



VOLUME 4 | ISSUE 2

WORLDBUILDING MAGAZINE

ANCESTRY & LINEAGE

& other topics

WORLD SHOWCASE

Zach's Murmdus

THINKING SIDEWAYS

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INHERITANCE PRACTICES

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

At the time of this issue's release, we've found ourselves in a strange and frightening time. COVID-19 is currently a worldwide pandemic, and many of us are staying home to try and keep ourselves and others safe. We encourage everyone who is able to help the nurses and doctors fighting this, whether that be donating money, making masks, or keeping yourself safe and out of the hospitals. It is our hope that Worldbuilding Magazine can help you pass the time, and help create something beautiful in the midst of the pandemic.

Ancestry & Lineage is treated differently based on the cultures you look at. From stories of kings passing their crown down to the eldest son, to using your own personal family history to help generate a world and story, we're excited to get into the subject with you.

Stay safe, and happy worldbuilding!

Adam Bassett, Vice Editor-in-Chief



WORLD SHOWCASE

Zach's Murmdus



PEOPLE NO ONE ELSE WANTED



BARDIC STORYTELLING:

Avoiding Exposition

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WORLD SHOWCASE

ZACH'S MURMDUS

Interviewed by Aaryan Balu, illustration by Zach

 INTERVIEW

Zach has been working on the world of Murmdus, a war-torn setting built for stories and role-playing game campaigns. This is how he describes his world.

Murmdus is a land steeped in conflict. From the violent conditions of its birth, to the struggles of its peoples, it's a land drenched in blood. A land where empires rise and fall, each opening and closing a new age of the worlds' history; where men live and struggle and where gods battled in primordial days. It is a land fraught with danger, adventure, and political intrigue.

Murmdus is the “kitchen sink” of different things that I personally enjoy when reading fantasy, with a good helping of my own creativity to make things stand out. It is grand in scale, filled with mysteries to be explored, with enough space for me to set whatever story I want in it. As a world, Murmdus is fraught with dangerous monsters and perilous ruins in the wild places. Civilized areas can prove just as dangerous, as political intrigue and the machinations of dark forces in the underbelly of the nations and empires threaten to throw the world into chaos.

What are some of Murmdus' defining features?

There are a few, but I would have to say the Spine of the World. It's a giant mountain range that splits the continent into its Western and Eastern sections. It was also once the center of the Dwarven Empire in the First Age and is dotted with ancient ruins. It is really the dividing line between two separate cultural groups, and since the coming of man, this separation has fed into several of the world's largest conflicts.

Another major location would be the Elerian city, Highron. Not only is it the most populated city in the world with a population of nearly 1.5 million people, it also serves as the capital of the Second Empire, which controls all of Murmdus west of the Spine. Highron sits at the convergence of two rivers and rises above the Northern Plains as a massive construct of marble monuments and palaces. At its center of Highron, Tarniman Hill rises 300 ft (91.44m) above the rest of the city, artificially created during the settlement's founding. At the peak of Tarniman Hill stands the Imperial Palace of the Davoustian Emperors, the beating heart of the Empire itself.

Can you tell us a little bit about Highron and its history?

In the early years of the Second Age, as humans first came to Murmdus, Higho Tarniman led a group of settlers to found a new city. When he came to the convergence of the Hircon and Besor rivers, he decided that here he would place his city. The two rivers provided easy access to water and trade as well as a natural defensive barrier. Tarniman died before the first walls of the city were built, but the people who followed him continued his efforts. Because the city sits on a wide grassy plain, it was decided that an artificial hill would best serve as the city's main defensive structure, becoming the aforementioned Tarniman Hill. The city itself took the first name of its founder, and so, Highron was born.

As the Second Age carried on, men continued to spread. During Highron's founding most of the continent was still recovering from a war between the Elves and the Dwarfs that saw the rise of an Elven Empire that controlled both the Eastern and Western sections. Eventually, Highron became a major population center in the northern lands, which the Elves called Eleria. The settlers formed six tribes, with Highron becoming the center of the northernmost tribe.

Soon tensions grew between the elves and the young race of humankind, breaking out into a war known as the Great Rebellion. When the fire of that war died down, Highron was the capital of the Northern Elerian Kingdom; Besserion was the capital of the Middle Kingdom; and Telisia was the capital of the Southern Kingdom. While the Rebellion succeeded, it left the world fractured and filled with more conflicts as petty kingdoms and warlords fought one another in a time called the Dark Age.

The next epoch of the city's history began when Octavio Delthion, King of the Middle Kingdom was refused the hand of Avita Tarniman, princess of the Northern Kingdom. Taking the rejection as a personal insult, Octavio led his



armies north and took the city, annexing its lands. This war became the first in the Elerian unification, which saw Octavio conquering the other kingdoms of humanity to form the First Empire. This endeavor began the Third Age.

How did Octavio pull off the unification?

He simply took advantage of the chaos already present in the world. In truth, the rejection was just the excuse he needed to attack an already weak kingdom. Highron had been engaged with the Northmen for some twenty years beforehand.

After laying the city to siege for three months, Octavio eventually took it. He and Avita married at the end of the war; however, her brothers had died in the defense of the city. These circumstances left Octavio as the heir to the north. From there his conquests snowballed. The Southern Kingdom was worried about an upset in the power structure of the region and went to war with Octavio's newly united kingdoms. With the combined strength and resources of both, Octavio crushed the South.

The rest of the human realms were taken in the decade after his unification. Octavio took over the Northern Kingdoms of Man to stop their raid on his frontiers; he conquered Westmarch and the Vale to gain access to their valuable iron and gold deposits. He took advantage of the death of the Frenski to the east and pitted the Rickvegians against each other by providing documents that showed the Crown Prince to be a bastard. Octavio just had to march his armies east and assume control. His conquests were driven by his desire to see peace reign over the land, something that no one had thought possible till he did it.

How did this empire fare?

Of course, empires do not last forever. After the last Delthinian Emperor died, the War of the Delthion Succession broke out. When things settled, the Wood Elf Avtavii Dynasty ruled the Empire due to their marital ties with the Delthions. They lasted three generations before the disaster of the East-West War, which was fought between the waning Second Empire and the rising Em-

pire of the Atmordia from east of the Spine. The Atmordians would not conquer the west, but the war fractured the Second Empire and the state became too weak to enforce its rule.

And so came the Great Confusion. This new period of intense strife and bloodshed saw Highron rise to become the greatest city in the modern age.

How does civilization recover from the Confusion?

One-hundred and fifty years after the Second Empire fell, the Elves of the Esmerian Isles invaded the mainland in an attempt to reclaim their old empire. They swept away the Men of Westmarch and the elves of the Vale Forest and pushed deep into Eleria. However, there was one king of men who dared to stand and fight the invading armies: Mattaus Davous, King of Highron and Prince of Coridgia. At the Battle of Teresti he defeated the elves, and over the next ten years, he drove the Esmerians out of Eleria and Westmarch.

When the war ended, he stood alone amongst the kings of men as someone worthy of the title Emperor. With his ascension as Emperor, Mattaus ushered in the Fourth Age of the world, the current age Murmdus is in. His empire has thus far stood for 790 years, with Sevestos Davous being the current emperor.

Can you tell me more about Sevestos?

Sevestos is an unlikely emperor. During his regency, he survived an assassination attempt by his uncle. Three years later, he led an army to attack Highron and reclaim what was his by right. He very nearly died again crossing a river, had it not been for a girl who fished him out—the woman who would go on to become Empress. He constantly looks back at his forefathers, trying to surpass them at ruling a massive empire. Moreover, he tries to be a better father than his ever was. All in all, he is a man who wants to do well in a position that requires him to do unsavory things. A man who wishes

to fulfill his duty to his people and still be his own man while doing so.

What are some of the main conflicts in the present day of the world?

There was a civil war some twenty years prior to the present between Sevestos and his uncle over rulership of the empire. Sevestos won the war, and he gave pardons to many who had sided with his uncle, but there are some who would have preferred the rule of another. Moreover, the Emperor insisted on taking a peasant girl as his wife; many nobles look down on this choice, upset that they couldn't marry into the Imperial family. Meanwhile, the once-powerful Atmordian Empire is expanding its power, and it's only a matter of time before Sevestos faces another large threat.

What are some of the stories you want to explore in this world?

I really want to explore the current intrigue in the Imperial court. Nobles are in the process of realigning as Sevestos tries to keep the scars of the civil war from opening up once again, all while trying to prepare for the coming war with the east.

Murmdus is large, and my history is full of lost artifacts and other hidden treasures that can become the focal point of an entire campaign. Honestly, one of the hardest things for me when thinking about the stories I want to tell in a world this large is which stories do I want to start with.

This interview was edited for Worldbuilding Magazine.

Thanks to Zach for joining us! If you would like to be featured in a future World Showcase, [click here to apply!](#)



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EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

ED GREENWOOD

Interviewed by B. K. Bass

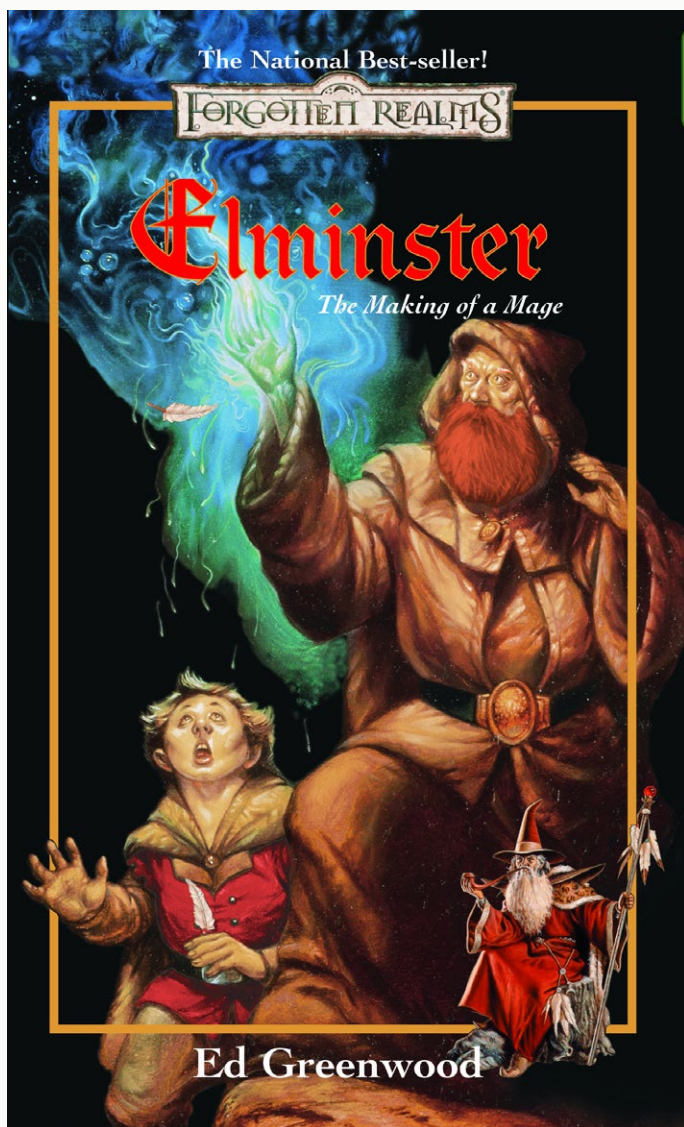


INTERVIEW



TABLETOP GAMING

We recently had the thrilling opportunity to chat with Ed Greenwood about his worldbuilding and publishing industry experiences. Ed Greenwood is most widely known as the creator of the *Forgotten Realms*, a *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign setting and host to hundreds of pieces of fiction. He is also a *New York Times* bestselling author with titles such as *Spellfire* and *Elminster: The Making of a Mage*.



For those who might not be familiar with your work, could you tell us a little bit about yourself and the projects you've worked on?

I was born in, and have been a life-long resident of, the province of Ontario, Canada. I have a university degree in Journalism, but since age fourteen have worked in public libraries. I've been a published writer since age five (and turned 60 last summer), mainly writing fantasy (my first love) and science fiction, and designing games in the same genres.

I've written or co-written over four hundred books—likely more than that number in magazine and web columns and articles—and briefly ran a publishing company and a public library system. I have been published worldwide in over four dozen

languages, and I am best known as the creator of The Forgotten Realms® fantasy setting.

The Forgotten Realms setting is highly regarded as one of the largest, most widespread settings in both fantasy literature and tabletop gaming. How did the setting begin, and did you ever imagine it would take off in the way it did?

The setting began as a backdrop world for my first, fledgling, non-pastiche fantasy tales (which were very derivative of the short stories of Lord Dunsany, Fritz Leiber's *Fafhrd & the Gray Mouser* saga, and Roger Zelazny's early *Dilvish* tales). I refer to them as "non-pastiche" because I learned to write by asking my father excitedly for the sequels to various pulp-era tales I found in his library, and was often told the author was long dead so if I wanted "the next one," I'd have to write it myself. So, I excitedly raced back downstairs to do so. The results were usually terrible but were a superb education in how to write in various styles (good and bad), establish mood, handle scene transitions, and master pacing.

Roleplaying games came along a decade later (if you didn't happen to be at college with Gary Gygax or Dave Arneson), and it wasn't until the original *Players Handbook* ("Players" not "Player's," unlike the later editions) joined the *Monster Manual* that I was sufficiently impressed with D&D to convert everything in the Realms to match it, so its rules and balance provided the keep-things-honest skeleton for storytelling. I began *Dungeon Mastering* regular D&D game play sessions in the Realms in 1978.

Despite the vast breadth of the setting, The Forgotten Realms contains specific details that can be found in every nook and cranny, such as the different subraces' cultures and religious traditions of various sects. Did these details spring out of the bigger picture, or did they come first and inform the growth of the setting?

The details came first, for two reasons. First, I was happily worldbuilding with that degree of

detail (deciding on the routes and flows of trade goods, and the background disputes and feuds and trends in the world rather than just the foreground ones) because it made the Realms feel more real to me. Second, when our D&D play began, my players (who were ham-acting roleplayers from the first, rather than metagame-playing roll-players) gently demanded that level of detail; they wanted their characters to have day jobs and investments and friendships and hobbies, and to be fully part of the imaginary communities they dwelt in and journeyed through. So they wanted to know how things worked in the world, what their favorite wines and ales and cheeses were, the heraldry and types of trees, how monsters reproduced and lived their daily lives, and so on—and I happily sat down to give it to them. I still work on the Realms every day of my life, as questions come in from gamers all over the world as well as fellow professional game designers.

Which leads us to one of the big questions in worldbuilding: top down or bottom up? Did you have a grand design at first, and then fill in the smaller details? Or, conversely, did you have a set of specific concepts that you then tied together to weave the tapestry?

I've designed or co-designed more than thirty settings down the years, often for clients who have specific needs, so I've done it just about every way that it's possible to worldbuild (come up with a backstory for these toys that link them with this art; or, we have these three short stories but at first blush they contradict each other, so could you concoct a linking explanation, or...).

For the Realms, I started with stories, first the snippets that were later melded together into the story *One Comes, Unheralded, To Zirta*, and then the Mirt tales, in which he had a shady adventure in a cold northern Sword Coast port city. Mirt then fled at tale's end a step ahead of creditors, the new foes he'd swindled in the story, and the authorities...to the next port south down the Coast. So, I was exploring the coast as I went.

Much later, when D&D play started in the *Realms*, Waterdeep (with the Dungeon of the Crypt and Undermountain beneath it) was the first play focus. The Haunted Halls of Eveningstar in Cormyr was the second, leading into Shadowdale, then Myth Drannor and the rest of the Dales, so the Realms expanded outwards from those foci, in reverse. By which I mean: caravans were coming into and going out of, or passing through, all of those places along trade-roads. A caravan carries goods surplus in one area to places where they're scarce enough for someone to want to buy them, which gives you information about what's produced in each (and where there are enough folks to be a market, too). In the tales I'd made some mentions of what sort of folk lived in some places, what they lived in, what the climate and topography were, and so on, so those became my "givens" I built on in designing far-flung locales.

The Realms preceded roleplaying games and was the land of a "thousand thousand" stories, not one epic quest like *The Lord Of The Rings*, so I explored it more akin to Conan's wanderings (as cobbled together retroactively by Lin Carter and Lyon Sprague de Camp from the clues in Howard's tales).

However, in some of my other settings, I've started with a concept and some "side wrinkle" ideas and cobbled them together, or been handed a list of "must be in there" elements (from dramatic and distinctive like floating cities, or a dungeon that's inside the skeleton of a buried dragon, down to more mundane concerns such as "we need you to build a long, perilous trek across a desert to separate X and Y for story purposes and to account for why no one has ever successfully moved an army from X to Y to invade and conquer").

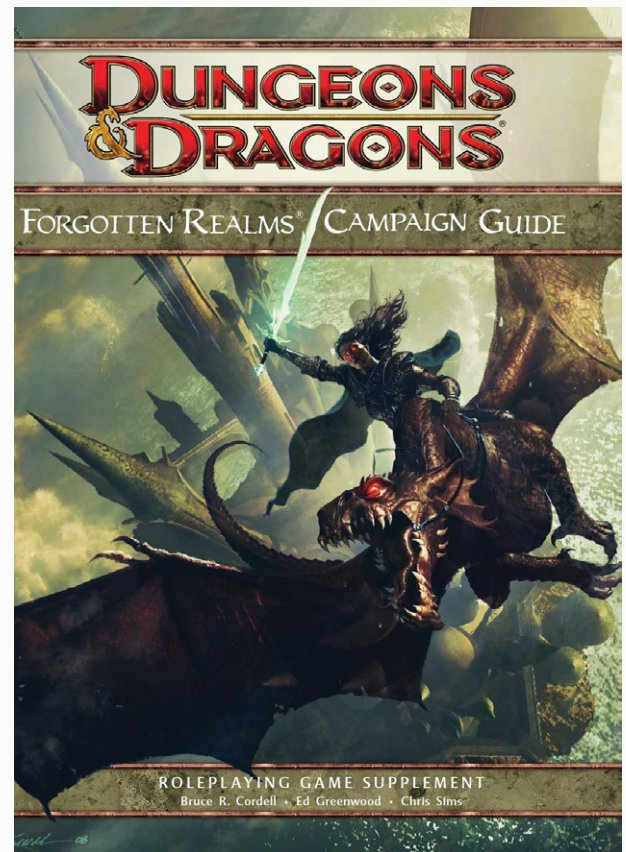
I once did an article for what was then known as *The Dragon* on how strategic land location can drive conflicts, needs, and story ideas, starting from a nigh-featureless map—that got ruined when they decided to replace my simple featureless map with a prettier, detailed one.

Many of us do our worldbuilding in isolation, or small groups, but The Forgotten Realms has run the gauntlet of being a world shared by a games and fiction publisher. What was that experience like? How much of the original concepts were changed? How much collaboration was there with other authors or artists to refine the setting before it was published?

As an experience, it's been a mixed bag. No one likes to not recognize "their baby" because other hands changed it too much, but the major changes to the *Realms* were ones I expected. I knew when TSR purchased it that they wanted a unified game world for the second edition of D&D, and it would have to accommodate things like pirate adventures, jungle adventures (which became Malatra), Arabian adventures (which became Al-Qadim), Oriental adventures (which stayed "Oriental Adventures"), and so on. TSR already had the Albion setting that staff designer Doug Niles had designed for TSR UK (before that subsidiary became reprint-parent-TSR-only), so I was asked if I minded if they made my Moonshae Isles go away and substituted Albion for them (I didn't mind).

What I *did* mind was the substitution of too many real-world historical analogs (or worse, Hollywood versions of real-world cultures) into the *Realms*, as I felt it was both lazy design and shattered the immersive experience of the fantasy setting at the gaming table. Inevitably some gamer will object to something using real-world meta-knowledge, such as "But stirrups weren't invented until..." I thought TSR went right over the line into objectionable when they put the Dalai Lama, a real-world spiritual leader, into the *Realms* as an NPC (non-playable character) with stats who the PCs could kill if they wanted to (in the *Empires Adventures* module trilogy).

I understand that real-world analogs are an easy shorthand for players to understand cultures. Because the *Realms* had to be a catch-all and so take in the pyramid-exploring *Desert of Desolation* modules and other existing "not



yet put anywhere" D&D adventures and ideas, I understood that this was going to happen (TSR had two former history teachers as senior designers, Doug Niles and Zeb Cook). But, I still think it was done far too overtly, what with The Horde and Maztica, and became a substitute for creating something new and different.

I was also less than enthused when power struggles between book folks and game folks resulted in poor communications between the two groups, which resulted in lore contradictions. *The Realms*—or any shared setting—needs a team, and it needs an overseer for consistency, or else it becomes a lore disaster rushing to soon happen.

Speaking of change, the setting of the Forgotten Realms has evolved over the years from in-world events, like the Time of Troubles to the Second Sundering, that have dramatically altered the world. Once the property was in the hands of the publisher, how much input did you have on these changes? Did TSR and (later)

Wizards of the Coast take control of the world, or were you able to keep a hand on the reigns to some degree?

In the early days, I had a huge amount of behind-the-scenes input because I became the go-to designer to help out the overworked staff designers. That meant I could provide gobs of color and culture for locales (such as wines, cheese, fashion, architecture, local sayings, and customs—the all-important “what you see and smell” window-dressing) whenever asked. But that’s not control. TSR controlled the setting and often resorted to what became known as Realms-Shaking Events (RSEs), such as the Time of Troubles (which was an old idea of mine from a *Dragon* magazine article. It served as a DM’s excuse to do a campaign reset without completely ending play while keeping a stable of PC characters. Events like this made major changes to the D&D game from edition to edition (like removing the assassins from the game, so all assassins in the *Realms* had to die at one big dramatic stroke except for, curiously enough, Bob Salvatore’s popular assassin character).

Over the years, it became an arms race of RSEs to make the stakes higher in novels, bring the gods onstage in person, and many other details that I considered mistakes in style. But, for the down-on-the-ground “what daily life is like in this village or that city” work, my heavy design workload afforded me chances to paint in a LOT of detail: local color in the *Volo’s Guides* series of guidebooks, for instance; or working on many major cities of the *Realms* in the *Forgotten Realms Adventures* sourcebook; and, most recently, the *Ed Greenwood Presents Elminster’s Forgotten Realms* tome, which is all local lore.

These days, Wizards of the Coast entirely controls the product line and their contents, and I occasionally provide details (like details of the coins of many places, or some names/heraldry) to save the staff designers time.

The Forgotten Realms has been the setting of more than 300 novels, at least 30 anthologies, and new licensed products still come out almost every month. It also has inspired over twenty electronic games. What has it been like seeing the setting grow through the hands of other authors and game developers?

Sometimes I’ve read *Realms* works by others and wondered how they could see the *Realms* so differently from the base lore I wrote, but more often I’ve been entertained or even delighted. The one thing your own world can never do, so long as you are the sole creator, is surprise you. Everything set down about it is something *you* put there. Occasionally stories can be dragged in unexpected directions by character development, but that affords nothing like the delight and astonishment that another creator doing wonderful things can engender.

It’s been my personal pleasure to watch “true fans” like Eric Boyd and George Krashos, and Brian Cortijo when it comes to Cormyr, extrapolate so much Realmslore and explain away many inconsistencies with “in-world” explanations. Over the years, Brian James stepped in to provide a coherent timeline, and truly talented fiction writers make the *Realms* soar. For example, Bob Salvatore bringing the drow to life in *Homeland*; Elaine Cunningham getting Waterdeep so right in *Elfshadow* and its sequels that I thought she was reading my mind; Rosemary Jones, Erin Evans, and several others penning wonderful *Realms* novels I know I would never have thought of or been able to write even if I’d been handed all of their ideas. I first got a taste of how different the *Realms* could be from my take, while still feeling like the *Realms*, when Jeff Grubb and his wife Kate Novak first showed me their version of the Wyvernspur family.

As a result, I have no one tale or game I enjoy the most (when it comes to games, I favor the *Lords of Waterdeep* board game over any computer game, though I’ve barely had a chance to play most of the computer games), but a bunch of favorites.

All in all, seeing others at work in the Realms has been a big pleasure for me.

What do you draw on for inspiration when you are considering the details of a culture? What are your tricks to avoid overusing historical trends and/or fantasy tropes, or reusing them in new ways?

First of all, nigh everything has been done before, somewhere and sometime in real-world culture, or in the imagination of a fantasy or sci-fi illustrator more recently. As a librarian, I've seen images from archeology and the current real world that far outstrip what I've been able to see in the many countries I've visited. As a writer, I've tried to see and smell what it's like at dawn in a desert, or a frigid northern wilderness lake, or at night in a graveyard, in the rain at an outdoor spice market, and so on. So I do have a lot to draw on. With that said, I have *no* interest in wholesale copying real-world anything for a fantastic setting; where's the fun and interest in that?

The trick I always use is to try to put myself in the mind of the people (human or critter, they're all people if they're sentient) I'm designing the culture of and try to see the world around as they would. What resources do they have at hand (stone for building? Mud brick? Dugout sod houses? Caves? Up in trees? Something else?)? What do they value culturally, like tulips in the Netherlands back in the day? What do they use as money (Is gold worth a lot, or low in value next to far more useful iron?)? What's scarce and therefore valuable? Where is their society heading (prolonged peace and prosperity? Long drought ahead? Inevitable war or cultural conflict with neighbors? Empire-building and exploration? Slavery?)?

These elements will all influence how people design and what they're interested in designing and building. Then I just have to decide if I'm going to have any "happy accidents" (unforeseen occurrences, such as first contact with an alien culture, a new invention that has widespread consequences, and so on) to stir things up.

With that decided, I can reason out how they might likely dress, what their dwellings and cuisine might logically look like, what needs and inevitable "how to serve those needs" activities and conflicts will arise, and so on.

If I envisage elves as living in forests and close to nature, then they might well want to live in growing trees they train and encourage to grow in ways that will allow the elves to live in them, as opposed to humans cutting down trees and constructing homes from the dead timber. The standard trope for dwarves is that they mine for metals and gems and live in caverns under the earth, but what if I need my dwarves to live in trees for story reasons? I'll have to start designing a new and different culture for dwarves from that "given." In futuristic sci-fi settings, dwarves might dwell in a massive spaceship graveyard, salvaging strange metals from many wrecked and junked ships...

Looking back with hindsight to the very first published version of the Forgotten Realms back in 1987, what would you have done differently, if anything?

I would have insisted on a royalty from every *Realms* product so I'd be stupendously rich, instead of poor. Of course that's a fantasy, as it likely would have meant someone else's world would have been picked instead, and most of us would never have ever heard of, or gotten to see, the *Realms*.

I think I would have insisted on the initial notion of my writing twelve *Realms* novels in a row, each about different protagonists in a different part of the Realms, be adhered to (it was an early casualty of changes in personnel and a new head firmly establishing a new direction). That would have resulted in everyone seeing the full scope of the Realms, rather than just the two intersecting development paths of the Sword Coast and the Heartlands. Instead of development moving outward from those two foci, there would have been little nodes of development all over the continent

of Faerûn, truly offering Dungeon Masters a buffet of different-flavor settings to set campaigns in.

Was there ever something about the setting you regretted including, or wished you had been able to include?

No, but I do regret the publisher's focus on gods, gods, gods (by which I mean avatars of deities with hit points that PCs can defeat and destroy, and so become gods). That took up space that should, in my opinion, have gone to churches/priesthoods and how to properly roleplay a cleric/priest PC, with taboos and creeds and daily prayers and all of that lore. All of that eventually came along, but it was downplayed at first because TSR was already facing the Satanic scare and "angry mothers from Heck" and denunciations from church pulpits all over the USA, so a polytheistic *Realms* in which everyone sane believed in ALL of the gods and not a single (Christian) God was already more than they were comfortable with.

What would be your number one tip for new worldbuilders and authors?

Decide at the outset what you're worldbuilding for. If it's one or a few stories, avoid the trap of endless worldbuilding (piling on lore detail, especially dim, distant history and genealogies) at the expense of storytelling. What's initially important, when it comes to history, is what characters in the story believe, or have heard as legends which they don't quite trust but have nothing better to fall back on. If you're worldbuilding for a long-running fiction series, then the major concepts or epic struggles must take precedence, and design accordingly.

But my number one tip, if you intend the world to last for longer than one storyline, is: no destiny. That is, no Chosen One who will be the Prophesied to save the world—because that changes self-willed heroes into pawns following a script. And a superman who can't be stopped, or who'll be rescued in the nick of time, every time, inevitably becomes boring...and then irritating.

Many fantasy authors and worldbuilders today cite you as an inspiration for their work, myself included. So, here's a deep dive into peeling back the layers of artistic inspiration: who inspired Ed Greenwood?

I've always been a voracious reader and book collector, worked in public libraries, and for well over half a century have soaked up real-world history and speculations about history as well as all genres and flavors of fiction, music, and art. Everything becomes grist for the mill. The more widely (different genres, something new, not just your favorite sort of entertainment) and deeply (amount of stories you sample) you experience to get input, the richer can be your output.

The maxim "write what you know" rings rather hollow if you're writing about humans having sex with aliens, or wizards casting spells that smash castles or build them in mere moments out of rubble—but it still points at the root truth: if you've tasted and smelled and seen and felt, you can write about what you experienced more vividly than someone who hasn't and draws repeatedly on their imagination with little new input. I have always been inspired by other writers and game designers, but the trick is: it's often easier to learn from what's flawed than what seems too perfect to ever match.

All my life I've worked in public service and have seen all manner of people come through the doors of libraries, or serve beside me on library boards, or sit nearby in restaurants or classes or at performances. I paid attention to looks, accents, mannerisms, turns of phrase that I can borrow a tiny bit of here, and a little more there, to build fiction characters from. I never, ever put a real person into fiction as a character, but I put many, many little details from real people into my fictional characters.

Finally, is there anything we haven't touched on yet that you'd like to share with our readers? Are there any projects you're working on that you'd like to share? Any special nuggets of wisdom about worldbuilding or life in general?

At the moment, I'm at work on two Kickstarter projects for others: a pirates-in-the-Asteroid Field adventure for Ken Spencer's (Why Not Games) *Rocket Age* science-fiction game (imagine our Solar System as seen in the era of glass-goldfish-bowl helmets worn in space, ray guns, and Mars and Jupiter inhabited by ancient civilizations), and a fantasy version of a real, historic city for the [Fate of the Norns](#) Viking-age roleplaying game designed by Andrew Valkauskas (Pendelhaven) that will follow the novel I just wrote for him, *The One-Eyed King*. Gritty Viking-age urban fantasy, intrigue, and fast action in the richest city in the world (thanks to its slave trade).

I have quite a few projects of my own waiting in the wings, but they'll have to wait because the most important thing to me in both writing and gaming is friends, and creating with friends. So these projects and more—several I can't talk about, and the [Amarune's Almanac](#) series of *Realms* sourcebooks released through DM's Guild by Steve Fidler (Vorpal Dice Press) and the [Border Kingdoms](#) work I've been doing with Alex Kammer (Gamehole Publishing)—are taking center stage right now because I'm having fun.

And that's the real key: fiction writing and game design work and artwork are all hard work at times, but if you can keep what you do *fun* more than slogging, life is bright. Right now, I'm having fun, and therefore eagerly and gleefully sitting down at the keyboard every day.

Finally, when it comes to worldbuilding or any sort of writing advice: take everything with a generous palm-full of salt, because we're all different. What works for me might not work so well for you. There is no "right way," there's just a "best way for *this* project," which you'll likely discover only when looking back after the project is done. *That* is life.

So do what works for you. I've tried every different way of creating I can think of, and still keep trying new ones. Everything from "I'm going to plan this twenty-novel series for ten years of lorebuilding before I start writing" to "Sure, I can write you a novel to go with that painting as its cover...by Friday." Keep it fun, and stay flexible, and you won't burn out or lose interest. If you bog down, that's why you should have multiple projects on the go at once: just turn to another one, and keep writing!

And *finish* it. There's nothing more frustrating than starting dozens of things and never seeing a single one through. I kept going, and have now published over four hundred books. You can too!

This interview was edited for Worldbuilding Magazine.

Thank you so much to Ed Greenwood for joining us for this interview. We also had the chance to follow this up with a discussion that was recorded for Worldcasting, the Worldbuilding Magazine Podcast. You can [click here to listen to that episode now](#), wherein Tyler "Dino" Sylva, Ianara Natividad, and myself discuss all these topics and more in much greater detail, and find out why one of the TSR employees back in the 1980s had to circumnavigate the city of Waterdeep in their office to get to the restroom!

You can follow Ed on [Twitter](#), or learn more about the Forgotten Realms on the official [Dungeons & Dragons website](#).



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COMMUNITY ART

Curated by Anna Hannon and Tristen Fekete

This is a small section we've dedicated to our community's amazing worldbuilding artists. To sign up and submit your own art for a chance to be featured in a future issue, [apply here](#).

COMMON HOUSE

by GiftOfGabby

This piece is a multi-generational home with the children, parents, grandparents, and aunts/uncles all living together on different floors of the home—based on their generation. Children live with their parents until they are about thirteen years of age. Once they come of age, the children

move to their own floor, where their parents will often visit to teach them how to be “young adults.” Once the first great-grandchild is born, they start building a new multi-floor home or move into a friend's former house.

Learn about the world of [Aura on World Anvil](#).



THE WOLF PRINCE

by Inky

“The Wolf Prince” is an old folk tale in Yashidal culture and its origins are as nebulous as its titular character. The fae-like Wolf Prince is mischievous at best, and murderous at worst, with both his human and wolf forms handsome but as deadly as his obsession with beautiful hair. One of the tale’s versions has been featured in the literary classic [101 Tales of Chaewon](#), which

helped spread the current Yashidal language and writing within the nation. The tale enjoys continuous popularity with parents so children especially in their adolescence don’t wander around at night.

Learn more about the [Wolf Prince and Heirs to the Crown on World Anvil](#).



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ARTIST CORNER

by Anna Hannon
art by Anna Hannon

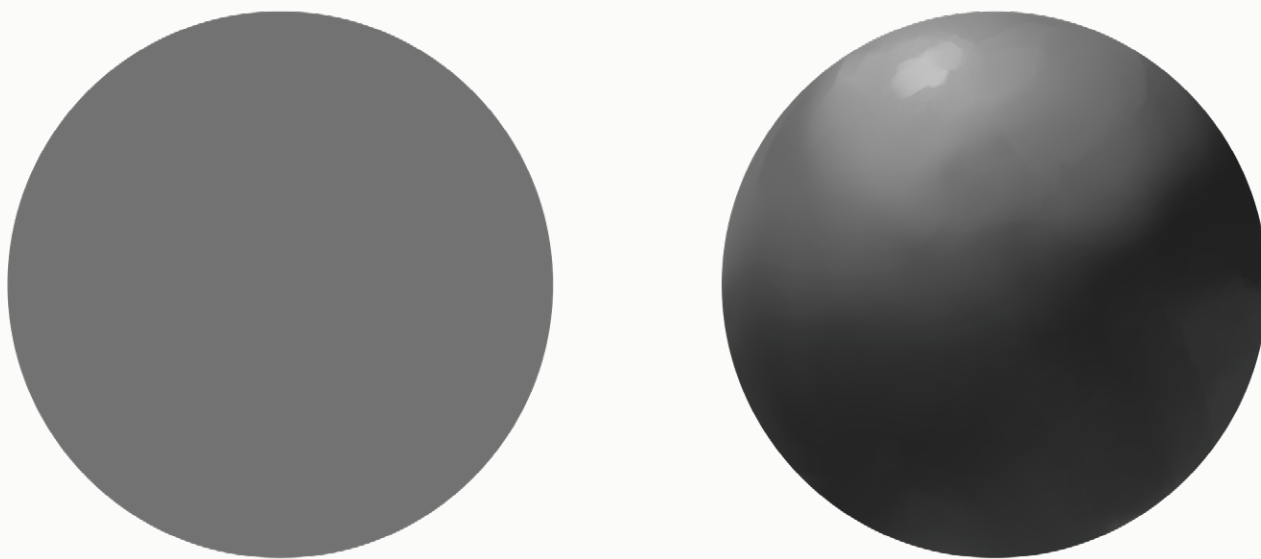
Let's talk about values.
What even is value? According to the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary:

“a: relative lightness or darkness of a color: *luminosity*.

b: the relation of one part in a picture to another with respect to lightness and darkness.”¹

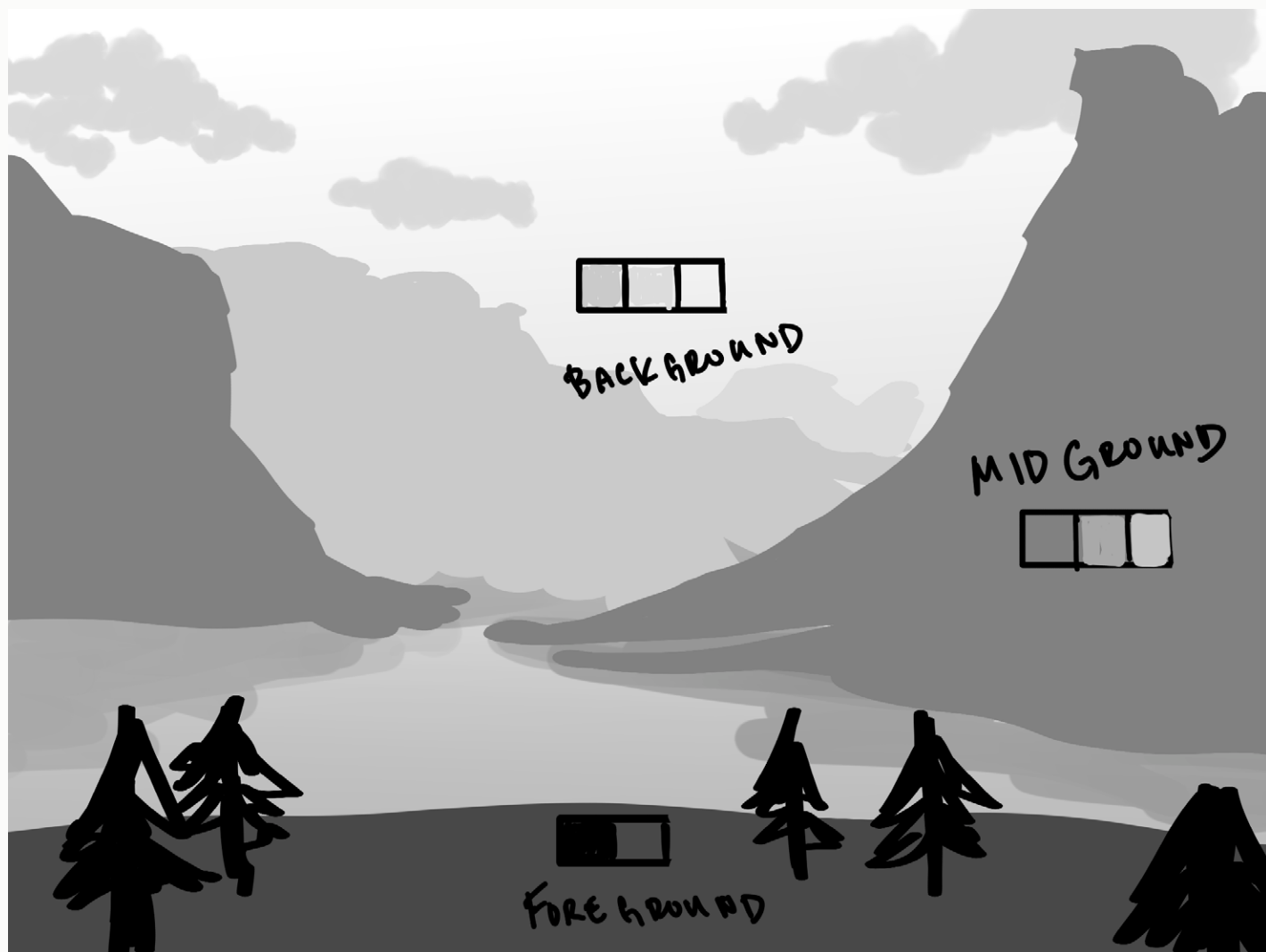
Pretty straightforward. When you see a black-and-white photo or painting, what you are seeing are the values without any color. From white to black, that is the *value scale*. When you see or hear “50% gray” as a term, that gray represents the exact value at the very middle between pure white and pure black. White is normally considered 0%, and black is 100%. Value scales can then be broken down into percentages of black from there; respectively, you can go 10%, 20%, 30%, etc. until reaching 100% black.

Now, why is this important? Value is what helps you discern three-dimensional shapes. If a rounded object has no shadow, it would appear as simply a flat two-dimensional circle rather than an orb.



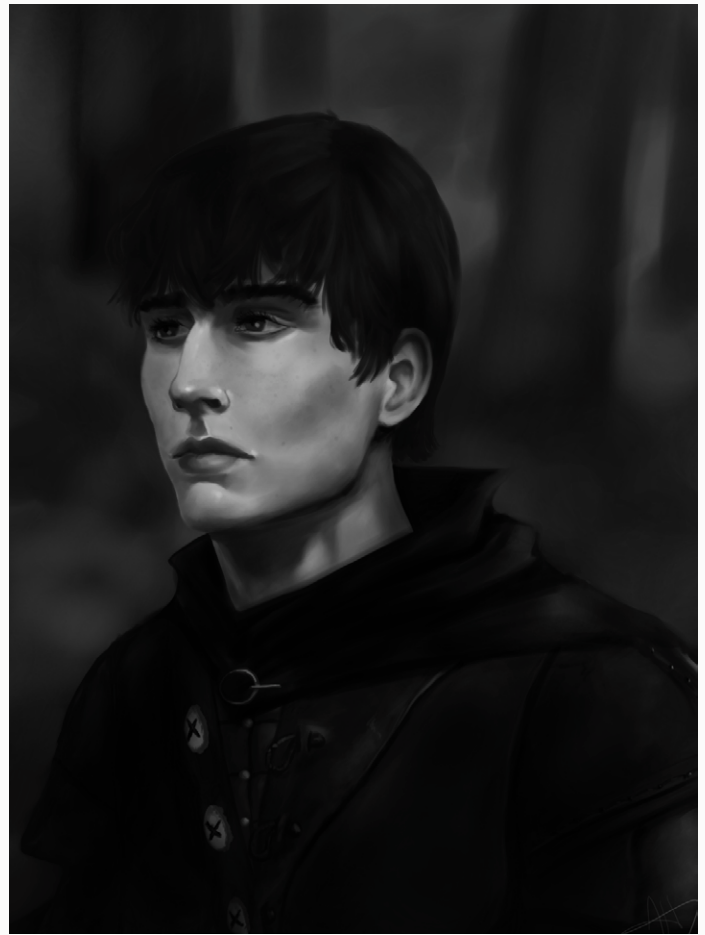
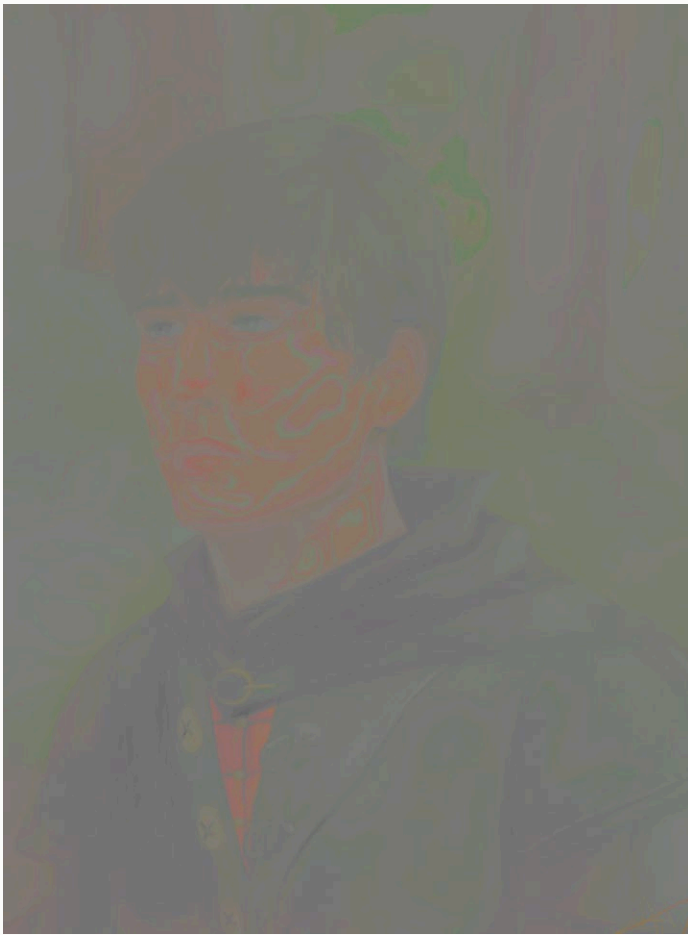
¹“Value.” *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/value.

Value helps create depth. The basic idea for adding depth to an image (whether it is photography, painting, or another medium) is to separate your background, midground, and foreground. This distinction is most important in landscapes where you will have mountains in the back, then possibly hills in the midground, and trees and flowers at the forefront or foreground. This is what gives the illusion of 3D space in a 2D image.



The ability to control your values will be a major reason your work succeeds. You can have all the color you want and all the beautiful textures you can add, but without values, you may not even be able to tell what the image is!

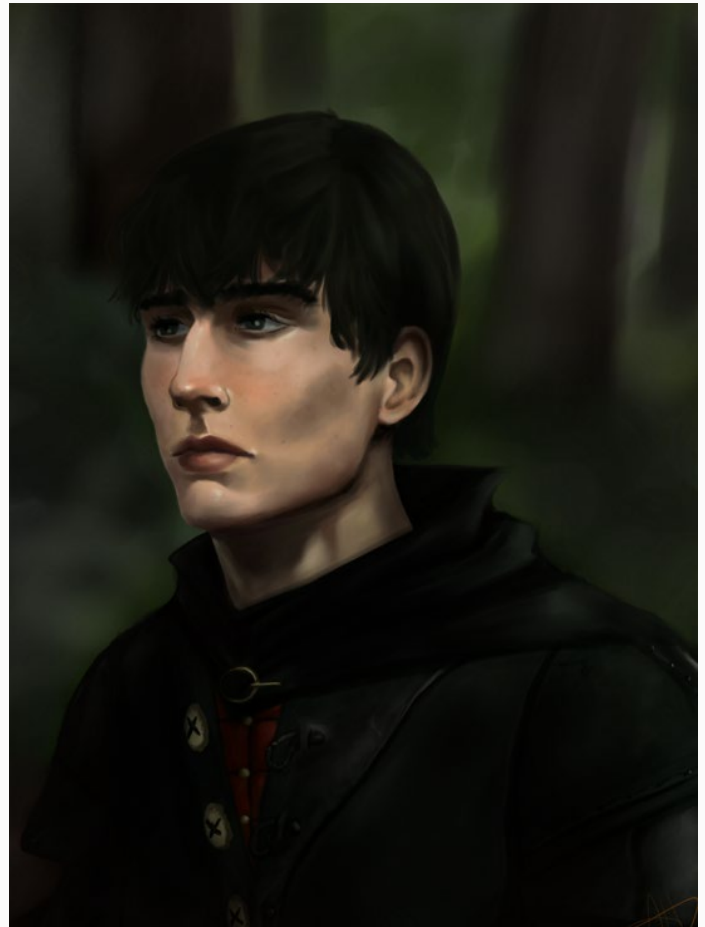
To control your values, create your background, midground, and foreground—then assign a *limited* value scale for each. For example, a full value scale is 0% to 100%. Let's say your background will be your lightest values, because the further away something is, the lighter it becomes. This phenomena of objects becoming lighter in the distance is called *atmospheric perspective*, a great tool to use in your work. So keep your background values to within 5% to 20% grey, and darken the midground and foreground. Now you have very strict value scales to stick to, and you're already well on your way to keeping your painting in check.



If you are working within digital software such as Photoshop or Krita, you can set a layer on top of all your artwork and set the layer type to “saturation.” Then, fill that entire layer with black. Now you have a layer you can toggle on and off to make sure your values appear clear as you paint!

Make sure to leave the highest contrast for your focal point. Contrast (the difference between a light value and a dark value) draws the eye. A contrasting set of values might be 20% gray and 60% gray, whereas a non-contrasting set of values might be 20% gray and 30% gray. High contrast could be 0% next to 100%.

Don't be afraid to start pushing your values! Good luck, and have fun.



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BY RIGHT OF BLOOD, BLOOD IS SHED

by B.K. Bass

▲ HISTORY

✊ POLITICS

One might envision some medieval king or lord eying his neighbor's land, pointing over the horizon and saying, "I want that." This simple desire to expand his domain might be the impetus for years of bloodshed as his people, and those of that other realm, clash on the battlefield. In ancient times and through the Dark Ages, this may have often been the course of things. In the High Middle Ages and later, though, warfare and politics became a more *civilized* affair.

But, why? Why couldn't a leader in the middle-ages act with impunity if he was the supreme will of the land and the embodiment of the law itself? While a sovereign might have held the majority of authority over their lands, there are a plethora of other factors to consider. The lesser lords who have sworn fealty to their liege are also a major source of his military might. Should they not see a war of aggression as being justified, they may very well decline to send their men to join the army. Indeed, this could even lead to an organized rebellion. The common people need to be on board with the idea as well, since they're going

to do most of the fighting. Neighboring nations, allies and rivals alike, will also have opinions on any action taken by this leader. If their leader is seen as a warmonger acting outside the bounds of civilized society, he might soon find himself at the point of another's sword—or at the end of a hangman's noose.

There was also the matter of the Catholic Church, which held influence over all of Europe. Should one Catholic nation go to war with another, the church would likely frown upon this action if the aggressor lacked justification to the undertaking. The consequences of such disfavor varied. Sometimes, the aggressor might be excommunicated from the church. Other times this belligerence could lead to the church actively encouraging reprisals from other secular powers, such as neighboring kingdoms. Hoping to avoid these repercussions, the aggressors often sought official sanction from the Pope to go to war.

How then would one justify a war of conquest? To anyone who has played the popular historical

strategy game *Crusader Kings II*, the answer will be clear: one must possess a *de jure* claim to the lands they wish to conquer. De jure is a term of Latin origin that means simply: in accordance with the law, or officially sanctioned.¹ In the aforementioned game, one must either possess or fabricate a *de jure* claim to a territory before they can declare war on it. A person cannot simply march armies across a border without one. And what is the most common sort of claim, one with a historical precedent and tradition seen again and again in medieval history? The answer, simply enough, is the *hereditary claim*.

From as early as the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE to as late as the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871, *wars of succession* were fought around the world. A war of succession is an armed conflict that arises when two or more parties each wish to establish a claim over a recently vacated hereditary title—and the accompanying territory—and a peaceful resolution to the conflicting claims fails to be reached.

Before we move on to exploring the ideas of *de jure* claims and succession in more detail, it's important to know why the hereditary claim to landed titles in medieval Europe was so valued. In a nutshell, almost all titles in the peerage system of Europe, from barons and counts, to kings and emperors, were hereditary. Should the holder of one such title become deceased, deposed, or abdicate, their heir would then inherit it. These titles almost always came with land, resources, and people, therefore making them the most valuable asset one could possess. Depending upon the law of the land, or the desires of the current holder of the title—if they had the authority to act on them—all of these holdings might pass to a

single heir. Usually in these cases, the eldest son would inherit the title and all that goes with it. Other times, multiple heirs might split the holdings. This would likely happen in cases where multiple titles were held by a single individual or when two sons were seen as rivals in regard to a large territory. A prominent example of the latter would be when King Pepin the Short divided the Frankish empire between his two sons, Charlemagne and Carloman, in 768 CE.²

Why were conflicts over who had the right to a title so common in medieval Europe? Other than in examples where two sons vied for power (such as that with King Pepin), there was a whole web of hereditary entanglements both within the borders of a realm and without. Sometimes the holder of a title might expire without an heir, in which case the lines of succession ran through a list of brothers, uncles, and nephews. Perhaps one individual had a clear hereditary claim, but the title holder named another as his successor, and the original heir refused to acknowledge this new claimant.

The practice of arranged marriage for political means during the era made lines of succession even more complicated. Alliances were often forged by marrying off one's daughter to a potential ally, or to rivals to ensure a tenuous peace. In the case of monarchies, these marriages could often be an international affair. In the case where a King might die without a clear heir, the list of claimants might reside in any number of foreign countries, many of them already holding titles of their own in those lands.

When multiple potential successors could claim a title—along with its associated wealth and

¹ Legal English: "De Facto/De Jure." Washington University in St. Louis School of Law. December 28, 2012. Accessed February 2, 2020. <https://onlinelaw.wustl.edu/blog/legal-english-de-factode-jure/>

² *The Rise of Charlemagne*. Western Civilization. OER Services. Lumenlearning.com. Accessed February 5, 2020. <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-hccc-worldhistory/chapter/the-rise-of-charlemagne/>.

power—the situation often led to war. Because of the convoluted nature of political marriages and hereditary claims in medieval Europe, it would take several books to explore them all in great detail. Also, these sorts of conflict are nearly global in nature and occur through much of human history, so an inclusive overview of them from a global perspective would further compound that issue. Still, it helps to look at an example of how hereditary claims can lead to wars of succession. For our purposes, we'll focus on a prominent period of conflict in England during the Middle Ages.

THE NORMAN CONQUEST

One of the most famous examples of such a conflict born of hereditary claims are the invasions of England in 1066 CE following the death of King Edward the Confessor. Before we can fully understand the conflicts that arose in the wake of Edward's death though, we need to look back to the life and death of his father and siblings to grasp just how convoluted the hereditary lines were before Edward was ever coronated. Now would be a good time to make some tea, because this is about to get strange.

King Aethelred II, “The Unready,” married twice. His first wife was Aelfgifu of York. Although records prior to the Norman Conquest are unclear, Aelfgifu was likely the daughter of a Northumbrian noble. Northumbria at the time was controlled by the Danes, and because Aethelred fought the Danes and their allies for some time, this marriage may have been part of a peace treaty signed with Olaf Tryggvason, King of Norway, in 994.³ Following Aethelred's death in 1016, his eldest son, Edmund Ironside, fought

to defend his right to the throne against Cnut—also called Canute—the Great of Denmark. They arranged a peace and agreed to divide the kingdom of England until such a time as one of them died, declaring each other their heirs. Edmund died a month later, and Cnut took the English throne and reigned from 1016 to 1035. Cnut was also elected King of Denmark in 1019 and later held sway over Ireland and parts of Scotland.⁴

What about King Aethelred's second wife? Following the death of Aelfgifu, Aethelred married Emma, the daughter of Duke Richard I of Normandy. The purpose of this marriage was to cement an alliance with the Normans in the face of continued Danish aggression. His first son from Emma was named Edward, a lad who would later be known as King Edward the Confessor. After Aethelred's death, his widow Emma remarried, further cementing another alliance for Normandy. Who did she marry? Cnut the Great, King of Denmark, and later King of England.³ Yes, *the same* Cnut.

Following Cnut's death in 1035, another series of hereditary claims and conflicts occurred over who would take over his many titles. Things get more complicated here. We'll see more of why later, but the important fact for now is that after seven years of conflict, Edward the Confessor—son of King Aethelred of England, step-son of King Cnut of England and Denmark, and grandson of Duke Richard I of Normandy by way of his mother—was crowned King of England in 1042.⁵

Yes...this is a mess. Before Edward took the throne, he had spent the years of Danish rule under Cnut at his grandfather's court in Normandy, a measure to ensure his safety. Upon

³ *Aethelred the Unready*. People. British Library. www.bl.uk. Accessed February 05, 2020. <https://www.bl.uk/people/aethelred-the-unready>.

⁴ *Denmark History - Canute the Great*. Dalum Hjalles Debate Club. www.dandebate.dk/eng-index.htm. Accessed February 05, 2020. <http://www.dandebate.dk/eng-dk-historie22.htm>.

his return to England, he needed to secure alliances and the allegiance of the English nobles, notably a powerful earl by the name of Godwine. To this end, he married Godwine's daughter, Edith. Should they produce an heir, Godwine's grandson would then become the next king of England. Unfortunately for many, this would not be the case. Edward and Edith failed to conceive a single child by the time of Edward's death on January 5, 1066.⁵

His death left the throne of England without a clear successor, and due to all of the political wrangling, arranged marriages, and prior conquests, there were a number of individuals who could make a case for being the next King.

The first of these candidates was the brother of Edward's widow, Harold. The Godwine family had been the foundation of Edward's power since he was crowned and, in his absence, stood as one of the most influential parties in the kingdom. Harold himself did not have royal blood, but as brother-in-law to the late king with the respect of much of the nobility and populace, he easily could be seen wearing the crown. Some even say that on his deathbed, Edward appointed Harold as his heir as reflected in the famous deathbed scene of the Bayeux Tapestry. To this end, Harold Godwinson was crowned the day after Edward's death.⁵



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS 

⁵ Nelson, Dr. Jessica. *The death of Edward the Confessor and the conflicting claims to the English Crown*. History of Government. Gov.uk. January 05, 2016. Accessed February 05, 2016. <https://history.blog.gov.uk/2016/01/05/the-death-of-edward-the-confessor-and-the-conflicting-claims-to-the-english-crown/>.

Fig. 1 "The Bayeux Tapestry." 2 Mar, 2015. Wikimedia.org. Wikimedia Commons. Web. Accessed 26 March 2020..

To further complicate this situation, Harold had a brother named Tostig. Also brother-in-law to the late king, Tostig had been the Earl of Northumbria until he was deposed in a rebellion a year prior to Edward's death and exiled. Wishing to regain his former lands, Tostig Godwinson allied with Harald Hardrada, the King of Norway.⁵ Harald's father, Magnus the Good, had been an ally of Harthacnut, who was the King of Denmark and England and son of Cnut the Great. Yes, *the same* Cnut. Harthacnut and Magnus had sworn that should they die childless, their titles would pass to the other. After Harthacnut's death during the conflicts that waged in the wake of his own father's demise, Magnus secured the crown of Denmark. He found himself lacking the crown of England, however, and sent a letter to Edward the Confessor threatening an invasion. Perhaps because he had his hands full establishing control over Denmark, this invasion never happened. Still, this claim passed to his son Harald Hardrada, who found himself in a position to act upon this claim due to an alliance with Tostig Godwinson.⁶

Harald wished to press his father's claim to the throne of England and even had support from Emma of Normandy, widow of both King Aethelred the Unready and King Cnut the Great. Harald and Tostig, joined by the earls of Shetland and Orkney, invaded Northumbria with a force of ten thousand men. By September of 1066, they had pillaged the countryside in good Viking fashion and defeated a Saxon army at the battle of Fulford. Only five days after that battle, Harold Godwinson himself led another

Saxon army to meet the invaders at the Battle of Stamford Bridge on September 25, where both Harald Hardrada and Tostig Godwinson were slain—putting an end to our second competitor for the throne.⁷

Then we have our third competitor, William of Normandy, also known as William the Bastard and later known as William the Conqueror—*spoiler alert*. William was the bastard son of Robert I of Normandy and great-grandson of Richard I of Normandy, who you may recognize as the father of Emma, wife of both Aethelred the Unready of England and Cnut the Great of Denmark. Despite being a bastard, William was officially recognized by the family as Robert's legitimate heir upon his passing and took over as Duke of Normandy when he came of age. Despite his distant ties to the throne through the marriage of his great-aunt, William ascertained that in 1051, Edward the Confessor had proclaimed that William should be his heir. He also stated that in 1064, Harold Godwinson agreed to uphold that claim. Therefore, he saw Harold as an usurper and the English Throne as his by right of Edward's own declaration. He then amassed a force of Norman and French soldiers and invaded England. William defeated Harold on October 14, 1066, and was crowned King of England on December 25.⁸

While that seems to tie a tidy bow on things, it should be noted that when William died, his two sons fought over their rights to his realm. Also, having a Norman dynasty ruling England—while still holding titles subject to the French

⁶ *Danmark's History - Magnus the Good*. Dalum Hjallesse Debate Club. www.dandebate.dk/eng-index.htm. Accessed February 05, 2020. <http://www.dandebate.dk/eng-dk-historie24.htm>.

⁷ Mandal, Dattatraya. *The Incredible Life of Harald Hardrada, the Last of the 'Great Vikings'*. Realm of History. www.realmofhistory.com. September 05, 2015. Accessed February 05, 2020. <https://www.realmofhistory.com/2015/09/05/the-incredible-life-of-harald-hardrada-the-last-of-the-great-vikings/>.

⁸ *William I, 'The Conqueror'*. The Royal Household. www.royal.uk. Accessed February 05, 2020. <https://www.royal.uk/william-the-conqueror>.

crown—led to centuries of conflict between the two kingdoms, including the Hundred Years' War. Rather than trying to unravel three centuries of lineages, however, let's take a look at a fictional example of hereditary conflict.

THE KINGSLAYER REBELLION

Inspired by these wars of succession from real-world history, I've worked a similar conflict into one of my own settings. This not only adds background to my setting, but also sets the stage for future machinations. While this example is by no means overly complicated, I feel it's a good illustration of how we can take what we see from our own past and weave a little extra layer of intrigue into our worldbuilding.

The setting here is a medieval-style kingdom called Brisland. As is often the case at the start of these events, a king dies. Rikard Leopold II leaves behind two brothers and a son, Miles, who is only eight years old. The eldest brother of the late king, Francis, takes over as regent and expects to rule only until his young nephew comes of age. The younger brother, Pavish, has other ideas. When Miles is murdered in his chambers and a failed attempt on Francis' own life is undertaken on the same night, Pavish Leopold is implicated in the conspiracy, and Francis orders for his arrest.

Firmly in control of the northwestern quarter of the kingdom as Duke of Northampton, Pavish decries his innocence and rallies the lords loyal to him to defend the duchy. Francis marches his army west, and the men of Northampton take up arms to defend their duke. The loyalist forces eventually push their way to the duchy's capital, seemingly entrapping Pavish inside its walls. Somehow though, Pavish and his son Nathan escape and flee to the nearby Principality of Remaria.

Thirteen years after the end of the rebellion, young Nathan married the daughter of the count of Barvalem, the county where he and his father

A PODCAST BY WORLDBUILDING MAGAZINE



WORLDCASTING PODCAST

Worldcasting is a podcast led by your host Tyler "Dino" Sylva, and his rotating panel of guests—other members of the *Worldbuilding Magazine* team plus special appearances by people such as author Phil Athans, and creator of *Forgotten Realms*, Ed Greenwood!

Together, the worldcasters draw upon their varied backgrounds and experiences to discuss worldbuilding in its many forms. Each episode tackles a different topic such as magic, religion, naming places, and more!

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were taking refuge in Remaria. When his father-in-law died without an heir, Nathan became the new count of Borvalem by right of marriage in accordance with Remarian law. Now, some thirty-seven years later, Nathan's son Jocham presides over his late father's lands in Remaria while eyeing the neighboring realm his father and grandfather were forced to flee with hungry eyes. As the great-grandson of Rikard Leopold the First, he has a secure claim to the throne should an ill fate befall its current, childless occupant.

WEAVING IT ALL TOGETHER

As we can see from this example, weaving hereditary intrigues into our worldbuilding not only gives us some interesting backstory to play with, but also sets up potential conflicts that we can exploit as our story unfolds. If we take a look at similar examples from history and pick a moment in time before the conflicts come to a head, we can analyze a similar situation. Taking the events preceding the Norman Conquest as an example, one could look at the moment in time when Cnut the Great was firmly seated on his various thrones. Yes, *the same* Cnut.

Here we have a foreign-born king ruling over England while a potential rival in Edward, son of Aethelred II, is secreted away in Normandy. Had Edward forged powerful enough alliances, he could have marched back into England and staked his own claim, starting what many would have considered a justified war that never occurred in reality. Or what if Edmund Ironside, the eldest son of Aethelred, had sired a son of his own before his death? After years of exile, would this young hopeful have been the one to return the Saxons to the English throne and avenge his father's death at the hands of the Danes?

In any setting where power passes on through heredity, conflicts are bound to arise over different parties with claims to the same title. With arranged marriages between powerful families cementing alliances, the web of potential

claimants grows even further. Also, the possible claims of each individual may also expand. Life is rarely so simple that a king is merely a king, but rather he might also be a duke, count, baron, or earl. Perhaps he holds one such title, or maybe too many to count on one hand. In another case, there may be some petty baron lording over a pastoral manor of little repute—who happens to be a cousin to the king. Under the right circumstances, maybe one day he will find himself marching to war, the gleam of a king's coronet shining brightly behind his eyes.

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PEOPLE NO ONE ELSE WANTED

by Master-Thief

▲ HISTORY



CULTURE



CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

I gave my parents some genealogy software for Christmas in 2008. Before family trees were linked to mail-away DNA kits, genealogy was a matter of two things: recordkeeping and record-finding. The software I bought helped my parents organize and digitize the records they had, going from painstakingly sorted collections of old paper in manila folders and plastic sheet protectors to a modern, searchable family tree. The ease of recordkeeping gave my freshly-retired parents inspiration for more record-finding. They started adding stops on their vacations to visit old family homes and records offices, looking for information

on their own parents and grandparents, going all the way to the first of my ancestors to settle in America. They visited long-distance relatives located through e-mail chains, phone calls, and word of mouth. Slowly, a picture of who they were—and by extension, who *I* was—emerged.

When I was younger, I only knew of my ancestry through tales of a few famous or notorious people with tenuous connections to the family line, most of which were more legend than fact.



TITLE CARD BY TRISTEN FEKETE

These literally storied ancestors included everyone from generals to statesmen to pirates, but DNA did not lie. Most everyone in my family tree lived, worked, and died in relative obscurity, their names only seen on gravestones or in official records.

Yet, not total obscurity. The distance between where a person was born and where they were interred is the sum of movement, and each of these movements were a chapter in a larger story. For most of my ancestors, those movements were not by their own choice—certainly not the archetypal “Hero’s Journey” cycle of Joseph Campbell.¹ The classic hero gets to go home, but my ancestors left theirs behind permanently. The classic hero gets a call to adventure, but my ancestors got the equivalent of government form letters marked “to whom it may concern.” Above all, the classic hero longs for adventure, while my ancestors all probably wanted nothing more than to stay where they were, only to have great power politics force them from their homes. The themes of these exiles—peoples transferred or replaced, with their nations destroyed, or simply being tired of fighting someone else’s wars—kept resurfacing. When I finally set down pixels to screen for my own science fiction novel, the stories of my exiled ancestors built themselves into my setting from the start.

TRANSFERRED & DISPOSSESSED

My paternal grandmother’s family originated in backcountry Virginia, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania. They were of Scotch-Irish descent, who the British referred to as the Ulster Scots. In particular, these were Scots that had been causing the English trouble for centuries, particularly in the border regions between Scotland and England.

During the late Middle Ages, wars between England and Scotland were constant, and the mixed Scottish-English clans living there suffered the most. With land unsuitable for farming but perfect for grazing livestock, these *Border Reivers* raided settlements on both sides for survival, and often profit. While Reivers served as mercenary cavalry in English armies, at home they were a persistent problem with a well-deserved reputation as clannish, stubborn, violent, and prone to all-out feuds over minor quarrels. So much so that the English crown kept special *wardens* in the region, Reivers on the royal payroll who started feuds as often as finished them.² Beginning in the 1600’s, James VI, who had unified the English and Scottish Crowns, banished the most troublesome border clans to the new English “plantation” in the northern Irish province of Ulster, whose people had been stripped of their lands.

The English conquest of Ireland had been a consequence of religious reformation a century earlier, which had seen the violent suppression of the Catholic Church in England and the rise of the royally-established *Anglican* Church. Ireland, however, had remained stubbornly Catholic, allying with France and Spain against the English, who responded by invading and conquering Ireland. But not all the religious feuds had ended. Scotland now had its own church: the Calvinist, anti-hierarchical *Presbyterian* Church which recognized no authority higher than that of a priest and frequently clashed with Anglicans. James’ son, Charles I, attempted to use force to impose Anglican worship practices upon the Scottish in defiance of his own Parliament, setting off a chain of events that led to civil war in the British Isles. Charles’ own Royalist supporters and the Roundhead supporters of Parliament fought all over England and Scotland, while

¹ Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*. 1949. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004. Pp. 33-36

² Fisher, David Hackett. *Albion’s Seed: Four British Folkways in America*. Kindle Edition. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989, Locations 9115-9206.

native Irish took the opportunity to rebel against the Ulster Scots. Twelve years of war later, Charles was captured and executed for high treason. The radical Presbyterian *Puritans* now fully controlled England, Scotland, and Ireland. The Roundhead Puritan general Oliver Cromwell had not only declared himself *Lord Protector* of all three Kingdoms, he had suppressed the Irish rebellion to turn his armies against the Ulster Scots. Ten more years saw the restoration of the monarchy under King Charles II, renewed Anglican primacy, and losses of Scottish influence.³

The hardships of war, financial collapse, and famine in the 1690s drove more Scots to Ulster, only to be caught between restive Irish peasants and disdainful English aristocrats and their imported indentured servants. Ulster Scot Presbyterians were stifled by church taxes and penal laws that privileged Anglicans, and tariffs and famines hampered their status as independent farmers. Thus, many Ulster Scots left for North America.⁴ These Scotch-Irish (a name intended to distinguish Ulster Scots from native Catholic Irish), according to historian David Hackett Fisher:

“...drifted south and west along the mountains of Maryland, Virginia and the Carolinas. They gradually became the dominant English-speaking culture in a broad belt of territory that extended from the highlands of Appalachia through much of the Old Southwest. In the nineteenth century, they moved across the Mississippi River to Arkansas, Missouri, Oklahoma

and Texas. By the twentieth century, their influence would be felt as far west as New Mexico, Arizona and southern California.”⁵

From this mix came my one documented famous ancestor, John Marshall, a Virginia lawyer and Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, best known as the author of the *Marbury v. Madison* decision that gave America’s federal courts their teeth.⁶ The Scotch-Irish branch of my family is a truly “extended” family with branches from southern Pennsylvania to west Texas, where my paternal grandmother was born.

The engineer who caught my Scotch-Irish grandmother’s eye and married her came from “Cajun Country” in Louisiana. The name *Cajun* itself is a remnant of what Cajuns used to be called: Acadians.

Named from the Míkmaq word *akedia* (“place of abundance”), Acadia encompassed modern-day Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, and Maine. French fur trappers settled in the region beginning in the early 1600s, working for the *Compagnie de la Nouvelle-France* and its royal monopoly on fur. There being no French women in Acadia, the trappers took Míkmaq wives, who considered children out of wedlock evidence of fertility instead of stigma. Most trappers soon lived in Míkmaq villages with their wives and mixed-ancestry (*métis*) children, following native ways of life.⁷

The European Wars of Religion caught up with Acadia, and the *Compagnie* forced out French-Protestant Huguenot trappers by order of the

³ Carruthers, Bob. *The English Civil Wars*. London, Cassell & Co., 2000. p. 152-220.

⁴ Blethen, H. Tyler and Curtis Wood, Jr., eds. *Ulster and North America: Transatlantic Perspectives on the Scotch-Irish*. Tuscaloosa, AL; University of Alabama Press, 1997, pp. 25-33”

⁵ Fisher, locations 9269-9273.

⁶ Brookheiser, Richard. *John Marshall: The Man Who Made the Supreme Court*. New York: Basic Books, 2018.

⁷ Faragher, John Mack. *A Great and Noble Scheme: The Tragic Story of the Expulsion of the French Acadians From Their American Homeland*. New York, W.W. Norton & Co., 2005, pp. 37-40.

staunchly Catholic French monarchy's regent, Cardinal Richelieu. These Huguenots, however, found patrons among their fellow Protestants: the Scottish. Soon, competing Scottish fur trapping settlements started in Acadia, to the alarm of the French. Previously abandoned plans for agricultural colonies to support the fur trade were resurrected. Farming families were recruited to put down roots and work the land along with French soldiers to man garrisons. But not only were Catholic Acadians outnumbered by the Protestant and Puritan British of nearby Massachusetts Bay, civil war over settlement leadership weakened Acadian government. In 1654, Charles de La Tour—who had been deposed by a rival faction in Acadia—went to London and pledged his loyalty to the British Crown, promising a share of the colony's profits in exchange for military aid. With their backing, de La Tour retook the Acadian settlements, which the English named “Nova Scotia” (“New Scotland”). French immigration to Acadia dried up and the *Compagnie* folded. This interregnum of English rule lasted until 1670 but confirmed a distinctive Acadian culture, only partly French.⁸

Though again under French control, Acadians remained scattered. They faced diminishing support from France, while native tribal raids on British settlements—instigated, the British believed, by France—continued. Acadians were forced to play British, French, and native against each other to maintain neutrality. In 1713, the English captured the Acadian settlements, yet many Acadians refused to swear allegiance to the British Crown, not wanting to give up their Catholic faith, alienate their native neighbors, or fight against France.⁹ In 1754, French armies

marched south from Quebec and seized British forts, beginning what became known as the *French and Indian War* to the British, but “*The Great Derangement*” to Acadians. British armies cut off the only overland route between Acadia and French colonies in Quebec and disarmed the Acadians. British Commander Charles Lawrence and the Nova Scotia Council used the Acadians' refusal to sign an oath of allegiance to the British Crown—and their own rabid anti-Catholicism—as grounds to begin mass deportations of Acadians directly back to France.¹⁰

Lacking land in France, a band of 1,600 Acadian exiles took up an offer to settle in the Louisiana territory. Louisiana was a Spanish colony at the time, a Catholic region where they could practice their religion in peace. More Acadian exiles followed, and soon they were the largest ethnic group in Louisiana, settled along the Mississippi River and the Atchafalaya Basin.¹¹ Yet, even as Acadians intermarried with other groups in Louisiana and became Cajuns, prejudice against them continued. Cajuns were considered an “other” people, not fully integrated in Louisianian and American society until the 1940s.¹² My Cajun great-grandmother was known as a caring and thoughtful woman, an avid gardener and cook, and a great dancer. Yet the phrase I heard most often used to describe her is “quiet” because she never felt comfortable speaking English, only her first tongue: the Cajun French she spoke with her husband and family.

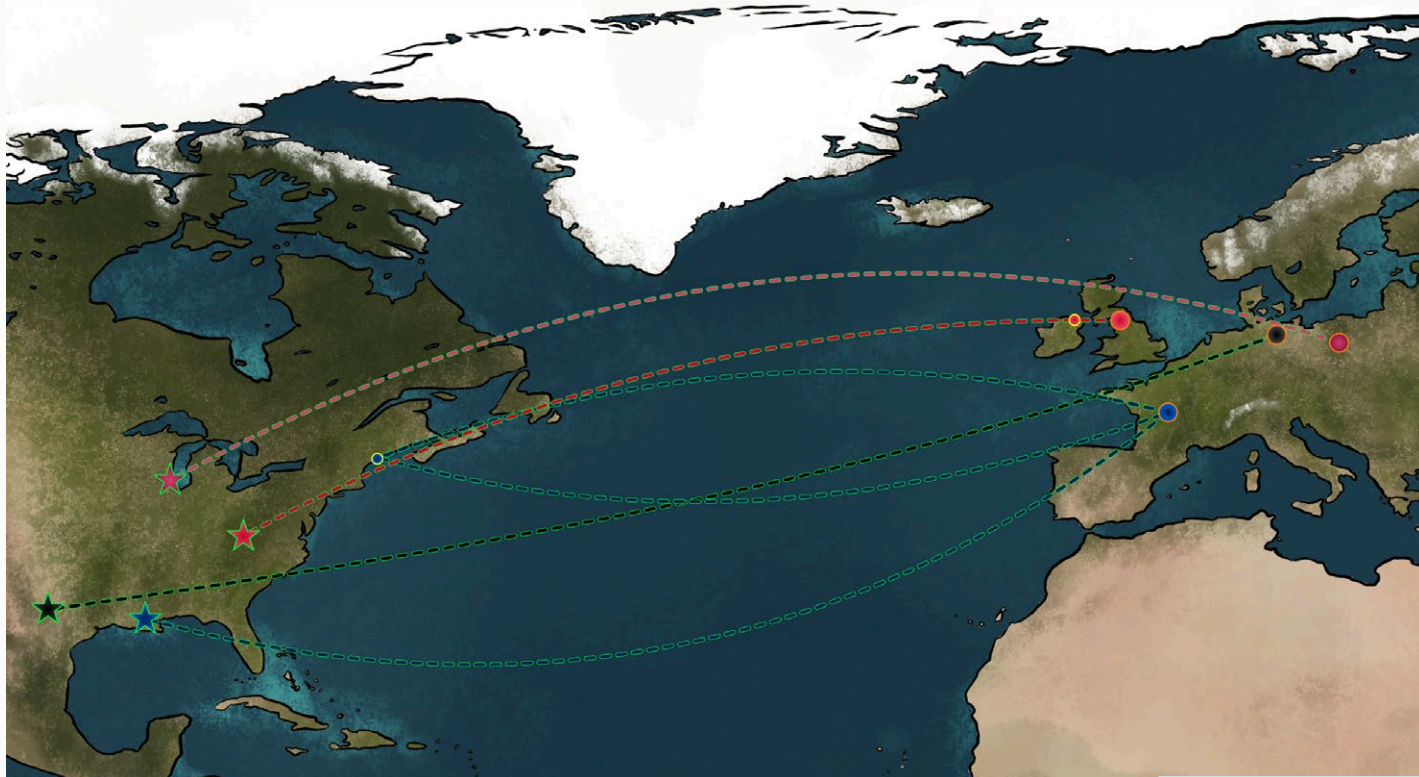
⁸ Faragher, at 69-70.

⁹ Faragher, pp. 151-178.

¹⁰ Faragher, pp. 313-334.

¹¹ Faragher, pp. 451-455.

¹² Bernard, Shane K. *The Cajuns: The Americanization of a People*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2003, pp. xvii-xxi.



ADAM BASSETT

NATIONLESS & WAR-WEARY

While my father's ancestors lost their homes, my mother's ancestors lost their nation. My maternal grandmother's family are the most recent arrivals to America: Polish immigrants to Chicago in the early 1900s. Poland has never been a country with fixed frontiers; it once extended all the way to modern Ukraine, only to disappear simply by virtue of having three much stronger neighbors. While the United States found its footing as a nation and Britain and France settled their scores, the Kingdom of Poland faced military attacks on all sides, with defeat inevitable. Between 1795 and 1918, there was no independent Polish state at all with Poland partitioned and Poles divided between three covetous empires.¹³ Austria—Hapsburg-ruled, German-speaking, and Catholic—was the cultural heart of Central Europe. Russia loomed large over Eastern Europe with vast territory straddling Europe and Asia.

Then there was Prussia; from a collection of lands around modern-day Berlin, the kingdom rose to become the largest and wealthiest of the German states through a series of wars and strong military leadership. Each of these powers took a chunk of Poland, ruling their new territory as they saw fit.

Prussia in particular tried to suppress Polish national identity: language, culture, and the Catholic faith. Life under new imperial masters spurred emigration to many other parts of Europe and to the distant United States. But from this hardship grew the idea of *Polonia*: the notion that Poland was not defined by a place, but by community—wherever that community was. Despite this shared cultural outlook, partition left Poles with decidedly mixed feelings about their neighbors: a hatred of Prussia, a fascination with Russia, and warm feelings for the French and British. Above all, Catholic faith defined Polish identity. With this association went the idea that:

¹³ Lukowski, Jerzy and Hubert Zawadzki, *A Concise History of Poland*. 2nd ed. New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pp. 128-132.

“[a]ny earthly ruler who raises his hand against the independence of a free nation is violating God’s law as plainly as a ruler who destroys the rights and moral independence of a single man or woman. This is why this Polish Pope [John Paul II] kisses the ground of each nation that he visits, and why Poles consider their struggles for justice and independence not only as a political cause but as a moral crusade.”¹⁴

Many Polish emigrants did not live to see an independent country after 250 years of partition, conquest by the Nazis, and then Soviet dominion. They chose to leave Poland—but not *Polonia*—taking their culture with them. Two of these many Polish emigrants settled in Chicago in the early 20th Century, where they raised two children. Their younger son had a difficult childhood and—according to family legend—had some collateral involvement in organized crime. Arrested for stealing a car, the judge gave him a choice between jail and the military. He chose the military, liked it, and stayed. Later commissioned as an officer in the U.S. Army Air Corps, he died in WWII when his bomber was shot down over New Guinea.

Their older child, a daughter, fell for a young Texan who had come north to Chicago for machine shop classes and rented a room in their house. That young Texan was my paternal grandfather; his ancestry comes from the chunk of western Poland that was then Prussian.

Prussia had assured its place at the geopolitical table by its key role in defeating Napoleonic France in the early 1800s. By 1858, Prussia had consolidated power over all German-speaking lands not claimed by Austria or under independent rule. Under the leadership and strategic acumen of Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, Prussia first

defeated Austria-Hungary in the Seven Weeks War of 1866, removing the German-speaking regions of Schleswig, Holstein, and Hanover from Austrian influence. By 1867, these lands and the large, well-off territories of Bavaria, Hesse, Baden, and Wuerttemberg (all former allies of Austria) unified into a single nation under Prussian norms, ruled by the Prussian Emperor William I and a Prussian-dominated Parliament. Unification was justified, in Prussian eyes, by continuing territorial designs on German-speaking lands by France and Austria-Hungary. Ever audacious, Bismarck skillfully managed to provoke France into a direct conflict by attempting to place a Prussian ally on the throne of Spain and then editing diplomatic cables regarding the crisis to provoke a French military response. The resulting *Franco-Prussian War* in 1871 was short and humiliating for the French, as their government fled Paris in a hot air balloon. Prussia then claimed the border province of Alsace. Bismarck did not even wait for formal peace negotiations before declaring the Second *German Empire*, successor to the once-great Holy Roman Empire that had once spanned all of Central and Northern Europe.¹⁵

Unification spurred rapid economic growth, political autocracy, and a *kulturkampf* (culture war) aimed at cutting off foreign—and, in particular, Catholic—influence in the new German Empire. Everything in the Empire had been Prussianized: the military, intellectual life, religion, education, and social policy. All was dedicated towards a strong state and a strong military, everything from a unified legal system to massive social welfare and social insurance programs. Bismarck’s government made the German Empire a world and colonial power, but not all of its people were suited for the regimented life of Prussians, particularly given the repression of socialists, Catholics, and

¹⁴ Ascherson, Neal. *The Struggles For Poland*. New York: Random House, 1987, pp. 5-12.

¹⁵ Turk, Eleanor L. *The History of Germany*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999. Pp. 55-74.

anyone else who questioned ruling orthodoxy.¹⁶

One of these disillusioned people was my great-great grandfather. A Catholic Pole, he came from a town in western Poland that had been under Prussian rule since the partition in 1795—hence his listing of “Germany” as his birthplace in U.S. census records. He had served as an engineer in the Prussian Army during the Franco-Prussian War but, as family legends say, found the military to be a terrible life. Not long after the end of the war, he quietly (and semi-legally) altered his residence papers to change his occupation from “soldier” to “baker,” hopped a steamship across the Atlantic, found some good farmland in the Texas Hill Country, and never looked back. His grandson (my grandfather) told stories of finding

an old *pickelhaube*—the iconic spiked Prussian military helmet—in his parents’ barn, only to be told that it belonged to his grandfather and not to ask any more questions about it.

ANYPLACE BUT HOME

Humans, I was chagrined to learn, have a long and ignoble tradition of expelling the losers of religious, political, and ethnic wars. While the premise of science fiction is that the world does change, certain elements of human nature never do. One need look only at the waves of involuntary migration and population transfer in today’s headlines for proof: the Uyghurs of China, the Rohingya of Myanmar, the Yazidis of the Middle East, the Salvadorans and Guatemalans at

 TRISTEN FEKETE



¹⁶Marriott, J.A.R. and Charles Robertson, *The Evolution of Prussia*. (revised edition, reprinted 1982). Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1946, Pp. 379-416.

America's southern borders, the North Africans in Europe.

If humanity ever developed the capability to settle other worlds, who would settle them? Sure, there would be the audacious government- or benefactor-backed explorers who want the honor of being first. But what next, when the truly hard work needed to be done? (And life in space will be *hard*.) That work wouldn't fall to humanity's elite; it never has.

I realized that work would fall to humanity's rejects—those who were despised, those who wouldn't get with the program or join the system. People who have no place else to go and no use to the powers that be. People who lost their own nation or were part of a nation they didn't want to serve anymore. People like my own ancestors.

From all the research, old parchment, and family stories, there came a setting, backstory, and characters. A fantasia on my own family tree.

COLONISTS & NAVIGATORS

While the governments of Earth planned an orderly settlement of habitable worlds, it didn't work out that way. Seeking a way to move his fellow displaced Jews on Earth to a distant colony world given to them as an afterthought, physicist Joshua Bar-Jonah developed the first true faster-than-light (FTL) engine—the Linear Quantum Induction Delimiter (LIQUID) Drive. Within a few years, FTL transit speed increased by orders of magnitude, and journeys to new worlds that previously took decades could be accomplished in months. Hundreds of “ark ships” capable of carrying thousands of colonists and the biomes needed to terraform new worlds were built including these new engines, and more than 11 million Jews left Earth in the span of 36 years and settled on their new colonial homeworld. When the arks had fulfilled their purpose, the now-Zioni sold them to small bands of spacefarers, veterans of the losing sides of civil wars then-raging all over Earth.

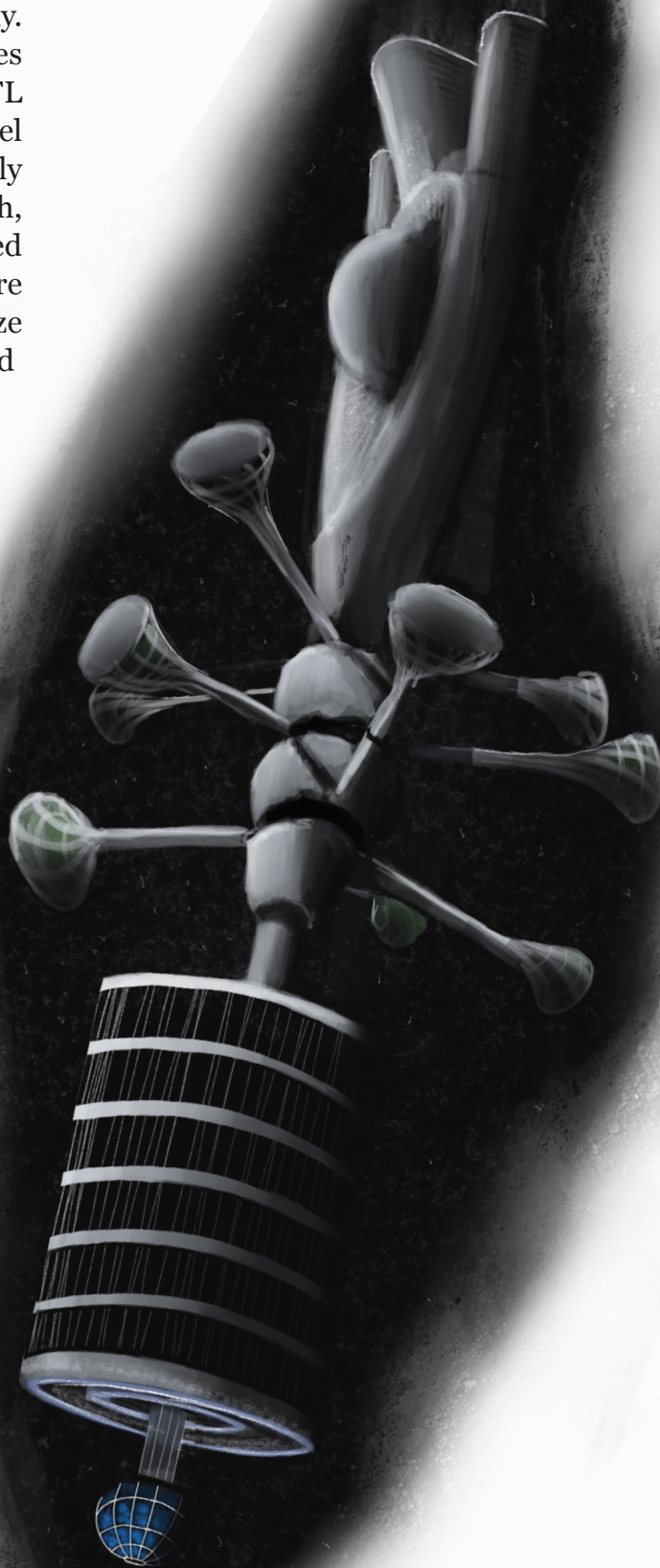
These wars had left millions dead and billions more disenfranchised or as second-class citizens. Their only offense was merely belonging to the wrong ethnic group, believing in the wrong religion, or having the wrong political opinions. A popular pseudo-scientific belief posited that these underclass cultures would never adapt to life in the regimented supra-national polities that life on Earth demanded, meaning a surplus of billions stubbornly resistant to military rule and reconstruction. With the feasibility of rapid colonization demonstrated by the Zioni, Earth's leaders came to a monstrous conclusion: those who resisted their rule would be exiled from humanity's cradle and left to fend for themselves on newly discovered, barely-terraformed worlds.

The second-wave worlds were given cursory terraforming and then declared open for colonization. For the next 200 years, unwanted humans were packed, 50,000 at a time, into ark ships and sent to “settle” these new worlds. As more habitable worlds were found, they too were brought to minimum habitability and opened for settlement.

Life aboard the ark ships was hard enough: journeys of up to a year in close quarters with inadequate food and medicine that had to be strictly rationed. Increasingly, the arks found themselves the permanent home of those ex-military unwelcome on Earth, who became known as the Navigator Clans. It was the poverty of the Navigators that drove them into this brutal cycle of transporting fellow exiles, leaving them behind and returning to Sol for more. The first Navigators were mostly from North America, Europe, or Oceania—descendants of soldiers and their families stripped of rights and property for fighting on the wrong sides after the Second American Civil War, Union Crisis, or Southern Cross Wars. In exchange for forfeiting all rights to return to Earth, they received ark ships fitted with LIQUID drives, supplies, and small arms to maintain order among 50,000 passengers during involuntary FTL voyages.

The rigors of life in space helped the Navigators develop unique skills: low-gravity farming, metalworking, and shipbuilding. They became masters of exploration and stellar cartography. Along with their remarkable astrogation abilities and experienced Navigators, they traversed FTL gravity currents in their massive arks as if by feel alone. Yet, on the colonies they were only barely tolerated as cruel, grifting mercenaries. On Earth, they were unequivocally unwelcome, considered a group of political criminals. Navigators wore this contempt as an honor; they still prize initiative, self-reliance, and preparedness—and despise Earther dependence and corruption.

Life on the colonies, however, was in many ways even worse. The inadequate and rushed terraforming meant that the new colonies did not have enough water or arable land, and in some cases, they even lacked enough oxygen in the air. Even as new terraformers were furiously added, it was rarely enough. Droughts, freezes, sandstorms, and famines were commonplace. On many worlds, settlements turned on each other with many warlords declaring themselves kings and tyrants, preying on the land of neighboring settlements. And yet during all of this, new arks kept coming filled with the exiled and dispossessed as conflicts on Earth continued. Earth's ruling classes turned a blind eye to the plight of their former subjects, simultaneously pressuring them to leave and then lamenting the “waste” of human life. It is estimated that of the four billion people exiled from Earth during the Second and Third Waves of colonization, more than half did not survive longer than 10 years on their new worlds.



✍️ TRISTEN FEKETE

However, out of this hardship came strength. Settlements pitched in whatever resources they could to continue the terraforming process and grow the biomes of their worlds. The experience of despotic government, on Earth and on the colonies, unified the survivors around commitments to the rule of law, individual rights, and strong communal democracies—and eventually, unified colonial governments. The randomness of settlement patterns turned peoples that would have been strangers—or even mortal enemies—on Earth into trading partners, military allies, and fellow citizens. Colonists developed their own ways of life and, unconstrained by all but the most essential regulation, developed new techniques in agriculture, mining, industry, and engineering. Those from Earth with an education, especially those blacklisted and exiled for teaching or studying the “wrong” subjects, shared what they knew. Libraries of printed surplus books from Earth made their way to the colonies. From these came schools, colleges and universities open to all, teaching not only practical sciences and skills, but the literatures, histories, philosophies, and theologies that had been dismissed on Earth as outmoded. Most of all, the colonies soon found it profitable to begin communicating and trading with each other directly instead of having Earth as the center of everything. In time, the colonies developed their unique identities. They were no longer Slovak or Kurd, Hausa or Sikh, Aymara or Quebecois. They were Capellans, Concordiens, Hansans, Anandi, Thumrait, Laurentiens, and Socratians. As these colonies faced their own crises, everything from the Dominionist Crisis to the H9N4 pandemics to the many small sandfire wars, they banded together in interplanetary governments: today’s Colonial Leagues.

In time, even the Navigators found a place. As Earth became frenzied and oppressive, Navigators converted their smaller ships into blockade runners and their arks into mobile trading stations, helping colonies bypass punitive Earth taxation in the early stages of what would become known as the Galactic Civil War.

After Navigator ships participated in the Battle of Zetva, the turning point of the War, Earth’s navy slaughtered a gathering of Navigator arks. Millions died, 70 percent of all Navigators. Enraged, surviving Navigators capable of fighting enlisted en masse in the navies of Earth’s opponents, the seven Colonial Leagues. In battle, they took lead roles in the costliest naval engagements of the war as pilots, engineers, gunners, and crack naval commandos.

One such Navigator, Dominic “Dom” Lightbown, served in the Navy of the distant Aquilan Confederation, a union of six colonies in the Sagittarius Arm of the Milky Way. Tracing his family history from North America on Earth, Dom was an astrogator (a pilot of ships traveling at light-speed) and one of the best. He was decorated for his pivotal role in finding the last major Earth Fleet and sealing its fate at the hands of the Colonial Fleet at the Battle of Beta Pyxis. Dom later met a civilian physicist, Cecilia Alarcón, herself the descendant of Chilean and Bolivian refugees who settled on a colony world called Borlaug. They fell in love, but Cecilia’s parents balked at their marriage and threatened to disown her, considering Navigators like Dom to be untrustworthy “space trash.” Cecilia defied her parents, married Dom, and accepted a new life; in time, she welcomed a son named James.

Dom, for his part, devoted his life to his new family, and the Aquilan Navy. While his early years were marked by the harshness of exile, he found peace and a home. Even after the tragic early death of his wife, he never stopped being grateful for everything he had and never stopped remembering the centuries of exile his ancestors endured.

So of course, Dom finds everything he’s spent his life protecting under threat. He and James—a father who carries the scars of a war to secure a home and a son trying to make his way in that new home—are two of the five point-of-view characters in my novel.

Nothing in human history has ever been wholly good or bad. My own ancestry is proof of this. Human ignorance and desire forced the relocation and exile of millions of people that nobody else wanted, in service of great schemes to serve the petty interests of kings or empires. Yet those same tragedies led to human beings of many different places, races, and ethnicities meeting, falling in love, and continuing the great human chain. If those children are lucky like I have been, they will learn about their ancestries and all the triumphs and tragedies their predecessors endured. Hopefully, new generations will work together to make sure the tragedies are understood—and never repeated. Maybe we'll even get a few good stories in the process.

That said, all this is to help me write a work of *fiction*. Please do not let any more of this future history come true.

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RESOURCES!

AFFINITY DESIGNER

by Adam Bassett



[Affinity Designer](#) is both a vector and pixel tool, which means it's for graphic design just as much as it's for illustrations. It's my program of choice for logo design, illustrating fantasy maps, designing playing

cards, and drawing portraits. The best part, especially at the time when I was a poor post-grad student, was that I was never asked to buy a subscription, and it was easy to learn after initially being trained on Adobe products.

PAINT TOOL SAI

by Inky

[Paint Tool SAI](#) is a lightweight, pixel-based, drawing and painting program with the advantage of not being a subscription-based tool. The 2.0 version has some added features like text and



geometric shape tools as well as a vanishing point ruler, but the original already has a very solid base to work with. Coming from GIMP when I switched to SAI, I noticed how incredibly intuitive the software was. Brushes are customizable and you have layers with additional modes that Photoshop doesn't even have. SAI unfolds its true potential when working with a graphic tablet, though. There is no need for additional pen pressure and stabilizing softwares since these are core features of SAI.

THINKING SIDEWAYS ABOUT CUISINE

written and illustrated by Robert Meegan



FOOD



CULTURE

As worldbuilders and storytellers, we strive to create unique cultures. We know that rich layers of detail create the depth that makes a world feel real. The problem is that our audience is unlikely to notice the countless hours spent in developing these details. Unless we specifically make them plot points, the intricacies of courtship rituals, the subtext of royal regalia, and the genetics and politics of hereditary succession will get little more than passing notice. This is particularly true in roleplaying environments, where players often display a single-minded focus upon the quest at hand, rushing between encounters and ignoring the world around them.

So, how can we make our audience savor our world? Make them *sense* that this place and its occupants are subtly different from where they were before? Can we do it in such a way that they don't consciously realize that their perceptions have been handed to them on a plate? The answer is so simple that even the most seasoned worldbuilders overlook it.

There is nothing that defines a culture quite like its cuisine. What comes to mind when you think about the following cuisines: Chinese, French, Indian, Italian, and Mexican? If you're reading this, the odds are good that you've had many—if not all—of these. Your view of those nationalities is colored by your experience with their food. Without realizing it, how you envision hundreds of millions of people has been shaped, in part, by a handful of meals.

Of course, a native of any country will tell you that there is no such thing as a national cuisine. Look at the regional differences between Szechuan and Jiangsu, Goa and Chhattisgarh, or Sicily and Lombardy to see the wide variations that location and history can create. At this level, meals may bear little resemblance to each other. Within a region there will be further variations, often with each city having a unique spin on a common dish with respect to additions or subtractions. In many places, the locals will be able to taste a version and point you to a specific



village or neighborhood where it belongs. There are hundreds of varieties of pasta in the world and the reason for this diversity has far more to do with culture than cooking.

Food is a powerful tool for manipulating your audience. Just talking about it can remind us of specific dishes and the times when we've eaten them. In fact, there is a reasonable chance that you're probably salivating right now. The senses of taste and smell are wired so deeply into our brains that they can drive our emotional responses. This is particularly true for communal meals shared with family and friends. Eating with others makes us happier and more connected to our communities.¹

The culinary arts offer a rich vocabulary that can be used for emotional manipulation. The immediate perception of soups and stews is that they are humble and homespun. Roasts sound more luxurious, the sort of thing served on a special occasion. Freshly-picked fruits and vegetables give the impression of abundance, while dried food can imply hardship. When you sit down to a steaming bowl of fish stew in a small coastal town, you can feel the sea fog rolling in. Conversely, at a feast, it would seem odd if there were not some roasted meat to show the significance of the event (with the exception of vegetarian cultures, of course). The nature of the main course would depend upon the prosperity

of the hosts and the community, as well as what beasts were available to be slaughtered. For a royal court, a boar or ox might be spitted over the fire, while on a farmstead an old hen could be the centerpiece.

The wily storyteller can twist these to distort perceptions. Consider the sentence "The rich in the city sipped their lobster bisque and nibbled at exotic dried fruits from faraway lands, while the poor in the country were lucky to have a roasted tuber and a hard, unripe apple that they picked just to fill their stomachs." Suddenly, that roast and fresh fruit no longer sound as appealing. Similarly, changing that fish stew to a lobster bisque immediately alters its nature, at least to our modern ears: in days before commercial fishing fleets, those who lived near the shore considered shellfish to be rather mundane and instead would speak longingly of eating "real meat."

Everyone eats. Regardless of what your characters are doing otherwise, they've got to stop for a meal sometime, most likely on a daily basis, if not more frequently. What's more, they'll do it as a routine activity. This allows us to use it as a tool without attracting excess attention.

¹ Dunbar, R.I.M., *Breaking Bread: The Functions of Social Eating*. *Adaptive Human Behavior and Physiology* 3, 198–211 (2017).

FOOD, GLORIOUS FOOD

If we're going to use food in our worldbuilding, we need to decide what foods we want to use. Since we have a sample size of exactly one reasonably intelligent species to work from, we'll have to use that as our reference point.

As humans spread out across the globe, they found that much of the flora and fauna that had served as food for the past few million years of evolution was not available in environments that did not resemble the African savanna. Instead, they found completely new things that needed to be evaluated for their nutritional value, taste, and toxicity. Given human nature, it's not likely that this was carried out in a thoughtful and controlled manner. A more probable scenario is that anything that looked remotely familiar was eaten, and if nothing fitting that description was available, necessity would inspire gastronomic experimentation.

One legacy of a couple of million years of life on the aforementioned savanna is the inheritance of a set of teeth that has more functionality than a Swiss Army knife.² Humans are equipped with teeth that can handle almost anything short of woody stems and particularly coarse grass. Ignore the hype—the real paleo diet was anything that fit into the mouth and hadn't

killed you first. On the other hand, if you want to continue as a functional member of society and not as, say, an ancestral spirit, you need to also ensure that what you eat doesn't kill you. In the post-industrial era, most foods that can kill you do so by clogging your arteries or by making your body resistant to insulin. Prior to the twentieth century, food mechanisms for getting revenge tended to be much quicker.

Much of what might reasonably be eaten is outright dangerous. There are a number of plants that fall into this category, as many produce toxic alkaloid compounds in their tissues. It is highly probable that the negative reaction that most people have to bitter tastes is a result of the bitterness of alkaloids. Those who stuck a leaf in their mouth and immediately spat it out were far more likely to pass their genes along than were the people who chewed thoughtfully and said, "well, it's an acquired taste." Why would people bother to eat plants that could possibly kill them? Well, some of the alkaloids might be familiar to you: morphine, cocaine, caffeine, nicotine, and psilocin.

Other plant toxins exist as well. Many fruit pits contain amygdalin, which breaks down to form cyanide. Fortunately, you have to work to get at peach and apricot pits. A more insidious killer is linamarin, found in some varieties of



² Lucas, P.W., Constantino, P.J. and Wood, B.A., Inferences Regarding the Diet of Extinct Hominins: Structural and Functional Trends in Dental and Mandibular Morphology Within the Hominin Clade. *Journal of Anatomy*, 212: 486-500 (2008).

dried beans and cassava, the latter of which is a staple crop in tropical regions. Fortunately, these chemicals aren't especially stable. Cassava can be rendered non-toxic by soaking it in water and allowing natural enzymes to break down the linamarin over several days. Other dried beans contain neurotoxins that can be broken down by cooking the beans in boiling liquids. One can only imagine the trial and error process that went into discovering these tricks. Sadly, both cassava and the beans in question are "last resort" crops, as they are more tolerant of drought and heat than other crops. Unfortunately, those stressors increase the levels of dangerous chemicals within the plants, while at the same time making it more likely that they will make up a significant portion of the diet.

The fungi kingdom is equally insidious. Many humans have a fondness for mushrooms, which have a bad reputation for being poisonous. In reality, only about one percent of mushrooms are toxic, and only a handful are drop-dead lethal. The problem is that nature, in her infinite wisdom, has elected to make the dangerous varieties look very similar to some of the most delectable species. Again, one has to admire the enterprising individuals who were willing to put their lives on the line in order to test a potentially tasty morsel.

Animals are the third major kingdom of edible living things. Here at last, we find good news. With rare exceptions, most animals are non-toxic. The exceptions are generally amphibians, (particularly toads), a selection of insects, and a few birds and snakes that eat the toads and insects. There are a few other oddballs, like the fugu pufferfish and blue ring octopus, but these primarily serve as a way for nature to eliminate overly self-important people.

Faced with this panoply of options, humans have taken the simplest course and decided that anything that walks, crawls, swims, flies, or remains stationary is a potential meal. Further, just about any part of an animal that might be considered remotely digestible can be found in somebody's lunchbox. Even such unlikely candidates as pig snouts, chicken feet, bull's testicles, and sheep's eyes are munched with delight.

Having gotten that out of the way, there's one more elephant in the room. Or rather, grub under the log. Insects are an outstanding source of protein, containing three to four times more than beef by weight. They're eaten around the world as dietary staples, delicacies, and occasionally as a last resort. The importance of this latter use can't be overstated. Books have been recommending that lost or stranded individuals not ignore this important source of high-quality nutrition for at least 250 years.³

We can use all of this information as fodder for our worlds. When characters stop at an inn for dinner, serve them *woodpig*. Let them figure out that it's a fist-sized grub. Similarly, as they buy supplies in the market, have the merchant casually remark, "Now that there is *western* packa root. Be sure to give it a good boil when you cook it. If you bake it like eastern packa, you'll have the shakes for a week." Not every food item needs to be exotic, but scattering them around can definitely set a tone. If you're at a loss for ideas, make a visit to a grocery store supplying the needs of a culture other than your own. You'll find plenty of inspiration on the shelves.

³ Drury, Dru, *Illustrations of Natural History: Wherein Are Exhibited Upwards of Two Hundred And Forty Figures of Exotic Insects, According to Their Different Genera ... With a Particular Description of Each Insect: Interspersed With Remarks And Reflections On the Nature And Properties of Many of Them*. London: Printed for the author and sold by B. White, 1770; U.S. Department of the Army, *Survival, Army Techniques Publication 3-50.21*, Washington DC, 2018.

SPICE UP YOUR LIFE

The types and quantities of herbs and spices used vary widely between regions. Some cuisines feature intense flavors, where each bite offers layers of complexity. Others lean more toward simplicity and a focus upon core ingredients. Contrary to what you might have heard, seasonings are not used to hide the taste of spoiled food. After all, if the food is spoiled, the diners' gastric distress will soon alert them to the ploy. Instead, food spoilage and the amount of seasoning appear to be related in a completely different manner.

A remarkable study examined nearly 4,600 meat-based recipes from thirty-six countries and compared them to the temperature and precipitation in their countries (or regions, in the cases of China and the United States) of origin.⁴ In addition, the antimicrobial effectiveness of the spices were examined. The researchers found both the number and quantity of spices increased in hot and wet climates—that is, those environments more amenable to the

growth of mold and bacteria. Also, the mean temperature of the recipe's origin showed a direct correlation to the use of spices that are particularly effective at slowing bacterial growth.

For example, spices such as garlic, onion, oregano, and allspice are extremely effective against bacteria. Not surprisingly, these were among the most commonly used in the reviewed recipes, particularly in warmer climates. Other spices that are nearly as effective include cinnamon, cumin, cloves, lemongrass, and those containing capsaicin—which gives peppers their “heat.”

A follow up study examined more than 2,100 vegetable-only recipes from the same countries comparing the usage of spices in those dishes to the previously-studied meat dishes.⁵ This analysis showed that while there was the same trend for additional spices with higher mean temperature for a region, it was not as pronounced as for the meat dishes. In every region, the vegetable recipes used fewer spices. Furthermore, the relationship between antimicrobial action and preference for a spice was lower in the vegetable recipes.



⁴ Billing, Jennifer, and Paul W Sherman. “Antimicrobial Functions of Spices: Why Some Like It Hot.” *The Quarterly Review of Biology*, vol. 73, no. 1, Mar. 1998, pp. 3–49.

The fact that many spices are able to slow the spoilage of food makes it beneficial to use more of them in your cooking, if you live in a climate where spoilage is a problem. Vegetables tend to spoil more slowly than meat, so they don't require the same level of protection. Rather than waste the often difficult to acquire spices on dishes that don't need them, the recipes evolved to use fewer and less effective spices. This becomes a self-reinforcing tendency: those who grow up with strongly seasoned food accept it as comforting and familiar, while those (at least in tropical climates) who don't care for spicy food run a greater chance of an early death as a result of a tainted meal.

CHEESEBURGER IN PARADISE

With respect to matters of taste, there are certain standards upon which all right-thinking people can agree, such as never putting ketchup on hot dogs, mayonnaise on fried potatoes, or Marmite on anything. Beyond that, virtually everything is open for debate. Every place has its own style of cooking, its special dishes that set it apart from everywhere else. Even when provided with the same ingredients, the results can be wildly different.

Take pork and cabbage, for example. In Qingdao, China, it might be a dry-pot stir-fry. In North Carolina, you'll get pulled pork with coleslaw on a sandwich. The pork loin will be roasted with a side of sauerkraut in München, Germany. In Limerick, Ireland they'll be simmered together in a stew. Each contain the same two main ingredients, yet no one would confuse the four dishes. Which way is best? They're all great in my opinion.

So what are the regional dishes in your world? Cuisines are generally formed when the world is at a pre-industrial level of agriculture, and when ships aren't all that capable—basically equivalent to any time between the classical era and the start of the nineteenth century here on Earth. If your world is set in a more modern time, the locals will still be eating the same foods, but external influences will make an appearance, usually as a result of immigration and assimilation.

To make this exercise as broadly useful as possible and to avoid confusion, I'll use the plants and animals found here on Earth; if you've populated your world with different forms of life, just replace my examples with your equivalents. Similarly, no fantastical elements will be used, although if you are developing a fantasy world,



⁵ Sherman, Paul W, and Geoffrey A Hash. "Why Vegetable Recipes Are Not Very Spicy." *Evolution and Human Behavior*, vol. 22, 2001, pp. 147-163.

owlbear can substitute for any of the wild game. Just remember to soak the meat in milk overnight before using, in order to get rid of the damp dungeon taste.

We'll start with a group of adventurers from a heavily forested temperate region. In this environment, domesticated animals are generally too valuable to be slaughtered for meat, at least while they're still capable of providing valuable byproducts. When they finally are eaten, they're old and tough, so chicken, mutton, and beef will normally make their appearance in stews, where the slow, moist cooking can work its miracles.

Until their soupy demise, those sheep and cows will be providing milk. Much of this will be converted into more storable forms such as butter and cheese. This is a product in which each town and village will take pride. Perhaps more than any other foodstuff, cheese is a product of microbiology. It goes against the sensibilities of our modern, sterile world, but in the past cheeses were put into caves and cellars to ripen, where they were exposed to a unique mixture of bacteria and molds. Similar cheeses from twenty miles away might have different characteristics due to varying amounts of salt or acidity.⁶ Needless to say, the version you grew up with was the ideal, and all others but pale imitations.

Rather than waiting for the family cow to dry up, our adventurers and their ilk would take matters in their own hands by hunting in the forests. They would bring in a steady stream of rabbits, venison, and wild boar. These are all leaner meats than we are used to, and most would be roasted. Preservation of the meat without refrigeration involves hanging pieces high above the fire, where the low heat would dry the meat and the smoke would form an antimicrobial outer layer. Salt is often used to aid in the dehydration process.



Boars are preferentially hunted in the autumn, when they have gorged themselves upon fallen acorns. The meat is particularly tasty at this time and the animals would have added fat to carry them through the winter. Bits and pieces of the meat not otherwise worth eating are minced with fat and salt prior to being stuffed into carefully washed intestines. These sausages are hung at room temperature for a few days to allow the fermentation process to begin, creating lactic acid that would help in preservation. They would then be smoked and dried. Hams could be treated in much the same way (minus the intestine-stuffing step, of course). These sausages and hams could last for years.

Fish would be available in small towns and villages located near streams and lakes, but

⁶ Button, Julie E., and Rachel J. Dutton. "Cheese Microbes." *Current Biology* 22.15 (2012): R587-R589.

fresh-water fish tend to spoil quickly, making transportation over any distance difficult. Away from the ocean, salting fish for storage would use too much of that hard-to-get product. Smoking is an impractical option, as the required amount of smoke can make the more delicate lake and river fish almost inedible.

Vegetables offer many options. Leafy greens would be available from mid-spring though the first frost. For the rest of the year, root vegetables such as turnips, carrots, and parsnips grow well and offer the advantage of long storage life in cool conditions. If the ground doesn't freeze, these can be left in the ground and dug up as needed. Where it's too cold for that, they can be stacked in cellars and caves. These vegetables can either be roasted or added to stews, so they work well with the available meats. Since most of the unforested land is needed for animal grazing, the primary source of starch will be grown as potatoes. These also hold for extended periods in the right conditions and can be dried and ground into flour.

The only extremely antimicrobial spice available here in the forest is onion. Fortunately, the cooler temperatures mean that meat spoilage will be slower and preservation will be less reliant on added spices. Depending upon the location, other spices such as juniper berries, cardamom, bee balm, caraway, and ginger might be found.

So what might our adventurers find as they leave their cool and shady lands and venture into the wider world? We'll send them to a steamy seaport on the estuary of a tropical river, where instead of cool breezes and foggy mornings, they'll alternately bake in the sun and soak in the monsoon rains. There are no sheep or cows around the city, and none of the sweet milk or tangy cheeses to remind the adventurers of home. Instead there are chickens, ducks, goats, and domesticated pigs that don't require grazing spaces and are more easily transported on the boats and carts. These arrive in the city, squawking and squealing, and are kept in pens, to be slaughtered either right before they're sold or after they're taken home. The meat must be cooked within a day (or two, at most) if it is not to spoil.

Several techniques are used for cooking these animals. All of the meat is first heavily rubbed with spices. The fattier pieces are cooked slowly over low heat while the lean cuts are quickly grilled over high heat. Those latter pieces might also be cooked in heavily spiced thick sauces as curries (or *étouffées*). After downing her third plate of goat curry, one of our adventurers might be overheard commenting on how this wouldn't have been a bad way to cook up that bear they had killed back in the forest.



A walk through the market brings the sights and smells of big river catfish, squid, shrimp, crabs, and oysters. Like the other meat, this is brought into the city alive, if at all possible, because once dead, it won't last a day before starting to rot. These are grilled, fried, or cooked in the same types of sauces as chicken or duck. They can also be used in spicy fish soups such as gumbos and bouillabaisse. In many kitchens, there will be a large pot of this soup perpetually simmering on a low fire, as it provides the only safe way to preserve fast-spoiling seafood. Each day, the leftover bits and pieces of fish are added, along with more water and additional spices.

The vegetables that our adventurers find include piquant peppers that scorch the mouth and sweet, juicy tomatoes. The latter are acidic, making the sauces in which they're used less hospitable to bacterial growth. Eggplant and okra are used both on their own and as thickeners in other dishes. There are leafy greens that grow well in hot and humid regions, such as collards, mustard, and kale. These tend to be tougher and are more often eaten in the rich stock of their cooking liquids. (Ironically, while these greens are now considered superfoods, in the past they were considered unfit for eating by the wealthy. There is a moral somewhere in this.)

Rice is one of the primary starches growing in the wetlands around the city. Its growing pattern does well with the seasonal monsoons that flood the fields when the plants are young. Other starches used in the city include yams (not to be confused with the orange sweet potato) and plantains, the savory relative of the banana.

The biggest change for our adventurers are the spices. Unlike the food at home, where the flavors of the meat and vegetables were the dominant elements, the food that they're now eating has many layers of seasoning. Instead of one or two spices in a dish, there are now five or six. Onions and garlic are nearly ubiquitous. The result is pungent enough to make the eyes water and nose run.

These elements make our worlds richer by engaging all of the characters' senses. The sights and sounds of the market are connected to the smells and tastes of the table. As the creators of cultures, we cheat ourselves and our audience by ignoring the essential role of food. Through the panoply of cuisine, we can manipulate deep emotional memories. Using these powerful connections, we can evoke feelings of hearth and home or demonstrate the strangeness of a foreign land. Anyone who has traveled knows the excitement and apprehension of discovering new dishes as well as the comfort of returning to plates of familiar favorites. Family and friendship are tied together by the things that we eat.

If none of that inspires you, consider that in our vast toolbox there is little that can match the effectiveness and efficiency of describing a meal. Even the most ardent worldbuilder is going to find it hard to show the difference between two cultures in fewer than two sentences: "Armond poked listlessly at a plate of pale poultry swimming through insipid vegetables in a colorless sauce. Once again, he vowed to ask the cooks whether some religious or civil edict forbade the addition of any seasoning that might impart a discernible flavor to the dish."

Bon appétit!



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MAPPING CONSISTENCY

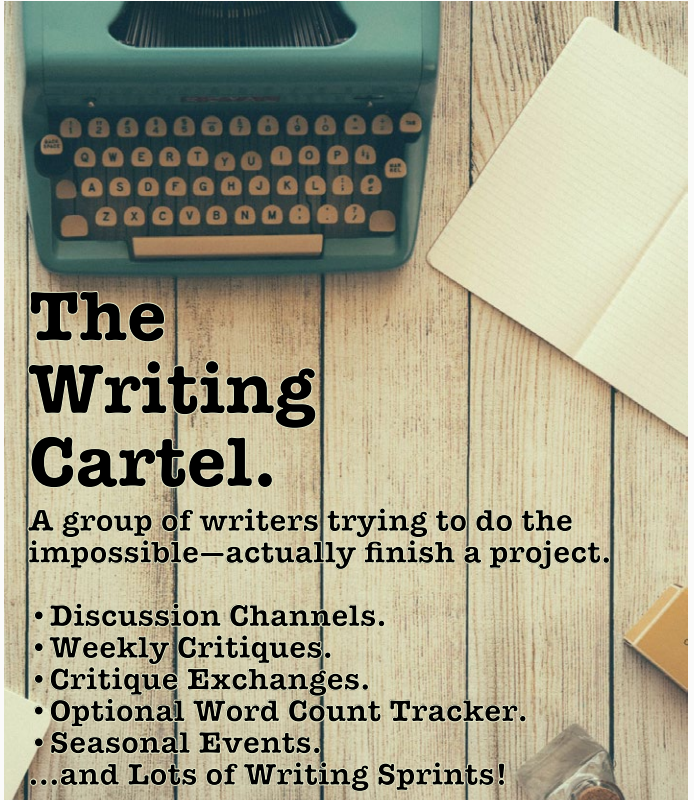
by Zaivy Luke-Aleman, illustration by deificat

RESOURCE

Editing complex worlds can be a rigorous process, and keeping track of consistency is of the utmost importance. Whenever I find an inconsistency in a piece of writing or worldbuilding, I change the text color and bring it up with the author later. I also write the page number of all these descriptions to make discussions easier and help me double check my findings.

Sometimes while reviewing a setting, opportunities to strengthen it also appear. To learn more about one method to track consistency, whether you are an editor or a creator, check out [this Worldbuilding Magazine blog post](#).

Zaivy Luke-Aleman is an editor for Worldbuilding Magazine. She has also beta read and edited other works through her freelancing experience, internships, and classes.



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INHERITANCE PRACTICES THAT BUCK THE TREND

by J. D. Venner

 HISTORY

 CULTURE

We are all familiar with the concept of inheritance. The devotion of humans to our families often extends beyond death, whether that's a modern human leaving behind a house or an ancient human leaving behind a useful tool. Today, inheritance can often be a source of contention, whether that be from real life injustices, stories of scheming family members, or the passing of laws concerning inheritance tax. This contention often leads to compelling fiction with there being a plethora of plotlines throughout our media depicting the dramatic effects an inheritance can have. The vast majority of these stories, however, fixate on a few very specific interpretations of the concept.

In Western media, we often focus on the implementation of a will, a document that describes the partition of the deceased's estate.

This system, also known as *testate inheritance*, often allows the deceased, or *testator*, complete control over their estate by defining in their will who should receive a portion and who is denied. It is a dramatic plotpoint, a narrative beat that often provides perfect fodder for writers with the possibility of dramatic arguments, cold shoulders, and even grisly murders. As it is so excellently put during the will-reading scene in the movie *Grand Budapest Hotel*:¹

**“WHEN THE DESTINY
OF A GREAT FORTUNE IS
AT STAKE, MEN’S GREED
SPREADS LIKE A POISON IN
THE BLOODSTREAM.”**

¹ Anderson, Wes. *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2014.

THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT

In fictional or historical stories, such as *Game of Thrones* or *The Tudors*, we look at an archaic system of inheritance known as *patrilineal primogeniture*. This tongue-twisting phrase can be split into two: patrilineal meaning that inheritance passes through the male line and primogeniture referring to the priority of the firstborn child. Taken together, this phrase refers to an inheritance law whereby the eldest son receives all of their father's estate. It has long been the most common form of inheritance and is still practiced in many places today.

Both forms of inheritance, testate and patrilineal primogeniture, are the most understood and widely utilized forms in Western media. However, there are many other forms of inheritance in use, in the past and present. Our view of inheritance and the effects it may have can often be limited by our experiences and Anglocentric popular media. As worldbuilders, we must remove these blinders and learn how different systems operate. In most modern non-English speaking countries, for example, wills play a significantly reduced role due to fixed inheritance percentages being allocated to family members regardless of what a will states. Meanwhile, throughout most of history, the entire estate would go to the eldest son regardless of the deceased's wishes.

These details may seem trivial, and in many modern settings, that might be true. However, we live in an era where social mobility is considered a key principle of modern society, where, with a bit of help and a lot of luck, it is technically feasible for someone to make it from the bottom of the economic scale to the very top. This mobility has not always been possible. In fact, for most of history, people were defined by their birth status. If your father was a noble and he left you, his

firstborn son, a castle and title, you would be able to follow in his footsteps. If you were a younger son, a daughter, his wife, or an illegitimate child, you would live a very different life after his death. In these contexts, inheritance—with all its nuances, laws, and expectations—became a vital part of life.

As worldbuilders, we can ensure inheritance takes on an even bigger part, often becoming a key indicator of societal importance for different family roles and genders. In a society where only men inherit, women begin life already at a disadvantage. If the firstborn is the only important son, the other children may be considered inconsequential and hold little status in society. If, as was the case in many feudal societies, peasant property reverted to the local noble upon death, what would become of the peasant's children?² We must ask ourselves these questions when building a world—and oftentimes we do—but if we wish to create alternative inheritance systems, there can be a serious dearth of knowledge to draw from.

Consider for a moment how a society would look if only women could inherit. Or perhaps, if only the youngest child inherited everything. What if no one ever inherited their parent's estates? Each of those societies, those worlds, would look and operate in a way fundamentally different to our own. Possibly they would result in a matriarchal society, or a world where people more willingly spend their pot of wealth before death. We can look to several historical examples of when inheritance laws went against the norms and how those societies were affected.

² Faith, Rosamond Jane. "Peasant Families and Inheritance Customs in Medieval England." *The Agricultural History Review*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1966, pp. 77–95. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40273202

CRACKS IN THE GLASS CEILING

One of the first things to understand when creating a matrilineal system, where inheritance passes down the female line, is that it is not the same as a matriarchal system, one run by women. There are many examples of matrilineal societies run by men, such as the Native American Navajo tribe which, whilst being a matrilineal society, traditionally had male chieftains.³ In these matrilineal patriarchal societies, the most important role is often that of the “mother-brother,” the maternal uncle who takes responsibility for his sister’s family unit. However, even in these societies, women often retain considerably more power than under traditional patrilineal patriarchal systems. Their ownership of property often grants them significant economic control with the ability to refuse or deny resources to members of their tribe. In the native Wayuu tribe, located on the border between Colombia and Venezuela, children are often reminded to respect their mothers and grandmothers, lest they be left penniless with no inheritance.⁴ Women’s ownership of the fields in the native Iroquois tribe of Northeastern America led to women exerting control over all food, including that which was brought by the male hunters. This custom gave them considerable power, even preventing several wars due to withholding food from the male chieftains and warriors.⁵

Often in these matrilineal societies, womanhood receives great respect and deference. It is no coincidence that many matrilineal societies predominantly pray to female gods and consider the act of childbirth sacred. Male Iroquois children learn from a young age to respect the little girls that would grow up to be both

important members of the tribe and lifegivers. In the Uduk tribe of Eastern Sudan, they often refer to the dominant bow of a double rainbow as female and the weaker one as male.⁶ Several matrilineal tribes have reportedly considered rape and other sexual abuse a more heinous crime than even murder; for example, members of the Nagovisi tribe in Papua New Guinea have trouble even understanding the concept of those crimes.

Some matrilineal cultures view men as having little to do with pregnancy. The Wayuu tribe believe that a man only nourishes the child already growing within the mother during inception. In Watson-Franke’s journal piece on matrilineality, she records that the father is often required to pay compensation to the mother for a particularly difficult childbirth, due to him “over-nourishing” and enlarging the baby. This diminished role of the father during procreation often continues beyond birth. In many matrilineal societies, the responsibilities that traditional Western society would usually consider belonging to the father are often instead performed by the “mother-brother.” These maternal uncles are expected to be the disciplinarians and leaders of the family unit while the father performs a more nurturing and emotional role for the child. Watson-Franke goes on to analyze an interview with a Wayuu father, in which he frequently expresses his joy at spending each day simply playing with his children. However, he struggles to hide his deep frustration that they will always owe their allegiance to their “mother-brother” over him. Similar observations of loyalty to the mother’s family over the father’s have often been observed in other matrilineal societies, something that

³ Wilkins, David. “Governance within the Navajo Nation: Have Democratic Traditions Taken Hold?” *Wicazo Sa Review*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2002, pp. 91–129. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1409563 Accessed 14 Feb. 2020.

⁴ Watson-Franke, Maria-Barbara. “Masculinity and the ‘Matrilineal Puzzle.’” *Anthropos*, vol. 87, no. 4/6, 1992, pp. 475–488. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40462657. Accessed 14 Feb. 2020.

⁵ Norton, Mary Beth. *A People And A Nation: A History Of The United States*, Vol 1. Cengage Learning, 2008, pp. 8–10.

⁶ Ardener, Shirley, and Wendy James. *Defining Females: A Matrifocus On African Women*. Berg, 1993.

initially confused explorers from patriarchal Western societies.

These concepts raise interesting issues to explore within our worlds. The allegiance that a child must show to their maternal uncle may conflict with the love for their father and his family. A young father could be torn between his responsibilities as an uncle in his own family and his insignificance in the family unit of his wife. The intricacies of these matrilineal societies often open up a plethora of complex relationships to introduce to our worlds.

THE LATE BIRD GETS THE WORM

Primogeniture is almost as ubiquitous as patrilineage. Even at times when it was not the dominant inheritance route, the eldest child often received the largest share. Throughout the entirety of the Ancient Egyptian period, for example, the eldest son was either the sole heir or inherited a minimum of twice as much as his brothers.⁷ This system has long prevailed amongst nobility and royal lineages, often as a means of consolidating power. After the Norman invasion of Britain and the establishment of the feudal system, primogeniture was heavily enforced to prevent estates from being divided and diminished upon the lord's death.⁸ However, prior to the Norman invasion, many Anglo-Saxon kingdoms practiced the complete antithesis of primogeniture: a system then known as *borough English*, although scholars would now refer to it as a form of *ultimogeniture*.⁹

With the practice of ultimogeniture, the last child inherits all or the majority of the estate. It usually stems from the need for someone to care for the parents as they age. The youngest child is

expected to take over the ancestral homestead and use the inherited wealth to ensure their parents spend their final years comfortably. As such, these societies often exhibit a deep respect for the elders within the community. This belief often combines with an inherent sense of honor in creating your own estate. Older siblings are expected to venture into the world and build their own legacy, while the final child remains behind to care for their parents.

Ultimogeniture has been instituted in several societies throughout history; although, it doesn't tend to last long, most likely due to the significant advantage in potential allies, influence, strength, and knowledge that an elder sibling will often gain before the inheritor's birth. A younger sibling can start at a significant disadvantage in fighting for their inheritance.

Often, expansionist societies used ultimogeniture. The Kachin tribes of Southwest China and Northern Myanmar utilized this system to rapidly expand their influence. In their culture, when a chieftain died, his youngest son inherited the title and lands, while the other sons were each expected to go forth and become chieftains of their own lands. This practice was similar to that employed in the early Mongol Empire, where the homestead was left to only the youngest son, who was expected to remain there and care for future children and elderly relatives. In this case, older siblings received a more mobile share of inheritance such as cattle and horses, although they were expected to leave the homestead permanently, either to live alone or with their wives.

However, it was not only expansive nations that have utilized ultimogeniture. In Anglo-Saxon Britain, the borough English system was

⁷ Gershon, Brin. *Studies In Biblical Law: From The Hebrew Bible To The Dead Sea Scrolls*. JSOT Press, 1994.

⁸ *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*. The University Press, 1910, pp. 273-274.

⁹ Faith, Rosamond Jane. "Peasant Families and Inheritance Customs in Medieval England." *The Agricultural History Review*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1966, pp. 77-95. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40273202

seemingly implemented in the belief that the youngest child would likely need the property, as they were unable to gain any for themselves. With many dying young in those times, and with parents usually birthing multiple children, many parents inevitably died while their youngest was still below legal inheritance age. In these cases, it seems that the practice of borough English may have been an attempt at legally protecting these minors from being stripped of all inheritance by their older siblings. The later system of *gavelkind*, which equally split all property between children, had a provision of “hearth cover” being reserved for the youngest son. This practice almost certainly refers to the youngest being entitled to housing of some kind from the estate.

There seems to be similarities here with the abundance of indigenous societies that have practiced ultimogeniture for centuries in Mesoamerica, particularly in Southern and Eastern Mexico.¹⁰ It seems that the system works well in these locations, which are often heavily agricultural and known for their large families. Ultimogeniture, much like primogeniture, allows families to retain large tracts of land and property without partitioning them amongst children within each generation. This aspect is particularly important with large families and agricultural economies, as farms often become less economical as they reduce in size. When the parents of a large family finally die, the eldest children often already have their own firmly established family units, while the youngest have barely reached maturity. This system allows for the youngest to retain the family property in one piece, while the other siblings continue to build their own properties and family units.

When we create ultimogeniture-based societies in our worlds, we can implement these key themes to add verisimilitude and accuracy. The idea of a youngest child, seemingly stuck at home taking care of elderly relatives, while their older siblings explore the world is incredibly evocative. An older child whose jealousy of the young heir drives them to subvert and slander their own sibling makes for a compelling plot line. Even on a macro scale, implementing unusual cultural practices in societies can create another layer of depth and complexity within a world. Ultimogeniture turns the traditional inheritance system on its head without having to change much about the way estates and titles are handled.

THE WEIRD AND WONDERFUL

Occasionally, throughout history there have been odd inheritance systems that seem to be more short-lived aberrations than lasting laws. While it is difficult to draw generalizations from these systems, they can still prove useful to worldbuilders as sources of inspiration within a heavily-ordered topic.

Take, for example, the inheritance practice of several ancient clans in the Scottish Highlands. In these societies, the clan itself owned all property.¹¹ Allocation of this property was strictly enforced by law with the best property and land always given to the closest family members of the chieftain. The next best land was given to the next closest family members and so on, all the way down to the least and most distant of the clan. When the chieftain died, his son would take over through primogeniture as usual. However, all other members of the clan would then have to move to reflect their new statuses. For example, the brothers-in-law of the previous

¹⁰Robichaux, David Luke. “Residence Rules and Ultimogeniture in Tlaxcala and Mesoamerica.” *Ethnology*, vol. 36, no. 2, 1997, pp. 149–171. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3774080

¹¹Keltie, John Scott et al. *A History Of The Scottish Highlands, Highland Clans And Highland Regiments: Vol 2*. Forgotten Books, 1875.

chieftain moved to lesser properties with the new chieftain's brothers-in-law taking their homes and land. Inheritance for everyone in these clans revolved entirely around the chieftain with everyone either shifting up or down upon each chieftain's death. Given how short a lifespan some of these warlike clans had, it is no wonder that this form of temporary inheritance didn't seem to catch on in the wider world.

Another interesting law is that of bilateral inheritance, whereby a wife and husband both retain their own family's property, passing them down to their daughters and sons respectively. That way, when the parents died, the sons would share the father's property, while the daughters would share the mother's property. In ancient Mayan civilization, this practice was combined with primogeniture, ensuring that only the firstborn of each gender inherited the property of their parent's clans.¹² In this way, property remained within matrilineal or patrilineal lines for hundreds of years throughout many generations, marriages, and inheritances. This system remains in place among some Javanese tribes in Indonesia.¹³

Both of these systems provide fertile ground for worldbuilding ideas. A society with strictly separate tribes may employ bilateral inheritance practices to ensure property remains intact within their side of a marriage. The example from the Scottish tribe could be implemented among hierarchical systems based on either family or status. But, more than just examples of odd systems, these instances also help show what is possible when it comes to inheritance practices. Over time, human societies developed convoluted, complicated, and confusing laws and practices, often only tenuously tied to their original reasoning. What starts as an emphasis on keeping family close can descend into a

complex system where people swap properties every few years. As worldbuilders, we can use these examples as inspiration. We can examine our societies, take a small seed at the heart of the cultural belief system, and expand it to dictate inheritance and other practices.

INHERITING THE PAST

As worldbuilders, we have to consider all sides of our worlds, turning and twisting each creation in our hands in an attempt to decipher the focal points and nerve centers that can influence cultures with small changes. Inheritance is one of these points. It defines who can gain, control, and pass on power, both economically and socially. Many of us know the long-lasting effects when generations of power are cemented in the hands of the male half of the population. In our worlds we may wish to do things differently, to have matrilineal cultures or societies that practice ultimogeniture. When we make these decisions, we should consider the effects that these changes would undoubtedly have on people's lives. It may seem difficult to create these societies accurately and faithfully, but the real world is far more varied and diverse than we think. We often need only to reach out and tap into the beautiful tapestry of humankind that surrounds us. There is an ocean of knowledge and experience out there, just waiting for us to draw from it as we shape our new worlds.



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¹² Edmonson, Munro S. "Some Postclassic Questions About The Classic Maya". Tulane University, 1979.

¹³ Emmerson, Donald K. *Indonesia Beyond Suharto*. Routledge, 2015.



ARTIST SHOWCASE

SOLOMON ENOS

Interviewed by Tristen Fekete



INTERVIEW

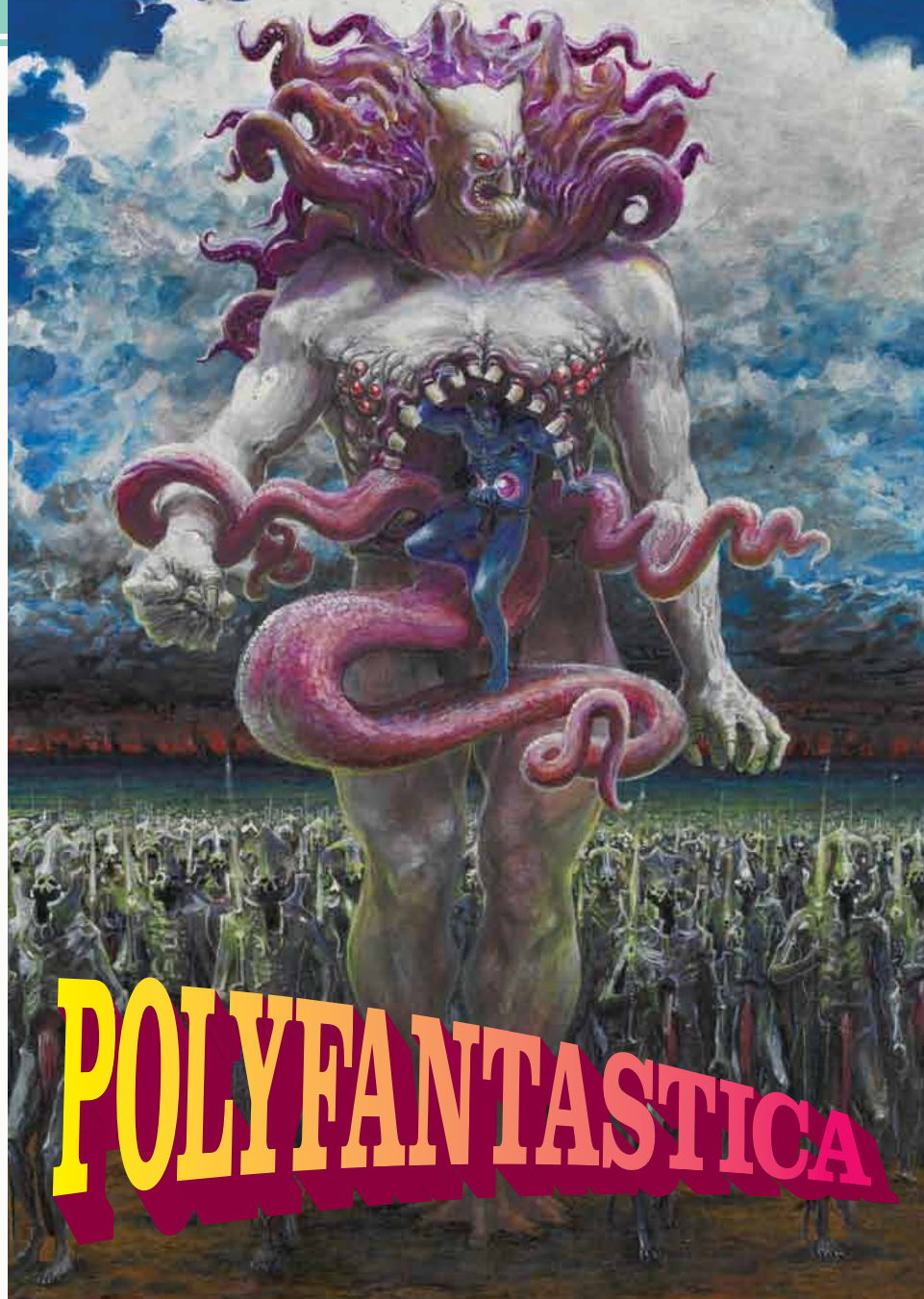


ART

Solomon Enos is a native Hawai'iian artist from O'ahu. His work has been featured at several exhibitions in cities like Seattle, Honolulu, New York, and Auckland. He is also the creator of Polyfantastica, a vibrant science fiction and fantasy setting, which Solomon has illustrated in detail.

My name is Solomon Robert Nui Enos, and I live and work on the Island of O'ahu, Hawai'i. I grew up listening to heavy metal and reading *Heavy Metal Magazine*, and I skipped all the Marvel and DC rubbish. I also discovered Katsuhiro Otomo in manga, and later in the figure sculpture realm, Takayuki Takeya along with Moebius, René Laloux, and Richard Corbin. It wasn't long before I became immersed in the world of Games Workshop ([Warhammer](#)), having built and played with over thirty armies of figurines counting in the thousands. That was my painting school, as I mostly skipped college entirely, except a handful of late stage basic art classes just to see if my theories were correct. And, before I get into my classical artist references, a special nod to Ian Miller. In the classical realm, all them of course, with Max Ernst at the top of the list today as I write this, and some William Blake. Moving into other media, on the music front I enjoy the Smiths, Godspeed You Black Emperor, Psychic TV, and Coil as of today. Perennially, Monty Python, and Akira Kurosawa, with Kubrick and Jodorowsky in the middle, are my favorite films. As for books, I've enjoyed the work of Phillip K. Dick, H.P. Lovecraft, Ursula K. Le Guin, Frank Herbert, Tolkien (of course), and P.G. Wodehouse.

All the while, I grew up in a community that was going through a cultural renaissance, and my family of community organizers were a part of it. The emphasis was the undoing of the effects of American occupation and colonization by planting and eating our traditional foods, as well as living our traditional Hawaiian culture again. All the while, I was making a connection between my reality and science fiction narratives, and struck on the idea of *Polyfantastica*. Polyfantastica poses



a simple question: what would happen if Hawai'i was never interrupted? If a pandemic decimated humanity, the island cultures would become predominant. I then planted this idea into a new world called Hōnua (the Hawaiian word for earth) and created a forty-thousand year visual timeline that takes the life from one planet and merges it with all life across the entirety of a galaxy, and this is done peacefully, as I aim to show that beauty and wonder are—and can be—more of a draw than violence as storytelling devices. Now, I am happily hopping around in my own multi-verse, creating worlds and adding life to them.



You have quite the diverse range of influences! That's an interesting concept, and forty-thousand years is a huge canvas to stretch for yourself. How long have you been working on Polyfantastica?

It's been around sixteen years in the making, and I began by creating forty Millennial figures drawings, each representing the most important archetype for every thousand years. I then created ten drawings per character that were effectively book covers for stories yet to be written, and each chronologically laid out to show the most important event per century, thus four hundred centennial create the forty thousand years.

That's an incredible amount of work! I've seen a small sample of your drawings and you've got a bit of everything—lots of drawings and paintings, and even sculptures. What's your usual process when putting an idea together?

First of all, I ask myself if I've seen anything like the thing I want to create, and if the answer is mostly no, then I move to the next step. I really endeavor to bring *new* things into this world, and that is helped by the fact that I am in a very unique part of the world and part of a very unique culture. As a native Hawaiian on some of the most isolated islands on earth, I get to draw from visual flavors that are by default rare and new, just like our endemic plants and animals that are found nowhere else on Earth.

Then, as I process the idea, I look to the excellence of technical execution by my heroes such as Katsuhiro Otomo and Moebius. I then balance this against the understanding that most of my work will stay as prototypes as I have too many ideas to spend more than a week on one of them.

As far as getting started, I have no real routine; sometimes I jump right in, sometimes I plan. Some concepts need to develop as I work them, and some need to be mapped out entirely. Most often, it's somewhere in between the two. The most important thing is to keep mutating my process. To revel in the fermentation of creation and not the formaldehyde of duplication.





Using individuality as a criteria for creating art is interesting. I think it's really worked out well for you. With all these ideas you have, do you find yourself drawn to specific subjects?

I am certainly drawn to figures, as there is a way to imply landscapes and environments indirectly through them. And this is a perfect segue into my next area of focus, which is to create a game/media-expression that aspires to map real-world data with representations of god-like figures. Sort of like *Final Fantasy* god summons and *American Gods*. I am posting about this now on Instagram so this is a perfect time for me to introduce this temporary course change as Polyfantastica is where I get this new idea for another world. I call it Mata.

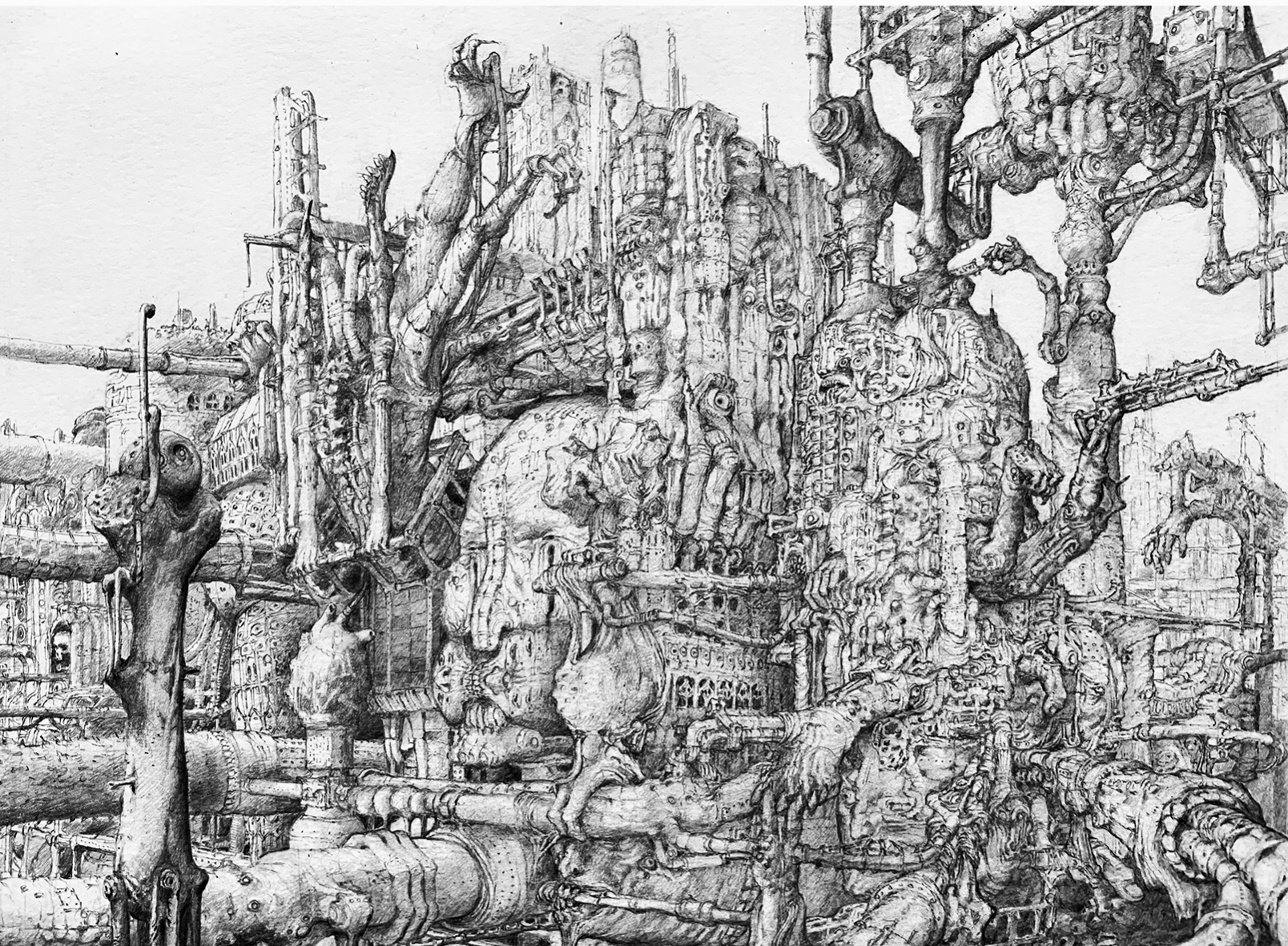
I did see you're starting a new project. That's very exciting! Do you plan on trying any new methods or media for Mata?

I think I am going to keep working in the analog and handmade world, mostly because there is already so much digital artwork out there. Plus, I intend to make some oil-refinery, shopping mall, border wall etc. deities, and I have lots of garbage lying around the studio that I need to use.

The basic idea is to put a face to the invisible forces that rule our world as a way of addressing and relinquishing them of power. I am actually thinking that I will create a paper/pencil/dice role-playing game based on this alternative shadow world where you can play as an ancestor from anywhere on Earth (actually a shadow of a parallel Earth) and you pull the proverbial thorn from the paws of industries that destroy and consume out of fear.

So, basically, ancestral native peoples from around the world vs. contemporary gods of consumerism. And, instead of fighting the contemporary gods, the ancestors are lancing their wounds, subduing and healing them, and pulling out the garbage from them etc. just like the river god from Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*, but not just land, corporations too.







Do you have a favorite piece you've worked on?

I can't possibly say, as I would have to point to the entire body of Polyfantastica as one big multi-faceted image.

Do you have any words of advice for aspiring worldbuilding artists and illustrators?

Quite simple: make a hobby out of worldbuilding to the point where you have little interest in any mainstream movie/TV series/video game. Build all the characters, landscapes, creatures etc. and dedicate them back to the world you are building; make it 'cause your new world wants to exist. And, in doing so, you will find out a lot about yourself and your capacity to change the way you see life. And, perhaps you can share your world with others to inspire them to start their own worlds. This is a kind of life-hack that can give you a sense of empowerment, a sense of independence that is not only good for your mental and spiritual health, but is also unlimited amounts of free fun.

Mahalo again for involving me in your work my friend!

This interview was edited for Worldbuilding Magazine.

Solomon Enos can be found on his [website](#) or [Instagram](#).

Special thanks to Solomon for taking the time to speak with us and share a bit about Polyfantastica! If you have an illustrated world of your own, [apply for one of our future art features](#).

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BUILDING SYSTEMS OF TANISTRY

by Seán Gray

 HISTORY  POLITICS

Fiction is overflowing with kings and queens, galactic empires, and bloodlines bursting with hidden power. History, too, is replete with important lineages and conquerors who spawned mighty dynasties. This article aims to explore an often neglected succession system that helped create several such titans and how it can be applied to your own worldbuilding.

Originally found in Gaelic Ireland, *tanistry* is a method of succession where the nobility elect a ruler from their own number. Each member of the nobility is eligible to become monarch. While named for the Gaelic version of this system, tanistry has also been used as a system of succession in the Ottoman and Xiongnu empires.

TANISTRY IN HISTORY

First, let's look at a few historical examples of succession systems similar to tanistry. We'll start with the Gaelic version of tanistry because it offers us clues as to how the system emerged. In this method of succession, the heir would be selected from a pool of potential noble candidates while the king still lived. This assembly, all of whom shared a common patrilineal ancestor, would choose an heir known as the *tainist*.¹

With so many potential candidates for the throne available, the inevitable happened. Infighting and betrayal became a common theme for Gaelic nobility as they raided and pillaged each other to assert their dominance. Reputation was everything if you didn't want to be deposed by your kin.² Unfortunately, these conflicts had the adverse effect of creating a poor reputation for

¹ Ekin Des, *Hell or Some Worse Place, Kinsale 1601*, O'Brien Press Ltd, 2018, Pg. 208.

² Ekin Des, *Hell or Some Worse Place, Kinsale 1601*, O'Brien Press Ltd, 2018, Pg. 208.

the Irish since others saw them as ruthless and constantly belligerent.

Gaelic tanistry demonstrates quite clearly how it, and related heredity systems, can take shape—and be shaped—by the lands of your world. Gaelic Ireland was a cattle-based society, where a person's wealth, measured in cows, could be stolen in minutes. Without a central government to enforce law and order, local leaders needed to be perceived as strong to dissuade potential cattle rustling.³ Naturally, a system arose to provide candidates who fit the bill and toss out those who didn't. Chieftains who couldn't satisfy their noble backers were quickly and violently ejected from power.

A similar system arose during the foundation of the Xiongnu Empire. As the first nomadic empire to arise on the Mongolian steppes, they practiced extortion on a national scale—raiding China to maintain the stability of their empire. Possessing a powerful military advantage through their use of horse-mounted archers, the Xiongnu set the stage for later nomadic empires such as the Huns and Mongols.

For 150 years, the Xiongnu ruled the plains uncontested.⁴ Their dominance was built on taking riches from China, either through pillaging, trading, or demanding tribute. The empire's leader, the *Chanyu*, then distributed this newfound wealth among the lesser chiefs of the Xiongnu to ensure their loyalty.⁵ Below the chanyu, the Wise Kings of the Left and Right functioned as governors of the Xiongnu empire, with the Wise King of the Left being the Chanyu's designated heir. Underneath these two officials, twenty-four “great chiefs” existed, who acted akin to an electoral college. If the heir was too young or

incompetent, they would choose from among the brothers of the dead Chanyu to rule the Xiongnu Empire⁶. This system, at a fundamental level, hardly differed from that of the Gaelic chiefs. If its similarity to Gaelic tanistry was anything to go by, infighting and chaos should have torn it apart.

Despite the odds, however, the Xiongnu proved quite successful. Perhaps it was due to the Chanyu's ability to reward loyal followers, ensuring it was better to back *them* than revolt. Whatever the reason, the Xiongnu Empire held together remarkably well for a confederacy of nomadic tribes unused to organizing on such a massive scale.

TANISTRY IS A FASCINATING DISPLAY OF HOW CULTURES' NEEDS SHAPE HOW THEY RULE THEMSELVES.

It is also worth noting that methods of succession can, and often do, evolve as time goes on with tanistry being no exception. The Ottoman Empire is an excellent showcase of how pragmatic concerns can change how tanistry works over time. As the centuries passed, the Sultans' succession processes transformed depending on the needs of the current situation. Early on, their tribal roots heavily influenced how leaders were chosen. Any male from the dynasty was eligible to rule under the old system, but there could only be one in charge of the empire. In response to this custom, a policy of fratricide became commonplace. Once the Sultan died, all

³ Ekin Des, *Hell or Some Worse Place, Kinsale 1601*, O'Brien Press Ltd, 2018, Pg. 209.

⁴ Man, John, *Barbarians at the Wall*, Bantam Press, Pg. 143.

⁵ Man, John, *Barbarians at the Wall*, Bantam Press, Pg. 92.

⁶ Man, John, *Barbarians at the Wall*, Bantam Press, Pg. 92.



JOSEPH STEYN

bets were off. To prevent infighting, beginning with Sultan Murat I in 1362, sultans killed their brothers and half-brothers once they took the throne.⁷ However, lifelong imprisonment eventually replaced this fratricide as a more humane solution.

While this system might sound incredibly unstable, it worked quite well. The Ottoman Empire grew from its humble roots as a semi-nomadic Turkic tribe to a great power that lasted for centuries (until its eventual dissolution in 1922).⁸

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Now let's look at applying tanistry to our own worlds. As the above examples show, the system has changed quite extensively depending

on local customs, needs, and events. These distinctions provide an excellent opportunity for worldbuilders, allowing them to create a bespoke version of tanistry for their own uses.

Picture an archipelago of small, wintry isles. This is Foria. Life is hard with scarce resources and long winters. A few humans live here, scattered into different tribes and small bands, struggling to survive. The soil is too poor for farming, so they hunt and forage to keep themselves fed and clothed. Without their magic, they would not survive on these islands, for the temperature drops drastically at night. With little to no wood to be found, it can be hard to keep oneself warm. Thankfully, their nobility can control fire, conjuring and manipulating it with ease. The blood of the sun god runs through their veins they say, claiming direct

⁷ Quataert Donald, *The Ottoman Empire, 1700 – 1922*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, Pg. 90.

⁸ Hughes Bettany, *Istanbul: A Tale of Three Cities*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2017, Pg. 587.

descent from him. Lighting fires not blessed by him is tantamount to blasphemy in their culture.

There is a cost, however, to these powers. Magic rots the body and mind, leaving its wielder addled and frail after prolonged usage.

Now that we've set the stage, let's look at how tanistry might arise in this setting. Initially, the chieftain passes their role onto a hereditary heir, but issues soon emerge. Many chiefs fall prey to magical illnesses before the birth of a suitable successor, leaving the tribe directionless. A leadership crisis emerges. Some clans respond by choosing a new chief from their ranks to fill the hole left behind. What begins as a temporary band-aid soon becomes permanent with the most capable magician assuming the role of chieftain—rather than a son or daughter. Those who use this new system thrive in comparison to their neighbours since they can better guarantee strong leadership. Before long, all of Forian civilization has adopted it.

Of course, this system isn't a panacea. It encourages infighting and equates magical prowess with good leadership. It is also, effectively, a meat grinder, ruthlessly masticating a tribe's magicians. Being crowned chieftain might even become something of a punishment—a way of substituting criminals for other, more valuable magicians.

Tanistry developed in Foria in large part because of the presence of magic. The unrelenting environment encourages small groups and intimate

connections if you want to survive. Being leader of the tribe quickly became a death sentence, leading to the concept of the “chosen chief.” Eventually, chieftain becomes a poison chalice, their early death becoming vital to the tribe's survival. Perhaps a long-living ruler is seen to be a selfish one, as he is not using his magic to help his people, but rather avoiding it to save his own skin.

CONCLUSION

None of this is to say that the success or failures of these cultures was due to tanistry alone. Many factors help explain the rise and fall of these groups, and attributing it all to a single reason would be a gross oversimplification. History is complicated, and any readers interested in learning more about tanistry's role throughout our past are encouraged to do their own, deeper research. This article is an overview of tanistry and its potential worldbuilding applications, not a comprehensive account of these peoples.

Tanistry is a fascinating display of how cultures' needs shape how they rule themselves. This system has much to offer any prospective worldbuilder looking to build complex, fleshed-out worlds. The sky may be the limit when it comes to constructing kingdoms and empires, but having a roadmap is always handy. The succession systems of the Ottomans, Xiongnu, and Gaels showcase the incredible potential of tanistry, just waiting to be tapped.

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John Smith is a synonym for an everyman's name, but what are some really common names in your world?

Has anyone done something so unspeakably terrible that none utter their name?

How do different cultures in your world trace kinship and succession of power or wealth?

Join us on Discord and sign up for weekly worldbuilding prompts!



#worldbuilding-wednesday

THIRTY-THREE TALES OF WAR

STORIES TWELVE THROUGH FIFTEEN

by Emory Glass, illustrations by Emory Glass and Tristen Fekete



FANTASY (HIGH)



FANTASY (DARK)



CULTURE

Thirty-Three Tales of War is a collection of flash fiction pieces that follow thirty-three anonymous individuals living during the Candrish Civil War. Earlier stories appear in [V3I2: Technology](#), [V3I6: Trades and Occupations](#), and [V4I1: The Arts](#).

XII: NOBLE

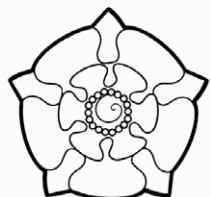
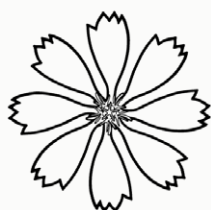
WHEN he looked upon the face of his newborn sleeping in her mother's arms, the Nobleman's heart broke under waves of unrelenting shame. He glanced at the rugs, the tapestries, the ornate bed frame, anything but the pale, dewy face of his blessed wife.

"Hello, Papa." His wife's voice was strained. She managed a weak smile and beckoned him.

His feet were lead weights. One step. He swallowed. "She's beautiful," he choked out.

Handmaids and physicians darted in and out of the vermillion room, dodging around him as if he were nothing more than another piece of furniture. *If only*, he thought. *If only*.

His marrow was mired in regret. Not for the daughter she had borne him—for he loved his little rosebud as any would love their own flesh and blood—but for the one he had no longer; the rose



culled before it first turned its face to the sun. Its canes had been snapped and budding union shorn by jealous hands.

She could never know there had been another rose.

A familiar pat on the back whacked him out of his thoughts. The Noble barely glanced at the man he could never forgive. The rose-cutter. The cane-snapper. He may as well have been a walking blade. His name sat first on the growing list of betrayers: the man, his wife's niece, the Noble's own mother. Her—the “her” whose name he refused to know even as his bones ached with her memory, the lover who had not known she had been loved and the mother of his first rosebud.

Yet his white knuckles confessed what only he knew: he had betrayed someone, too.

“Artis!” His wife sang with far too much energy for someone who had just given birth. The Noble cringed at both syllables of the man's name. His wife handed their daughter to the man, who cradled her like a careful bouquet.

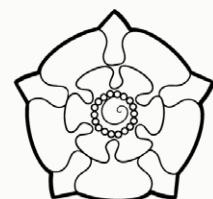
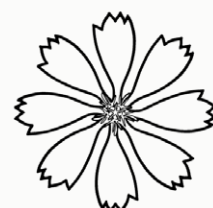
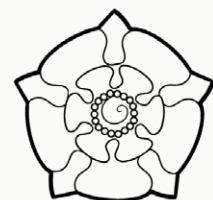
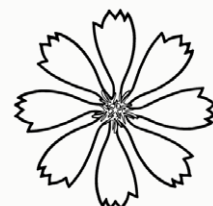
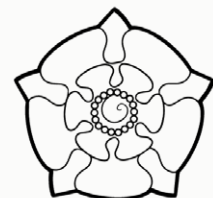
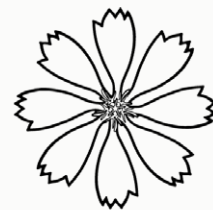
“What is her name?” Artis asked through a watery Brisian accent.

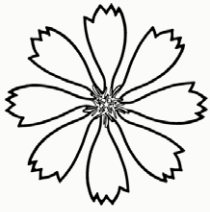
“I think we'll call her Igana,” she replied. “She takes after her papa's nose, don't you think?”

Both looked to the Noble as if to tease out an agreement. Shame rooted his eyes to the mahogany floor. *Thank Leladya*, he thought, *that this child was born in Zoldonmesk, even if she is a child of war. Thank Leladya that she will inherit the powers others would deem the realm of men.* His jaw clenched at the sight of Artis' fine slippers. *Thank Leladya that wretched cur can never cut her away from me.*

The Noble approached his wife's silk-sheeted bedside as he would the cage of a feral beast. “You're right, my honey,” he murmured, quickly adding, “But her eyes must look like yours—red as garnets, I expect?”

Her expression soured. “*My honey.*’ Gods, you sound Brisian.” She turned to Artis. “You've had him down in that miserable swamp far too long, blueblood. But...” she looked back to the Noble. His heart thumped. “I am pleased you were so swift in reeling him back here. I have no idea what I would have done if I'd had to do this alone. But, I trust whatever *business* you two were carrying out is well ended. I dislike my husband residing so far from our home.”





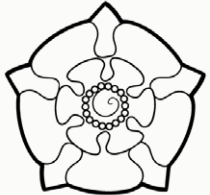
"From now on, his attention is all yours, madam." Artis laid the child upon her chest.

Her expression suddenly became serious. "Husband."

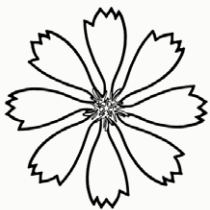


He could barely bring himself to meet her gaze. Her eyes hooked into his skull and forbid him let go.

"You must promise you won't leave me—*us*—alone ever again. I need you here with me. This war isn't over yet."



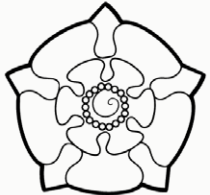
The room spun and his ears rang. Deep within his marrow, he felt it. The panging. Rose petals stamped on and bleeding in the rain. *Don't go. Don't you leave me here.* His stomach sat in his throat.



Already he had taken too long to answer. Swallowing, he said, "I will stand by you and my daughter until my dying day." He stood still as a statue. His eyes fell upon the content face of his daughter. "I have only ever loved you."

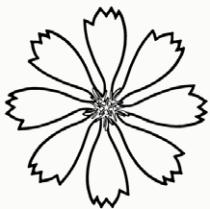


His daughter: the second. The first to turn her face to the sun in bloom and his only legitimate heir. Smiling, his wife gestured for him to sit beside her. For the first time, he held his daughter in his arms. "Hello, Igana," he whispered. "Oh, how long I've already loved you."



XIII: DAUGHTER

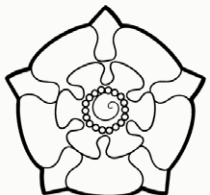
THE Hall of Prisms in Sarona was nothing like the Rose Fortress. Everything was so...damp and stony, walls punctured by enormous stained glass windows that dwarfed the young girl standing where the great Ranov queens once stood, in garb they once wore, waiting to be called down to her coronation in the very halls they once stalked.



The Daughter chewed her lip as red-clad seamstresses and tailors circled her for yet more pinning, tucking, and stitching. Normally, the gown would have been finished ages ago, but her accession to the throne of Sosna Chonok was so sudden there had been no notice until the moment was nigh. Or...that's what her mother told her, at least.



"Young mistress?" Her governess' voice queried from the plush chair on the other side of the room. "How do you fare?"



The Daughter stopped chewing her lip. "Like a mannequin. When will they be done? I want to see my mother again before...well, you know."

Her governess came to her, cupping the Daughter's cheek in her smooth, grey-skinned hand as if she were a child much younger than fifteen. "I am certain your mother would love to see you before your coronation. Know she will be watching you every step of the way even if you are a *Chobortsriya* when next she sees you."

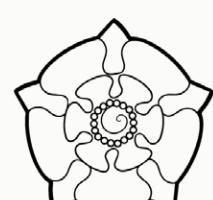
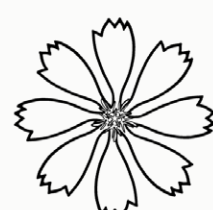
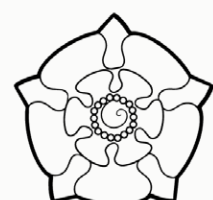
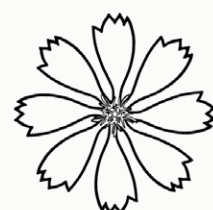
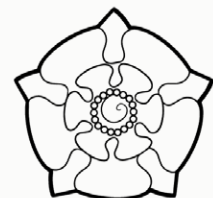
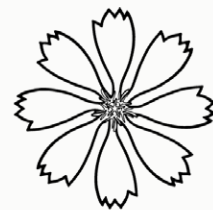
The Daughter bowed her head and considered her feet, which sweat something awful buried in fine black-and-red-jeweled slippers that looked far too imposing for her taste. She mumbled, "I suppose it's better if we don't. I want to be taken seriously as a *Chobortsriya*."

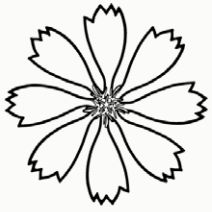
"And you will be," said her governess. "You look exactly as fierce as your mother. Eyes, red as garnets. Hair, crimson as an Ignan rose. Skin silver and dewy as the stars. More wit than most know what to do with. And, most importantly of all—" she rested a manicured hand on the Daughter's shoulder. The seamstresses worked around the intrusion, stitching beads onto a high, red collar. "Birthright. Your mother's armies crushed the false queen's rebellion just weeks ago. Sosna Chonok has been a lawless pit since well before then, but it must be restored to order. You, her eldest heir, are the only woman to whom she can entrust this most important and sacred job. *Chobortsriya* of Sosna Chonok. The Rose of the North. You will raise this realm to greatness." With a reassuring pat, her governess withdrew her hand.

The Daughter bit her lip. As far back as she could remember, everyone had just *talked* about what would happen if Zoldonya Chovrekzh broke the allied North and finally claimed its land: who would lead Sosna Chonok once the newest false queen was ousted and how the Blue Queen's remaining allies would be wiped out, what to do if the Yellow Queen went back on her word and attacked. It all seemed so...big. And herself, so small. Her stomach was a jar of fireflies. She was just two years old when the Blue Queen was executed one early spring—not that she would have wanted to see such butchery. It took thirteen years to break the Northerners of their dedication to her, but her mother proved it could be done. Yet, some dark and deep part of the Daughter wished the Blue Queen had never been captured at all, nor the Northern regions shattered beyond recognition. Perhaps then filling her shoes wouldn't seem such a daunting task.

"I just don't feel *ready*," she admitted. "I don't think I'm ready to lead anybody, much less the former capital of Kandrisev."

"Neither did your mother, when she became *Chobortsriya* of Zoldonmesk at no older than six. But that's what your household is for: a governess to teach you, advisors to guide you, and many



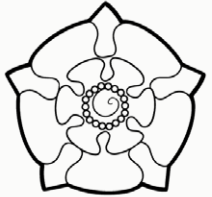


more members to keep your necessities at bay while you focus on honorable rule and just command.” Her governess clasped her hands around the Daughter’s. “Please, young mistress, don’t worry. Everything will turn out perfectly fine.”



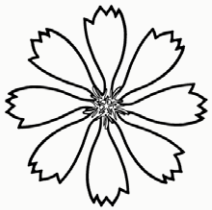
“But what if they don’t...” her voice grew as tiny as she felt. “Like... me?”

“Who?”



“The Chonokians. A-and the rest of the Northerners. Surely just because we conquered them they won’t turncoat and start hating... *her*.”

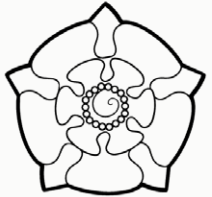
Her governess bent down to look her directly in the eyes. A stained glass cornflower reflected in her deep pools of yellow. The Daughter’s heart fluttered. Was it a sign?



“They *will* love you in time. You are kind, brave, and a more capable leader than you know. Your abilities will only flourish as long as you are still willing to learn. I am certain of it.”

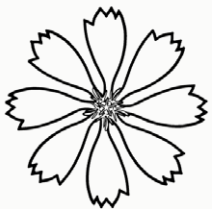


The cornflower’s reflection enraptured her. The sigil of a dead queen. On her coronation, she’d be asked to choose a sigil to herald her presence, too. Nothing had stood out to her other than a rose until the reflection of that glossy cornflower in the eyes of her governess. There would be riots if she chose such a symbol. She may even be killed over it.

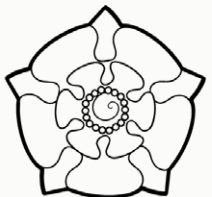


“Mistress? What’s wrong?”

The Daughter shook her head to clear it. “Sorry, I...” she looked around the room, searching for an excuse. Most of the old furniture had been covered in sheets and ancient tapestries telling stories of the Ranov family’s ancestors. One bore a pedigree chart. She shifted her feet. “I just know the Yellow Queen isn’t happy about this. I was supposed to marry her nephew and now I’m not, and she called all the Rahvi warriors back to Chariv.”



Her governess’ knit brows faded to a softer look. “Marriage contracts shift all the time, as do military alliances. Your mother won the North, so she picks who leads it. If need be, she will win the West just as easily. Do you trust me?”



The Daughter swallowed. Truthfully, she didn’t know. Her head was spinning with scenarios, plots, and subterfuge. All of it just seemed too big. Too hard. Up until her mother brought

the last bastions of the Blue Queen's allies to heel last autumn, the Daughter hadn't set foot outside the Rose Fortress in Igna, much less the borders of Zoldonya Chovrekozh. Still, she sighed. "Yes, governess, I trust you."

"Then believe me when I say there's no reason to worry." She extended a hand. "Looks like they've finished dressing you up. Are you ready to meet your future subjects?"

The Daughter barely realized the seamstresses had finished stitching her into the gown. They now stood in a neat, pin-straight line off to the side, heads bowed so they could better hear her next command.

She looked down at herself. Red, as always. Vermillion, crimson, currant and ruby, interspersed with sable and onyx. Her hair, plaited into one waist-length braid, cascaded over her shoulder and down her front. It was stunning. Then, every outfit she wore was stunning. She could be given no less.

Cautiously, she stepped toward the door. When she moved, the gown tinkled. She looked over her shoulder at her governess and the stained glass window behind her. The Blue Queen had also been young when she came into power. She hadn't been ready for it, either. Such thoughts made her doubt her own true-heartedness. A thought that raised the hair on the back of her neck crept to the forefront of her mind. Had Sofezhka Ranov been scared, too, when she was crowned the Blue Queen of Kandrisev?

XIV: SON

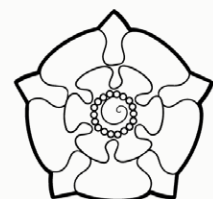
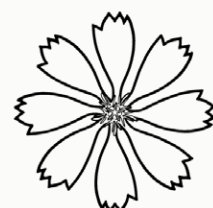
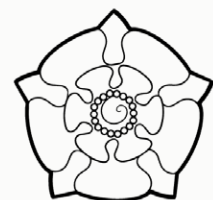
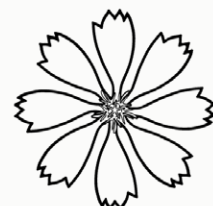
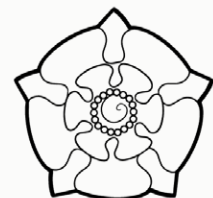
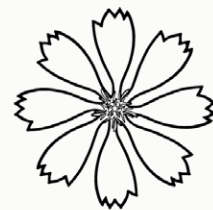
Content warning: graphic violence

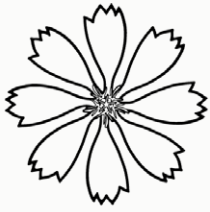
THE air was a wet and suffocating blanket. Behind rain-thickened clouds, the moons struggled to bare their faces. Starlight died in the swirling grey mist before ever gracing the ground. A crackling bonfire hidden away in a poplar grove alone lit up the night.

Thankful for the kiss of heat against his clammy palms, the Son rubbed his hands together and held them just above the flames. Warm. Invigorated. Stripped of coldness and uncertainty. That's how he imagined his whole body would feel when at last Ranovi Hoshal and its Sentinel fell to justice. For Sosna Chonok. For the Blue Queen. For him.

"You're certain?" his elder sister, Chedevrena, asked.

Alongside her stood many familiar but stony faces, eyes eager for

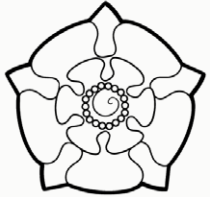




the blackness of war. Avgana, their eldest sister. Their mother's brother, the Commander. All the generals and officers under him who were dedicated to doing the true and right thing. Each would receive a promotion and a pay raise if the plan succeeded. When. There was no "if" because there was no uncertainty. Nearly the entire city was behind him and his sisters' plan.

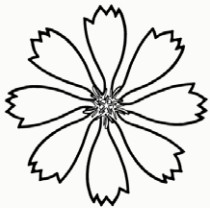


"If they refuse to fight we'll bring the fight to them," the Son said. "Why are your feet so cold just now? We've planned for months."

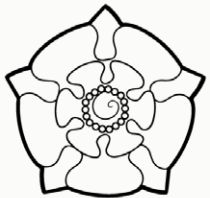


"My feet are fine," Chedevrena snapped with an air of indignance. "You just...you seem different now that we're so close is all. I want to know you're alright."

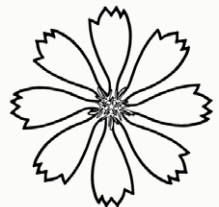
"I'm fine," he said through gritted teeth. Silence. He went back to contemplating the flames.



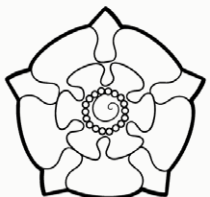
If Nezhlovyad Region had just chosen a side in this war—the Blue Queen's side, the right side—and quit stuffing their ears with cowardice by pretending neutrality would cure this madness, he wouldn't have had to act. If Ranovi Hoshal, at least, had agreed to side with the Blue Queen and aid her armies in driving back the Usurpers, it wouldn't need to be overthrown. Nezhlovyad wouldn't lose such a valuable spot near their borders. In their daft eagerness to remain uninvolved—as if that would keep the Usurpers from cutting them down where they stood once they made it to the eastern coast—they had done little to defend themselves from the Red and Yellow armies. Overthrowing Ranovi Hoshal and taking it for the Blue Queen would be a simple task; especially when the so-called *leader* they prepared to overthrow was their mother.



The pathetic loon knew what Ranovi Hoshal's support would mean for the North. Solidarity meant everything to the Ranovs: rather, the only Ranov left. Her dynasty began here in Hoshal Fortress over two hundred years ago. Instinctively, his hand covered the back of his neck. It didn't matter one bit if the Blue Queen had been *nezhdoya*. She bore the name Ranov, and that should have been enough for anyone. His tattoo prickled. *Nezhdoya*. If his mother had ever cared about him, she had an odd way of showing it. Choosing neutrality was choosing inaction. It was choosing against him.



"Then if everyone is warm and ready, we await your command," he said to Avgana.



After tonight, she would become the Sentinel of Ranovi Hoshal and declare it independent of Nezhlovyad. If Nastveta Evgorod wanted

it back, she could damn well raise an army and take it herself.

Everyone looked at Avgana. She gave a quiet nod.

“Move out,” the Son commanded.

The mob advanced on the city walls. They were hardly impregnable, being made of wood and stone that was crumbled and rotten in more than one place. Complacency had made them weak. As they drew nearer more faces joined, ducking out of alleyways and turning off street corners, pouring from backdoors armed with whatever they could grab. Scant few had outright refused to participate. Their silence was duly ensured. Those who were expected to refuse were never asked at all. When dawn broke, they’d know.

As the mob thickened, so too did it hasten. The Son, along with his sisters, led the charge. His veins buzzed with levity. The corners of his lips cracked into a grin. Tonight, justice. Tonight was for everyone like him.

Like waves, the mob broke through the outer walls of Hoshal Fortress, flooding the gates with cries for blood and war that grew louder as their passion crested. The Son and his sisters breached the curtilage first, followed by a surge of bodies. The watchers at the fortress door turned their spears on the position they once defended.

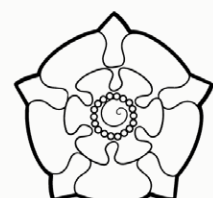
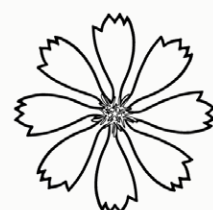
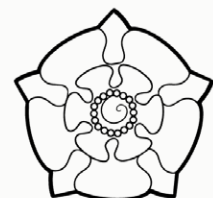
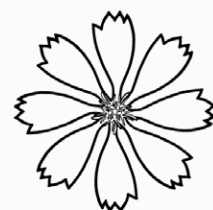
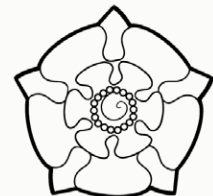
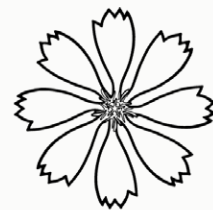
“Down with the *Xobortsriya*!” Someone shouted. “Kill the Sentinel!”

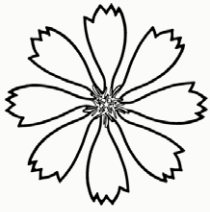
The Son didn’t care to hide his mirth any longer as more voices joined in murky chants. The day had finally come when his sisters stood at his side to say “No.” The Blue Queen’s word was law; the time of *nezhdoya* was over. He would not be sold like chattel to some foreign princess. They had already torn him away from one family and he refused to suffer through it again.

The watchers at the fortress door held it open for him and his sisters to enter. The wood cracked against stone as the mob bled in, inundating the main hall. The Son and his sisters raced to their mother’s quarters.

The Son slammed open the reinforced door. Their mother huddled in a corner with her handmaids, her bodyguard standing over them with menace in his eyes. When their eyes locked, his mother burst into tears.

“My son! My son! Thank Leladya you’re here, my *son*! Have they hurt you? How did they get in? My gods, it’s like the whole city



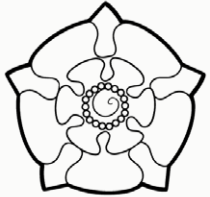


has gone mad.” Her face fell as his sisters stepped out aside him. A general guarded the threshold. “What’s happening?”

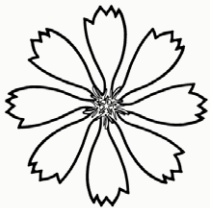
“It didn’t *need* to be like this.” The Son drew a lithe blade from the strap on his chest and handed it to the bodyguard. “But it is what I wanted.”



His mother and her handmaids screamed, wailing like the fools and lunatics they were. The bodyguard jerked down on each handmaid’s hair to force them to expose their throats. He slit them with no ceremony. They coughed and gurgled for some moments, clothes stained black and floorboards slickened by a swelling pool of hot, black blood. This room would need intense tidying after this was over. Or...perhaps it could serve as a deterrent.



“Mercy. Mercy!” his mother screeched.

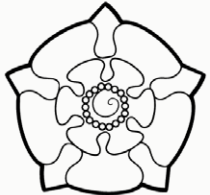


Her bodyguard seized her and pulled her up. She doubled over, still sobbing, skirts wet with blood and urine. The bodyguard returned the blade.

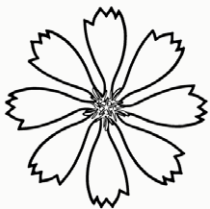


“Sisters?” he asked.

Quietly, Avgana and Chedevrena stepped around him. They, too, held blades. Their mother made a horrible noise as if the air had been sucked from her lungs. Sputtering, sobbing, all she cried was, “Why?”



Avgana came to her and kissed her on the cheek. “I’m sorry, mother.” She stuck her stomach with the blade.

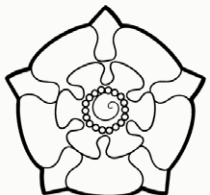


Chedevrena approached. “I’m sorry, mother.” She stabbed her ribs.

The noise it made pleased him. Like a dart whistling past one’s ear. Torn cloth, flowing blood. He approached. “I’m sorry, mother.”



When his blade entered his mother’s back, no pangs of remorse sickened him. In fact, he felt nothing. Not even relief. The bodyguard released her. They stabbed until their mother’s blackened, stumbling form slumped over on the floor. She convulsed. Her lips quivered as if she were trying to speak, but only air escaped. The Son knelt at her side. Her sea-grey eyes, glossy and fading, searched his face.



“The Sentinel is dead,” he whispered to her. “Long live the Sentinel.”

She stopped shaking as he spit in her face.

XV: HUSBAND

A FIRE crackled in the hearth. It was the only noise inside the cabin. He sat on a hard-bottomed chair, staring deeply at the woman he called his wife.

“Divchena,” he whispered. “Please, don’t do this.”

She looked back at him from the dining table bench, tears in her oaken eyes. Sniffing, she pulled a stray hair back behind her ear. “My country is falling apart.”

“We don’t need a country. Not out here. Don’t go. You’ll be killed before you get across the border.”

She bit her lip.

“These are Zoldoni lands,” he said. “Zoldoni trees, Zoldoni skies, Zoldoni mountains. We grew up here. Our village—”

“Our village is gone,” she snapped. “If the Red Queen can’t protect her subjects I’ll find a Queen who will.”

“If you go to war—”

“When. When I go to war, I will fight amongst my sisters and brothers at arms. I am a woman of Kandrisev and it is my duty to fight for it until my dying breath.”

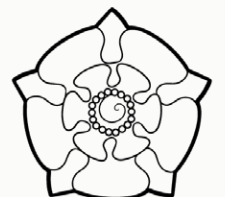
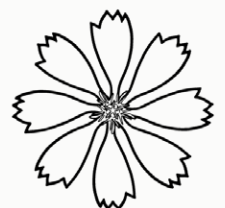
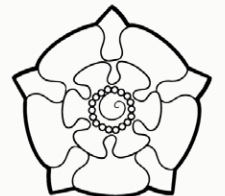
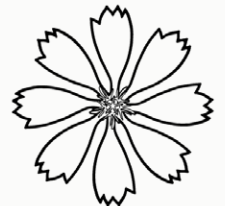
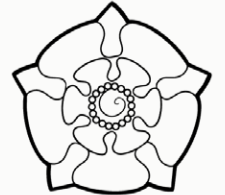
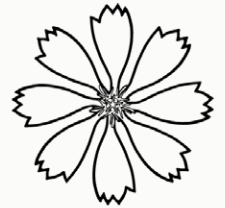
“But why fight for *her*?”

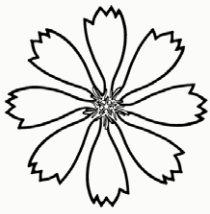
Silent, she kept her gaze set on the floor. A thousand moments of silence passed between them. Each held a memory, a piece of the life they’d built together. He begged her, in his mind, not to shatter them to pieces.

She took a deep, shuddering breath. “I am barren. I will not bring children into this world. If I cannot protect my own child, I must at least protect another’s.”

“It could be me that’s barren,” he exclaimed. “And I don’t care about children, all I want is you.”

“And you can have me,” she said. “But our home will never be safe. When the raiders come our crops will be taken, our well polluted, and our house burned to ashes. If they let us live, we’ll have nothing. It’s six days to Losevka and even farther to Igna.



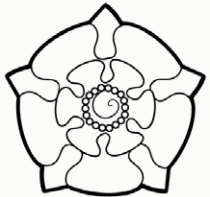


We will die here in this shack, alone, having done nothing to save ourselves or anyone else. Is that the kind of life you want?”

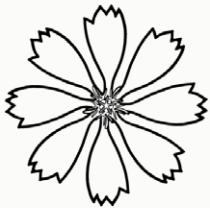
Tears welled in his eyes. “We’ll be safe if we stay here. There’ll be plenty of orphans. We could adopt. We’ll have as big of a family as you want. We don’t have to die here and you don’t have to sacrifice yourself for nothing. We can make it work.”



“Two years.” Her voice grew loud and biting. “That’s how long we’ve been at war. How many more years do you think it will take to end this if every woman and man isn’t out there fighting to end it? One more? Two? Six?” She picked up the sack on the floor next to her and slung it over her shoulder. Standing, she wiped the tears from her cheeks. At the door, she paused, but did not look back. “When I return—”



“You won’t.” The words shot out of him rough and ragged before he could think what they meant.

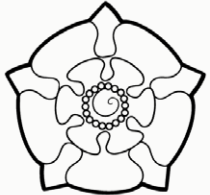


She turned, covering her mouth. For a moment, she did not speak. Then, her words were low and fierce. “No. No, I might not. But at least I will have died for something I believe in.”

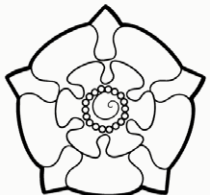
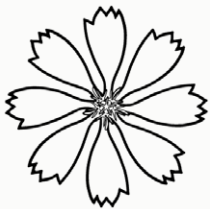



“Divchena, wait—”

The door shut behind her, leaving only ghosts in the firelight.




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BARDIC STORYTELLING

AVOIDING EXPOSITION

by Taylor Frymier, illustrations by Ghranze

▲ HISTORY 📖 CULTURE 🎵 MUSIC

A greybeard sits on the steps of the dais, lyre in hand, recounting the lineage of his lord. The august courtesans and attendants listen with rapt attention. His gnarled fingers nimbly fly across the strings as he immortalizes his master's mortal ancestors in song and meter, recounting generation by generation, king by king, ruler by ruler. He composes a song of remembrance, a lay of validation.

A young woman sits in the ship's mess minding her own business, dark hair drawn like a curtain across her face. A gang of thugs approach, thumping down on the seats around her. Surrounded, she continues to eat, heedless of their threatening presence. Their leader asks for a song with a voice like gravel. She pauses, pulls a zither from her pack, and regales the eatery with tales of the heroes that came before, of gods and their doings, of the stars and their forging. The mean looks the thugs bore on their craggy faces slowly fade to awed attention.

An elf dressed in feathers and hide, covered in ceremonial warpaint, dances around a bonfire chanting in a native language. They keep time with a buffalo-hide hand drum as the shadows mingle with firelight in a display of their own. The watchers sway to the storyteller's rhythm as they listen to an epic of past wars, distant battles, and the brave deeds done therein. The tribe members' hearts beat in united anxiety for the coming conflict.

The heart of humanity beats to the rhythm of story and song. Since early civilization, people have gathered to hear the past recounted. Certain individuals in our history have made a profession of this tradition. From ancient fireside tale-tellers to actors of antiquity, medieval court troubadours, and modern-day writers, folk have made a career of storytelling. These individuals have gone by many names: *skálds* in Scandinavia, *rhapsodes* in Ancient Greece, *minstrels* in Medieval England, and, most recognizably, *bards*.

Bards were professional storytellers, musicians, oral historians, and genealogists in Celtic societies.¹ The term “bard” comes from the self-same Scottish and Irish Gaelic word and the Welsh word *bardd*.² Dissimilar from the roguish and adventuring *Dungeons & Dragons* class that added to Sir Walter Scott's efforts in romanticizing the concept, original bards were typically employed by a patron (a noble or monarch) to capture their deeds in song or to establish an artifact of their ancestry and heritage. Through the memorization of oral histories and tribal warriors' acts of courage, pre-Christian Celts kept an intricate catalog of their past.



Preceding any Dark Age or Medieval annalists, the Grecian rhapsodes were professional performers of epic poetry. These individuals made use of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the wisdom poetry of Hesiod, and Archilocus' satires, among others. Notably, the rhapsodes were competitive performers, contending with

1. West, Martin Litchfield. *Indo-European poetry and myth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

2. Matasović, Ranko. *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Celtic*. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2009.

3. Bahn, Eugene and Bahn, Margaret L. *A History of Oral Interpretation*. Minneapolis, MN: Burgess, 1979

other singers for prizes at religious festivals. Some cities even wrote their participation, and the manner of their participation, into law.³

Farther afield, skálds, from the Old Norse word for “poet,” composed in the Scandinavian courts during the Viking Age. Many skálds famously used the *dróttkvætt* meter: the highly rhythmic alliterative verse preferred by J.R.R. Tolkien in his mythic retellings.⁴ Like bards, these individuals were primarily employed by noble courts to keep histories and encomiastic tales—songs praising a person or thing.⁵

In worldbuilding, storytellers like bards, skálds, minstrels, or rhapsodes may be employed to provide a natural exposition of a society’s history, their important persons’ genealogies, and even convey cultural aesthetics.

HISTORY WITHOUT A LECTURE

Do you need to narrate a society’s past or tell of their heroes’ grand deeds? Are you trying to provide a catalog of wars, battles, rebellions, and revolutions? Mythic tales of creation, cosmic crises, and the destruction of the gods and, ultimately, the world? Look no further than your local bard! These noble wordsmiths, prosemakers, and lay craftsmen serve as excellent tools for a worldbuilding writer to provide their audience with the necessary—and, at times, self-indulgently unnecessary—information to capture the nuance of current events.

As all modern events are informed by the past, it’s important for authors writing speculative fiction—especially that which is set in a secondary world—to make an effort to include the history of their setting. Your characters will act within



their setting and maintain a worldview reflective of its past. The audience should, eventually, be made privy to this information, but it is generally a bad idea to explain your world’s history out of context. Bardic storytelling provides an excellent way to make these connections.

One thing to note: bardic storytelling often appears to be a secular establishment. Because they desire control over the narrative, religions typically seem to maintain their own method of chronicling. Even pagan religions keep their own oral records apart from bards or minstrels.

TABULATE YOUR DEAD

Let’s face it: nobles and monarchs are often sociopathic narcissists who can’t wait to regale their sycophants with a lengthy list of their dead ancestors. And by regale, I mean bore to

4. Gade, Kari Ellen. *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages II: Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas II: From c. 1035 to c. 1300*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2009; Anonymous, Tolkien, J.R.R., and Tolkien, Christopher. *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary*. New York City, NY: HarperCollins, 2014.

5. Helle, Knut. *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

6. Weir, Alison. *Britain’s Royal Families: The Complete Genealogy*. London: Vintage Books, 2011.



servile incipience. Nevertheless, an inventory of a leader's heritage can be an important artifact to maintain for any society. No more so than for its leader. Genealogical records help solidify their right to rule and determine their successors.⁶ Furthermore, feudal societies—with their heaps of dukes and duchesses, barons and baronesses, marquesses and marchionesses, viscounts and vassals—require devoted documentarians dictating an account of these features to uphold the system.

Bardic storytelling can be used here to great effect. It would feel unnatural for an author to provide direct narration of a ruler's genealogy, but an in-world individual whose job is to keep that oral record could authentically relay that information.

THE COLOR OF STORYTELLING

As with any art form, song, verse, and stories feed a culture's aesthetic. Does your culture use alliterative or syllabic verse? What words are often repeated? What rhymes are commonly used? Intentional use of poetic structure can be a subtle way of implying a culture's flavor. The austere sounding iambic pentameter can reveal a predilection toward nobility and a more developed culture. Aggressive alliterative verse can imply a more naturalistic, primitive culture. And, rhyming songs with shorter lines often give the impression of a folksy people set in rural scenery.

What is the tone of this culture's bardic storytelling? Bright? Dark? Silly? Scary? Satirical? How a song feels can influence the way an audience perceives the culture or subculture from which it stems. Similar to the aforementioned way, poetic structure can influence the flavor of a



culture; this effect can have a far greater impact than one may realize at a surface level.

What instruments are typically used? Typically Medieval English fantasy fare, like lutes and lyres? Or, something more exotic like the Arabic lute-like *oud*, the iconic Chinese *erhu*, or the underrepresented *dulcimer*? Not only do the instruments involved help provide the audience a mental image of the scene and its sounds, but it can indicate real-world cultural inspirations. Music is a vital part of culture and the instrumentation used is often unique to a specific people. Consider indicating distinct musical instruments to set the scene and identify your culture's source.

What characters are frequently cast in these people's tales? What are they praised for? What are they demonized for? What lessons do they commonly tell? What symbols frequently arise in these narratives? Numbers? Colors? Animals? Themes? Myths, legends, and folktales often teach

a great deal about a past culture. The themes and tropes portrayed will provide a glimpse into the actual values and priorities the culture held. Your setting's cultures are no different, and the songs your bards and storytellers sing can reflect their cultural values in an organic and reputable way.

These aspects and questions subtly get to the heart of what is important to your culture. After all, we look to our real-world cultures' myths, legends, and folktales to discover who they were. And, in many ways, those tales lean into their aesthetic. The songs and stories you provide your bards, *skálds*, and rhapsodes to tell will convey tone and color, the rhythm your culture barely notices themselves—their heartbeat.

For worldbuilders, many strategies can be employed to provide background details other than overt exposition. Certain tools work better than others for specific tasks, and the information provided here is a specific tool efficient at certain

tasks. So, whether you're attempting to chronicle the life and deeds of your king's great-great-grandfather or provide the gory details of an important battle in your setting, consider using a minstrel to strum the lute, a rhapsode to sing the song, a skáld to tell the tale, or a bard to write the story.

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ASK US ANYTHING

by B. H. Pierce

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

Is it normal that I see my world as a collage of different books I've read? I try to write on my own, but can't help not see the similarities.

—*Dorian the Grey*

This brings me back to my undergraduate days. I did a term paper about determining when the last original work of fiction was created. Turned out it was sometime around Gilgamesh. The point is—there is nothing new under the sun. Or other suns. Under stars in general. Everything that has been written, displayed, or sung off-key in the shower is an amalgamation of the creator's favorite works. The key is not always to be original, but to not blatantly rip off the things you love. To mix concepts in new or interesting ways. Being able to say 'My world is like X mixed with Y with a little bit of Z thrown in' is not a sign of unoriginality, but a good way to quickly describe your world to someone new.

So, if the similarities you see are extreme, first you should show it to some other people and see if they make the connection. Don't tell them at first about the comparisons you see, though, as that could introduce bias into the situation. The similarity may very well be in your head because you know what you're drawing inspiration from. If they see what you do, then your next step should be to start drawing inspiration from more sources or interpret the existing ones through a different lens. Read authors and genres you usually don't. Take it one step further and start reading some nonfiction. Find the bits of history

that inspired your favorite works, and do some research on them to see what you can learn. Doing more research tends to be the solution to most of life's problems. If you expand your horizons, the horizons of your worlds will expand as well.

What are some common pitfalls that worldbuilders can find themselves falling into?

—*Daemon Honey*

One issue that worldbuilders commonly encounter is a problem of scale. Many worlds start with epic visions with hundreds of cultures spanning thousands of years. Many of these do not get far beyond the point of a handful of disconnected places and events before the overwhelming scale of the exercise crushes the builder's enthusiasm. This sad state of affairs can be avoided by picking one small part of the world and working on that until it's complete enough for your purposes. Even the greatest worlds in fiction are only fragments of a greater whole.

Another issue that affects worldbuilders is a familiarity problem. Humans, by nature, are provincial creatures. They see the world through a lens fashioned from their own experiences, which creates a problem when they try to create a world very different from their own. What they create can be riddled with inaccuracies easily noticed by people with more knowledge of the environment or culture in question. Do your research, and most importantly, talk with people from places and cultures similar to the

ones you're developing. Such conversations can give you insight even research cannot.

For our last pitfall, we must divide worldbuilders into two groups. Those who worldbuild simply because it's a fun way to spend a sleepless, caffeine-fueled weekend; and those who worldbuild as a greater project, be that writing a story or making a setting for a game. This pitfall more often affects the people who are building for a purpose rather than fun. Too many worlds focus on the magic system, technology, or some other mechanical aspect, and then fail to consider the implications for the characters with whom the builder intends to populate it. An example is a world where great effort has been spent on developing a grand pantheon with extensive prose and intricate charts showing familial relations and their alliances and grievances, only to completely neglect how any of this affects the daily lives of mere mortals. The gods above may be engaged in an eons-long struggle for control of the universe, but if you're telling stories about individuals with short lifespans and more pressing concerns about where their next meal is coming from, that information is going to be largely unneeded.

What challenges do fantasy authors run into when developing a fantasy world that has entered the age of gunpowder and cannons?

—Il Magnifico Barbarossa

Gunpowder and the weapons systems based on it cause no end of headaches for the worldbuilding community. The gunpowder question is so

common that the Interdimensional Commonality Cataloguing Endeavour has an entry on it filed under "Fantasy Gun Control." The main challenge many face is along the lines of "I have all these monsters and magical people, but don't they all become obsolete when they can just be shot?"

The answer to this, as always, lies in extensive, thorough research.

Let's look at monsters first. It is true modern rifles and other weapons can take down large animals like bears or elephants or whales. It is also true that spears were capable of killing them too, a weapon accessible to most everyone for most of history. Also keep in mind that early firearms were slow to load and inaccurate. If you don't kill the troll with the first shot, which you are remarkably unlikely to, then you are back to using good old melee weapons. The introduction of muzzle-loading, smoothbore firearms is unlikely to change people's relationship with local monsters and beasts too much.

But what about magicians, wizards, and the like? Surely the masters of the mystics arts will be laid low by hordes of pistol wielding mundanes, won't they? It is rather hard to give a solid answer to this question due to the sheer variety of magic systems. A good question to ask yourself is, 'how do magic users counter archers?' Early firearms have similar capabilities to bows and arrows, so it's a safe bet that if your magic users haven't been conquered by the likes of Robin Hood, they're likely to survive the era of the musket.

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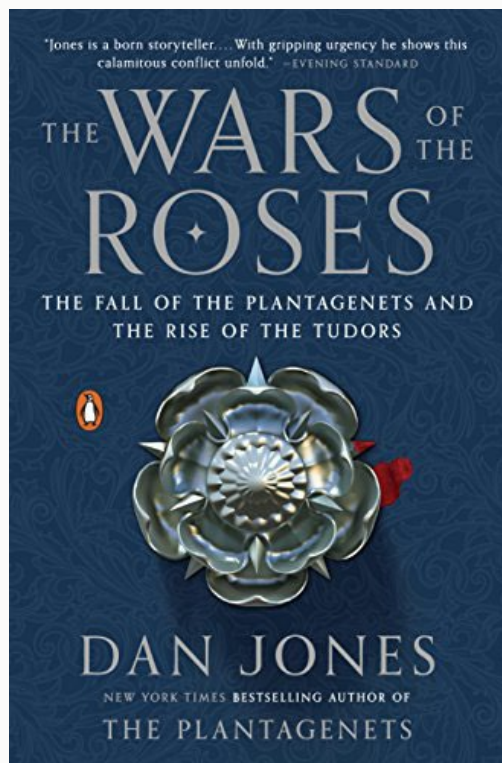
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STAFF PICKS



THE WARS OF THE ROSES: THE FALL OF THE PLANTAGENETS AND THE RISE OF THE TUDORS

By Dan Jones

Published by Penguin Books (2014)

Picked by B. K. Bass

Discover the historical events that inspired George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series. More intricate, exciting, and unbelievable than any piece of fiction, the Wars of the Roses saw rival claimants for the English throne plunging the kingdom into over thirty-two years of civil war.



THE ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW

By Richard O'Brien (Stage Play, Music)
& Jim Sharman (Screenplay)

Published by 20th Century Fox (1975)

Picked by B. K. Bass

A newly engaged couple have a breakdown in an isolated area and must pay a call to the bizarre residence of Dr. Frank-N-Furter. Through the perspective of hetero-normative couple Brad and Janet, the viewer is taken from a familiar setting and thrust into the deep end of a world where any expectation of gender norms are thrown out of the window. This cult-classic musical is a wonderful example of taking the social norms of gender roles and sexuality and throwing them into the blender.



AD ASTRA

By James Gray

Published by New Regency Pictures (2019)

Picked by Taylor Frymeir

While I found Ad Astra's ending unremarkable, and can't guarantee the filmmakers' attention to scientific accuracy, I can't praise the film's masterful and intentional approach to its worldbuilding. Without distracting from the story, the film finds ways to inform the audience that the moon is in a state of unofficial mine wars and covered with roving space pirates, Catholicism has adapted to interplanetary travel, and all of North America is a single country in the wake of an enigmatic Arctic Circle conflict. Worldbuilders would avail themselves the opportunity to see effective setting craft performed, while keeping the writing devoted to the plot.

An advertisement for the 'Paths: World of Adia' tabletop RPG. It features a map of the game world in the background. In the foreground, there is a book titled 'PATHS WORLD OF ADIA ROLEPLAYING GAME PLAYER GUIDEBOOK' by Sean Fallon, Jacob Waterman, Bailey Phillips, Will Egger, and Emily Blinn. Below the book, the text reads 'Play the Paths: World of Adia Tabletop RPG in our FREE open beta at' followed by the Smunchy Games logo and the URL 'SMUNCHYGAMES.COM/PATHS'.

An advertisement for Campfire Pro, a worldbuilding software. It features a dark blue background with a campfire icon at the top. The text 'BUILD MAPS AND LOCATIONS' is next to a map of a castle. 'DESIGN SPECIES AND CULTURES' is next to a screenshot of a species design form. 'CRAFT LANGUAGES AND MAGIC SYTEMS' is next to a screenshot of a language and magic system form. At the bottom, it says 'build your world with' followed by the 'CAMPFIRE PRO' logo and the website 'www.campfiretechnology.com'.

MEET THE STAFF

AARYAN BALU

Interviewed by Adam Bassett

Photography by Michael Bailey

Hi there! I'm Aaryan, a reader, writer, and tabletop nerd who's been around the magazine for a little over a year now. I've dabbled in writing and editing, but I'm mostly focused on conducting the World Showcase interviews that show up at the beginning of every issue. In my free time I'm an audio engineer, writer, and full-time student. I've appeared on and edited the Worldcasting podcast and am the creator of the Worldhopper's Guide to the Cosmere podcast. Meanwhile, I'm busy writing my own books in private as well as posting worldbuilding content online for *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Can you tell us a little more about the process of conducting those World Showcases?

It's pretty straightforward. We put out a call for submissions (and, hey, quick reminder that [you can submit](#) as well!). I read through them, find what excites me, shoot that person an email, and organize a time to talk about their worlds!

The interviews themselves are very relaxed. I've got a few questions prepared ahead of time, but most of it is about listening and latching onto the aspects of a world that catch my interest—because I'm pretty sure that'll interest the reader, too.

After that, editors yell at me for using too many commas. I fix those in the document, and then we send it off to publishing.

What makes a setting stand out for you?

I'll be honest—I'm not a snob when it comes to fantasy/sci-fi/horror elements. Throw something you find cool at me, and if you sell it right, I'll probably love it as well. The secret is to get me hooked on a character going through change.

In some cases, that character is literally within the world—an interesting person whose journey



MICHAEL BAILEY 

SHE KILLS MONSTERS, UVA Department of Drama

lets us experience all the cool things you want to show off. Other times, the reader is the character. As a tabletop nerd, if you can quickly set me in a location and show me some cool new places on the horizon, I'm deeply invested in finding out what's on the other side. Give the world a core "identity" for me to get excited about, then throw in interesting conflicts and hooks and walk me through the implications.

Finally, the interviewee might just be awesome enough to make the world come alive. I love hearing people talk about things they're passionate about—and when people get passionate about their world, that's when some of the coolest, weirdest, and most interesting stuff comes out.

If you're curious to learn more about Aaryan's work, you can find all of his worldbuilding and writing [in this Reddit post](#). You may also follow him on [Instagram](#) or [Twitter](#)!

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Clearly, there's a lot happening. We're just excited that we get to talk about worldbuilding with you.

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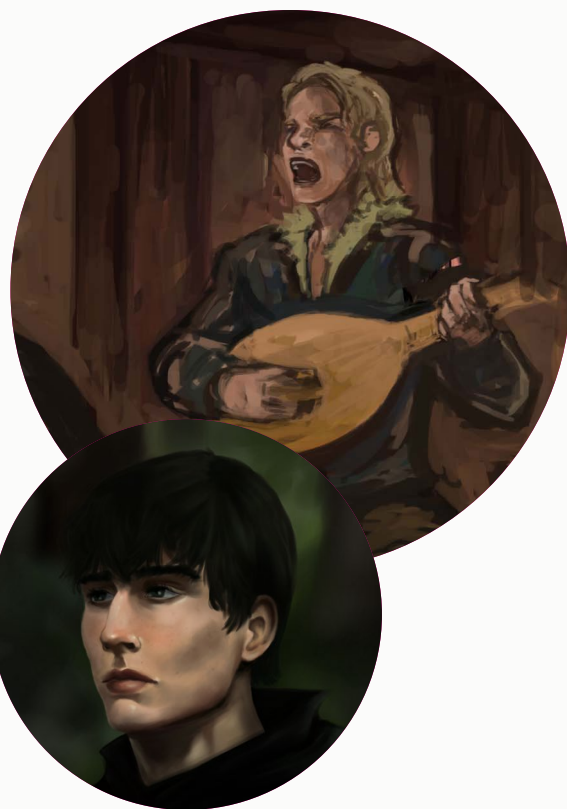
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The background of the entire page is a teal-colored illustration of a museum gallery. On the left, a statue of a woman in classical attire stands on a pedestal. In the center, a large mural depicts a historical scene with several figures. In the foreground, two people dressed in historical or fantasy costumes are seen from behind, looking at the mural. The overall style is artistic and detailed.

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The *Worldbuilding Magazine* team is made of of volunteer writers, artists, editors, and organizers who all have a passion for worldbuilding in one form or another.

If you would like to contribute to this project, simply contact us and tell us what you're interested in doing. We're always looking for people to help out!

[Learn About Our Team](#)