categories:

- It's a trope or cliché that they can't seem to make their own.
- It's vast and all-encompassing, but too high-level to create the details underneath.
- It's inspired and precise, but so narrow that the next step is not obvious.

The solution that I propose is simple: *Think Sideways*.

Most creative problems aren't candidates for head-on attacks. Staring at a blank screen and trying to fill it by sheer force of will is not normally a successful strategy and it only gets worse when the screen is half-full and you find yourself stuck in the middle of a sentence. Instead of hammering yourself against the wall that's blocking you, why not take a peek to see if there is some way *around* the problem.

YOUR BOX OF IDEAS

The most important tool that you possess is your box of ideas. I guarantee that you have one, and that you carry it around with you all day. If you are going to build rich and exciting worlds, you're going to have to keep it well filled. The good news is that there are ideas all around that are free for the taking. The bad news is that you need to be looking for them, and you have to be able to sort out the fresh and crispy ones from the old and stale.

Let's say, for the sake of argument, that you want to have a culture set in a cold climate. After you've marched your protagonists into a town there, how do you make it obviously different? You can talk about the snow piled everywhere and have someone selling penguin on a stick, but it's really more of the same of what you'd find everything else, with nothing but a change of clothes and sleds replacing wagons.

How about a showing a funeral?

I can hear you asking, "What's the point of that? There are funerals everywhere."

To which I reply, *exactly*. And what happens at a funeral? There is preparation of the body, a service, and then everyone marches out with the guest of honor who is deposited into a hole. A few more words are mumbled and everyone goes home.

Except it's winter. The ground is frozen solid. What happens to the dearly departed when you can't dent the soil?

This is actually a pretty common problem even today. And there is a simple solution. When someone departs this mortal coil at an inconvenient time of year, everything goes ahead as normal until

you get to the part about marching out. At this point the deceased is taken, in their coffin, to a warehouse to wait out the rest of the winter. Please note that it's an *unheated* warehouse. You want everyone to stay nicely frozen until you get your chance to plant them after the ground thaws in the spring.

The actual burial is usually a low-key event. No one other than the grave diggers, some staff to help with the coffins, and a member of the clergy attend. Why? Because the dead are more or less considered buried once they've been hauled off to the warehouse. To save their mental health, the residents of the community don't think about the building out back.

Those who died during winter are placed into the ground as soon as the soil warms enough for graves to be dug. Later, some communities will have services in the spring when the sun is shining and the flowers are blooming.

Consider all the ways in which your characters could come across these events. They could attend a funeral and after everyone leaves they might notice the body or coffin being moved off to a strange nondescript building. They could accidentally break into that building, thinking it was something else entirely. Or they may come across a burial team with a half dozen coffins and wonder what's been going on in the town, not knowing that's four months of dead.

Any of these encounters would help to emphasize the *otherness* of the town. It's not like the places that the characters are familiar with. What's more, any of them could serve as the basis for a conversation, or even a complete adventure.

THINKING SIDWAYS

The cold storage idea isn't bad, but it makes the assumption that the location that you had in mind has a climate that warms up after a cold winter. That's a reasonable one, but it's not universally true. What if your culture is located even closer to one of the poles. What if it's in an area where the soil is permafrost?

What's permafrost? Well, in most places the temperature underground is fairly close to the average annual air temperature. If you think about it, this makes sense; huge amounts of material take a long time to heat up or cool down and it's kind of hard to argue that the ground you're standing on isn't a huge amount of something. The depth at which the temperature becomes nearly constant depends upon variables such as the nature of the soil and the amount of moisture. Water conducts heat faster than solid rock and rock conducts faster than loose soil.

In any case, the depth is usually less than you might think. One meter down the temperature changes of the diurnal cycle are undetectable. Two meters down and the seasons only change the temperature by a couple of degrees. By four meters, the variation is almost completely gone.

So, what does have to do with planting people in the cold, cold ground? As you move toward the poles, the average temperature drops until it falls below freezing. This means that the underground is permanently frozen (hence "permafrost"). If the climate is cold enough, the soil may freeze completely in the winter. And, of course, the farther north or south you go, the shallower the layer that thaws in the summer.

By this point you're probably asking why I'm writing an article on soil science. The answer is that if when the ground freezes and thaws, it moves. A lot. People who live where the ground freezes in the winter know that if you build, you need to dig down to the level that either stays frozen or never freezes. Otherwise, whatever you build will be moving up and down with the seasons. For this reason, it's not really practical to bury someone in this environment. If you dig a grave, it's got to be shallow, because you're hitting frozen ground when the hole gets about waist-deep. Once you've dropped the body into the hole and covered it up, it's just a matter of time before it pops back up to the surface, propelled by frozen soil. Unless you have a strong desire to meet your ancestors every few decades, a better solution has to be found.

Cremation avoids this dilemma, but has its own concerns. The first is the availability of suitable material for burning the bodies. If you happen to be in a boreal forest, trees are plentiful, but on the open tundra, your choices are more limited and less appealing. The most common fuel in that environment is peat, which burns at a rather low temperature and with a great deal of smoke. The funeral business is going to smell rather like a barbeque cook-off with hints of Scotch whisky.

Let's think about this sideways. How could a people who can't bury their dead and who have no fuel to burn them deal with the bodies? This is where keeping that idea box well-filled comes in handy. Surely, there are real people who have to deal with this problem.

The Tibetan plateau is an interesting place. It's the highest permanently inhabited region on Earth and many of the inhabitants practice an ancient culture that is vibrant and renowned for its deep, rich spirituality. The soil, on the other hand, is shallow and poor and rests pretty much on solid rock, straight down to the core. Those plants that manage to grow in that thin air and sparse soil are far too valuable to use to burn the dead. So how do these people deal with their dearly departed?

Sky burials. The dead are prepared, services are held, and then the bodies are brought to platforms of stone or timber that are located high in the mountains and laid out. There the bodies serve as food for birds and other scavengers, returning the gift of sustenance to the world that provides for them in life.



That's pretty neat. There is a circle of life aspect to it. What would normally be an unhealthy and unsavory situation is resolved, and the physical limitations of the environment become advantages.

For tundra-dwellers, the sky burial approach has promise. Of course, unless you want to create the somewhat unique *Snow Vulture*, there is a serious shortage of scavenging avians. If you want to follow

the Tibetan approach, you'll need to rely upon other animals on the tundra that are opportunistic scavengers, such as bears and wolves, to do the whole circle of life business.

So, should you have your people of the tundra lay out their dead for the wolves to eat? That could work, but it is not without a few problems, either. The first one to come to mind is that wolves are quite happy to eat living people as well. Giving them a taste for human flesh might have certain unfortunate side effects. For the most part, scavenger birds don't form packs that can hunt down lone people.

A second problem is that Tibetan sky burials take place at sacred locations high above the villages and the birds aren't about to carry off a person. With wolves, you've got an animal that is capable of ripping a limb off and carrying it a considerable distance to its den. It would be rather awkward to be hiking along through the countryside only to come across pieces of Uncle Charlie.

The tundra people need a solution to the wolf problem. Fences won't work because of the shortage of wood and the propensity for blown snow to pile up, making them easy to cross. Fortunately, while wolves are good at many things, climbing rock faces is not one of them. If the burial platform is on a rock outcropping too steep to climb, you could keep them away. A few hand- and footholds would let the those appointed to the duty scramble up and the bodies could be lifted with a rope and hoist.

And yet we're still stuck, because without scavengers, eventually every high flat rock in the region is going to be covered in a mound of undecaying, uneaten corpses. Even the most stone-hearted nomad is eventually going to get depressed looking at ever-growing piles of bodies.

However, there is another alternative.

Somewhat counterintuitively, the tundra and other high-latitude regions tend to be very dry. Desert-dry, as a matter of fact. In the Dry Valleys of Antarctica, the bodies of seals are occasionally found. There are no scavengers and very little bacterial life to cause decay. Instead, these animals mummify in the combination of glaring sunlight and freezing cold wind. Essentially, they are freeze-dried as thoroughly as any modern factory could do.

So your people are going to lay their dead out on the burial platform for a year and a day. Why that duration? From practical standpoint, a full year ensures that the bodies will experience plenty of wind as well as the nearly constant sunlight of summer, no matter when they died. Also, it has a nice ring to it. A certain neatness. It defines a reasonable mourning period and if the people are nomadic, it's likely that they'll be back at about that time next year. Saying "a year and a day" also gives it a more poetic feel than saying, "a year, more or less, depending upon the weather and how busy we are." The little details matter when it comes to establishing traditions.

Of course, you can't have bodies just piling up on the burial platform, no matter how well preserved they are. There's only so much room up there, after all, as well as the aforementioned depression. So,

when the year and a day has passed, the time for mourning has come to an end. The family and friends of the loved one will return to the platform and one of the attendants will lower it back down. For the sake of decency and to keep any parts from snapping off, the attendants will wrap the body in a cloth which is bound tightly around it. It's easier to handle now, as it's much, much lighter than before.

To complete the burial practice for our tundra dwellers, we need a form of closure. After all, there is now a freeze-dried corpse to deal with and the mourners don't want to be dragging it around forever. If your people are relatively settled in the region, you could have a cave in which all of the dead are laid to rest. Certainly there is plenty of precedence for that in both history and literature.

Somehow, that feels like a bit of a letdown, though. We've been creating layers of detail to make these people more interesting and simply having them shove the bodies in a cave seems a bit — well, dull. We need to find a solution that takes it up one more level and makes this culture really memorable.

THINKING EVEN FURTHER SIDeways

Now, we're going to rummage around at the bottom of the box of ideas to come up with something really remarkable. I mentioned earlier that there are great ideas everywhere that are free for the taking. Well, this idea cost 99¢. Really. There are a lot of books available on Amazon for their Kindle readers. In fact, you don't even need a Kindle to read them, as they have browser-based software as well. One really under-appreciated thing about the Amazon Kindle is that there are a lot of books that have been scanned and are available for less than a dollar. These are generally old books, often on obscure topics, that have fallen out of copyright.

What's great is that there are all sorts of great histories and memoirs that cost next to nothing. For example, there's Charles Oman's three-volume history of the dark ages with a thousand pages covering everything interesting that happened in Europe, North Africa, and Southwest Asia from 476–918 A.D. All for less than three bucks. You'll

have characters, plots, and names for a lifetime of worldbuilding. Barbarians, emperors, consorts and generals are there for the picking.

My favorite low-cost books are the memoirs. In the days before Instagram, if you led what might be considered an “interesting” life, you wrote your memoirs when you got old. (If your life was too interesting, someone else would have to do the writing, of course.) These volumes are wonderful sources of material. Obviously, a healthy dose of skepticism regarding any particular claim is in order, but we’re not looking for perfect historical accuracy. Instead, we want things that are close enough that no one at the time would have considered them out of order.

For our burial practice, I’m going to use an anecdote from *A Warrior Who Fought Custer*. These are the memoirs of Wooden Leg, a Native American

of the northern Cheyenne people. His story was written by the government doctor Thomas Marquis when Wooden Leg was seventy-three years old.

Wooden Leg talks several times in his memoir about a great chief of his people named Little Wolf. Unfortunately, when Little Wolf became drunk on the whisky given to him by a soldier he shot and killed another Cheyenne. Among the people, the greatest law was that no Cheyenne may kill another and Little Wolf, despite being the chief, was banished for years, forced to live apart from his tribe. To atone for what he had done, he gave away all of his horses and for the rest of his life he traveled on foot, living in the open or in temporary shelters. He walked from one tribe to another, sometimes covering hundreds of miles in a journey.

When Little Wolf died, at the age of eighty-three, his wives and closest friends stood his body upright



on a hill overlooking the valley where the Cheyenne lived and then build a large cairn of rocks around him so that he might stand there, looking out at his people.

That story has potential. Let's turn it sideways. When our tundra-dwelling people come from the burial plateau with the body, they have one more task left to do. The body is taken to a plain near the community. Instead of looking out over the people, the body is positioned so that it looks away, out into the wide world. It's not there to gaze in remorse over what was lost, it's there to serve as a sentinel for the community, guarding it from any evil that might be approaching. The body is carefully arranged upright and stones are placed to encase it in a cairn much like Little Wolf's, protecting it from the elements, but allowing the spirit to see out in order to watch the endless lands. All around the community these guardians stand their eternal watch.

Now imagine your characters approaching this community. The landscape is flat, with only scattered signs of life. A cold wind blows, cutting through their cloaks. As they get closer, towers of rocks appear. Passing one, they notice that a rock has fallen and through the opening, they can see a long-dead face peering back at them, the skin dark and leathery.

They pause and take note of the hundreds of towers that dot the plain.

Imagine their thoughts. Who are these people? Why have they been placed here? Who would do such a thing?

That's the material of worldbuilding, the stuff of storytelling. Starting with a simple question such as "How do they bury their dead?" and seeing where it takes you. 🐾

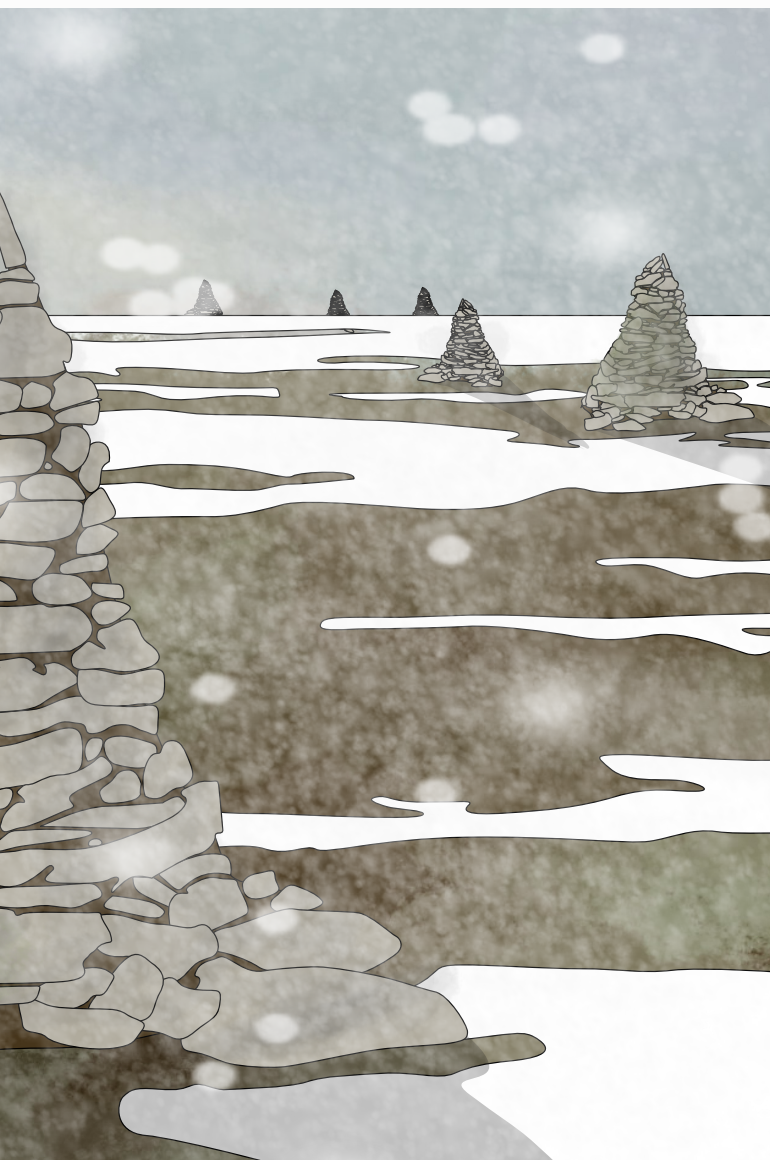
WORKS CITED

Liquori, Donna. "Where Death Comes in Winter, and Burial in the Spring." *The New York Times*, 1 May 2005, www.nytimes.com/2005/05/01/nyregion/where-death-comes-in-winter-and-burial-in-the-spring.html.

Mass, Alex. "Mummified Seals." *The Last Degrees*, 14 Dec. 2013, thelastdegrees.wordpress.com/2013/12/14/mummified-seals/.

Oman, Charles. *The Dark Ages, 476-918*. 4th ed., London: Rivingtons, 1898.

Marquis, Thomas Bailey,. *A Warrior Who Fought Custer*. Minneapolis: The Midwest company, 1931.



FUNERAL CUSTOMS

Skyler Armstrong

Art by Anna Hannon

DEATH



CULTURE



RELIGION



When considering funeral customs for invented cultures, it's important to keep an open mind and to consider the practical side of things. Cultural relativism and respect for other perspectives are always important for your worldbuilding, especially with touchy subjects such as how to handle the dead. As mortician Caitlin Doughty writes in *From Here to Eternity*, “we consider death rituals savage only when they don't match our own.”

Before considering funeral practices, make sure to define how corpses are viewed by a people. Cultural attitudes toward corpses vary widely. If you grew up in North America or Europe, touching the dead is probably not appealing to you. Yet, in other cultures around the world, touching the bodies of the dead is an essential part of showing respect. The Toraja of South Sulawesi, Indonesia, exhume their dead annually to clean the bodies and dress them in new clothes. Meanwhile, the Malagasy of Madagascar rewrap the bones of their family members every seven years and dance with them in a practice called *famadihana*. Contrast these practices with those in the United States, where the dead are put on display for a final goodbye and once buried, remain that way.

Respect for the dead may be exhibited in ways that may seem grotesque to outsiders. In New Guinea, people long practiced funerary cannibalism—they would express gratitude for the work of a person's hands while eating those same hands. This cannibalism eventually resulted in the spread of the deadly, mad cow-like disease called kuru, which passed to those who ate the brains. A fictional example of the opposite extreme is the *Parshendi* in Brandon Sanderson's *Stormlight Archive* series, who leave those killed in battle to rot where they fall because it is taboo and disrespectful to even touch them.

There is a quote, much beloved of modern funeral homes, which demonstrates the narrow-mindedness with which “strange” funeral customs are often viewed: “Show me the manner in which a nation cares for its dead, and I will measure with mathematical exactness the tender mercies of its people, their respect for the laws of the land and their loyalty to high ideals.” Though the quote is usually attributed to nineteenth-century British prime minister William Gladstone, it actually first appears in a 1938 article on cemetery advertising. This modern provenance, and the alacrity with which it has been taken up, emphasizes the urge to see one's own cultural practices as appropriate expressions of grief, as opposed to those which discomfit us. However, beliefs change over time. The Parshendi body taboo only came into being when humans started to hack apart their bodies to extract a valuable organ. In the *Star Wars* Expanded Universe, people from the planet Corellia could not return to their homeworld to be buried with their family. Instead, the Corellians turned the dead into diamonds and displayed them in a chapel.

While keeping these concepts in mind, consider the environment as well as any supernatural elements. In the *Dragon Age* games, spirits regularly possess corpses to create vicious undead, so dead bodies pose an additional safety issue. Cremation is the most common funeral practice in this setting, which dovetails nicely with the dominant religion's founding narrative. The story of the prophet Andraste, who led a slave rebellion, ends with her being sentenced to death by burning by the empire she fought against. She actually dies by a sword shortly after the pyre is lit, but fire imagery nonetheless remains prevalent in the Andrastian religion.

Supernatural elements could also play a more benign role—what additional options for body disposal does your magic system or futuristic technology give you? Some cultures in the *Stormlight*

Archive preserve the bodies of nobles by turning them into stone statues. This practice maintains their memory and image for future generations and neatly solves the problem of disposing of bodies in a world where the ground is almost always exposed rock.

More mundane environmental factors may also affect how societies develop or carry out their funeral customs. Is there enough soft ground that burial in the earth is viable? Can people afford to set aside land for cemeteries? If not, consider alternatives like cremation or the Parsi custom of allowing birds to dispose of the body. Tombs are also a possibility, but can everyone afford them? What about settings with limited resources? In *Dune*, natives of the titular desert planet reclaim water from corpses as a matter of necessity. Whatever your society's beliefs, their actions must make sense in their environment.

If creating a more industrialized world, consider the role of business in funeral practices. In South Korea, land for burials has

become so scarce that the government mandated the exhumation of burials after sixty years. This circumstance gave some a new business opportunity. Aside from cremation companies, multiple companies that will take cremation ashes and turn them into beads, which are meant to be less "creepy or scary."¹ It's also worth considering the cost of a funeral.

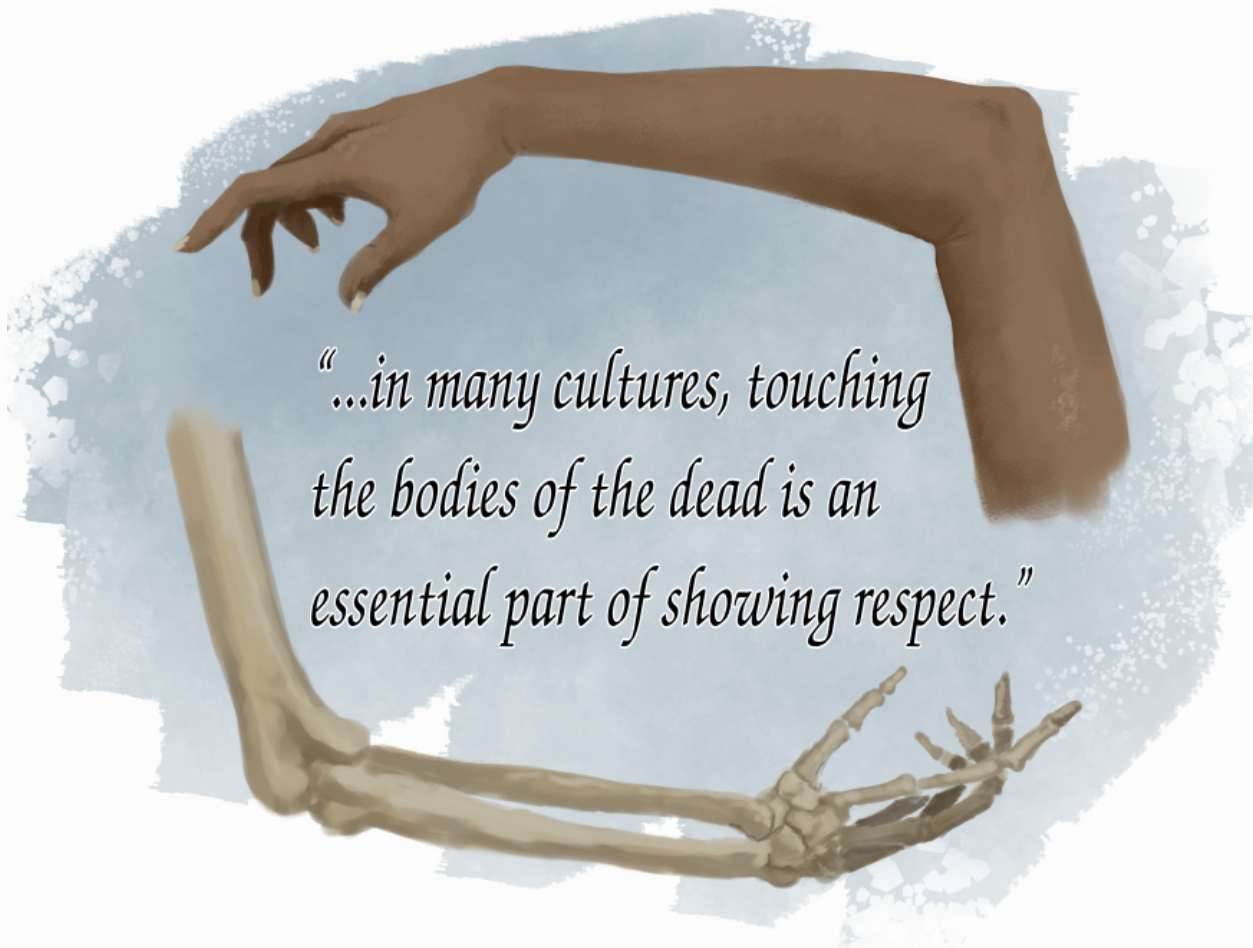
In the United States, the average casket costs over \$2,000. The gravestone, wake, flowers, and other arrangements can add greatly to that cost. But, if one is seeking an affordable alternative, Walmart gladly fills that need, offering coffins of their own to the tune of \$1,109. Think about the cost of funerals in your world, be it financial or otherwise. What are the costs to a royal family for the building of a tomb complex? What about regular people in their society? On the other end of the spectrum, what corners will the very poor cut to keep expenses down when they need that money to survive?

Like beliefs, cultural customs change over time. Look to the Parsi Towers of Silence, the sites of the previously mentioned disposal of bodies by birds. When vultures started dying off in India (after eating the bodies of cows injected with a new veterinary medicine) in the late 1990s and early 2000s, bodies were left to rot for extended periods of time. In addition to causing emotional distress, the smell became an issue. Solar concentrators were

¹ "Turning the Dead into Beads: South Korea's 'Odd' New Trend." *The Week*, The Week, 24 Jan. 2012, theweek.com/articles/478701/turning-dead-into-beads-south-koreas-odd-new-trend.

added to the Towers to focus heat and dehydrate the bodies, but as of the 2010s, there were still issues during the cloudy monsoon season. Driven by these changes in their environment, in 2017, members of the Parsi community in Navsari debated whether they should accept in-ground burials as an alternative.

in the *India West* newspaper discussed the possibility and legality of building a Tower of Silence in Texas. It can also work the other way around with religion being influenced by the culture of its adherents. In *Dragon Age*, Nevarran culture takes a very different attitude to the undead due to variation in dominant religious beliefs. They house corpses in secure tombs.



"...in many cultures, touching the bodies of the dead is an essential part of showing respect."

You can apply these principles to the environment. A minor, real-world example can be found in New Orleans. The high water table makes burying people underground infeasible, and groups that normally practice burial have their dead placed in aboveground structures.

Funeral customs are also a good place to display diversity between and within cultures. After all, different religions will have different customs, even when living in close proximity. A letter to the editor

The fact that they will become undead is expected and welcomed, since they believe that the spirit animating the corpse was displaced from the afterlife so there would be room for the newly departed's.

For a theoretical example involving the supernatural, consider a world where the spirits of the dead linger by sacrificing for blood magic. One would see very different cultural reactions to this feature of the world depending on the culture. Whereas one people may seek to let the dead rest, others may seek to profit off the spirits. Still more may seek wisdom by those who have died. It brings into question blood magic and opinions on that

practice, as well as what a life is worth.

All real-world cultures have practices connected to respect for the dead. Funeral customs, no matter how strange they may seem, are meant to dispose of a body acceptable to a society's religious beliefs and their environment. If there's magic or supernatural effects in play as well in your world, these must be considered too. The best way to serve your story is to holistically connect all these elements, and funeral rites are a great place to do this. 🐼

WORKS CITED

Bygott, Robert, director. *Kuru: The Science and the Sorcery*. *YouTube*, m.youtube.com/watch?v=NJrD1JcmUiE.

"Caskets." *Walmart*, www.walmart.com/browse/home/caskets/4044_4431611_1058564?page=1&sort=price_low#searchProductResult.

Doughty, Caitlin. *From Here to Eternity: Travelling the World to Find the Good Death*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2018.

"Egyptian Mummies." *Smithsonian*, www.si.edu/spotlight/ancient-egypt/mummies.

"Funeral Costs and Pricing Checklist." *Consumer Information*, 13 Mar. 2018, www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0301-funeral-costs-and-pricing-checklist.

Hannon, Elliot. "Vanishing Vultures A Grave Matter For India's Parsis." *NPR*, 5 Sept. 2012, www.npr.org/2012/09/05/160401322/vanishing-vultures-a-grave-matter-for-indias-parsis.

Herbert, Frank. *Dune*. 1965.

"Madagascar's Dance with the Dead." *BBC News*, 16 Aug. 2008, [news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/7562898.stm](https://www.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/7562898.stm).

Munnik, Jo, and Katy Scott. "Famadihana: The Family Reunion Where the Dead Get an Invite." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 28 Mar. 2017, www.cnn.com/2016/10/18/travel/madagascar-turning-bones/index.html.

"Parsis from Navsari Demand Change in Burial Tradition." <https://www.hindustantimes.com/>, *Hindustan Times*, 9 Jan. 2017, www.hindustantimes.com/mumbai-news/south-gujarat-parsis-ask-for-burials/story-osIlzSaS2kMzaBkW9MgYzI.html.

Sanderson, Brandon. *Stormlight Archive*. Oathbringer. Tor Fantasy, 2017.

Solanki, Khushbu. "Tower of Silence For Parsi Funerals Can Be Built in Texas." *India West*, 2 Dec. 2018, www.indiawest.com/letters_to_editor/tower-of-silence-for-parsi-funerals-can-be-built-in/article_a4d37006-f432-11e8-b909-d7d7ffaa6d8b.html.

Stackpole, Micheal. *The Bacta War*. Bantam Spectra, 1997.

"Turning the Dead into Beads: South Korea's 'Odd' New Trend." *The Week*, 24 Jan. 2012, [theweek.com/articles/478701/turning-dead-into-beads-south-koreas-odd-new-trend](https://www.theweek.com/articles/478701/turning-dead-into-beads-south-koreas-odd-new-trend).

Inkblood

SPECULATIVE FICTION WRITERS' GUILD

Have an idea? Ready to commit? Join below!

<https://discord.gg/QcfSH9K>



ASK US ANYTHING

RESOURCE



BH Pierce

Brotato

Should you write the story-first, with the world being tailored to it; or world-first, with the story being tailored to the world? Is either approach better or can they be used to achieve the same result?

Not only can both approaches be used to achieve the same result, they will always be used together. If you set out to tell a story first and worldbuild as you go, then you will often find yourself referencing back to the work you have done in previous chapters. Suppose you are a zealot—er, zealous worldbuilder, and you set out to plot every little piece of your world before you write chapter one. No matter how thorough you are, your characters, willful little buggers that they are, will eventually wander across some aspect you missed. As for either being better, each creator must find the method that will make them happy with their work. While one may be fine with conveniently forgetting that a certain spell exists, another will rework their entire plot or magic system so the two don't conflict.

TheLanger

How do you incorporate a language into a story naturally?

The absolute worst thing you could do is hurl a bunch of grammar and syntax at a reader with abandon. Nothing will drive an audience away quicker. Start slowly by introducing your language through the names of people and places. This will clue your reader into the common sounds and simple structures of your language while remaining relevant in the story. After that, introduce concepts that your language has words for, but English (or whatever language you're writing in) does not. For example, in George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, a **Khalasar** is a large group of nomadic warriors

under the command of single leader, a **Khal**. While words like **Army** or **Tribe** are close in meaning, they don't capture the nuances of **Khalasar**. Using the term frequently helps ground the reader in the world and adds strong flavor at the same time.

Another way to incorporate your language into your story is to have sayings or phrases that are important to the plot or the culture that speaks the language. A repeated saying about the joy of freedom or the sacredness of duty will help characterize the themes and peoples of your story. Note that all of these things do not require detailed work, they can be achieved with a very basic understanding of a language's common sounds and grammar. If you've been touched in the head and want to walk in the shoes of Tolkien, go right ahead and construct entire families of languages. Just make sure to keep them in the appendices and not on the third page.

Some resources for the interested!

zompist.com - The most often linked introduction to conlanging.

conlang.org - The Language Creation Society has a ton of links and resources. [Here's a direct link to their web resources.](#)

Huntsman

How do you include an important text in your world, like a book, that is culturally important? Do you only reference the name or excerpts, or do you write the whole book?

How to include it will greatly depend on the nature of the text you're trying to include. Is it the focus of a religion, a famous novel everyone has read, a groundbreaking scientific study, or a

revolutionary political tract? Each of these will make their marks in different ways, but there are two aspects universal to all of these.

The first is the age of the text. If it has been around for thousands of years then the mark it makes on society will be widespread. Places may be named after locations or events within the text and other great works of literature will make references to it. The second aspect is just how widespread detailed knowledge of it is within a culture. Does it have tropes or sayings that everyone knows? Or does a common person simply know of its existence and importance while only a few have deep knowledge of it?

Once you have determined these two things, an important text can be a powerful tool for characterization and scene setting. If a character is never seen without a famous literary masterpiece or political tract under their arm then it tells the reader something about them even before they say a word. If the audience is shown a house with a sacred book prominently displayed then they know they are in a pious home. Knowing the main themes of the work and a few excerpts is the most that is required. But if you're a very dedicated worldbuilder (with too much time on their hands, perhaps), then feel free to write it out. It's your world, do whatever you want! 🐉





CONSIDER

looking at topics and concepts from a different

OUT OF THE VIEW

THE 2019 WORLDBUILDER'S CHECKLIST

RESOURCE 

Adam Bassett & M.S. Jenkins

Worldbuilding is a somewhat abstract concept, and may be a daunting task. What it entails changes based on the project at hand, yet the overarching mission to construct a coherent imaginary world is the same. Over the last two years, we've tried to provide some tips and tricks ranging from how to get started, to creating religions, to imaginative food chains and the creatures which populate them. Something we've lacked, however, was a cohesive checklist of topics you may want to tackle to help flesh out your worldbuilding project.

To begin, nature seems a strong starting point for nearly every world. Whether you're creating a galaxy far, far away or a hamlet of hobbits, the natural world is an important consideration. If you're writing a story, the characters will need landmarks to pass by and destinations to reach. Perhaps, along the way, one among the party finds a rare plant that helps them recover from some prior struggle or accidentally stumbles over some unobtainium. Whole stories can revolve around nature as an antagonist, such as in *The Grey*, in which John Ottway (Liam Neeson) and others are being hunted by wolves after crashing in the Alaskan wilderness.

Settings present more than places to explore, challenges to overcome, and dangers to avoid; it can determine many things about everyday life. If you are building a science fiction universe, farming will look dramatically different than it did in 1920's America and perhaps even more so in a world where magic exists. Worldwide governmental philosophy would be fundamentally different if the French Revolution never happened. It's your job as the worldbuilder to determine what all of this means, and to balance the setting with the project's purpose.

Professions are a further expression of what a society both needs and wants. In any society there are a variety of occupations that are valid

economic decisions, but not all of them are—strictly speaking—legal. Professions can range from the overtly mundane to the extremely specific. For example, you might find an Elven linguist teaching Orcish farmers to speak a common language, an Artificial Intelligence who does accounting for a space slug mob boss, or just some scoundrel-type mercenary who works for money (and definitely shot first). Jobs come and go as dramatic world events can shape the employment landscape. For example, don't expect to get a job as a magician's assistant if the Wizard's Council just caused an explosion on the northern continent that is responsible for the world's tilted axis, and expect to be out of a job as an ESL teacher if someone invents universal translators.

Language, too, is a dramatic expression of many aspects of a culture's principals and values as well as one of the foundations on which nearly all forms of communication depend. One example that is instructive and straightforward is found in Korean which is a language that uses honorifics in relation to social status. This linguistic mechanism has many implications for the culture, such as the existence of a status-based social system, the importance of respect for others, and the Confucian ideology of "defined roles and mutual obligations..." (Jacobson, 1993). Language informs many other topics while worldbuilding because people tend to talk and write about what is important to them and these communications inherently overflow into other categories like art, politics, economics or history. Overlapping connections like these form the basis for a connected world that will simultaneously feel organic and appear dynamic.

While it may not be flashy or often mentioned, architecture and art can help cement the values and interests of a culture as well as how people react to those norms. For example, *The Raft of the Medusa* by Théodore Géricault was a monumental piece when it

was unveiled in 1819. Inspired by true events which exposed major issues in French naval command structure and led to the death of about 140 sailors, it was a critique of the admiralty that struck many critics with its realism. The painting divided those who saw it. Some thought it nothing more than a “pile of corpses” while others found powerful meaning and “praised its political theme [and] liberal position” (The Louvre).

Whatever your project requires, try to keep an open mind. The list following this short prelude contains items we’ve discussed in previous issues as well as ones we have yet to tackle. Consider looking at topics and concepts from a different point of view, especially one that you disagree with or know nothing about. Inspiration can explode from many different sources, including from reading our past publications. We currently have two years worth of articles in *Worldbuilding Magazine*, but there are several other excellent sources on culture, geography, the expanse of space, and everything else you may need. These are just a few suggestions on topics but there are surely more avenues to explore. To help, we’ve assembled a list of suggested topics to investigate in your worldbuilding. You may tackle them all, or pick just what is best for your own creative project. If you need a simpler file to print and not use too much ink, we’ve got one [here](#) for you on the website. 🐉

The Grey. Directed by Joe Carnahan, performances by Liam Neeson, Dermot Mulroney, and Frank Grillo, Open Road Films, 2011.

“The Raft of the Medusa.” *The Seated Scribe* | Louvre Museum | Paris, www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/raft-medusa.

Jacobson, Esther (1993). *The Dear Goddess of Ancient Siberia*. New York: E.J. Brill.

THE NATURAL WORLD

- ☐ Stars (and constellations), suns, moons, and planets
- ☐ Celestial clutter: comets, asteroids, black holes, etc.
- ☐ Mountains, woods, and/or other prominent features of the landscape
- ☐ Oceans and/or major bodies of water
- ☐ Common plants
- ☐ Rare plants
- ☐ Poisonous and/or medicinal plants
- ☐ Common animals/creatures
- ☐ Rare animals/creatures
- ☐ The ecosystem (natural selection, food chains)
- ☐ Invasive or foreign species

LOCATIONS

- ☐ Natural formations
- ☐ Countries/states/cities/planets
- ☐ Monuments
- ☐ Landmarks
- ☐ Government buildings/castles
- ☐ Train stations/airports/subways/launch pads/highways
- ☐ Retail: Shops/stores, Eateries/restaurants
- ☐ Houses/apartments, Slums, gated neighborhoods
- ☐ A Map or maps to display them

WEATHER & CLIMATE

- ☐ Typical weather
- ☐ Atypical weather
- ☐ Natural Disasters
- ☐ Seasonal variations in weather (or lack of variation)
- ☐ Atmospheric phenomena

RACES & SPECIES

- ☐ Primary/major races and/or species
- ☐ Minority races and/or species.
- ☐ Dynamics between races and/or species.
- ☐ Cultural disconnects between races and/or species.
- ☐ Commonalities between races and/or species.
- ☐ Species commonly kept as pets.
- ☐ Species used for industry.

TRAVEL

- ☐ Restrictions on travel (societal/geographical).
- ☐ Dangerous locations.
- ☐ Luxury/vacation locations.
- ☐ Immigration/emigration.
- ☐ Travel times between locations.
- ☐ Un/common methods of travel.
- ☐ Affordability of travel.

ECONOMY

- ☐ Distribution of wealth.
- ☐ Lifestyle of average income earners.
- ☐ Lifestyle of the poor.
- ☐ Lifestyle of the rich.
- ☐ Money or bartering system.
- ☐ Currency conversions.
- ☐ Immigration and foreign workers.
- ☐ Opinion of wealth among various cultures.
- ☐ Economic growth & trends.

ARCHITECTURE & INFRASTRUCTURE

- ☐ Architecture as Art.
- ☐ Common building materials.
- ☐ Expensive building materials.
- ☐ Appearance and layout of typical houses.
- ☐ Appearance and layout of expensive houses.
- ☐ Appearance and layout of typical shops/stores.
- ☐ Streets and sidewalks (brick, cobblestone, dirt, etc.).
- ☐ Availability of plumbing and sewage.
- ☐ Garbage collection.
- ☐ Distribution of energy.
- ☐ Heating & cooling homes.

SOCIETAL ORDER

- ☐ Social structure/hierarchy.
- ☐ Social mobility.
- ☐ Social norms and values.
- ☐ Individuality and equality.
- ☐ Slavery and servitude.
- ☐ Clans/legions and their alliances/enemies.
- ☐ Supremacy/Inferiority.

HISTORY

- ☐ Beginning of the world.
- ☐ Major world events.
- ☐ Major wars.
- ☐ Major natural disasters.
- ☐ Age of civilization.
- ☐ Previous leaders/rulers.
- ☐ Previous prodigies, rebels, world-changers, models.
- ☐ Cultural/gender/racial shifts.
- ☐ Old clans/legions.
- ☐ Economical/social downfalls/rises.
- ☐ Extinctions of species.

HEALTH & MEDICINE

- ☐ Curable diseases.
- ☐ Incurable diseases.
- ☐ Common diseases.
- ☐ Rare diseases.
- ☐ Availability of medicine.
- ☐ Cost of medicine.
- ☐ Legal drugs/potions/substances.
- ☐ Illegal drugs/potions/substances.
- ☐ Un/common allergies & reactions.
- ☐ Healing / Health-Alerting Rituals.

PROFESSIONS

- ☐ Common professions.
- ☐ Less common professions.
- ☐ Rare professions.
- ☐ Gender/racial/species/education restrictions of professions.
- ☐ Unemployment rate.
- ☐ Perspectives of professions.
- ☐ High/low-paying professions.

CLOTHING

- ☐ Cheap fabrics.
- ☐ Expensive fabrics.
- ☐ Uniforms and functional clothing styles.
- ☐ Lower class clothing styles.
- ☐ Middle class clothing styles.
- ☐ Upper class clothing styles.
- ☐ Differences in clothing between genders.
- ☐ Differences in clothing between regions.
- ☐ Differences in clothing between cultural groups or species.

- ☐ Seasonal wear.
- ☐ Styles/color preferences.

FOOD

- ☐ Staple foods.
- ☐ Luxury foods.
- ☐ Availability of food.
- ☐ Local/regional dishes.
- ☐ Foreign foods.
- ☐ Natural/Artificial foods.

ENTERTAINMENT

- ☐ Professional sports.
- ☐ Hobby/schoolyard sports.
- ☐ Board games and/or card games.
- ☐ Musical styles & instruments.
- ☐ Common themes and subject matter of fiction.
- ☐ Printed entertainment / digital media.
- ☐ Government/legal/regional restrictions on films, plays, novels, music.
- ☐ Affordability of films, sports games, board games, instruments, books, etc.
- ☐ Art (Painting, Sculpture, Mosaic, etc.).

LAW

- ☐ Criminal justice system.
- ☐ Fundamental rights.
- ☐ Minor crimes.
- ☐ Major crimes.
- ☐ Laws impacting daily life.
- ☐ Common sentences for crimes (prison, labor, execution, etc.).
- ☐ Police behavior, uniform, practices, powers.
- ☐ Prison conditions.
- ☐ Recidivism rates.
- ☐ Public opinion of law enforcement.
- ☐ Corruption.
- ☐ Reforming the law.

POLITICS

- ☐ Political parties.
- ☐ Ruler/King/Queen/President/Prime Minister.
- ☐ Prominent Members of Court/Government.
- ☐ Secret government agencies and/or organizations.
- ☐ Public opinion of the ruler/government.

- ☐ Influence of religion on government.
- ☐ Conspiracy theories.

MAGIC

- ☐ Access to magic.
- ☐ Access to education in magic.
- ☐ Common spells.
- ☐ Rare spells.
- ☐ Restrictions on spells.
- ☐ Common magical skills.
- ☐ Rare magical skills.
- ☐ Restrictions on magical skills.
- ☐ Common potions.
- ☐ Rare potions.
- ☐ Restrictions on potions.
- ☐ Prevalence of magic users.
- ☐ Society's perception of magic.
- ☐ Requirements of using magic.
- ☐ Items used to cast or prevent casting magic.
- ☐ Magical Items
- ☐ Magic's relationship to Science.
- ☐ Evolution of alchemy.

SCIENCE

- ☐ How the smallest entities work.
- ☐ Elements (Periodic Table).
- ☐ Anatomy.
- ☐ Effects of science.
- ☐ Experiments/conspiracy theories.
- ☐ Pseudoscience.

TECHNOLOGY

- ☐ Availability of technology.
- ☐ Capabilities of technology.
- ☐ Offensive and defensive technology.
- ☐ Entertainment technology.
- ☐ Energy creation technology.
- ☐ Transportation technology.
- ☐ Inventions that change how society functions.

RELIGION

- ☐ Major religions.
- ☐ Structure within the religious order.
- ☐ Dynamics between religious groups.
- ☐ Dynamics between religious and secular groups.

- ☐ Places of worship.
- ☐ Religious holidays.
- ☐ Morals and beliefs.
- ☐ Origin of religion.
- ☐ Prevalence of religion.
- ☐ Influence of government on religion.
- ☐ Pseudo-religions.
- ☐ Branches of major religions.

FAMILY

- ☐ Typical age of marriage.
- ☐ Typical number of children.
- ☐ Typical family dynamic/structure.
- ☐ Attitudes towards children.
- ☐ Attitudes towards the elderly.
- ☐ Attitudes towards love.
- ☐ Care for elderly relatives (in-home, nursing homes, etc.).
- ☐ Care for children (traditional parenting, nannies, boarding school, etc.).
- ☐ Gender roles or lack thereof.
- ☐ Importance of birth order to family roles, inheritance, profession.
- ☐ Perception of birth control.
- ☐ Life expectancy rate.

EDUCATION

- ☐ Typical education level.
- ☐ School subjects.
- ☐ School environment (strict, lenient, etc.).
- ☐ Availability of schooling/education.
- ☐ Cost of education.
- ☐ Restrictions on education due to gender, abilities, species, etc.
- ☐ Societal influence on education.

LANGUAGE

- ☐ Primary/major languages.
- ☐ Regional/minor languages.
- ☐ Prevalence of multilingual/bilingual people.
- ☐ Colloquial phrases, slang, and curses.
- ☐ Unconventional or unusual languages.
- ☐ Etymology (word derivation).

CULTURE

- ☐ Types/Stereotypes.
- ☐ Behaviors different than other cultures.
- ☐ Traits and habits.
- ☐ Burial practices.
- ☐ Holidays & Events.

 *The Raft of the Medusa*, by Theodore Gericault

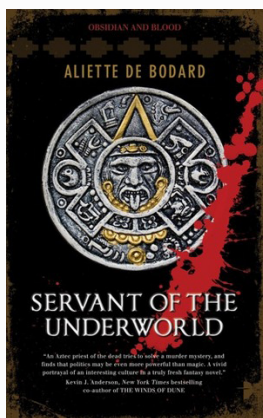


STAFF PICKS



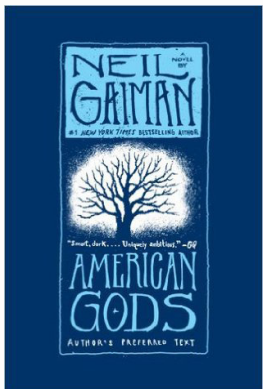
Title: *The Summoning*
Author: Kelley Armstrong
Publisher: HarperTeen
First Edition: 2008
Chosen by: Rose Brady

This is the first book in “The Darkest Powers” trilogy. It follows Chloe, a girl who must navigate the world not only as a teenager, but as a newly-realized, supercharged necromancer who can raise the dead without even trying. She has to escape the organization that made her this way, or they will kill her like they did her first roommate, Liz. Together, necromancer and ghost, they’ll navigate the streets of New York to freedom.



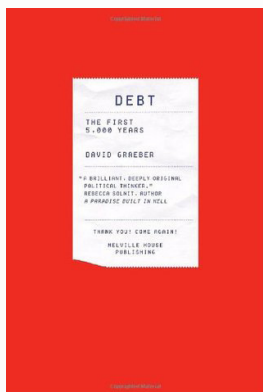
Title: *Servant of the Underworld*
Author: Aliette de Bodard
Publisher: JABberwocky Lit. Agency, Inc.
First Edition: 2016
Chosen by: Cathy, the Overprepared GM

Servant of the Underworld is a closed-door mystery set in a fantasy version of Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital. Rather than a gumshoe detective, the protagonist is Acatl, the High Priest of the Dead. He’s been trying to avoid politics and just serve his gods, but part of his duties include murder investigations. The more he uncovers, the further he’s drawn into the politics of nobles and deities alike. On John Scalzi’s blog, Whatever, de Bodard talks about the worldbuilding for this book.



Title: *American Gods*
Author: Neil Gaiman
Publisher: William Morrow
First Edition: 2001
Chosen by: Brotato/M.E. White

American Gods is about an ex-convict named Shadow who comes into the employ of the mysterious Mr. Wednesday, who is not who he appears to be. What happens to mythological figures when they are no longer worshipped, believed in, or even remembered? Who has come to take their place in the melting pot of the American collective unconscious? What does it mean to be alive or dead? Apathetic, taciturn Shadow, confronted with this strange reality, is just along for the ride.



Title: *Debt: The First 5000 Years*
Author: David Graeber
Publisher: Melville House
First Edition: 2012
Chosen by: Bokai

The title says it all. *Debt: the First 5000 Years* is a somewhat revisionist attempt at explaining how systems of debt, money, and commerce have operated since the beginning of known human civilization, and leans heavily on anthropological examples to make its points. Even if as a reader you find the central arguments of this book to be unconvincing, the copious examples of debt in action across space and time serve as excellent worldbuilding fodder.

PROMPTS

What is the leading cause of death in your world? What makes it so deadly?

How does your world treat alcohol? Is there a minimum drinking age and what does that say about the society that enforces it? What new forms of alcohol are they brewing and what sort of things go hand-in-hand with drinking?

If your world were to have a planetary capital city, where would it be and why?

How do the governments of your world make money? What, if anything, is taxed?

Describe a government's best-kept secret. What would the consequences for this government be in the event that this secret was leaked? What ramifications does this secret have for the citizens/constituents?

A man was framed for a crime he didn't commit, and has been fined more than he can pay. How do the authorities deal with situations like his?

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 contact@worldbuildingmagazine.com or on Discord/Social Media.

Submission Requirements:

Submissions must be no longer than 5,000 words

The submission must include title and author(s) in case of questions.



MEET THE STAFF

Curated by WithBestIntentions

I'm Alex, but online I most frequently go by Spartango these days. I have been with WBM since the first issue acting as an editor. It has been a privilege to watch the magazine grow into what it is now; it was quite a bit different and less streamlined in the beginning. Unfortunately, my academic life has prevented me from giving more time to the magazine, but it has been a very enjoyable journey so far.

I just graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering from one of the satellite campuses of the University of Minnesota. In January, I begin grad school to obtain Master of Science in Electrical Engineering and Mathematical Sciences. In what little free time that I don't spend napping, I enjoy consuming sci-fi and fantasy media (whether that be anime, manga, or traditional dramas) and playing video games. Of course, I enjoy worldbuilding too, but usually require a bit of

time to get back into the flow, so I usually end up simply making mental notes about fun ideas that I encounter in other pieces of media.

Despite having been working on it for a few years at this point, my world is still in a rough sketch. I've definitely rewritten the origin story several times at this point. Not being an experienced writer, my world is progressing more along the lines of being able to support stories in the future, either by myself or others that may eventually gain interest. Right now my main design focus revolves around building functional conlangs (how I was actually formally introduced to the idea of worldbuilding) and making a "kitchen sink" of ideas work together. To put that into perspective, my world features over 20 sapient species and over 20 forms of magic.

In an effort to stop rambling, I will close with a picture of one of my fur-babies, Max:



LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Greetings worldbuilders!

It is my pride and pleasure to give to you the debut issue of our third volume! With this new volume, as you no doubt have noticed, comes a redesign months in the making. Many of our beloved artists have put a lot of work into this redesign, tackling different aspects and utilizing feedback from the whole team. I hope that you find it more interesting and easier to read.

This is the first fruits of many projects we've been cooking up. In the coming months, you will see more and more wonderful changes, including bringing this redesign to our website. If you pop by our Discord server, you'll also be able to take part in new events such as our RPG Test Kitchen and vote on future issue themes!

You may have noticed that despite this issue's theme, there is a distinct lack of tax-related content. This was a regrettable accident, as we did have tax-related content but it had to be pulled due to time constraints. But rest assured, we plan to cover economics in-depth in a future issue, so taxes are indeed still inevitable. We've simply filed an extension.

If you're interested in contributing to the magazine, we would love to have your help. We're a completely community-run publication, so we're always looking for more artists, organizers, editors, and writers. If you would like to help, send us an email at contact@worldbuildingmagazine.com or join our Discord server.

Hope you enjoyed the issue, and happy worldbuilding!

LieutenantDebug, Vice Editor-in-Chief

P.S. On a personal note, I have changed my online name from Debug200 to LieutenantDebug. So if you see the name "Debug200" in older issues, that's still me. Don't worry, we haven't changed Vice Editor-in-Chiefs.

CONTRIBUTORS

Editor-in-Chief — Strongly_O_Platypus
Vice-Editor-in-Chief — LieutenantDebug

Editorial Department Chair — Ianara Natividad
Editorial Deputy Chair — Bokai
Editorial Deputy Chair — Jaren J. Petty
Editorial Deputy Chair — M. E. White

Writing Department Chair — Adam Bassett
Writing Deputy Chair — B. H. Pierce

Art Department Chair — Wynter
Art Deputy Chair — Tristen Fekete

Meta Department Chair — WithBestIntentions
Meta Deputy Chair — Cathy, the Overprepared GM

Alex L. — Editor
Anna Hannon — Artist
Asanouta — Editor
B. K. Bass — Writer
Cat Optimist — Editor
deificat — Artist
Dylan Richmond — Editor
Ike Riva — Editor
Mick Gadaleta — Editor
M.S. Jenkins — Writer
Robert Meegan — Writer
Rose Brady — Editor
Skyler Armstrong — Writer

